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ACCIDENT

By JAMES H. RAMP

At least I called it an accident. Now that I've had time to mull it over, I'm not so sure. Is there a destiny that shapes our ends, rough hew them as we will? Old Bill said so, and he was a wise customer. Well, my end is quite shapely, thank you. But it is not on exhibition, thank you again.

I had usual sex education by my parents. None at all. Grapevine gutter gossip took care of that. At thirteen I knew where babies came from. At fourteen, what booked them for arrival; at fifteen I knew I could book passage for a baby. Not that I wanted to. There were four squallers and diaper mussers in our family younger than I. Each one unjointed my nose a little more. I learned to love them later . . . A boy is a boy. Just where and when the chemistry of growing supplies him with judgment and discretion, varies. I've known adult males who lacked these virtues. Somehow, perhaps by accident, I learned them early.

High school was my trying ground. I guess it is for most adolescents. There are so many giggling, female hot-pots to tease and titillate the *atha-letes*. I was a *atha-lete*. Football, basketball, track. Not bad, either. Dad provided me with the frame. I put the muscle on it. But I was a freak—a square. I was a BRAIN. I preferred books to broads, learning to loving-up. And I had a problem. It showed in my pants, though I wore a tight strap. When most of the gals cooed me, I got eye treatment below the belt.

This cooled me. I always figured it wasn't what you had but how you used it. Later I was to learn that both men and women are phallic worshippers. The stallion seems to be our golden calf.

Don't get me wrong. I've never denied that Onan was a relative of mine, or that I didn't like women. *Women*, I said, not girls in heat. Instinct, I guess. I learned from *knowers*, not noddle-heads. And it was . . . pleasant. Not world shaking . . . but nice. Not prostitutes. In my opinion, boughten pussy is for the pussilanymous. Virgins are for virgins. I have never maimed a maidenhead, nor intend to.

What about marriage? Now there you have something . . . but what is it? I've studied the lets and hindrances of sacred monogamy . . . having my own bed and broad, but I'm not sold. At least I wasn't sold for a good many years. I was a freeloader all through the University and a World War. When I shucked my gussied officer's jacket for a try at sanity, labor organizations intriggered me and I joined the ILWU. I goudged my way into public relations and began the study of genus *homo longshoreman* and *warehousman*. Downright interesting. Knothead, most of them, but hell-bent for double overtime. And some of them for Communist doctrine. Share the wealth. Hell! Most of them were paid fantastic wages. Their bosses held transportation in an iron, blackmailing fist, and squeezed with the threat that no ship, no train, no truck could move if they did not get their sevenses. They got them, and the consumer, including themselves, paid the bill. But no matter. This is not a lecture on economics. It has something to do with an accident. Not a *physical* accident . . . yeah, but wait! I guess it *was* physical . . . since it had to do with the heart.

As a public relations *Counselor*, one of my jobs, was to deal with the trouble makers in the union. To persuade them to see the light of dictatorship. Else who would pay for the Rolls Royce, uniformed chauffeur and town place of the Big Chief and his sycophants? The Mafia were amateurs, compared to them.

So Tony was siphoned in to me

«He is a iggerunt meat-head wop,» opined his foreman, who had made the complaint against Tony, and came to my office to lay the ground-work for Tony's expulsion from the union. «He works awright on the regular shift, but he don't want to do no overtime at double pay. Says it keeps him from enjoyin' the Opera, Simphonies, Ballets . . . and all such like. MIGAWD! No real man goes in for stuff like that!»

«I do,» I confessed. «Might do you some good too!»

«Me? ME! When I am off work I want a bottle an' a broad! Any he-man does. Wops is all queer, if you ask me.» The foreman flexed his stringy muscle.

«I didn't ask you. Why do you hate Wops?» I asked experimentally.

«I hate anybody who ain't Amurrican» declared the foreman. «We foundered this here country, and there ain't nobody got a right to weasel into this Union who ain't Amurrican. It's bad for wages . . . and well . . . anyway, Tony is a turd.»

«Any particular kind? Horse, goat, dog?» I grinned.

«Goat, sence that is the stinkin'est! vowed the foreman.

«Well, Billy . . . send him in.»

«My name ain't Billy!» objected the foreman. «If you gotta know, it's Humphrey. The guys call me Hump . . . your *know* . . . with the ladies?»

«Ain't it nice that you know some *ladies!*» I agreed. «Where's Tony?»

«Out there.» He thumbed my waiting room. «Should I kick his ass in?»

A word will do. Keep your kicks for your wage slaves,» I suggested.

I don't know what I expected. A figure of fun, I guess. A slap-stick's rendition of what he considered a Wop stevedore would be: a wild haired, gesticulating, accent-uated figure of Latin fun. I did a double-take when Tony walked in and closed the door.

«Mr Cooper,» he said politely, «I am Antonio Brentano. You wanted to see me?»

I guess I gaped like a stuffed sturgeon. Then I remembered my manners and offered my hand which was gripped and crisply dropped. I gestured a chair and grinned feebly. «I didn't want to see you. It's part of my job to investigate complaints made by the union. But now that I see you, I *do* want to see you. But I don't *believe* you.» Tony bristled. «I haven't told you anything yet!»

'Haven't', mind you. Not: 'ain't told you nothin'. No Neapolitan patter.

«No, Tony . . . I mean Antonio . . . *Mister* Brentano. I didn't mean I wouldn't believe what you haven't said! I mean I can't believe you're a stevedore!» I stuttered.

«I'm big enough,» he offered gently.

«And husky enough.» I remembered his hand gripping mine. «*Why* are you?»

«I am a laboring man by choice. I have expensive tastes,» he explained. «I like hard work, but not maneuvered overtime for double pay. I just happen to be on the gang that gets the gravy. Gravy is too fattening when there are plenty of other guys in the union who don't get any.»

I gawped at him and he chuckled.

«Didn't you *know*, Mr. Cooper? Certain foreman—gang bosses—hog the overtime for their men. All they ask is half of the double overtime. Matter of ten dollars an hour per man.»

«Lot's of grease in his share of the gravy, eh?» I grinned.

«Actually he only get's ten percent of the take. The rest to the Big Chief to lubricate his Rolls,» Tony explained.

«Ain't graft wonderful?» was all I could manage to say.

«Not in my book,» he grunted. «I want no part of it, but I know too much for them to kick me out.»

«They might drop some freight on you,» I suggested.

«I've taken care of that, Mr. Cooper,» he said quietly. «Will that be all?»

«Far as my mediating job is concerned—yes. For me—no!» I surveyed him slowly: youth, masculinity, the dark beauty of his face and I felt a stir of envy. «Mind telling me how old you are?»

«Thirty,» he said. «And . . . yes, I went to school. And yes . . . because you have already been told . . . I like good music, opera, ballet, art. These are the expensive tastes I mentioned.»

«Are you married?» ((Now where in the Hell did that question pop from?)) «Excuse me. That's none of my business.»

He smiled. «Why not? If we are going to be friends, you'll know I'm not. I should tell you I know much more about you. Perhaps that's none of my business either, but men gossip almost as much as women. One of my brothers was in your outfit overseas. Another played football with you at the University. I'm the only one who didn't change his name to Brent . . .»

«And you were in the Korean War,» I remembered. «I also listen to gossip.»

«I have better things to remember,» he said, getting up.

«Wait! . . . you said we were going to be friends,» I blurted hastily.

«I said *if* . . .» he corrected.

«No *if* about it!» I insisted, unwilling to let him go.

«I'll think about it,» he said, pleasantly enough. «We might be friends if we have enough in common. And I don't mean war. I prefer to forget that, and I am not the parading buddy-buddy type who can't forget it.»

«Nor am I,» I assured him. «Now: when am I going to see you again?» (I sounded so urgent I was embarrassed.)

«Most any time, nights, week-ends,» he studied me gravely. «Can't guarantee to be home after seven, in case you telephone. My *cultural pursuits*, you know.»

«And you won't share them?» I tried to sound lonely . . . and by God I did!

«You have a tux, I'll tie your opera tie,» he promised solemnly.

When he had gone, I still saw him, sitting across the desk from me. I shook my head to remove him. I even closed my eyes, and he was there, behind my lids. «Goodbye, Tony! I said *goodbye!*» I muttered. «I've got a report to write on you, and I can't do it with you sitting there.» He didn't budge.

«All right! Come have a drink with me!» I grabbed for a non-existent hat and slammed out. He walked beside me down the block and into a bar.

«What will you have, Tony?» I asked.

«My name's not Tony,» said the bartender. «What will *you* have?»

«I was talking to my friend here,» I said, indicating Tony.

«What friend?» growled the bartender. «Mister, we don't *serve* drunks in here!» I turned . . . and Tony wasn't there. Neither was I . . . very long.

What was this? An obsession? I consider myself to be a pretty level-headed guy, but Tony had bugged me. Why? I'm not given to self analysis. Introspection ain't welcome. So I squirmed. Even in bed. When I woke from screwy dreams and reached to see if Tony was there. Why in Hell should he be? On the other hand . . . ?

I settled for the obvious and telephoned before seven.

«You . . . you . . . *culturing* tonight?» I managed dryly when Tony answered.

«Depends on you. Right now I'm busy making dinner for you,» said Tony casually.

«For me? But you didn't invite me!» I yelped.

«I had a notion you would call. How do you like your steak? Better get over here quick if you want before-dinner amenities.»

«Whores' ovaries? I like mine fishy. Do I dress?» I babbled.

«I believe the police insist on it. I think there's an ordinance or something about southern exposure. Just come comfortable.»

I almost made a crack, but thought better of it.

Tony lived in an old flat in North Beach. (Still does.) I'm not given to hyperboles, so excuse it, please. You ever walk into a poem, a perfect production of Mozart, a famous painting where you knew you belonged? No questions asked? Well, I did! Tony said: «Come to the kitchen. This is a family meal. Can you toss a decent salad? What will you drink?»

I sniffed the kitchen. «Nothing to dull my palate. Bring on the makin's for the salad. Garlic, or I'll picket you!»

«Nothing much to eat. This is one of my frugal days. Steak with sour cream and chivees on your baked potato. Salad. Grapefruit *au rhum*. Sour French bread. Suit you?»

«You also read minds?» I jibed as I started making the salad. «Where's the promised inebriation and fancy fripperies called appetizers?»

He brought light, dry wine, anchovies on squares of toast, artichoke hearts with ginger and mayonnaise. We sat in a boothed dinette. He surveyed me silently.

«Do you know what you are about to do?» he asked, finally.

«I'm about to eat and drink . . . I hope!» I parried feebly, reaching for an anchovy.

«Bob,» he said sharply, «don't lie to me!»

«All right! I won't. Yesterday I couldn't get rid of you. You wouldn't leave my office. I took you to a bar and made a fool of myself when you vanished.»

«So!» he said softly. «That's good.»

«Good? What's good about it. You kept me awake all last night, and when I reached for you . . .»

«You reached for me? And then what happened?» inquired Tony.

«What the Hell do you think happened? You were not there!» I snapped.

«And if I had been . . .?» he asked sweetly.

I froze . . . and then melted . . . a little. «I dunno,» I confessed weakly.

«Well . . . until you do, or have an idea, we'd better eat the salad you've been mauling.»

I never knew what a good salad-maker I was. Maybe I'm prejudiced, but it had everything. Including an undefined excitement . . . I guess I ate steak. I remember something chewy and delicious . . . and the tart of sour cream. I don't remember coffee. But I did remember eyes. And of all things, *blue* eyes . . .

and black lashes . . . and a mouth I would have died to claim. Later, I thought this was part of a dream. When? Sometime during the late evening Tony ushered me out, gently, firmly. «You have some soul searching to do, friend!» He saluted me, and I achieved my own bed without help. It was a wakeful and uneasy achievement. I wasn't drunk. On wine. We had talked. Likes and dislikes. Women, of course. And men. Experiences, appreciations, opinions. All carefully impersonal.

Tony had asked: «Do you know what you are about to do?»

At the moment I had evaded his question, because I didn't *know* what I was about to do. Later, in bed, I pondered his meaning. Was I unwilling to come to grips with it? A man, I thought, irrelevantly, shouldn't have a mouth like a . . . magnet. Or should Tony have one? Or did it only affect me that way. What would I have done—the night before—if I had found him—when I reached? That is . . . if he had been willing? Willing to do what? Hot excitement swelled. I veered away and began examining the time we were together. Usually I do not have a photographic memory, but I had total recall of Tony's every word, gesture, smile. To such an extent that, as I said before, I don't remember much about eating. Or what I said. I must have acted like a zombie. Somewhere, near the threat of morning, I slept and wetly dreamed.

Day brought approximate sanity and I went, unwillingly, to work. When Hump called to ask if I had persuaded Tony to be a good boy, I suggested that he get another man to work Tony's overtime.

«But damn it, it wouldn't be *overtime* for another man unless he had been working on another gang during the day.»

«Then I think you can spare your cut,» I said coldly.

«He told you about that?» Hump muttered angrily.

«In confidence. I'll keep quiet if you quit pressuring Tony,» I promised.

*

The object of my fixation telephoned shortly after five and my heart bucked at the sound of his voice. I said I didn't think Hump would bother again. «But I will,» I added.

«That a promise, Bob? Tony said blandly. «I could get another ticket for the opera tonight.»

«Early dinner at the Dial. I'll pick you up soon's I rush home and don my deodorants,» I blathered.

It was top-coat weather . . . and we were a little late. No time for the check-room. Lights were lowering as we found our seats, and the orchestra was preparing to begin to commence. Opera: *The Barber*. It wouldn't have mattered to me if it been one of Wagner's whooping crane o-pusses.

Seated, with top-coats lapped, my knee proposed to Tony's and was accepted. His hand came to mine, and we . . . or at least *I* felt bubbling bliss in my blood. We sat silent through the intermissions, shoulders, things, hands glued together. And I wondered if he was only being kind! I sighted . . . and he looked at me, smiling. The damned opera was far too short. In my car, on the way to his flat, he spoke once. «Come up for a night-cap?» I nodded.

Once there, I didn't know what to say . . . or do. Tony brought drinks and I opened my mouth . . . and closed it.

«That's right, don't say it . . . yet,» he said softly. «Far as I am concerned,

there is more to this than just . . . bed.»

«Of course!» I croaked, and oiled my rusty throat with liquor. «But how . . . why? I mean I've never . . . Oh Hell! You know what I mean.»

«I know,» he agreed. «But we are almost strangers. Let's not try to build a house on sand.»

«Would you . . . I mean . . . could I kiss you?» I asked, desperately.

«If I kissed you now, I couldn't let you go home tonight. That might be disastrous,» he suggested.

«Well . . . you're too big for me to assault. I guess I'd better say goodnight.» I got away fast.

But I couldn't keep away. We went to the beach on Saturday, drove to Asilomar for Sunday dinner, but my control was sufficient—as long as we were not alone in a room—to keep my hands off Tony. We talked endlessly, exploring our private worlds. Sunday night when we parted, I said: «One more day is the limit of my endurance. Frustration is wrecking my gonads and all the connecting machinery. Manual operation brings no relief.»

Tony regarded me solemnly. «Think I'm made of iron? I tried a woman and couldn't make the grade.»

«So did I,» I confessed miserably. «She cussed me for an impotent bastard.»

«Tomorrow night, then?» queried Tony.

«Why not tonight?» I insisted.

«I haven't digested all our talk yet. Bob . . . I've lost my heart . . . I know, but my damned mind keeps yakking about the risk of not finding what I need,» Tony explained.

«And what do you *need*?» I whispered.

«You, of course. But more . . . I need assurance that this will work for us. Once I commit myself, there's no turning back, for me.» Tony glanced at me briefly.

«Nor me,» I conceded. «You'd better parachoot out of the car. I can't take much more.»

«Your apartment or my flat?» murmured Tony, getting out.

«Your flat,» I decided. «It was there I went into orbit. I should tell you I will not be interested in food *per se!*»

Monday was a bitch of a day. I made my pert secretary cry, insulted some superiors and abused some inferiors. The clock crawled. Not my heart. It cavorted. Fortunately my possibles were out of sight under my desk, so I was decent if not comfortable. Work's end found me a scalded cat. I don't mean *brought* me one. Yeah! And I was also a turpented dog. You know what I mean? No? Too bad! I mean I was in haste. Tony's door was a-jar and I banged in, busting the jar. So was his bedroom door, and I busted that. I don't know how I got out of my modesties. I discovered later that I tore some of them. No matter. I was aiming for his lips, and I zeroed in, somehow.

You want to know something? I'll never be nearer Heaven again. He sort of gathered me in . . . and I mean *in!* Totally and absolutely in. Men don't faint. I know! I know! 'T'ain't fitten, but I came damn near it. I had better things to do . . .

Wellll . . . it's been ten years, and if you ask me, that's a mere second in time. Where do you go to burn incense to the Gods? And I don't mean Jehovah. He wouldn't understand.