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TEACHING FISHES TO SWIM

by Jerry Mander

Professor Daniel Stacey, a rather slight, graying man in his early fifties, returned to his room where books lined the walls and the air was faintly permeated with the aroma of tobacco and the fleeting scent of English lavender. Without turning on the light he removed his top-coat which he threw over the foot of the bed, reached for a cigarette, lighted it, and sank down in his easy chair. As his eyes became accustomed to the darkness his attention was drawn to the small bronze statue the Jewish family in Berlin had given him those first months of Allied Occupation for certain kindnesses and consideration he had shown them. Light from the street-lamp outside a window bathed the nude figure in an iridescent glow. There were diamond flecks on the tip of the nose, the right shoulder, the inner thigh of the left leg, and on the exposed cheek of the buttocks.

Stacey's thoughts ran on in a bemused sort of way, a kind of indulgence he did not often allow himself, for he had learned from years of experience that this kind of dreaming often led to an overdose of self pity, a thing he abhorred in himself as well as in others. He was a conservative man, inclined to withdraw within himself, never knowing how to cope with praise or recognition. He often thanked the powers that were for his usually happy disposition, the ability to laugh at himself, and the philosophy of tolerance he had over the years been able to make an integral part of his character. He was religious, at least to the extent of trying to the best of his ability to live up to the edict: «Love thy neighbor» and all that this embraced. He was pagan in that he worshiped beauty in any form, insisted he could forgive most people nearly anything if they by thought or actions increased his knowledge and appreciation, and would never be dissuaded that an agile youthful body in motion was God's most glorious creation.

Any teacher in a small, church-affiliated, liberal arts college lives in a fish-bowl. When that professor is a homosexual he must not only live in a glass house, be better than Caesar's wife, but must conduct himself at all times as if his bathroom fronted on the busiest corner of the Quad. He must be most discreet in actions and speech, seemingly indifferent to all male beauty about him, drop a remark now and again to reassure his colleagues he at least understands their cult of mammary-worshippers, keep his peace when the refining qualities of the fine arts are jokingly belittled, and above all things keep his hands in his lap.

But there are compensations for this sort of man and his hypocrisy. Aside from the contact and association with agile young minds, there is the privilege of seeing those handsome young bodies in T-shirt and shorts the first warm days of spring. To have a right to walk past the tennis courts and watch the poetry of motion there. To appraise the sculptural quality of damp torsos catching the light of the sun. To glory in the rhythm of a sprinter or the grace of a swimmer. These are some of the tangible things which help him live through the days and can, in the twinkling of an eye, make his heart sing.

Dan Stacey roused himself, and turned on the light; as he reached for another cigarette he noticed several letters that had come that day. As he looked through the little pile he saw an envelope addressed in a dear and familiar hand.

Will the salutation, he thought, after all these months, be the same?

He hesitatingly tore open the envelope, took out and unfolded the single sheet it contained.

Yes, just the same: «Dear Mr. Stacey:»

Seeing the familiar script set Dan to dreaming again. In his mind's eye there flashed before him a classroom—the students were more or less indistinct save for one in the front row. The dark hair, immaculate but somewhat unruly, the slightly crooked nose, the expressive eyes, and those hands!—there were no other hands quite like them—spatulate and strong, good hands that were so articulate at the keyboard and eloquent when the mind was emotionally stirred. But the face—so mobile and expressive in every way—the slightly pursed lips when the mind was deep in thought—the faint smile that hovered about the mouth when the lad was lost in the polyphonic intricacies of a Bach Fugue or the perfect balance of a Mozart phrase.

(Dan could feel the old tug at his heart, the familiar knot in his chest.)

The strong throat rising from the collarless shirt; those two blessed little spikes the nipples raised on the front of his shirt; those tight jeans with the copper rivet at the base of the fly; the very white athletic socks making the black hair on the legs, which the trousers never seemed fully to cover, look like shadings in India ink on buff parchment . . .

For those two years Ronald was in his classes, Daniel Stacey was eloquent. He had a disciple, one comprehending mind which drank in the wonders the professor from his knowledge and experience poured out, but which so often fell upon unheeding ears. His was an agile mind that responded with understanding, and upon it the teacher played like a fine instrument. A scholar. This relationship between the older man and the youth was the ancient Greek ideal of education reincarnate.

Dan opened his eyes, picked up the letter from his lap and resumed reading. Months had passed since Dan had last heard from his former student and in that letter the young man had stated his eagerness to see his *good friend* and teacher.

«I should have written sooner,» the letter ran, «but I have been very busy since getting back to the States. You know it takes a court order to get me to write, or at least, you should know by now!»

Were I a court Judge, my boy, you would have had a summons many months ago! Time, in some ways, means so little to the young.

«I am going east very shortly either to look for a job, enter Grad School or both.»

And then, there it was:

«Time is so short I fear I will be unable to come to Westdale to see you before I leave. The weather is uncertain for driving and there are many loose ends to secure before I pull up stakes here. I did so want to see you.»

Easy, Dan! You've known disappointment before—this is just one more you must take in your stride. But why, in the name of heaven, didn't he arrange his affairs so that he could take the time? Is it money that is the trouble? If he flew or took the train in place of coming by car, that would cut off several days' travelling time. Do you suppose — — —

He got up from his chair, went to his desk, drew a check payable to G. Ronald Edwards, signed it, wrote a short note, put both in an airmail envelope, sealed and addressed it, put on his coat, and before reason could dissuade him, marched down to the mail box on the corner and pushed the letter through the slot.

There, that's that and there is no undoing it, he said to himself as the letter box lid closed. As he walked back to his room, doubt mounted with every step.

Dan Stacey was no coward nor was he being weak-kneed in this attitude and behavior. He had never been promiscuous during adolescence and young manhood, and seldom in adult life. Certainly, he had frequently been in love in the past thirty years; a man in his position and of his disposition would not be human otherwise. During his late twenties and thirties, he had known an almost perfect homosexual relationship for over six years, and there had been other lasting relationships with sex a-plenty. Every one of them had been built on deep affection and love, *well, almost every one*. To Daniel Stacey loving was giving, whether it be of his intellect, his knowledge, or of himself completely. The greatest ecstasy he knew was the sex act when the heart was so full of love everything else paled before it. He was a romanticist in the broadest sense of the term.

During Ron's last two years in college there had been more than intellectual companionship between them. It had come about so naturally—Dan seldom invited students to his room but Ron began coming fairly regularly as he lived at that time across the street and several houses down. He first came to discuss certain aspects of music theory. From this they went on to aesthetics in music and then the visual arts. The professor noticed the young man's interest in the bronze statue and was not surprised when he asked about it and lovingly caressed the figure as they talked. They discussed the nude as a form of artistic expression and were delighted to find both of them agreeing that, to them, the male figure was infinitely more expressive than the female. Ron went on to say that he had attended a life class at an art institute the previous summer. He delighted Dan by bringing his charcoal sketches on his next visit.

«Have you ever drawn from life?» Ron asked.

«No. I am a complete dud when it comes to anything like that.»

«Have you ever wanted to?»

«Oh my yes, but the nearest I have been able to come to it is to collect some photographs. I used to be fairly good with a pen and ruler—especially in drawing electrical hook-ups in physics.»

«Well good, but I don't mean that sort of thing. How would you like to try right now? I'll pose for you.»

«I'd like nothing better, but all I could do would be just to sit and admire.»

The lad began quickly to undress.

From there on Ron led and Dan followed.

How absurd it is usually to take for granted the idea that the older person seduces the younger! It is usually the other way around and it certainly was like that in this relationship.

When out of his clothes the youth was a different person. He knew how to pose. He seemed completely at home in his nudity, took pride in his beauty and the suppleness of his body. He became bolder, his attitudes more provocative until there was no question as to his intentions and desire; in fact he made known his wants.

In a kind of blind ecstasy Dan ascended Parnassus. It was wonderful for this youth, whom he loved so dearly, to offer himself in this way, and yet Dan slowly came to realize the lad was completely narcissistic in this phase of his makeup. Ron wanted, needed, to be admired in an overt way; but the selfishness that accompanied this desire was in certain ways distressing. When he got what he wanted he quickly packed up his toys and departed. The next few weeks he did not come near Dan nor more than nod when they passed in the halls or

on the campus. Then, unexpectedly, quite late one night he called.

«Are you busy? Will it be all right if I come up?»

After several of these «on-again-off-again» episodes, Dan asked him: «Have you a guilt complex that's bothering you, or is it that you now just come to me when there is no one else to take care of your needs?»

Ron was somewhat evasive in his answer but insisted he was not «queer». That he expected to marry someday and have a family. That he liked attention and needed release but it did not matter if the admirer were male or female. Ron, therefore, never took an active part in their lovemaking, nor did Dan ever thrust himself or his wants upon the youth. It was quite enough having what he did have, but there was always something lacking—Ron never made his lover feel an integral part of the ecstasy. Dan would climb Parnassus but never Olympus, and there *is* a difference. He often thought about this but was so in love and so thankful for what he did have that he was too weak to act as had Socrates with Alcibiades. What if he could not have the universe? Did he not have the moon and was that not much more real than wishing for the stars a million light-years away?

Ronald Edwards graduated with honors and secured a teaching position not too far away in a neighboring state. From time to time Dan heard from other members of the music faculty about him and they all seemed favorable reports, but never a word from the young man himself. There had been a Christmas greeting but with nothing more than a signature.

Months passed.

One night in March Dan's landlady called him to the telephone. His heart almost stopped when a familiar voice asked, «Are you busy? I would like to see you. Is it all right if I come?»

The waiting for the familiar step on the stairs, the bitter-sweet pleasure of expectation and wonder.

The young man came in looking like a fashion-plate, for he always wore his clothes well and showed good taste in their selection. The old intimate conversation took a little time to develop, but was soon back on firm ground as if nothing unusual had happened. They talked about things of mutual interest, the unrewarding task of teaching the young and uninterested, Dan's latest publications and the like. Finally, a silence fell between them. The youth seemed to become restless and preoccupied. And then suddenly he began to unbutton his shirt and blurted out with a questioning look in his eyes, «Do you mind?»

As soon as he was out of his clothes the relationship, as had always happened in the past, reversed itself: Ron became the *Dux* and Dan the *Comes*. Ron returned once again that spring and in the fall after school had been in session several months. This time Dan was immediately conscious of a change in the boy.

The reason for the change soon became apparent under Dan's questioning.

Ron simply could not go on trying to beat musicianship and appreciation into the minds of indifferent, unresponsive «brats».

«Music means too much to me to sacrifice it on such an altar.»

He had refused to sign a contract for another year of teaching and would enter military service just as soon as school was out.

«Maybe this will give me time to think. I simply cannot go on this way.»

Dan talked like a Dutch uncle, an understanding mentor and guardian angel all rolled into one, but with no effect.

«I'm through. I've got so I hate music. I know I hate kids. There is nothing you can say that will keep me from this decision.»

And there wasn't.

Finally the boy said, with a deep sigh. «I don't really know what's the matter with me. I feel often quite dead inside. What's wrong with me?»

The older man tried to console him by giving him the old line that time was a panacea for all ills. The lad listened only half-heartedly and then, in a rather reluctant and wistful sort of way said, «I hate to admit it, but I know well enough what the trouble is.»

As he said this he reached down and began to untie his shoes. When he was out of his clothes he stretched in a luxuriant sort of way and murmured, «Oh, it has been so long.»

The opiate of sex and its release was a benison and at least a temporary solution to Ron's problem.

He entered military service that summer, got sent to a music school, auditioned and was accepted for one of the military organizations touring Europe. His letters were infrequent but when Dan did get one it was a regular Baedeker with a few interesting personal observations thrown in. Always very impersonal letters and all with the same salutation, «Dear Mr. Stacey:»

*

And now after two years, would the young man come? What would he be like? Dan almost feared his arrival and yet the fear that he would not come was much greater. Each evening as the professor looked through his mail he was almost thankful he did not see the bold handwriting. The day he did find a letter waiting for him he had to admit relief, for this anxiety was wearing. He hesitatingly began to read. Apologies for the delay in answering and then, «I am accepting your generous gift and will see you sometime Thursday afternoon.»

By noon on Thursday Dan was beside himself. What he had done in his classes that morning he could not remember with certainty. He had issued dispensations for incomplete assignments, he vaguely remembered, and had changed his lesson plan at the last minute to a listening session on the Bach *Double Concerto*.

Was there ever a more fervent prayer than that Adagio?

The professor started for his room around one o'clock for he could eat no lunch. He stopped at the market on his way home, got a couple of thick juicy steaks, fresh asparagus, strawberries and ice cream—Ron's favorite meal—and with a thumping heart climbed the stairs to his room.

No Ron.

But, you silly ass, he couldn't be here yet. The earliest time he could possibly arrive is the one fifty-five bus!

Coffee time, and still no Ron.

Just as his landlady came to the door to ask if he wanted a cup of coffee he heard the familiar step on the stairs, and without waiting for his knock to be answered, Ron walked into the room. A firm handshake, a warm greeting, and a wonderful smile did much to ease Dan's tension. Without further ado Ron took off his top-coat, threw it with his hat on the bed; and then walked about the room touching familiar objects, commenting on the addition of new things and the disappearance of other remembered ones. He had a kind of ease and self-assurance about him he had not hitherto possessed.

The bronze was in its accustomed place and as the young man stood before it he said, «I saw other things by this same Nazi patriot in Germany. They had a strange fascination for me as this one has always had. It is not great art, you know.»

Certainly Dan knew it, as he also knew the fascination the artist's work had for people like himself.

Mrs. Fitzroy brought them coffee as their conversation jumped from one side of the Atlantic to the other. Finally Dan got in the question that had been troubling him since the lad had arrived. Much depended on the answer.

«Where is your luggage?»

«Oh, I left it across the street at my old digs. You remember I stayed with the Graham sisters my last two years in college.»

Do I remember it! thought Dan. *I still never go by that house but what my heart does a bit of gymnastics as it never failed to do when you lived there.*

«I thought it best to stay with them. They have always been so kind and make me feel so welcome.»

Damn the Graham sisters, anyway!

It began to get dark.

«Would you rather go out for dinner or stay here?» Dan asked. «Mrs. F. says we may use the kitchen.»

«Please let's stay here. It's so good to be home again.»

The steaks turned out well and they both seemed to be ravenously hungry. Dear Mrs. F. had insisted, as she left for her weekly Scrabble game with friends, that they leave the dishes.

When the two men got back to Dan's room the host asked, «Will you have a snifter of brandy?» He did this rather hesitatingly for in the past Ron had always refused on some moral ground or other.

«Certainly,» was the reply with no hesitation whatsoever.

«So! You are a changed man, yes?»

«In more ways than one,» was the serious reply and his unflinching gaze confirmed the statement.

For a long time they talked. They were more or less back on the same old ground they had known in the past but there was much new terrain they had never explored together, and they both found delight in this new country. Ron was frank, honest, and forthright. He had grown and matured and the older man liked what he saw. Dan did not hesitate to express intimate feelings and reactions he had hitherto sometimes withheld in the past. They were on equal footing now with only the difference that one of them was a bit wiser because of his more years of experience and learning. Ron was now a man.

Shortly after ten o'clock they heard Mrs. Fitzroy return and soon after potter off to bed. Dan was reading aloud from one of his favorite poets for the conversation seemed at the moment to demand it. As he looked up from the book he saw the young man lean down and begin to untie his shoe laces. Dan's heart leaped into his throat so that he could hardly finish reading the last two lines of the sonnet. He closed the book and sat silently watching. Ron had always been an artist at taking off his clothes but he was now a master at it.

Finally when the young man had stripped completely, he stood before Dan in a tantalizing posture with one arm over his head.

God in heaven, was there ever anything more beautiful?

Dan stood and took the lad in his arms. They moved toward the bed. This

night Dan not only ascended Mount Olympus but drank ambrosia with the gods. This was no longer Parnassus. For the first time in the relationship of these two, after the young man's passion had been brought to fruition, he put his arms around his lover's neck—the kiss he gave was a benediction. There had been no question that emotionally, as the now mature ephebe mounted the heights of ecstasy, he took his partner with him all the way.

This is how Mount Olympus is reached!

Dan sat, fully clothed, with Ron's languid body across his lap and his head cradled in the crook of his right arm. They spoke low and fervently, for this was intimate talk, the kind which knows complete understanding and has no fear of being misunderstood. Where had Ron been «brought out»? In Paris. By whom? An army buddy. But no! «I had experiences long before that . . . during my last year in high school a classmate and I fooled around at least twice a week but it was right here in this room I learned the most about love and unselfishness. And I keep on learning each time I come.» Ron went on to explain the excitement he felt in intrigue, flirtation, and the chase; but sex without deep affection was poor by comparison. There had been interesting and quite satisfying experiences but they had faded quickly.

«I no longer have any doubts about myself and know definitely I am not »on the fence«. I know that I want a lasting relationship with a person more or less my own age; but I thank God for you, Dan (*the very first time he has ever used my Christian name!*), and you will always be a part of me no matter what happens. Once you accused me of being vain (that hurt clear through), but I know it's the truth and I am trying to overcome it as well as the selfishness that goes with it. I hope tonight has been some sort of expiation for my sins and the unhappiness I must have caused you. Will you accept it as such?»

No sound would come from Dan's lips nor march through the narrow arches of his throat, but as the young man again kissed him more was said than ten thousand words between them.

Dan hesitatingly dressed his Ganymede after once again consorting with the gods and on equal terms with them. Soon Ron reluctantly departed for his solitary bed across the street.

The next day they hardly saw each other, for Dan's schedule was a heavy one and Ron had many people to see. They met for lunch and sat surrounded by members of the faculty. They had very little time to themselves before Ron had to take the bus at two o'clock. Their parting at the bus station was just another of those fond farewells where a handshake had to suffice for a more overt expression of their deep and pent-up emotion.

Dan returned to his room—this room now filled even more with provocative memories. There stood the bronze in all its manhood. He went over to it and lovingly touched the cold metal where Ron's hand had warmed it. He tried to channel his thoughts in a sane and logical course but they were with a man on a speeding bus. Wearily Dan sank into his large comfortable chair, leaned back and in retrospect re-lived the past twenty-four hours. Then, with supreme effort, he forced logic and reason to take possession of his mind.

No man has a right to happiness. When it comes, as it has to you, thank God for it, but remember you have no guarantee nor claim upon its happening again. When the longing is upon you and your arms are so empty they ache, just remember, Dan Stacey, you have been on Mount Olympus and have drunk ambrosia with the gods. What more can mortal man ask of life?

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