

My Jimmy

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Objektyp: **Article**

Zeitschrift: **Der Kreis : eine Monatsschrift = Le Cercle : revue mensuelle**

Band (Jahr): **33 (1965)**

Heft 11

PDF erstellt am: **22.07.2024**

Persistenter Link: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-570589>

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MY JIMMY

by RALPH HARRIS

Why is it, do you suppose, that people often become relaxed and contented after a summer shower, when the sun shows itself again and the trees take on a brilliant, almost translucent green, with little diamonds of water dropping lethargically from the leaves? At times like these certain people almost automatically collapse low on their spines upon a comfortable couch and say things they would otherwise have never dreamt of saying.

Such then was the time, and such was my Jimmy.

In the space of two weeks now he would begin evening classes at a local school and he was rather excited about it. Indeed, it was quite a decision for him to seriously commit himself to four and a half years of studious evenings, not to mention every Saturday afternoon. It would mean a complete break with all the habits of his life to which he had grown so accustomed. Not only for himself, but for his young wife as well. And, I might add, myself also. No more Saturday afternoons with him in my apartment; now the lovely Saturday afternoons would be gone. Oh the happy anticipation of his ringing my bell while I looked once more at the table I had set with my best china, the sunshine reflecting in the silver sugar bowl—and those amusing little altercations we always had about kissing on arrival. I'm afraid he was never much for kissing men. Well now he would not be asked to, for it would all be over. Oh I would still see him, an hour here, an hour there. He would make sure of that. Knowing my Jimmy, he would not lose that altogether.

«Now tell me,» I said to him quietly, «what do your parents think of your bold new plan?»

«My parents?» There was a serious, half smile on his face. «I haven't even told them.» — — «But why not?»

«Oh I suppose mainly because Mother is a funny woman, if 'funny' is the right word to use. Strictly speaking, she's not funny, she's more on the grim side. First of all she'd rush about telling everyone that her son was attending evening classes to better his station in life, or something equally as noble. But you see, deep down she'd only be waiting for me to fail in my first year. This would give her just the opportunity she's looking for—to say that it was no wonder; what good could possibly come of this wastrel son of hers?»

«That's rather a contradiction, don't you think?»

«I suppose Mother is a contradiction in herself,» he mused, flashing his bright eyes at me. — — «Oh? How do you mean?»

One finger played pensively in the palm of his other hand as he went on without looking up at me. «Oh—she loves me all right, I suppose. And yet on the other hand nothing would give her greater pleasure than my failing—failing at anything, not just school.»

I looked at him. As though he could read my thoughts he went on slowly. «You actually know very little of my life, don't you. Though we've been so close now for over two years you know so very little about me.»

It was true. Ours had been one of those friendships that prove just how little one can know about those dearest to him. You see, I loved my Jimmy; I had loved him from the moment I'd met him some years ago. And I was not deluded in thinking that he was especially fond of me, that in some way I had become an integral part of his young existence, even though it was something akin to an anchor on a ship.

«I never gave me parents much thought, I suppose,» Jimmy went on. «Mother was always difficult to live with. I always felt her strict Catholic upbringing never gave her a real chance to be happy. She was always high strung and often downright hysterical. Father never played a big part at home. It was always Mother's health which was the main topic. Then everything more or less exploded when my young sister died. She was only eleven years old. When that happened Mother went completely out of control. So they finally decided the best thing to do would be to send me for a year to a nuns' school in the country until she had calmed down. The year at that school was the worst of my life. I was fourteen at the time, and it was a huge boys' school. Good lord, mass every morning on an empty stomach, and prayers and hymn singing practically all through the day. So you see, it was bad enough as it was, but the worst thing was the sadistic pleasure the nuns took in punishing us. Good lord, boys will be boys, even in a cloister-school, but at the slightest provocation we had to hold out our hands and they would beat our fingers until quite often there was blood on them. You could just feel how they enjoyed beating us. Do you wonder that I gave up going to church the moment I was on my own?»

No. No, I certainly did not.

«So when I was seventeen I started as an apprentice. I earned a nice bit of pocket money in my first two years. But I had to hand it all in at home, and they kept most of it. They didn't need the money at all. Dad having had quite a good job. We lived in a house of our own, we wanted for nothing, really. But you see, it wasn't 'good' for a boy to have money to spend. Hell, I was seventeen and eighteen at that time, and like all my other pals I wanted some fun now and then. Naturally I had my pals, but every single one of them I went around with was in my mother's eyes a criminal, and it goes without saying that every girl she saw me with was a tramp.»

The memory wasn't any too pleasant for him, I could see that. After a pause he went on. «It has taken me years to understand Mother's attitude. I suppose deep down she loved me a very great deal, in her warped sort of way. You see, it was an intensely possessive love and full of jealousy. Mother just couldn't bear the thought that I might some day be fonder of someone else than her. Then all came to a breaking point when I was nineteen. My parents still insisted on my being home at nine o'clock every blessed evening. One night I was ten minutes late. *Ten minutes!* Mother opened the front door and the very next moment she had slapped my face twice. I was quite stunned, I can tell you. And when she lifted her hand for the third time I raised my arm in self-defense and by an unlucky coincidence one of my fingernails scratched her arm. Well then the hue and cry started. 'A son of mine striking his own mother!' she wailed. Dad came out and it turned into the most frightful row. You can believe me I never in my life had any intention of hitting my own mother. So when I returned the next night, there she was, stationed imperiously at the top of the stair, hurling shoes, clothes pegs, and various unidentified flying objects at me. Actually I suppose it was all very funny, depending on how much humor you see in Tennessee Williams. Oh she was like a fury. So I slowly took things up and threw them back at her. Not to actually hit her, you understand, and they didn't, just to show her how ridiculous she was acting. Luckily, Dad never showed up. But he certainly acted the next day. My best pal had driven me home on his scooter, and when we arrived at the house we found a neat pile of suitcases and boxes stacked in front of the door. When I rang the bell Dad opened the door just a crack. Obviously he had been waiting for me. He shouted at me that they didn't want to have anything more to do with a son of theirs

who did such disgusting things to his own mother. They never wanted to see me again. So he slammed the door in my face. And, as a matter of fact. I didn't see them again until I got married some years later.»

«But Jimmy, what on earth did you do then? What about that night?»

«Funny to say, but the moment Dad slammed the door my pal and I broke into fits of laughter. It was really too funny for words, all the tumult and the shouting and the gnashing of teeth. My pal told me I could stay the night with him. So we started 'moving'. It took us several trips to get all my things to his home. When we came in from the last trip my pal's parents had returned and kindly offered to take me in. I thought it was pretty decent of them.»

Seeing his cup empty, I poured him more coffee, all the while treasuring the confidence he had in me.

«My parents were terribly narrow-minded in all they thought. The mere word 'sex' would have shaken Mother to her foundations, spiritual *and* sartorial. I often wondererd about that. I mean after all, they had four children. As a youngster I did a lot of—well, you know what youngsters do. One day my father lectured me on 'self-abuse', telling me I was bound for hell if I continued such an evil thing. Mind you, he didn't stop me. But the moment I started living as a boarder at my pal's parents I started having girls.»

There was a pause before he went on. «Now don't you dare laugh at what I'm going to tell you next! I had been piling up images of girls intensely for such a long time that the first time I went to bed with one I couldn't do a thing! Oh, I was furious! But you can be sure it never happened again. The girls seemed to fall for me and I could have most of them for just the asking. Served Dad right, I often thought at that time.»

Suddenly I could not help but feel somehow that his body had tensed up. He bent forward and gave me his typical, penetrating expression that always presaged the dropping of a verbal bomb.

«Now I'm going to confess something *else* to you . . .!»

«All right. Let me have it.»

«I just wonder if you'll understand.» The usual fluidity of his voice had gone.

«But why shouldn't I?»

«You see—we've become such good friends—I don't want to hurt you.»

«I'm not easily hurt—you should know that.»

«Yes, I do, but still—» — — «Oh lord, spit it out.»

I could actually see him take all his courage in his hands before he said in a rather subdued voice, «Well, it's just that you aren't the first man I've ever slept with.»

We looked at each other. It was one of those moments in life when seconds can mean hours, and the speed of thinking becomes violent. Perhaps I had subconsciously been asking myself for a long time the very question he had just answered so simply. I hoped he couldn't see anything of the havoc his words had wrought in my mind. «If you care to tell me about it—.»

«You see, I had been hustling for quite some time even before I got married.»

«How did it come about?»

«When my parents had thrown me out I was on my first job. Naturally the pay wasn't too much. I could only make both ends meet with considerable difficulty. Then a couple of months later I met another pal of mine in a bar. We fell to talking about money, and when he heard I was nearly always short on cash he told me I could at any time supplement my pay by going with men. I'd be a success with them, my pal said. He took me that same evening to a gay bar in town, the first time I had ever entered such a place.»

«That should have been interesting.»

«Oh it was. Then just as my pal had predicted, I had no trouble whatever. In a word, I was a 'success.' So after that, whenever I ran short of cash I'd simply go to one of the bars. It never took me long to find a customer.» Then my Jimmy grinned roguishly at me.

«Some months later I met a very decent old chap. A doctor, he was. Actually he was one of the very nicest men I've ever known. I went steady with him until I got married. I would have continued with him even afterwards but he didn't like the idea. He had a lovely car, and the amount of money he spent over an excellent meal was considerable. He was really a very decent chap and from time to time even asked my girl to join us on one of the drives or for a lovely meal. But you're not going to believe this: I actually knew this doc for nearly two years, and yet we never had sex together.»

«You're right, it does sound rather unbelievable, doesn't it.»

«And yet it's the truth. Whenever I was with him in his apartment all I had to do was to undress. He liked to see me lying naked on his couch while he sat in an easy chair and talked to me.»

«But then—?» I suddenly stopped, feeling I had begun a sentence that had best be left unsaid. — — «Yes? Well what is it?»

«What I mean is—I don't drive a car and I never take you out to luxurious dinners, alone or with your wife. You know I have enjoyed very much giving you some little thing here, some little thing there. I always knew you were pleased. But it's always been, had to be, strictly within my very limited means. And yet—» — — «And yet?»

«And yet you have been visiting me regularly for a couple of years now. That's what I don't understand.»

For a fleeting moment he looked seriously at me, then erupted into his infectious, carefree laugh. «Oh, this is fun—!» — — «What's fun?»

«Your proving again what a blasted fool you are.»

From long experience I knew that to be called a blasted fool by him was actually a compliment.

«How so?» I asked, unable to repress a faint smile.

«Can't you really see the difference between the old doc and yourself? For him I was in a way not real; he never counted me as a person. Not that I minded so awfully in his case. But I need a bit more than that, especially now that I'm married. I want a real friend and that's what you've become these last few years. I know you're a good deal older than I am, but for that matter so is my father who doesn't care two hoots about me . . . whereas you do.»

This, I'm afraid, was rather an ambiguous sort of compliment. He was quick to see the wry expression on my face. With one of his lightning-like movements he bounded from the couch, and the next instant had thrust his mouth down by my ear. «You're the biggest fool I ever met. But let me tell you this once and for all: To be looked at as though you were a piece of statuary may be quite nice, but I much prefer the way you mix it with a couple of other delectable little things. Come on and I'll prove it to you.»

He turned and went again to the couch. There my Jimmy stood, his hands on the upper buttons of his shirt, looking fiendishly provocative.

And thus we passed from astonishing confessions to astonishing actions. And all because of a summer shower? Oh I think not. No, I'm afraid I know my astonishing Jimmy *much* better than that!

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