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ARE YOU AVAILABLE?

by JAMES H. RAMP

That was Burt's approach. It might mean anything. Available for bridge, poker, bowling. It wasn't what he had in mind, of course, but it worked—occasionally, and snagged some guy for a brief roll in the hay. Sometimes he was beat up and robbed. Not too often to discourage him in his quest for a suitable mate. A man of intelligence and sensitivity, of courage and dependability. At times he told himself this was not the way to go about it, but being a maverick, he had no close friends to advise him. Then one night he accosted Pete Denihue with his usual parlay: «Are you available?» Pete got the drift and smiled. «For conversation». He looked around the crowded bar. «Not here. Come home with me. My partner has a business conference this evening, so I am on the town. Socially, that is.» — — Burt hesitated. Pete grinned.

«No entrapment, robbery or blackmail.»

Dave was home when Pete returned with Burt. He kissed Pete and asked: «Who's this handsome young man?»

«I dunno. He solicited me in a bar and I asked him to come along for some conversation.»

«My name is Burt Dunbar.» Burt said reluctantly. «And I didn't solicit your . . . friend. I only asked if he were available!»

«His name is Pete and I am Dave. Glad to know you. Available for what?»

«Oh . . . for anything. A drink, maybe?»

«That we will have now. Take the weight off your knocking knees,» Pete advised. «What's your poison?»

When they were settled, Dave asked flatly: «What were you shopping for?»

Burt hesitated. «For something you and Pete seem to have.»

«You won't hardly ever find it in a casual pick-up,» Pete advised. «You promiscuous?»

«How else can you find someone?» Burt said defensively.

«Not that way,» Dave said. «What do you do?»

«Either way . . .» — — «No—I mean what is your work.»

«Oh. I'm a stevedore.» — — «Have any friends in the union?»

«Sure, but I wouldn't want them to know!» Burt objected.

«Why?» Pete demanded. «Think you are the only one?»

«Of course I am!»

Dave chuckled. «How many men in your union?»

«Oh, I don't know . . . several hundred.»

«Well, let's say seven hundred,» Pete suggested. «Anywhere between forty and seventy have the same yen you do.»

Burt stared at him. «But that's not possible!»

«'Deed it is! Statistics prove it,» Dave assured him. «Anyway, evidently you don't want a stevedore. Aside from your work, what are your interests? Social, that is.»

«Bowling, poker with union friends.» — — «Same ones in both activities?»

«Mostly,» Burt said. «Why?» — — «Where do you bowl?» Pete asked.

«Golden Gate Alley.» — — «What night?»

«Tuesday.» — — «We'll be there in the cheering section,» Dave promised.

«But why?»

«We want to select a friend for you. Now don't explode. We know they are your friends already, but one of them might just be your better half,» Pete explained.

«Then what?» Burt said suspiciously.

«Now take it easy! A great man once said: «There is nothing to fear except fear itself.» We watch you and your friends bowl. If one of them shows more

than average interest in you, we come down and say howdy. As friends, you see, and ask to meet that particular guy because we admired his skill.»

«Then what?» — — «Then we kinda suggest you bring him to drinks and dinner. We'll explore his possibles with E.S.P. . . .»

«E.S.P.? What's that?» Burt said uneasily.

«Extra Sensory Perception. Means guys like us can spot guys like us,» Pete explained.

«Well, I'm sure no one on the bowling team feels like I do,» Burt said positively.

«We'll see. Meanwhile, you cooperate, hear? No more scouting bars or Union Square,» Dave advised. «Unless, of course, that is what you prefer?»

Burt gulped. «I don't, but I didn't know how to go about finding *him*.»

«Well, God Bless!» murmured Pete, «give us time and we will find him for you.»

*

On Tuesday Dave and Pete were at the bowling alley, in spectators' seats. Burt saw them and grinned at them doubtfully. Nervous, he bowled badly. One man on the team seemed concerned. He kept clapping Burt on the shoulder, encouraging him with advice and assurance.

«Long legged Swede,» Pete murmured. «Just a *little* too interested and concerned.»

«Think you are right,» Dave agreed. «Right age, too. Burt is a knot-head!»

When the opposition took over, Dave and Pete drifted down, greeted Burt and asked to meet his friend.

«Knute, meet Dave and Pete,» Burt introduced. «Friends of mine.»

«Friends of Burt are friends of mine,» acknowledged Knute, shaking hands. «He has had an off-night. Happens to everyone.»

«We are bowling fans,» Pete said. «Once I got my thumb stuck in a ball and I went along with it, making a perfect strike. Trouble is, someone set me up in the next alley.»

«We came to invite you and Burt to dinner,» Dave added.

«When?» Knute demanded eagerly.

«Would tomorrow night seem too soon?» Pete grinned. — «If Burt is free!»

Burt looked scared. Things were moving too fast. «Well, all right, and thanks.»

«See you at seven,» Dave suggested. «Burt will give you our address.»

*

Knute arrived on schedule. But not Burt.

«You suppose something happened to him?» Knute said anxiously.

«I think he had a sudden attack of doubt,» Pete said solemnly. «Now, Knute, you *know* about us?»

«You *shine* with it. Sure, I know. There is an electricity between you two. I know.»

«And how do you feel about Burt?» Dave queried gently.

«He is *stupid!* Afraid of his shadow. Yeah! I want him. Sure, if he had the guts he must have known that.»

«Knute, we are only interested in permanency. Kind of marriage. Maybe not blessed by church and clergy, but sanctified by love. You want that?»

«I do!» Knute vowed. «With all my worldly goods and gonads.»

While they were at dinner the door bell rang and when Pete opened the door, Burt staggered in, stoned.

«Is he here?» He floundered to a chair. «I diddle . . . I don't believe that he loves me.»

«Shush! He'll hear your. Come to the kitchen and I'll fix a prairie oyster. You're too pixilated to eat.»

In the kitchen Burt rushed to the sink and regurgitated while Pete held his head. Empty, he gagged and groaned. Pete steadied him to a chair, wiped his chin and whipped an egg with Worcester-sauce and tobasco. «Swallow it! In one gulp.»

Burt gulped and muttered: «I wanna go to bed . . .»

Pete assisted him up the stairs, helped him strip, stowed him in bed. «Bathroom's there, in case you want tu erupt again.»

Burt dived into slumber.

When Pete returned to the table he said: «Doubting Thomas Burt arrived loaded, discharged cargo and is snootzing it off, wrapped in the aura of alcohol.»

«That's strange,» Knute said, «Burt never gets drunk.»

«He's been under pressure since last night—no, for a week now. Ever since the night he picked up Pete in a bar. Pete brought him home to meet me and we talked. He said he was trying to find a permanent relationship. That was why he was promiscuous. We suggested he might have some friend who loved him. He said there was no one. That's why we came to watch the team bowl. He was scared and bowled badly. Then when we invited you to dinner he dithered.»

«But why?»

«He is convinced you do not like him and is afraid to suggest sex with you,» Pete said.

Knute grinned ruefully. «And I felt the same way toward him!»

«Do you consider this kind of love unmanly?»

«Hell no!, but I'll admit that you are the first two who have made it work. The first two I have known, that is. Like Burt, I have been promiscuous. Trade.»

«Would you live with him, be constant, really work at it? »Pete asked. «He said he has been shopping for something like we have.»

«I'll settle for that!» Knute declared.

«One thing about you two: you are educated, articulate men. I thought stevedores . . .»

«Had muscles in their heads? Some do. Guess I was first attracted to Burt because he is interested in living—in what goes on in the world, and can talk about it in the King's English. As for our occupation: we are gang bosses—straight ones.»

Dave shook his head. «Then I can't see why you have wasted so much time avoiding the issue of love. Are you sure you aren't ashamed of it?»

«No . . . not after seeing you and Pete, and how it *can* be. Look! Will you get Burt back in shape and send him to his job tomorrow? Meanwhile, I'll go home and sleep on this. Won't be the first time I have slept on a wagon tongue. Burt does this to me.»

«Before you go,» Pete suggested, «what, if anything are you going to do to solve this situation?»

«I'll sleep on that, too. Or lie awake on it. You have any suggestions?»

«Yes,» Dave replied, «lure Burt to bed. Be tender, give him assurance that it is right and *permanent*.»

«But how can I promise it will be permanent if he won't work at it too?» Knute objected.

«Then *persuade* him to work at it. He wants to believe you desire him, but he thinks you are too masculine to settle for this kind of relationship,» Pete insisted.

Knute grinned. «You know, this is all kinda incredible? Guess, as a stevedore, I shoul'da said unbelievable!»

«Sleep—or lie awake on it, anyway,» Dave chuckled.

*

When Burt rolled out the next morning, he had a watermelon head and a foul mouth. After a shower he felt a little better. Pete brought black coffee and a razor. — «Breakfast is ready, if you can face it.»

«Where's Knute?»

«He went home fully indoctrinated, after dinner last night.»

«Bet he was disgusted with me!» Burt muttered.

»We explained why you got tight. Now, all you have to do is straighten up and fly right. Into his arms, if you know what I mean.»

«You persuaded him?»

«Didn't need no persuadin'! Jeez, Burt, you have been a dumb cluck,» Pete declared.

Burt came alive, grabbed Pete and kissed him. «God Bless!»

«O.K. Get prettified. We will take you to your job. The rest is up to you. Take it careful if you want Knute.»

*

Burt saw Knute briefly at the union hall when they received their assignments for the day. He tried to say something, but words locked in his throat. Knute, seeing his difficulty, said: «Dinner tonight at Jackson's? We can talk. After that . . . well, we'll settle that later.»

During dinner in a booth, Knute said: «We have been a coupla schmos—stupid, I guess. Now I am laying it on the line. I want you, I need you. I hope you feel the same way?»

Burt wiped his eyes. «You . . . you mean that? Knute, I've been so lost . . . Well, never mind! Where?»

«My flat. It's closest—here in north beach. You want dessert?»

«You will do very well!» Burt said urgently. «For dessert, I mean . . .»

*

«We've wasted a lot of time,» Knute sighed, around midnight. «Why in Hell didn't you proposition me?»

«For the same reason you didn't proposition me,» Burt mumbled against his breast. «I was afraid!»

«Are you afraid now?»

«Not never no more!» Burt declared. «You want us to live together?»

«What else can we do? I will buy a chastity belt tomorrow and carry the key myself.»

«Pete says there are probably from forty to seventy guys like us in the union. You think he is right?» Burt inquired.

«Probably more,» Knute opined. «A man's occupation has nothing to do with his sexual drives. That's a myth. I've seen some of the huskies in my gang doing what they preferred in the holds of ships and in warehouses. They took for granted I would look the other way, so they must have identified me.»

«Any of them make passes at you?» Burt growled jealously.

«Sure! but I didn't respond. Some of them might goof-off on the job if they had anything on me. Anyway, I never mix business with pleasure.»

«No need to now. Let's mix more pleasure with pleasure,» Burt proposed.

*

They thought their newly found happiness would not be obvious to their friends, but at the next poker session, one of the players jolted them. He was host for the evening, and after the game managed to maneuver Knute and Burt into staying after the others left.

Jack Anderson grinned at them. «Congratulations! This happy event calls for celebration.» He prepared drinks while Burt and Knute watched him uneasily. When he passed the glasses, Knute asked: «What are we celebrating?»

«Don't kid me!» Jack chuckled. «Remember the old corn: Unlucky at cards, lucky at love?»

«What makes you think . . . I mean, we didn't lose much,» Burt mumbled.

«I'm not prying,» Jack assured them. «I think it is wonderful! How did you . . . get together?»

Burt looked at Knute who nodded. «Might as well tell him. He knows anyway.» — — «How do you know?» Burt demanded.

«You *shine* with it. The electricity between you is tangible, almost visible to the eye.»

Burt told of picking up Pete, going home with him, meeting Dave. How they put the finger on Knute in the bowling alley. Of the advice Pete and Dave had given them.

«Must be quite a team, your friends. Think you could do the same for me?» Jack urged.

«You? But you are married!» Knute objected.

«See any wife around lately? She divorced me. Charge: sexual inadequacy.»

«YOU? Then she must be a nympho!» Burt blurted.

«It takes two to tangle in bed. I couldn't meet her standards.»

«Then why do you think you could qualify with a man?» Knute said gently.

«God Damn it! Because that's what I've always wanted!» Jack confessed.

«Then why in Hell did you marry?»

«To escape what I considered unmanly, I guess. A blind impulse rather than a planned mess. I agreed not to mention her adultery if she would skip alimony.»

«Nice arrangement, but why tell us? — — «Because I want your help!»

«Anyone in mind?» Burt inquired.

«Yeh! But no hope,» Jack was despondent. «I thought you might find a second best.»

«It doesn't work that way,» Burt protested. «Heart's best or nothing. That's where you made your mistake in the first place. Is your first choice married?»

«I don't know. Never had the guts to ask him,» Jack admitted. «If he said yes I think I'd bust out bawling!» — — «That bad. Suppose I ask him?» Knute proposed. — — «But you don't know him.» — — «Introduce me.»

«I can't. I don't know him,» Jack confessed. «I know that sounds screwy.»

«Who is he?» — — «A cargo inspector for Marine Insurance.»

Knute snapped his fingers. «Know just the guys. Hank Davidson, Lou Jenkins, Insurance. Dave and Pete told me of them at dinner the other night. Hank can find out if he doesn't already know. You must know the Inspector's name?»

«J. A. Smith.» Jack smiled ruefully. «Know how many J. A. Smiths there are in the telephone book?»

«Then you have looked!» Burt chuckled. «Knute, I think this is a job for Pete and Dave, since we don't know Hank and Lou.»

«O.K. You get in touch with Pete. Jack, if your man is available and willing, consider it done,» Knute promised.

Burt telephoned Pete and explained the problem. «Knute said you knew Hank and Lou in the insurance business.»

«Sorta kinda,» Pete admitted. Will confer with Dave. Betcha we will come up with love!»

«Looks like you are all set, Jack. Hang up your sock for Santa.» Burt said.

Jack shook his confused head. «Things don't work that way!»

«Just wait and see,» Knute advised. «So all right! If Smith is married, we'll find you another man, because if he *is* married, he is not first best. We all make mistakes.»

«Like I did. Two sad wrongs do not make a happy right,» Jack said.

*

Pete called Hank and asked if he knew J.A. Smith, Inspector for Marine Insurance.

«Slightly,» Hank said. «He is stand-offish. Not a snob, but a loner. Why?»

«Burt and Knute have a stevedore friend who is intriggered by him.»

«I know the President of Smith's firm very well. Will get the dope on the Inspector soon as I can snag his boss for lunch,» Hank promised.

Pete passed the word to Knute who in turn informed Jack. «Hank will get his pedigree and criminal record. May take a few days. Thanks for the drink. Burt and I were a little startled when you identified us.»

«Be sure I won't blabber about it,» Jack promised. «I may need a little training—marriage counseling—if I make the grade with Smith.»

«We are amateurs,» Burt confessed. «Pete and Dave are the wise ones.»

*

Hank got the dope on Smith and asked for an introduction to Jack. «I'm not a psychologist but I think I should know Jack before I give him the information, Knute.»

«I'm sure that can be arranged. Want to go to Jack's place?»

«That would be best. A bachelor's habits can sometimes be judged by the house he keeps.»

Knute arranged the meeting and suggested that he and Burt be there for moral support.

*

Knute introduced them: «Hank Davidson, Insurance broker, this is Jack Anderson, stevedore.»

Hank sized up Jack as they shook hands, and nodded. «A very possible specimen! Please give me a thumb-nail sketch of yourself.»

«Norwegian-American, thirty. Professional foot-baller five years. Stevedore, five. High school. Merchant Marine sailor two years. Interested in athletics, weight lifting; member of a barber shop quartette. Divorced. Own this house. Guess that's me.»

Hank smiled. «You have some things in common with Jason Smith. He is divorced. Wife snagged wealthy man. Jase played football at the University. Majored in business administration and insurance law. His boss admires his ability and is going to offer him a partnership next year when he is thirty. No known women friends or family. Has some business friends. Is working on a novel about the waterfront. Attends opera and symphony concerts.»

«Sounds like an interesting guy,» Knute commented.

«Guess he wouldn't be interested in me,» Jack sighed. «I'm not educated.»

«Don't jump on a conclusion,» Hank chided. «It might run away with you. It is apparent you and Jase are in need of each other—sexually, at least. Two men with exactly the same interests seldom agree. Some common interests are necessary, as are some common experiences. You've both had failure in marriage. You have both been football players. Your employment is similar. If Jase writes about the waterfront, he needs an intimate knowledge of those who work there. Just observing isn't enough. He must know the guts and gizzard of at least one stevedore. Yours.»

Jack was uncertain. «How do you propose bring us together?»

«Guess that is up to you. Next time you see Jase, why not shine up to him? Invite him to bowl or play poker.»

«Just like that? He would give me a brush-off!»

«O.K. Suppose I tip him to accept your blandishments? Anonymously, of course,» Hank proposed.

Jack was doubtful.

Burt grinned. «A little mystery intriggers us all. Give it a trial run, Jack.»
«When?» — — «When is he due to examine your next cargo?» Knute asked.
«Week from now,» Jack estimated.
«Then he will be indoctrinated,» Hank promised.

*

At home, later, Hank and Lou considered possibilities.

«Jase will have a week to digest this.» Burt suggested. «Let's give him the hot-foot. He reacts one way or the other. Jack wants something definite.»

They connived and finally settled on a typewritten, anonymous letter:

«Next week you will be approached by a very personable, intelligent stevedore who might contribute much to your book about the waterfront. You have much in common: women, sports, music. Do not brush him off—as he fears you may. This might be the beginning of a rewarding friendship. His name is Jack Andersen. He knows yours.»

Jase was wary. The letter was fantastic. People, in his experience, did not operate this way. Blackmail? Hardly, since he had the letter as proof of enticement.

He suffered out the week wondering how in bloody Hell a stevedore had found out about his book or had the brass to think he could contribute to it. Would the lug buzz his apartment on Nob Hill or accost him on the street? Who wanted to talk about women? He walked warily, ready to reject any approach, any attempt to invade his privacy. He didn't expect to be accosted on the job. Nor by such a personable, quietly spoken man.

«I'm Jack Andersen. You've seen me before. Many times. You're Jason Smith. Will you be my friend?»

Jason stared and gulped. «Why? Why should I?» he demanded.

He expected anything but the answer he received.

«Because I need you, and I think you need me. I know a great deal about you. Here's the address and telephone number of a mutual friend. Ask him about me.» Jack thrust a slip of paper into Jason's hand and returned to his work.

Jason watched him go in amazement. What was this? A gag? . . . The man was personable, intelligent in appearance, moved with controlled grace and power. He was clean and . . . and masculine. Jason glanced at the paper: Henry Davidson, Insurance Broker. Now what the Hell? This Andersen . . . this *stevedore* a friend of a millionaire? He rushed to a pay phone and made an appointment with Hank. For dinner that night, at Lou's. Jason was confused. Why not at the Davidson home? He found out.

A gangling young man admitted him to a pleasant apartment. «You're Jason Smith. I'm Lou Jenkins, Hank Davidson's friend. He was late getting home. Having a shower. He'll be in shortly.»

«But I thought Hank lived with his mother?»

«She's gone to Europe. We're having a house built for us.»

«A house for you?» Jason was startled.

«For us,» Hank agreed, entering the room. «How are you, Jason?»

«A little confused. Why a house when you have one of the finest in San Francisco?»

«My mother has. Newlyweds should have their own,» Hank said serenely.

«*Newlyweds?*» Jason groped for a chair and sat down.

«You need a drink. Martini?» Lou proposed. He went to the kitchen where Hank's houseman was preparing dinner. «Company's here.»

The 'company' was staring at Hank in disbelief. «Repeat that!»

(To be concluded)

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