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The Peachiest Fuzz

by John McAndrews

I came awake with a start, for a moment disoriented and confused. A little light trickled in through the partly closed slats of a venetian blind; the air was hot and unmoving, and my armpits were filled with sweat.

There was a rank sort of locker-room smell everywhere, as if it were compounded of discarded sweat socks and damp towels and dirty jockstraps. This was not at all unexpected, since I was actually in the back locker-room of the place called Steve and Mike's Gym, and I had fallen asleep on a canvas cot while waiting to see if we could catch our intruder.

«Try to get the bastard this time,» Mike had said to me. «You stay back here all night and maybe he'll show up again. I'll give you five bucks extra.»

«It's a waste of money, Mike,» I said. «You know what it's like down here at this end of the Loop. It's just on the edge of the honky-tonk district. Your prowler's nothing but a wino sleeping it off on the backstairs or the fire-escape.»

«Just the kind of bastard to start a fire,» Mike said. «That's all I'm worried about. Damn, what'd he *steal* in a gym? The weights? Protein tablets? Dirty towels? Nah, just catch him and kick him out. Don't even call the cops—just take him downstairs and kick his ass out in the alley.»

So that's the way it was. I heard the noise again, the sound that wakened me—someone trying the backdoor. I eased myself off the creaky canvas cot very gently. Because of the heat I had nothing on except gym shoes and socks and a pair of gym shorts. In the light of the red exit bulb above the door I saw the knob turn again, back and forth. I reached out and slid the bolt back, and then in one movement banged the door open and flicked the hall light switch.

A pint-sized, stubble-chinned, watery-eyed wino stood there swaying and blinking, and trying to raise one arm against the light—or a possible swat from me.

«Hey, man!» I said, and grabbed him by the arm. «What the hell's the idea, tryin' to break in like that?»

He was so terrified he couldn't speak. I suppose it had thoroughly shocked him—the sudden light, the sound of the door, a naked man twice his size grabbing him by the arm and yelling at him. All he could do was stutter and gasp.

I took him by the shoulder of his dirty shirt, bending his arm back up behind him, and marched him downstairs, not without a considerable lot of stumbling and falling against the bannister. At one point I thought we would both fall. I shook him a couple of times. Halfway down the second and last flight, he found his voice.

«Please, mister . . . all I wanted wuz a place to sleep.» He stank to heaven of body dirt and old sour wine. «Don't call the cops.»

I shook him again. «I ain't gonna call the cops,» I said, «but I find you in here again, I'm gonna bust your head. How'd you get in anyway?»

«Back door . . . lock's busted,» he mumbled.

Well, that would have to be fixed. I looked up and saw the lock hanging nearly loose. The back door opened on one of the dark narrow alleys of the Loop. A single bulb burned about halfway down the empty passageway towards the next cross street.

I held the door open with one hand and gave the wino a push with the other. He staggered across the width of the alley, threw his arms almost affectionately around a telephone pole that got in his way, banged his head against it, and sank slowly to the ground. I let go the door and the door-check pulled it shut. I walked over to see if the wino had hurt himself when he hit the pole.

I was bending over him when someone with a deep baritone voice said harshly, «What the gah-damn hell is goin' on here anyway?»

I jumped as if I had been flicked with a bullwhip. It was a cop, a young one, standing scowling under his low-pulled cap brim, one fist knuckled against his hip, swinging his long yellow nightstick in his other hand.

«I . . . yi . . . yee,» I stuttered. «Y-you scared the hell outa me, officer. I was just throwing this stew-bum out the back way. Caught him up at the gym door. But I think he was just lookin' for a place to sleep.»

The cop's scowl deepened. «What gym?» he growled. «What back way? All I see is some big naked bruiser bendin' over a drunk in an alley. Maybe tryin' to roll him, huh? Or what else?»

I looked around. The door-check had pulled the backdoor shut, of course. I admit things might look a little odd to someone just arriving on the scene. I felt my face begin to get warm, and so I grinned at the cop and said, «If you'll just come up with me, officer, I can show you the gym and my I.D. and straighten things out . . . I suppose it does look a little peculiar to you.»

His scowl was still there. «You can just bet it does, Mac,» he said, «and I'll come right up like you say. We'll just make sure that Junior here stays put . . .» and then very efficiently he unhooked his handcuffs from his belt, closed one grip around one of the wino's thin wrists, and fastened the other around a convenient pipe angling out of the building. «Now,» he said, «we'll look into your side of the story. Where's the door?»

I reached for it and pulled at the edge; it was one of those all-metal rear doors without a knob or handle. Of course the lock would choose that moment to function satisfactorily. I couldn't open it at all.

I looked at the officer. I was sweating just a little. He looked more angry than ever, and I saw that he had drawn his gun out of its holster.

«I think I'd better take the two of you down to the station,» he said, «to clear this thing up.»

«Officer—honest,» I said, frantically trying to get a purchase on the door edge. Just at that moment I did, at the cost of a bent-back fingernail, and the door opened magically into the red gloom of the hallway exit bulbs. It looked like the stairway to hell.

«There, you see,» I said, panting a little. It was not the most inviting doorway in Chicago.

He pulled the flashlight from his belt and flicked it on. «After you, buddy,» he said grimly, and waved me to the stairs.

It would be just a further sample of my luck, I thought, to find the gym door closed and locked too. But no—it was open and the bright hall light was on. I reached in and snapped on the main switch.

«Come on in, officer,» I said. «I'll show you my I.D. and buy you a coke.»

The scowl was mostly gone. I watched it ease up to a frown and then saw the beginning of a small grin. He put his gun back in the belt holster and poked one finger at the brim of his cap, tipping it back an inch on his head. It was the first good look I had at him.

I've seen a lot of handsome studs in my happily wasted life, but this guy would be right up in the top ten. Once in a while among the background extras in a movie or on television you catch a glimpse of a face that makes the heart stand still—so wedded to the moment, so ultimately right for its role and so handsome in every way that you lose all track of the continuing action on the screen as you look—tranced, hypnotised—at the magic of that anonymous profile.

This was a face that belonged to a cop's uniform. The expression—a little cruel, somewhat sensual and commanding—was the kind associated with a nightstick, handcuffs, and a gun in a holster. It was very male. It was the kind of face that would comfort old ladies, excite virgins, strike terror to gangsters, and give homos the hots. The shadow of the cap-brim pointed up the height of the cheekbones, and cast pale shadows into the flattened planes beneath them, and

darkened the deep cleft in his chin. The carving of the dark full lips was subtle and precise. His hair was black, short, and curly, from what I could see of it; his nose was aristocratic, and standing with a bit of patrician flare to the nostrils under the generous dark eyebrows. The eyes, black and humor-filled now, were lively and full of light. He wore the smart dark blue uniform as if it had been specially tailored to his broad shoulders and trim waist. Maybe it had . . .

The tight breeches clasped his knees, flaring at the thighs like dark and sensual wings. And I noted his knee-length boots, carefully tended shining encasements of mobile flickering black—a kind of special indulgence, I thought, paid for with his own money; for the police department certainly never bought more than leather puttees for its patrolmen.

«You work here, then,» he said. He stood at ease now, his coat unbuttoned and a hand in each hip pocket. His cap had tilted forward again until the edge of the brim almost rested on the bridge of his nose. It made him look very dashing and romantic.

«Yes, I'll show you my—»

«Never mind.» He grinned. «I can tell by your build you're not a clerk in a department store. And you've got the gym's initials on your shorts.» He looked around. «Pretty fair-sized thing you've got there.»

«Yeah,» I said. «You look like you've been using one yourself. That's a good build you've got.»

«I used to swim a lot,» he said. «And work out some, before I did my hitch in the Navy. And there I was a boxer.»

«All comes in handy now for police work, I reckon,» I said.

«Yeah.» He looked at me again with his eyes a little narrowed, it seemed. Then he drew a deep breath, changed position, and said, «How's about that coke?»

«Sure thing,» I said, thinking idly how often a lot depended on the length of vowel sounds. I uncapped a coke at the cooler and handed it to him. I could hardly take my eyes off him, and at the same time could hardly stand to have them rest on him. Once or twice in a lifetime you find out what the words 'animal magnetism' mean. He had it. You could almost hear it crackle.

He walked around the gym with the easy loose-jointed perfectly controlled body movements of a professional athlete, commenting on this or that piece of equipment, pulling a weight here and there, turning a handle. I made some of the usual explanatory noises that I make to a prospective new gym member, but without the hard-sell that usually goes with such talk.

We made almost a whole circuit of the gym, and finally he sat side-saddle on a low leather-covered 'horse'. «You know,» he said, «I really ought to start working out a little again.»

I laughed. «I hear that a lot,» I said. «Well, be my guest.» I waved towards the gym and all the mirrors and pulleys.

«Nah, seriously,» he said, still grinning. «What evenings you work here? And what's the slackest time?»

It seemed a little as if he were interested in me as much as the gym—one of those fleeting featherlight impressions you sometimes get—sometimes wrongly. But it made my heart pump a little faster for some reason.

«Monday, Thursday, and Friday evenings,» I said. «And Thursday's dead. Why don't you come in then?»

«That's my day off too,» he said. «What's it cost?»

I almost said something about just considering it good public relations with the police department, but I didn't, warned off by a small cautionary signal. «Two bucks for the whole works,» I said. «Sun lamp, pool, showers, towels, all equipment.»

«Reckon I can afford that,» he said. He smoothed his hand slowly, almost lovingly, down over his belly, and farther—drawing it away when he got just below his crotch, as if he had forgotten about it, a sort of absent-minded gesture. «Don't want to get a potbelly,» he said.

Suddenly he banged the coke bottle down on the counter beside him. «Damn!» he said, his eyes widening.

«What's the matter?» I said.

He made a wry face and began to laugh. «I just remembered that poor sonofabitch handcuffed down there in the alley.»

He walked rapidly towards the back door. He turned around and flicked his fingers to the brim of his cap. «Take it easy, Mac,» he called. «See you next Thursday.»

His boots clattered loudly on the iron steps as he hurried down the stairs.

*

With my feet up on the desk, I could look down the ramp of my hairy legs to the microcosm that was Steve and Mike's Gym, neatly framed right and left by my dirty gym sneakers. And what a fascinating little world it was, too—this world of the weightlifters, those passionate devotees of bodily perfection, combining in themselves the self-adoration of Narcissus with the desire that psychiatry labels exhibitionism. Here the young male Vestal virgins tended the lamps before their body's superb musculature—and to what end? When it was all done and they looked approvingly in their mirrors, they could not find a suit of clothes to fit them. The coat hooped up around the enormous trapezius of the neck. The seams burst out under the arms, which themselves stuck out from the body in an ape-like slant. All the handsome ones could hope for was the arrival of summer, when they could parade on the public beaches unclothed, doing their handstands and balancing acts and pigeon-strutting for the benefit of all, bringing their godhood to the dirty sands, wasted among the hotdogs and flies.

I watched them at their labors, 'these lords . . . of folded arms, th'anointed sovereigns of sighs and groans,' mixing up a little what Shakespeare said of Cupid and lovers. They really were almost virgins, priests of a new cult of denial—no smoking, no drinking, no sex because it would waste their powers and juices. It was almost a terror for them to sleep without a towel knotted in the middle of the back, for during the night their energy might spill from them. They lived on carrots, greens, raw beef, magic powders and proteins, black-strap molasses, brewers' yeasts, and vitamins. They held arcane dialogues among themselves or with the empty air on the horrors of sleeping pills and alcohol and coffee.

Still and all, the end result of this fanatic devotion to the body was by no means entirely displeasing; and about two out of five of them eventually became available as hustlers. I wiggled my toes in my sneakers as I watched one of them, a particularly rugged and well-developed ace of spades, and dreamed a little black dream about him . . .

This Thursday was no different from any other day, I suppose, except that the hours of it seemed to take longer to pass. I picked up weights and put them in the racks; I picked up damp towels and one or two discarded smelly jockstraps and some old once-white gym socks—we laundered all the discarded stuff and kept it for those occasional visitors who came without a gym-suit . . .

. . . as I supposed the fuzz would, if he really did show up. And while I was thinking about it, I wondered where in the hell the word 'fuzz' had come from and how it ever got to be applied to cops. Peaches had fuzz—and that cop was surely the peachiest fuzz I had ever seen, but what connection there could be in

the gangland or criminal mind between the fuzz of peaches, and the world of the policeman I'd never know.

The crowd in the gym began to disappear, and by eight-thirty it had thinned out to nothing. I was all alone. The radio was a comfort at such hours. When the gym was empty it became a lonesome place. You heard the screech and rumble of the elevator as it swung around the tracks outside, and you heard the noise of cars from the street below; in the gym itself was the motor of the pop-cooler and the chugging of the aerators for the aquariums that belonged to Steve, and that was all.

Just as I settled down to read a paperback, I heard the automatic elevator stop on our floor, and the door opened. I looked up to the half-door entrance where all the strangers stopped first, and there he was.

«Hi,» he said. «I'm Jim McAuley—remember me?»

Sure, I remembered him. I'd been waiting five days for him. I grinned and said, «Hello. I guess we never did introduce ourselves the other night. I'm John McAndrews.»

But my heart was sinking as I swung my feet down and went to shake hands with him, and unfasten the lower half-dor. He was not in uniform. He had on a sport-coat and a pair of black slacks, and no hat on his unruly black hair. I looked at his feet. At least he was wearing his boots underneath the slacks.

«I didn't recognize you for a moment,» I said, «without the uniform.»

He cocked an eyebrow at me and looked quizzically out of the corner of his eye. «Think it does somethin' for me?» he said. I couldn't analyze his inflection.

«Oh, not necessarily,» I protested. But, damn, I was disappointed. And then I began to wonder why.

«Too late for a little workout?» he said.

«No, sure not,» I said. «We're open until eleven. You got a pair of trunks with you, or you want one of our old laundered jockstraps?»

He laughed easily. «No, I been out havin' a few drinks,» he said, «and got no clothes. I'll take the jockstrap if that's all right. I'll work off some of this booze and then take some steam room and a shower and maybe I'll feel better.»

«Okay,» I said, «the joint's yours. The locker-room's back there. Put your clothes in any open one. They'll be safe.» My mind seemed to be full of puns at the moment: could you say that now the joint had been copped?

«Well, okay,» he said. «But I'll leave my wallet here... and this.» He shrugged his wide shoulders out of his sport-jacket, and I saw the nickel-plated pistol hanging in its holster at his belt. «We gotta carry 'em all the time,» he said. «On duty, off duty.» He put the holster on the glass-topped counter. «You watch it for me, will you? The safety's on.»

«Sure thing,» I said. He went whistling back into the locker-room.

Well, he wasn't in uniform, but he did have a symbol of authority with him. I guess that would have to do. The problem of the uniform has always interested me—why some were so attractive and some not. Perhaps it was that a few—like a sailor's—represented a way of life that many people could never know, investing the body beneath the black wool with a strength and bravery and glamor that its owner did not of course possess.

But why was it that eight out of ten homos wanted to make a cop more than anyone else in the world? Their uniforms were often very attractive, but not all that good always. Was it a guilt feeling? Was it the necessity to be dominated or punished? Was it the liking for the idea of being forced to do something, of being psychically raped? Did responsibility disappear under coercion? Or was it just snobbishness? Since cops were generally considered so completely hostile, it would be more than just a single plume in the bonnet to have one—a kind of status symbol in the homo world.

When he came out of the locker-room, I almost let out a wolf-whistle. The

uniform, although it had been informative in suggesting his physique, had deceptively not told all. He had a swimmer's body, yes—but with perfect definition, and muscles showing everywhere. The square pectorals of his solid chest tapered to a flat stomach and sturdy hips. The jockstrap so closely matched the color of his skin that from the length of the gym separating us I thought him at first glance to be naked. His legs were long and strong, darkened on the calf and thigh with hair; and there was hair—just enough for my taste—in the small fan on his chest. He had two tattoos, one on each biceps. On one side was what looked to be a large green, red, and yellow dragon; on the other, a black panther clawed its way up to the deltoid. There was a vague memory in my mind about an article on sailors and tattoos that I once read: if you were a sailor and had one tattoo, all was okay, but if you had two—well, chances are there was a small thing wrong somewhere inside your head . . .

I pretended to read, but I watched him with fascination over the top of the book. He knew his way around a gym all right, and his routine eventually got all of his muscles working. Then he disappeared for a while—to the steam room, I supposed—and I looked at the clock. Ten-thirty, time to begin to close.

I went around fastening windows, and somehow just managed to be in the shower room picking up some towels when he came out of the cubicle. It was difficult to keep my eyes raised to the proper impersonal level when I saw him. «How'd it go?» I said.

«Swell,» he grinned. «Feel like a new man.» He towelled himself vigorously, and then spread the damp towel on the bench while he sat down to put on his socks. He put on his jockey shorts. «I think I'll have a coke,» he said. «You in a hurry to finish closing?»

«Nah,» I said, feeling the old ticker commence to beat heavily again for just a moment. «Nothing on for tonight.»

He picked up his clothes and boots and carried them into the gym, and on through to the desk and lounge area where the pop-cooler was. Then he fished two dimes out of his trousers. «My turn this time,» he said. «What do you want?»

That was almost too much of a question to ask me at the moment, but I swallowed and said «Coke's fine.»

He flung his clothes on the old overstuffed chair in the lounge, and took two cokes out of the cooler, uncapped them and handed me one. «It's all right to be here without any clothes on, isn't it?» he said. «I mean—there won't be anyone else in at this hour?»

I shook my head, negatively. He sat down casually on the divan, sprawling out on it—one foot up on the divan itself, one on the floor—in a widespread leg position that opened him up to view—and took a long pull at the coke bottle.

«Damn,» he said. «I feel fine. Now if I only had a woman . . .»

I locked a couple more windows, and then went to lock the main door to the gym. «Yeah,» I said, noncommittally.

«How about this part of town nowadays?» he said. «Any girls out on the street?»

I shook my head. «Not any more,» I said. «There used to be. South State Street was really a swingin' place. But the mayor cleaned it all up. You still might be able to pick up a B-girl in one of the girlie-bars or clip-joints.»

«Not for me,» he said. He made a face and cupped one hand down over his crotch. «Don't want to take any little surprises home with me.»

«Of course,» I went on, «there's a thousand fruits out on the streets in this neck of the woods—you oughta be able to get one of those easy.»

«Anything at all,» he said. «I'd go for anything at all.»

This time I felt something do a complete—though small—somersault inside my chest. I bent down to fumble with the desk drawer. This was as much of a

come-on from a cop as I'd ever had. And yet there was the dreadful worry: suppose I get so far, and then he says something like «Come on, buddy—let's you and me go down to the station-house.» Still—said another side—he can't do it anymore, not with the new Illinois law. And there was something about him and his free-wheeling sensuality that made it difficult for me to think of him as a cop. He seemed more like a young hood with a cop's gun—and that first time I saw him in a stolen cop's uniform.

I busied myself with some paper shuffling, looking down and not meeting his eyes. «I guess the new law really brought a lot more queers out into the open.»

«Not that so much,» he said. «It just stopped the cops blackmailin' 'em. Made a lot of the 'trappers' mighty mad. Took away their supplemental income.» I looked at him, and he was grinning.

Well, I'd have to make sure he was familiar with the new law, point by point. «I understand,» I said, polishing the desk with a dustrag that I'd picked up. «I understand that as long as it's done in a private place, with someone over eighteen—everything's okay.»

«And no force used, and no money changing hands,» he added. Then he chuckled. «Funny—there's a joker in that money section. A person can receive favors or presents of a non-monetary nature for sex, and still not be a whore. So you can give away a yacht or a Mercedes-Benz.»

I smiled a little, weakly. «How about solicitation, then? I thought the law was strict on that. And how you gonna get anything if you can't talk about it? Sign language? Groping?»

He laughed. «No,» he said. «The solicitation angle comes up just with prostitution for money.»

«You seem to know the new law pretty well,» I said.

«I ought to. It was part of our basic training. That new superintendent . . . damn! Lotsa the old timers hate him, and he's silly in some things. We're told that, quote, when you are patrolling in a sector of minority ethnic groups, you must be very understanding, end quote. I suppose that means that when you get a black bastard with a knife in his hand in an alley, you gotta go up to him and say 'Excuse me, sir, but I know you are a member of a minority ethnic group, and I do not wish to offend you, but I must insist you put that knife away.' Like hell you do. You say, 'Okay, mofo—get the fuck over here against the wall and get your hands up on it,' while you frisk him.»

I laughed more loudly than the occasion demanded. I felt the sweat roll down my back as my indecision mounted. The palms of my hands were wet.

The cop went on. «But when it came to the new law, he insisted we all know it inside-out. Didn't want any suits for false arrest . . .» Then he suddenly changed the subject. «Why do you think I could find me a fruit?» he said. «I thought they were all scared to hell of us.» I imagined I heard a little bitterness in his voice.

«Nah, they really like cops,» I said. «There's a quarter of a million of 'em right here in Chicago at this very minute who'd give anything they own if they could have a young goodlookin' cop.»

He looked puzzled. «Why's that?»

I shrugged. «I dunno,» I said. «Possibly a status symbol. Perhaps because they want to be dominated. Maybe guilt feelings are in there some place. But the uniform works wonders.»

«You mean I'd have to be in uniform to get one,» he said.

«Not necessarily,» I said. «And it'd be terrifying to them if you were. But they'd prefer it.»

His eyes twinkled a little. «You mean it'd sorta be like the frosting on the cake,» he said.

«Yeah,» I said.

He drained the coke bottle and got up to put the empty in the rack. Then he turned and faced me, and put his arm above his head and stretched.

«Well, I guess I gotta go out and look me up some pussy,» he said. «Or something.»

I turned the main switch so that the lights in the gym went off, leaving only the ones in the lounge area still lighted. My indecision had risen to an almost intolerable pitch. I was trembling when I reached for the switch, and my knees literally were weak. So much could go wrong. He had given me all the openings in the world. I tried to project myself into his social life—and wondered what he did for amusement. Did he and his wife, if he had one, associate only with other cops and their wives? Did he sense the coldness of his neighbors if he went into the corner bar, or did acquaintances toady up to him for favors? No wonder he ran around without his uniform.

Suddenly I thought of a lot of things I still wanted to do in life, and wondered if I would still want to after a prison term were over. I wanted to go skiing in Switzerland, and have me an Arab boy behind a dune on the north edge of the Sahara. I wanted to see Paris again, and Rome, and go to Copenhagen to the Tivoli Gardens. I wanted a Roman soldier in the Coliseum on a moonlit midnight. I wanted to walk down the Ginza in Tokyo with a cute little Japanese trick under my arm. I wanted to whip all over the world, like a wild wind blowing. I wanted to go surfing on Tahitian beaches, eat at Maxim's and see the lights of Hongkong on an August evening.

And yet, and yet . . . My mouth was very dry. I wet my lips. He stood there, weight on one leg, thumbs hooked in the band of his jockey shorts, pulling them down a little.

«Uh . . .» I began. He tilted his head a fraction of an inch and I saw a smile move briefly into the corner of his mouth. «Uh . . .» Then I thought, oh, what the hell. «W-would you c-call this a private place?» I said.

He looked towards the door. «Is that locked?» he asked. I nodded dumbly. «Well,» he said, looking at the overhead lights, «if those lights were out so no one could see in, I certainly would call it a private place.»

My hand visibly trembled again as I reached for the switch and snapped it off. Divided into squares by the window-bars, the light from the street fell upon the ceiling. We could see each other quite plainly. The vein in my throat, I noted idiotically, was chugging in exact tempo with the aerator motor on the aquariums.

I picked up the holster with his gun in it. «P-put this on, please?» I said, holding it out to him. «And your boots?»

I could see that he was smiling widely as he pulled down his jockey shorts and stepped out of them. And then he took the belt and holster from my nerveless shaking fingers and buckled it on. He sat in the shadows on the edge of the divan and pulled on his boots.

Then he stood up.

«Well?» he said. «And now what?»

© by John McAndrews

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Täglich ab 19 Uhr geöffnet

Hamburg 1, Kreuzweg 6 - Telefon 24 26 07

Seelsorgerliche Hilfe und Beratung

Freiestrasse 134, 8032 Zürich — Tel. No. Privat (051) 47 78 53

Homoeroten, die das Bedürfnis haben an einem seelsorgerlichen Kontakt oder Gespräch, können sich vertrauensvoll an diese Stelle wenden, wo sie sich mit einem Seelsorger aussprechen können, der sich speziell mit der Homophilie und Homosexualität beschäftigt.

P.A. Rademakers