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SHE'S APPLES, MATE

by Stornoway

«I wonder why all the bars in this country look like public lavatories,» Jeff Kilmartin said morosely, as he sipped his beer. The bar, near the Sydney waterfront, was typical of an Australian city pub. It had walls and floor of pale green tiles. An enormous circular bar stood in the corner of the room. The bar-counter was wet with beer slops that dripped on to the floor. There was a lot of noise and the sound of gun fire from a television set mounted high in one corner of the room, but no one seemed to be interested in television. The bar was packed tight with men and the air was heavy with stale smoke.

«Like in New Zealand,» said his mate Dick Watson. «And all the public lavs there have a sign that alcoholic liquor must not be consumed on these premises.»

«And they shoot your beer at you through a flipping great long rubber hose. Got to be careful you don't get it in the eye,» Jeff continued.

«No women either. No women allowed in the bars either here or in New Zealand. Got to take them into the lounge and pay double prices and tip the waiter as well.»

«I'm near broke,» Jeff complained. «Couldn't afford to take a girl out at present, even if I could get one.»

«The bars are better in the city,» said Tom Hannan, the third member of the group. «Or out at King's Cross.»

«No women, though,» Dick said gloomily.

«No women,» Tom agreed. «Only the barmaids.»

«And they won't serve you if they don't like you. I'm browned-off. Who's coming back to the ship?»

«I'm with you,» Jeff said, finishing his beer.

«I'm going up to the 'Queen',» Tom said.

«That's an idea, Dick,» Jeff said eagerly. «Get all the 'girls' you like there. How about it?»

Dick spat. «Flippin' 'Queen' full of flippin' queers. I got no taste for that sort of thing.»

«No, but the moment they know you're a sailor they start buying you drinks and then when the pub closes at ten o'clock they want to take you home and then you can put the pressure on them for a feed. Then you can either go the whole way with them or dump them, just as you please.»

«I still got no time for that sort of caper, even when there's money in it,» Dick argued.

«There's money in it, if you play your cards right,» Jeff insisted.

«I don't like any of those people and I don't want any part in it. I'm going back to the ship,» Dick said firmly.

«Mind how you go then, when you're rounding Death Corner.»

«I've got nothing to lose,» Dick said. «Not even my virginity. And I've handled Sydney thugs before.» Hands in pockets, he slouched out.

Jeff and Tom followed him. They parted in the street, Dick going back towards Pyrmont and the other two making for the main city area.

«I reckon Dick wants to play it alone,» Jeff said.

«I don't,» Tom said. »I think he's just saying what he thinks.»

«But you've got no crazy idea like that, Tom. You're in this lark just for what you can get out of it. I'm right, ain't I?»

Tom did not answer. He was tall, fair-complexioned, and clean looking. Jeff was shorter and more thickset, with red hair and a mean face, but handsome in a rough sort of way. His general appearance was scruffy. The two had never been over-friendly, but because they served on the same ship, they were inevitably in each other's company at times. At the moment Tom wanted to be alone, but he could think of no way of ditching Jeff.

The 'Queen' was also overcrowded. This was another enormous room with an island bar and other bars along the four sides of the room. It was less austere than the first place they had been in. Everybody had to stand because there were no seats. Tom pushed his way through the crowd and eventually managed to insinuate himself into a space by the circular bar. Ten minutes later he had a drink.

«Proper crowd of Charlies here tonight, ain't there?» Jeff remarked.

«It's always full between five and six in the evening,» Tom said. «Then they nearly all rush home.»

«See anyone you know?»

«Not likely in this crowd. Someone from the ship, you mean?»

«You know what I mean. You've been here before, drinking with some of the locals. You must know some of this lot.»

«I can't see anyone I know, Jeff. I never knew any of them well enough to remember them later, anyhow.»

«Come off it, Tom. I'm your pal, ain't I? Don't try to keep it all for yourself.»

Tom did not answer, but tried again to attract the barmaid's attention. Jeff stepped back, and in so doing collided with a man.

«Careful, mate,» the tall Australian said. «You spilled my beer.»

«Sorry,» Jeff apologised. «I didn't mean to. I'll buy you another.»

«You don't have to,» the man said, turning away.

«But I insist,» Jeff said.

The man turned round again. «Listen Pommie. I said I didn't bloody want one. Now pull yer head in or I'll dong yer one.» The man's appearance was menacing.

«Not very friendly, some of these Aussies,» Jeff whispered to Tom. «Let's move over towards the door a bit.»

«They're a bit hard to get to know sometimes,» Tom agreed. «They're all right when you get to know them. Only, don't rush them.»

The man who had spoken looked like a labouring type. The company in the bar was very mixed. Many were coatless, and some did not wear ties. Others were well dressed in business suits. From what Tom could see, it looked as if the gay crowd had moved on to another bar since he was last here.

«No class distinctions here,» Jeff remarked. «You'd never see a mixed bunch like this anywhere else, and I can't see any prospects for a good time. I should have gone back with Dick.»

«The place has changed, since I last was here,» Tom admitted. «I think I'll go up to King's Cross. No need to come if you don't feel like it.»

«Oh, I'll come alright,» Jeff said. «You don't want to get rid of me, do you?»

«Of course not.»

«Then let's go.»

They took a tram to King's Cross. This part of the town always seemed to be in a holiday mood. They forced their way through dense crowds on the pavements until they came to a bar which was even larger and more crowded than the 'Queen'. The dress of the occupants, their mannerisms, and the general air of camaraderie within the bar was enough to tell them they had come to the right place. Jeff got some drinks.

«See anyone here you know, Tom?» Jeff asked.

«I've been here only once before, Jeff,» Tom protested. «I don't think I've met more than two people in Sydney, and I wouldn't know either of those if I saw them again.»

«This place has possibilities, anyhow. Lots of them.» Jeff indicated a youth in a gaily patterned Hawaiian shirt, part of a group making a lot of noise, who was staring at Tom. «Maybe that's one of them over there.»

«Could be,» Tom agreed. «Yes, I think I have met him.»

«Then why don't we go over?»

«I could be wrong, but if he's the one I think he is, I don't want to meet him again particularly.»

«Well I might be able to use him. I think he's coming over, anyhow.»

The youth in the bright shirt was, in fact, making his way towards them. In addition to the shirt, he wore very tight slacks, and except for thongs of gold leather, his feet were bare. With his glass held high above shoulder level he wriggled his way towards them through the crowd. «I'm sure it's Tommy,» he said with a high pitched voice and a simpering grin when he got close enough.

«Yes,» Tom admitted.

«You do know me, don't you?»

«I remember your face, but I've forgotten your name,» Tom said.

«Oh, you faithless old cow!» he squeaked. «After that fabulous weekend at Narrabeen. I'm Robert, but everybody calls me Sadie. Don't you remember saving my life? Everybody said you should have got a mad medal or something, from the Governor.»

«Yes, of course. This is my friend Jeff.»

«I'm so pleased to meet you,» Robert said, extending a limp hand.

«What happened before?» Jeff asked. «Did you get drowned or something?»

«Well practically,» Robert giggled. «That weekend we all went swimming in the middle of the night, with nothing on of course, and I got out of my depth and Tommy had to bring me in and give me mouth to mouth resusciation, and all the girls said I was putting on a mad act because I nearly got drowned once at Bondi and the lifesavers had to bring me in. We took some lifesavers up to Narrabeen once and they all got drunk and wouldn't have been able to rescue anyone. They were a tragic disappointment, to all of us.»

«Do you go to this place every weekend?» Jeff asked.

«Oh no. It all depends on when anyone offers us a house. We're all going up to Palm Beach tomorrow, that's further on, and we're going to stay until Sunday. You must both come. All the girls will be there and it's going to be heavenly mad.»

«We might have to work,» Tom said weakly.

«Not this weekend, we don't,» Jeff said quickly. «We're neither of us on gangway roster. I checked the list before we came ashore this afternoon.»

«We'll have to think about it.»

«I'll be there,» Jeff said. «How do we get there?»

«It's Greg Martin's house. His people are lousy with lolly and they're away. Everybody brings a bottle, of course, and we put in for food, not that we ever eat, anyhow. Everybody usually gets too pissed.»

«What do we bring?»

«Most people take nelly. It's cheaper and it goes further.»

«Nelly?»

«Yes. Plonk, you know.»

«He means wine,» Tom explained.

«That's what I said, darling. Everybody will be there and we have to use the beds two at a time, not that anyone ever goes there to sleep,» he giggled. «We all meet in Martin Place at one o'clock, and if we don't have enough cars some of us'll have to go by bus.»

«I wouldn't miss it for quids,» Jeff grinned.

«Good. I'll go and tell old Mother Martin. She's over at the bar now. Why don't you come and meet the mob? We're going to a mad party when the bar closes. There'll be lots of theatricals there.»

Wriggling his hips he went back to his friends.

«Looks like we've struck gold,» Jeff said, with a satisfied look. «Let's go over.»

«You please yourself, Jeff,» Tom said. «You can go if you like. I won't.»

«You mean the beach party, or the party tonight?»

«Both. I'm leaving here now.»

«What are you going to do?»

«See a film, or just walk around. I don't want any more to drink tonight.»

«I'm going to stay and meet the other girls. You heard what that little prick said. The guy who owns this house is lousy with lolly.»

«You're welcome to it, and to him too. He's probably ancient. See you back on board.»

Tom went out, while Jeff made his way over to the bar where Robert had rejoined his friends. In the street Tom was undecided where to go. There was another bar nearby, but it was quite likely that Robert and Jeff might show up there also. Then he was suddenly aware of someone by his side. It was a good looking man in his early thirties.

«You're Tommy, I think?» he said with a pleasant smile.

«That's right.»

«I'm Greg Martin. I believe you're coming to my shack at Palm Beach this weekend.»

«Well, I hadn't really said so,» Tom admitted.

«I hope you will. The kids put the acid on me for a weekend up there, and I'm really a little sorry I let myself be persuaded. But they're not a bad crowd, and they amuse me.»

Tom was agreeably surprised at Greg Martin's appearance. When Robert had referred to him as 'old Mother Martin' he had expected him to be a fat middle-aged auntie type willing and able to buy the young stuff. Instead, Greg Martin was about the last person he would pick in a crowd. He was quietly dressed in casual clothes and there was nothing in his manner to indicate any deviation from the normal. Like most Australians he was deeply sun tanned.

«It might be fun,» Tom admitted.

«Why not come up to my flat for a quiet drink and some coffee and think it over. Ill play you some records if you like that short of thing. Then I'll drive you back to the ship whenever you're ready to go. The flat's not far from here.»

Greg had a slick sports two-seater parked nearby. It looked expensive. In a few minutes they were at Point Piper. Greg parked the car in a garage underneath a tall block of flats and they took the lift to the top floor. One glance at the apartment was enough to make Tom realise that Robert's expression 'lousy with lolly' was probably not exaggerated. The apartment was in actual fact a penthouse, overlooking the harbour, and the view was breathtaking. It was expensively furnished in the contemporary manner. Tom felt he was sitting on air as he relaxed on a divan.

«Drop of Scotch or do you want to stick to beer?» Greg asked.

«Scotch, if it's all the same to you.»

«Scotch it is.» Greg produced soda, water, and ice.

At that moment a young woman carrying a small dressing case came from one of the inner rooms. She too was fair, with skin the colour of honey.

«This is my wife Kim,» Greg said. «Kim, meet Tommy. I don't know the other name.»

«Hannan,» Tom said, rising.

«Don't get up,» the girl said pleasantly. «I'm going home for the weekend,» she said to Greg. «Back about Tuesday. Pop said I can use the Cessna. He won't want it till Wednesday.»

«Okay. Want a drink?»

«Never when I'm flying. You know.» A bell rang. «That must be the taxi. I rang for it an hour ago,» she said crossly. «I wanted to be home soon after sunrise. See you Tuesday.» She went out.

«What's a Cessna?» Tom asked. «One of your local made cars?»

Greg laughed. «No. It's a small two-seater plane. Kim uses it a lot for travelling between here and the homestead. I'm scared of flying. Of flying myself, that is. I don't mind being flown by someone else.»

«How many places do you live in, then?»

«The main homestead's over by the South Australian border. I hardly ever go there. I hate country life, and Kim loves it. Then we've got this joint, and the shack at Palm Beach.»

«You call this apartment a joint?» Tom asked with a smile.

«Oh, it's all right I guess, but a bit small for both of us. We sort of share it, though when Kim's here I usually go to the shack.»

«But you said she was your wife.»

«Does that surprise you?»

«It does, rather.»

«Don't let it worry you.»

«Don't you live together?»

«As man and wife? No. Not really. I didn't find out about myself until after we were married.»

«Doesn't she mind?»

«Not a bit. She's a good sport, and rather nice, but cold as ice really. We have different friends. She likes some of mine, though she doesn't know them all. She doesn't care for the little trisses like Sadie and his gang. That's why I prefer to entertain at the beach.»

«Do you like Robert, or Sadie as you call him, and his gang?»

«They amuse me.»

«When you said your wife was cold, what did you mean?»

«No bed life. Not with me, which I don't mind, nor with anyone else so far as I know. She's not a Lesbian though. I'm pretty sure of that.»

«She must have some hobbies,» Tom said.

«All she likes is sheep, and we've got about half a million of those. She's mad about the properties. Spends days just riding round on horses from one place to another, often with only a black stockman with her. Have another drink.»

«There's a lot that I don't understand,» Tom said. «It's no business of mine, but why get married if you feel the way you do.»

«Her father's property is next to ours, and her old man and mine got the idea that both stations should link up. I'm a bit of a disappointment to my father, because I don't show much interest in the station, but Kim looks after everything and we've got a couple of good overseers. The thing worrying our respective fathers most is that we've not yet produced a colt, but neither Kim nor I ever seem to get in the right frame of mind for that sort of thing, though we feel we'll have to do something about it sooner or later. You wouldn't like to go into stud on my behalf, would you?»

Tom almost choked on his drink. «I don't understand. At least, I think I don't.»

«Produce an heir for me, through Kim. You don't live in this country, so it wouldn't matter very much, if only the three of us knew about it.»

«I don't think I could, Greg. If she's as cold as you say she is, then I wouldn't get much help from her, and I'd need it. Don't you ever do anything for yourself?»

«Not much. Not if I can avoid it, anyhow.»

A couple of hours passed, with drinking and talking. Eventually Greg rose.

«Want to go to bed?» he asked.

«Where? Here?»

«Where else?»

«I should get back to the ship. I've got work to do in the morning.» Tom found himself attracted to Greg, but the luxury of the apartment

overwhelmed him. He certainly did not want to be coerced into making the third side of the strange domestic triangle as Greg had suggested.

Greg did not press him to stay. «I said I'd drive you back. I'm a bit tired too, as it happens.»

«There's no need. I can find my way.»

«No. I'll drive you. I'll drive you up to the shack tomorrow also. The others will make their own way up. There'll probably be a couple of cars. You will come tomorrow?»

«I'd like to, but I don't want to impose on you.»

«She's apples, mate.»

«Apples?»

«Yes, she's jake. Glad to have you with us.»

It was midnight when Tom arrived back at the ship, and it was seven in the morning when Jeff turned up, looking smug, in spite of being bleary-eyed. Tom saw him stuffing some notes into a wallet.

«Made a bit last night,» he admitted.

«What? Not from Robert or any of his crowd?»

«No. They're just a bunch of shopgirls. I got this from an actor bloke I met when I left the others. Had to use a little persuasion, though.»

Tom frowned. «I don't like that, Jeff.»

«You needn't worry. They tell me this bloke Greg who owns the beach shack is well oiled.»

«You lay off there, Jeff.»

«Why? You think you'll get your claws into him?»

«I went back to his flat last night, just for drinks and coffee.»

Jeff looked surprised. «How'd you meet him?»

«He followed me out of the bar, when you went over to join Robert. He's a nice guy, and married, too.»

«Married? That makes it more interesting. The married blokes are easy, if you want to put the squeeze on them.»

«I met his wife and she knows the score, so there's nothing to be gained by putting on a squeeze. Besides, I won't stand for blackmail.»

«It ain't blackmail.»

«Then what is it?»

«Payment for services rendered. Well, it's up to you if I don't make him. He should be good for something without too much pressure. Fifty-fifty on what either of us makes?»

«I tell you Jeff, I'm going on this trip to get away from the ship for the weekend. I'm not in it for money.»

Jeff looked at him narrowly. «Say Tom, I'm beginning to think you're in this because you like it. Could that be so?»

«I don't like your insinuations Jeff.»

«I'm not insinuating anything. If you don't run around with queers for money, then you must be one of them.»

«I just like people who are amusing.» Tom knew the explanation was weak.

«Come to that, I introduce you to a girl who'd make you laugh your pants off; that is, if you don't want to spend the weekend with that Greg character, and the rest.»

«Let's say we leave that to another time.»

«I'd say you aren't going to be parted from Greg too easily.»

Tom was worried. He wondered if he should try to contact Greg and explain the situation in an effort to get him to call the weekend off. That would raise difficulties with the others. There was also the possibility that Greg might find Jeff attractive and make a proposition to Jeff for his service at stud, in order to produce the desired heir. Jeff would never pass an opportunity like this up. Even though their ship might leave before Kim returned to Sydney, Tom knew that Jeff would be prepared to jump ship for a proposition that might mean big money, and Jeff would see that the money was big. Tom decided to let the matter ride, but to stay close to Greg, during the whole of the weekend.

They left the ship soon after lunch. Robert and several others were waiting in Martin Place, on the steps of the general post office. The Australians wore clothes of all the colours of the rainbow. Practically each one carried a transistor radio, and seemed to have enough hand baggage for a month's holiday. Tom felt drab in grey shirt and slacks with a red scarf knotted around his throat. The Australians were all twittering like birds. Tom was introduced to the others, who eyed him with interest.

«Tom saved my life you know,» Robert burred. «Literally snatched me from the jaws of death.»

«He never stops talking about it.» said a youth named Ricky. «I sometimes wish you'd let him drown, the silly old cow.»

«Don't be beastly darling. Here's Greg now, and Freddie.»

Greg in his sports car and another man with a late model American car arrived simultaneously.

«Hi there,» Greg called to Tom. «You come with me and the others can go with Fred.»

«Are we all here?» Ricky asked.

«Jack took the rest up earlier on,» Greg explained.

Tom climbed in alongside Greg, leaving the others loading their baggage into the other car. He did not fail to notice the searching looks that Jeff gave Greg. So far they had not met each other.

«No baggage?» Greg asked.

«Toothbrush and razor in my pocket. Bathing trunks underneath. Jeff has my towel. I think that's all I need.»

«No pyjamas?»

«Lord, I forgot those. Does it matter?» Tom forbore to say that he hadn't any.

«I can lend you some, but I don't think you'll need them,» Greg laughed. «I think it's going to be a nice weekend.»

Everything promised that way, for the day was hot and there was not a single cloud in the sky. The car made its way over the harbour bridge and turned towards the beach suburb of Manly.

«How big is this shack of yours?» Tom asked. «There's going to be an awful lot of people, if there's another carload already gone.»

«There are four bedrooms. They won't all want to sleep at the same time. Some of them won't sleep at all, until they pass out. Then we just dump the bodies, on the patio, in the garden, or anywhere.»

«Sounds a big shack, with four bedrooms.»

«I suppose you'd really call it a cottage.»

They stopped at Manly for a drink.

«I think it's a good idea to let the others arrive first and get organised.» Greg said. «It takes them an hour to settle in. They all have to change their clothes several times, of course.»

«I want to get something to take up,» Tom said.

«If you mean something to drink, forget it,» Greg said.

«But Robert said everybody took something.»

«With this lot I insist on it. Not because I don't keep a good stock of liquor up there, but I think it's good for them to have to contribute something. You'll be my guest, completely. I like the look of your friend.»

«Who, Jeff?»

«If that's his name. He looks rugged.»

Tom felt a moment of conflict between his liking for Greg and loyalty for his shipmate, embarrassing though the loyalty might prove. He decided to say nothing for the moment, but strengthened his resolution to keep the two apart as much as possible.

«Who's the one they called Fred, with the other car?»

«Fred? Oh he's on radio and television. I'm not sure just what he does; advertising mostly, I think.»

They took their drinks slowly, until Greg judged that it was time to move on. The road stayed close to the coast. They passed a number of sandy beaches, each separated from the next by massive rocky headlands. The beaches were all thronged with people. A heavy surf was running, and they stopped to watch some surf riders in action.

«I wish I could do that,» Tom said. «I don't think I'd ever have the nerve.»

«It's easy enough,» Greg said. «All you want is a good sense of balance, and a little practice.»

«Do you do it?»

«Oh yes. I joined a lifesaving club once because there was a lifesaver I had a thing about.»

«Lifesavers seem popular around here.»

«They're all muscle boys. It's the animal in them that appeals.»

They passed Dee Why and Narrabeen and just before they reached Palm Beach Greg turned off the main road into what appeared to be dense bush country. The road was bad, narrow and full of potholes. Greg steered the car carefully until they came to a clearing from where they looked down on to the calm blue waters of the Pittwater.

«The surfing beach is over to the east, and that's our private beach down there, where we keep the boats.»

«Boats?»

«A cabin cruiser and a yawl. There's the shack down there.»

From where they were standing, all Tom could see of the shack was a red tiled roof. It looked a bit large for a shack, or even a cottage. The other two cars were already parked. From the direction of the shack

came the sound of shrill voices. It sounded as though the party was already well under way. Greg led the way down some stone stairs and Tom followed. Tom found himself outside a large cream and green painted house of two floors which would have been a smart residence in any area. Its position on the side of the hill made it invisible from the road, and the dense growth of eucalypte made it equally invisible from any neighbouring houses. A wide patio in front of the house was bordered by tree ferns and exotic shrubs. More stone steps led down to a small beach where there was an enclosed pool and a small wharf to which a cabin cruiser and a yawl were moored. Inside the house, almost the whole of the ground floor constituted a large living room, of which the side facing the water was all glass. As in the flat, the furnishings were contemporary and in good taste. The bedrooms were upstairs.

«You call this a shack?» Tom asked.

«Of course. What did you expect?»

«I don't know. A tin hut, or something. I guess.»

Greg laughed. «I think I explained, we use this as much as the flat. If Kim wants the flat, then I come here, and vice versa. It's a good arrangement. Keeps us from seeing too much of each other. Our people use it for a couple of months in the summer.»

Robert and Ricky and the others were darting about the house shrieking and screaming and deciding what they were going to wear on the beach. One of them, Butch, was making heavy going in deciding which of four bathing slips to wear. He tried them all on in the living room, checking the effect in a mirror, and finally decided on one he had made himself out of a couple of handkerchiefs. Eventually they went off, leaving only Tom, Greg, Jeff and Freddie in the house. Jeff had already found the cocktail bar and helped himself.

«We'll have coffee first, and then we'll swim,» Greg said. «Do you want to go to the beach or shall we just go down below?»

«After last night, I need gentle handling,» Freddie said. «I couldn't face the surf.»

«I really prefer calm water,» Tom said.

Jeff could not swim at all, so he said nothing.

«Good,» Greg said. «We'll go down where the boats are tied up. We don't really need costumes there anyhow.»

He went into the kitchen to make coffee, accompanied by Freddie.

«How are you making out?» Jeff whispered.

«All right, I guess. Greg's a nice fellow.»

«Like to get my hands on some of his dough. Just look at this place, will you?»

«I told you to lay off that, Jeff. We're his guests, remember.»

«Still, he might like to make a small gift.»

«Nothing doing.»

(To be concluded.)

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Samstag, 9. Dezember, punkt 21.00 Uhr, Modeschau mit Tom

Sonntag, 17. Dezember, 16.00 Uhr, Weihnachtsfeier für Abonnenten

Sonntag, 31. Dezember, ab 20.00 Uhr, Silvester

Eintrittspreise: Abonnenten Fr. 4.40 Gäste Fr. 6.40

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