

Zeitschrift: Der Kreis : eine Monatsschrift = Le Cercle : revue mensuelle
Band: 34 (1966)
Heft: 6

Artikel: Down the street
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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-569039>

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DOWN THE STREET

by JAMES H. RAMP

He lived down the street.

Not a remarkable guy. At least I didn't think so at first. When I took an apartment in that neighborhood, I noticed him first at the bus stop. Ordinary, but neat, well dressed. About five-ten, well put together, with a good face. Not handsome, but . . . well assembled, if you know what I mean. I didn't notice much more that morning, except that he smiled at some woman he evidently knew, showing fine teeth. He got off the bus at Geary and Powell.

Thereafter I saw him every morning for a month. Evidently we had the same working hours. And . . . oh yes . . . I noticed he had small, well set ears. I have a thing about ears. Once I sat behind him on the bus, and . . . well I noticed his ears.

Then one morning he wasn't at the bus stop. The bus was loaded, so I didn't take it. He wasn't there when the next one pulled up, so I didn't wait. Why should I? He didn't mean anything to me.

The next morning he wasn't there but the woman he had smiled at was, and I said: «What happened to our mutual friend?»

«Our friend?» she asked doubtfully. «I don't know who you mean.»

And I'll be damned if I didn't describe him, down to his polished brogues and up to his small ears.

«Attractive, isn't he?» She smiled. «But I don't know who he is. We usually take the same bus, that's all. Friend of yours?»

I felt the world's fool. «Casual acquaintance,» I muttered.

«Perhaps he is ill . . . or on vacation,» she suggested. «He lives in that apartment over there.» She pointed. «You could inquire.»

«Not important. Here's our bus.» But damn it, it was important, suddenly and with no logical reason.

So that evening I went to the apartment house the woman had indicated and talked to the manager. «I don't know his name,» I said foolishly, «but I can tell you what he looks like.» And I did.

«Why do you want to see him?» the manager asked suspiciously. «Are you a bill collector or something?»

«Nothing like that,» I assured her. «I wanted to be sure he wasn't ill.»

«You seem greatly concerned about a man you don't know, but if it any business of yours, Mr. Conrad is on vacation. And I'm busy!» She closed the door smartly.

I went away with jam on my face. Later, in bed, I damned myself for an impulsive idiot. A thirty-five years old stockbroker behaving like a nosey kid. Conrad didn't mean anything to me. But just before I went to sleep, he smiled at me and I saw his ears . . . How *long* a vacation?

Something bothered me. You ever try to remember something? A quotation, maybe? An idea that bombed you when you were young? In this case, I groped desperately, but couldn't come up with an inkle. It bugged me all day at the office. Finally I called the public library and asked for information.

«Something by Walter Pater,» I apologized. «I read it in college. It has to do with the face of one's friend . . . and frost and sun . . . this short *day* of frost and sun.»

«To sleep before evening,» the librarian chuckled. «If I weren't acquainted

with essayists, I wouldn't know where to look. In this case let me quote:»

«Slowly,» I demanded, «this is important. Let me take it down.»

Three minutes later I had it . . . staring at me from a scrawled sheet of paper.

«While all melts under our feet, we may well catch at any exquisite passion, or any contribution to knowledge that seems, by a lifted horizon, to set the spirit free for a moment; or any stirring of the senses, strange dyes, strange colors and curious odors, or the face of one's friend, or the work of artist's hands. Not to discriminate every moment some passionate attitude in those about us, and in the brilliancy of their gifts, some tragic dividing of forces on their ways, is, on this short day of frost and sun, to sleep before evening.»

I took it apart. «*the face of one's friend.*» But Conrad wasn't my friend. «we may well catch at any exquisite *passion?*» PASSION? «Not to *discriminate* every moment . . .» Now what the Hell? Was I trying to discriminate? If so, what? Between a stranger and what? A passionate attitude?

It didn't make sense. Why had I dredged up this ponderous paragraph from a study of the Renaissance? I read it again and suddenly the most important phrase lunged at me: «Some passionate attitude in those about us . . .»

It hit me in the gut. The truth. I couldn't accept it. I crumpled the Pater quotation in an unbelieving fist and threw it savagely in the wastebasket. That night I looked him up in the telephone book. John Conrad. The only Conrad at that particular address. *Damn* his ears!

I bit back my impatience and suffered out the days of his vacation.

When he turned up at the bus stop at the end of two hateful weeks, I blurted: «Where the Hell have you been?»

He eyed me coolly. «Any business of yours? Just who in Hell are you?»

«Joe Cooper. You . . . I missed you. Thought you might be ill . . . had an accident,» I blathered.

«Nice of you. I'm John Conrad. Manager told me a man of your description had been looking for me. Why?»

«I don't *know* why! Here's the bus. If we can find a seat together, maybe we can talk.» I was surprised at my own urgency.

No seat. We stood, in the crowd, holding on to the ceiling grips for standees.

«Look,» I said. «You get off at Geary and Powell. I get off at Market. Have lunch with me at the Fly Trap? 12:15?»

«Why?»

«Don't keep saying that!» I growled impatiently. «I want to talk to you . . . about . . . Walter Pater!»

He smiled. «An old friend of mine. What about him?»

«Something he wrote. I need . . . your opinion. It's important to me. Please meet me for lunch?»

«I'll be there. Dutch treat. My father warned me about letting strange men buy lunch for me.» John grinned and my heart shouted.

At the office I took counsel with myself. «Look! You all of a sudden have this . . . urge? No, be honest. It's more than an urge. It's an obsession to possess. How crazy can you get?» I wasn't queer . . . homosexual. Then *why?* That was what John said: Why?

My mind shied away from the implication of my impulsive action. What could I say to Conrad? He might be angry, disgusted . . . or think me a nut. Come to think of it, the quotation from Pater . . . he might not be acquainted

with that particular passage. Or, if he was he might just try to clobber me. No... I'd better try another approach. Approach to what?

We went for lunch and I worked so hard at being casual while pumping him for personal information, that he regarded me curiously. Finally he smiled and said: «Why the elaborate third degree? I thought you wanted to discuss Pater.»

«I did... but I changed my mind,» I confessed.

«Why?»

«I decided the... the quotation I had in mind was too personal. That's why I wanted to get better acquainted first.»

«First? You mean before we discuss this mysterious, mysterious passage? Again, why?» John persisted.

«That's right. You might not understand... the impulse. I'm not sure I do,» I confessed.

«Well, I must get back to work.» John rose and picked up his check. «See you on the bus.»

I was fit to be fried in frustration! The facts I had gleaned about John made him more attractive, but there was no indication he would tolerate my madness. I chewed the problem, trying to extract a new approach. Lack of sleep gave me grumps, and like most intelligent people, I blamed the cause: John. I was tempted to take an earlier—or later bus to avoid him. I didn't. And he didn't, but he was talking to another guy—a damned attractive guy, when I joined him.

«Pete Johnson, Joe Cooper,» John introduced, and the damned Square-head stuck out his mitt. I wanted to spit in it, but being a gent, I gave him three fingers and muttered «...tuh meatcha.» Why didn't the damned bus come?

When it did, I jumped on and found a seat. John and Pete stood, talking about some fool thing. Just before Powell Street, John leaned over, touched my shoulder and said: «Pater's Child in the House?»

«No,» I blurted, «Renaissance!»

«That's a *book*,» he objected.

«Conclusion,» I muttered, afraid to look at him.

For some reason he squeezed my shoulder, and when I glanced up he was smiling. The bastard Swede got off the bus with him and I chewed nails the rest of the way to my office, where I snapped at my secretary and yelped at a petty gambler in the stock market. Somewhere in the middle of a turgid afternoon, John telephoned. I guess I sounded surprised, for he chuckled. «You *did* tell me your name and office address. You *are* a stock broker, aren't you? And I think you have had a bad day. Thought I'd let you off the hook. Pete is my brother-in-law. Lives in the same apartment house.»

My heart bumped. My office was suddenly prismatic, sun-dazed.

«Hello!» John demanded.

«Still here,» I managed. «But... do you know what this means? I mean... well, you know what I mean!»

«I know you were jealous... rude to Pete without cause!» he said drily.

«No... not without cause, but don't ask me for definitions right now. I'm sorry I was rude, but I can't apologize for the other reason. I can't help... that, although I know I have no reason to be... jealous... but I was, I am. What has happened to me?» I gulped and listened.

«Nothing unusual,» John assured me. «Just that you have been pre-conditioned to doubt. Don't let it throw you. Why don't I come to your apartment

this evening, and we can talk about this 'passionate attitude'?»

«You . . . you'd do that?» I choked.

«Why not? We are both admirers of . . . Pater?» His phone clicked. I sat, staring stupidly at my own, cursing myself that I had not invited him to dinner. But, no, I decided, I was not capable of coping with cooking and Great Expectations at the same time.

You ever see a dream walking? Not a beautiful one of course. In fact a thoroughly blissfully befuddled dream? That was me.

Once home, I became terrified. What should I say, do? It was vital that he understand the vulture of desire that tore at my guts, but how could I explain? Pater, the esoteric philosopher, had no beautiful phrase for me. «Passionate attitude»? Hell, the word was *hunger*! Nothing about John suggested he would or could experience such desire for complete possession. I was suddenly cold, since I am not a traveller on one-way streets. Pride is a prickly house guest, but he had been mine, I had to admit, and I would not ask him to take a walk. I needed a drink.

When John arrived I was fortified. When I opened the door he sniffed and grinned. «Hope this is not a habit!»

«Come in, John. No, it's not a habit and probably smells stronger than it is. I forgot to eat, what with one thing and another,» I apologized.

«Then I'll make you a prairie oyster. Show me the kitchen,» John demanded.

In the kitchen, he prepared tomato juice, tabasco sauce and a raw egg. «Swallow it without a breath.»

I gulped fire and slime.

Back in the living room John pushed me into a chair, gave me a cigarette. «Was it that bad . . . the waiting, I mean?»

«It was that bad,» I agreed huskily.

«And why were you afraid to tell me?» John asked softly.

«Afraid you would reject the idea . . . me,» I explained.

«Well . . . I must admit 'exquisite passion' and 'passionate attitude' are a little far out. Love is a matter of cultivation—trial and error. Passion's the flower, not the seed of love,» John murmured.

«Then you . . . ?» I began eagerly.

«Let's say . . . possibly,» John interrupted. «As I said, it's a matter of trial and error. I like you very much, but if I am not mistaken, this is a strange venture for both of us. Why not explore the possibilities carefully?»

I sighed with relief. «Forgive me my hot flashes.»

«If you'll pardon mine. Tell me about women,» John suggested.

«Not much different from men,» I opined. «Like the little girl: When she was good she was very very good, and when she was bad she was horrid.»

«Sexually?» said John slyly.

«Why not?» I chuckled. «Forgive a bad pun, but this is another country.»

«Why don't you ask me?» John said quietly.

«What you want me to know you will tell me. What *about* women?» I tried not to sound interested.

«As you said: some are good and some are horrid, but something bothers me. Scuttlebutt has always been that a 'pieca ass' is man's most supreme experience. The lack must be in me, though I worked at it.» John looked worried.

«And what about men?» I asked, and waited with a touch of ice along my backbone.

«What about men? I knew something about boys when I was one, but my dad whupped the piss out of me when he found out.» John sighed. «I think he had a guilt complex.»

«Don't we all?» I confessed. «But it was all so... guilty!»

«Tell me,» John said gently, «what sold you on me?»

«Practically everything—but most of all your ears!» I confessed.

«My ears?» John was puzzled. «What about my ears?»

«I... just have a thing about ears,» I mumbled. «Silly, isn't it?»

John grinned. «So do I! Big floppy ones like yours, all freckled... and red, right now.»

I laughed. «This is the damndest courtship!»

«Oh no! This is the polite introduction. We are going to spar awhile. Keep your heart and I'll keep mine until a more salubrious day.» John flicked my nose with a knuckle. «Next time be sober! Good night now.»

«Hey, wait,» I called, but he was gone. What do you do for—or with a guy like that? You wouldn't have known from his manner next morning an the bus, that we had explored possibilities... but there was something in his eyes. And his ears were more provoking. I pulled mine in exasperation. When he left the bus he murmured: «Stay sober and I'll feed you tonight, tiger!»

You ever watch a balloon go up? I haven't... but I was on it! For the rest of the delirious day, I was on it. Bad for business? What the Hell!

Somehow I got home, bathed and banished my five o'clock shadow, and if you must know, I was nervous as a bride when I arrived at John's apartment. He let me in, and (I guess) seeing my anxiety, took me in his arms and kissed me soundly.

«Don't be scared,» he chuckled, «it's only me!»

«Do that again!» I demanded.

«Not now. Food and conversation first. Come shake a cock's tail while I broil the steak. You like yours ruined or rare?»

While we were eating, John asked: «Are you sure?»

«If I wasn't before you kissed me, I am now!» I declared blissfully.

«Ever occur to you that I might not like to do what you like to do...in bed?» John suggested.

That jolted me. «But I've never been to bed with a man!» I confessed.

«Neither have I. Only another boy. But I don't think mutual masturbation is what you have in mind.» John grinned.

«No... but there are two other...» I muttered.

«Yes, I know,» John said gently. «One of which I do not like, but it might be your preference.»

«I... have no *preference*. All I want is you in any fashion,» I said softly.

«And if I don't fit the bill? Remember? This is strange country.» John smiled.

«Then I will compromise,» I promised.

«No!» John objected strongly. «That's a house on sand. We couldn't live in it very long. Either we live in a house on 69th street...»

«At what address?» I inquired, happily.

«69,» John said gravely.

«Then let's leave the dishes and go inspect it!» I exclaimed.

It's a wonderful house! Having lived here fifteen years, John agrees that we made a wise choice, since it is completely furnished with happiness. Moving was a simple problem, since it is just down the street from where we used to live.