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A TRAP FOR TIGERS

by WARD STAMES

Telephones are instruments of the devil. They put you at the mercy of every idiot with a dime in his pocket. Mine rang at nine in the morning, an hour before I am used to getting up.

«I bet you can't guess who this is,» said a voice.

«I don't like guessing games this early in the morning,» I growled. «But I happen to know anyway. It sounds like Danny from Chicago.»

«How'd you ever know that?» he asked.

«By your voice,» I said, my irritation growing a little softer around its hard center.

«Where are you?»

«In San Francisco,» he said. «Down at the bus station.»

I finally managed to come fully awake. «What the hell are you doing out here?» I said.

He laughed, the easy laugh I knew so well, and remembered with delight. «Just takin' a trip,» he said.

«You going to be here long?» I said. «Where are you staying?»

«No place yet,» he said. «I thought maybe you could tell me one.»

«I can't very well put you up,» I said. «My little house has only one bed, and that's a single one. You'd have to sleep on the couch.»

«Easy,» he said.

«Well,» I said, a little doubtfully. I was momentarily upset. My privacy is a very precious thing to me. And then I remembered his laughing voice, his blue eyes, the Caesar haircut that went so well with his being a basketball-player, the loose-jointed walk of the handsome lanky young animal, and I thought what the hell: I can stand it for a while.

«If you want to,» I said, «you can come stay with me. But it's the couch for you, ole buddy.»

«Sure, I won't mind at all. »

And so I gave him directions how to get to my place near the Golden Gate Park, and lay back in bed for a while thinking, remembering...

... remembering his initial clumsy attempts at being a hustler in Chicago, coming to me with a «recommendation» from another guy I knew, and the fright that paralyzed him that first time he had ever been with a man. When he was dressing after that encounter, so long ago, something dropped from his pocket. It was a small-sized meat-cleaver, and I picked it up.

«What the hell is this?» I said. «Did you think I was going to kill you?»

The fair blond skin turned pink. «I just thought I'd be prepared,» he said.

I laughed. «You'll know me better the next time,» I said.

Danny. He came from a broken home with a vanished father, had spent three years at Boys' Town, and wanted to be a minister. That was the thing that nearly threw me. «Don't you think,» I said when he told me, «that the preparation you're getting in my apartment is hardly the thing that might lead you into such an occupation?»

He shrugged. «I'm tryin' to save up enough money to go to the seminary,» he said.

Well, that ambition didn't last long. It was broken by things other than my «hiring» him. But despite his coming around every week for a few bucks, he

seemed to maintain his aloofness, his . . . purity, if that does not seem to be a paradox. As a hustler, he needed quotation marks around the name of his calling. Like so many of the young heterosexuals, he made the plank, as the French say. It was about as exciting as going to bed with a sack of potatoes. Flat on his back—all passion concealed, or non-existent; all reactions achieved only with difficulty after an hour of labor. It was hardly fun. Under my repeated physiological instructions he got to the point, finally, when he might make a tentative movement of his own devising. He was under my preferred age group, below the age I liked, being only about twenty-one. There was no experience in sex behind him—certainly none with men, and very little with women and girls. And he was full of the big talk, the impossible dreams of the untalented young. There was only his long-legged charm, his strong slender hands, the feeling that here was something to be molded, to be set on the right path, to be helped over this temporary money-making scheme of his, which netted him hardly enough to be mentioned.

I suppose the thing that really fascinated me, however, steeped in evil as I am, was the fact that he was one of triplets—and identical ones at that. He showed me pictures of his two older brothers (he was the youngest by three minutes)—one of them a paratrooper, one in the army, and they were, as we used to say in Ohio, the spittin' image of himself. As chance arranged things one winter night in Chicago, they were all three in town together. And they came to my place, giving me one of the oddest experiences I ever had. When they were all undressed, it was like being surrounded by three mirror images. There was no way to tell them apart with their clothes off—save that one bent left, one right, and one pointed straight up. And Danny, secretly amused, I think, had arranged it all for me as a special treat . . .

After about six months of seeing him, I got a jolt. There was a buzz at my door one day, and I pushed the button to let the caller in. He trudged up the flights of stairs, while I bent over the bannister and hollered, «Who is it?»

No answer, but the footsteps came on. As he rounded the last landing, I saw his face. It was a tough face, handsome and square-jawed, with a deep cleft in the chin. I recognized him from the pictures Danny had shown me—the older brother, whom they called JD, for John David. The triplets were lanky and lithe and very tall—rangy you might say—but this one was compact. A heavy beard-mark gave a kind of blue male magic to the high cheekbones and the face with its fascinating planes. He was solid, and looked dangerous. I liked him on the spot.

«I'm JD,» he said. «Danny's brother.»

«Oh, yeah,» I said, quite confused. He was twenty-eight years old and used to be a racing motorcyclist. He was in a neat dark suit, with gleaming cordovan shoes, but years of life-courses at the art institute had taught me how to undress a person by the clues you saw even through the clothes. From the hairs on the backs of his big hands and fingers, and the beard-mark, I saw the hair on his chest, tick-matted; the muscular legs darkly covered, and even the black curling hair on the knuckles of his long toes. I appreciated the excellent definition of his muscles, the hard square chest, the flat belly.

I invited him in and we sat down.

«I'll come straight to the point,» he said. «I'd like to ask you to lay off Danny.»

«Lay off!?» I said violently. «I didn't go looking for him. He came to me. And he's twenty-one. I suppose I don't have to point out to you that in this

state you can have experiences with anyone who's over eighteen, and it's legal.»

«Yes, I know,» JD said. He looked a little unhappy. «It's just that we think Danny ought to be getting a job, and as long as he's . . . er . . . doing what he is, he won't work.»

«He gets little enough from me,» I said. «He's not worth very much in his chosen field.»

JD made a grimace. «There are others,» he said.

«Perhaps they pay more,» I said. «What're you doing—making the rounds of all of them?» And then, because he was so attractive and looked so male and so much more experienced than Danny, I began to soften considerably. «Look,» I said. «The damage was done before he started this game. Something's either wrong at home, or he's fighting the same thing in himself. I don't know.» I did—but I wasn't saying, for Danny had told me how the silver cord of his mother's making was choking him, and how his big brother's heavy-handed aggressiveness and bossiness was smothering him.

«But you haven't anything to worry about from me,» I said. «I'm leaving Chicago. I'm going to move to California, and I'll be out of everyone's hair.» Pity I'll be leaving you behind, I thought, but didn't say it.

«Will you promise me you won't see him again?» JD asked.

I laughed. «I have never called him or sent for him in any way,» I said. «He calls me, or pushes my bell without warning. Sometimes at very inconvenient moments,» I added, thinking of the few occasions when Danny had caught me with someone else.

«Well . . . » JD said.

«Forget it,» I said. «I won't have anything to do with Danny again. But you'd better do a little looking deeper if you want to get him back on the straight and narrow, headed for the seminary.»

JD got up. He looked so tough and masculine standing there, his feet well apart, that it nearly broke my heart to remember, as Danny had told me, that he hated queers, that I could never have him. I thought I'd take the chance anyway.

«Uh . . . » I said. «If you ever get to California, look me up.» I smiled at him.

The look of loathing on his tough handsome face was just what I wanted. I treasured it for several weeks, and it enchanted the fantasies of my solitude for many nights.

*

Danny had not changed much. A year had filled him out a little, but his youthful enthusiasms, his pointless sad little jokes, were just about the same. His immaturity remained with him, as mine did with me. Most of us never grow up. But Danny had managed to maintain the things we others lose early: the qualities of wonder and appreciation and excitement that vanish all too soon with the prison gates of life closing upon one.

We did the town, by daylight and by dark. Seeing San Francisco through his eyes, the eyes of anyone who did not know it, was almost as good for me as my first trip there. Privately I always thought of it as the «magic city», and called it that a lot. It was as phony as I was, but there was an engaging devil-may-care frivolity to its falseness. Even the tourist-trap parts of it remained charming. To me there were three great cities of the western world: Paris, Rome, and San Francisco. And of all the cities in the states none could, in my opinion,

rival the magic city by the blue bay... In a curious way, it was the death-wish city, too, for here flocked those who were for one reason or another seeking the end of the life, whether by actual self-destruction (and what could be more dramatic and final than a leap from the center of the Golden Gate Bridge?) or by slow degrees, through alcohol or drugs, for the city led the nation in ailments caused by drinking. And there was always the fear, deeply buried in the subconscious, that old Mother Earth would suddenly convulse as she often had before, and slide the whole city into the bay.

Danny and I rode the cable cars, visited Fishermans' Wharf and Ghiradelli Square, walked through Chinatown, and did everything that the tourists always did. And then at night there was the curiously rewarding comfort of lying close to him, smelling the young sweat, and doing what I had to do, driven by my inner fire, when a healthy young clean-limbed animal was beside me in the same bed. And always afterwards, he went back to his own couch.

Two or three days passed in the most pleasant of diversions, and then I began to sense something amiss. So much of his story—why he had suddenly quit his job, gone to Dallas with one other of the triplets, come on to California—began to fall apart. I caught him in little halftruths, or incomplete ones. Something was being omitted. And a telephone call one evening, while he had gone out to the drugstore, filled me in.

The voice was not familiar, and yet there was something teasing about it in the back of my head. He introduced himself; it was JD, calling from Chicago.

«Have you seen Danny?» he asked. And because my basic impulse is always to tell the truth when caught off guard, I could not help answering yes.

«Is he coming back home to Chicago?» JD asked.

«H—He hasn't said anything... about it,» I half-stammered.

«Is he there?»

I began to get control of myself. «No, he's not staying with me,» I said. «He's somewhere in a hotel downtown. I don't know which one.»

ID coughed. «I suppose he told you that he was married four months ago and that his wife is two and a half months pregnant, and that he just ran away from her?»

It took all my acting ability to say casually, after such a thunderstrike, «Oh, yes. He told me all about it. Seems that there's a bit of in-law trouble,» I added. «On both sides.»

Isn't there always? It was a lucky hit. «There might be,» JD said. «I wish you'd tell him to call home, will you?»

«If I see him again,» I said. «I haven't seen him for four days now.»

«Did he say how his money was holding out?»

It was all gone, that I knew. I'd been giving him some. «Not very well, I guess,» I said. «He's been looking for a job.»

«Well, I'd appreciate it if you'd tell him to call,» JD said, and we said good-bye.

I hung up the receiver, sweating. Gahdamn that kid! And gahdamn JD and his elephant's memory. Suddenly things looked a little grim. To have relations with another man in Chicago where it was permitted was one thing; to have them with a young runaway husband in California, or with any man, was another.

And here I was, innocently involved in a dirty little domestic situation—well, not so innocently, of course. I reflected a while on the entrapment of

youth—how when it is least prepared to withstand the imperial commands of its young blood, it is most easily caught. I remembered my own escapes from women, and then tried to think of the name of the animal which—when a leg is imprisoned in the jaws of a trap—will chew the leg off above the snare, and escape. A fox, I guess. With a charge of wife-desertion hanging over him, possible extradition, divorce, and alimony, Danny was much like the legless fox. He would be hobbling for the rest of his life.

I was very calm when he returned from the drugstore, grinning and happy as usual. And very slowly I entered the subject.

He denied nothing. «I just couldn't stand the naggin',» he said. «Not only Della but my mother. And as soon as we were married, Della changed. She wouldn't watch TV any more; she wanted to be asleep by nine-thirty every night.»

«Have you no friends in your family?» I asked. «Are they all against you—childbride, mother, JD, brothers?»

«There's Grandmaw,» he said slowly. «But she lives in Indiana. She's always for me.»

«The parents are the enemy,» I said; «the grandparents the friends. It's always like that.»

«What do you think I oughta do?» he said. He looked miserable, hunted.

I made a little shoulder movement. «I don't know, Danny. I suppose—if I'm your father-image, I'd have to tell you . . .»

«He ran away just after us triplets were born,» Danny said.

«Yeah, so you told me,» I said. «Well, you know what you ought to do. You ought to go back and face it. But it's hard. It's a problem.»

«I'd like to stay out here,» he said, «and get a job and then maybe if Della and I got away from mother . . .»

I gestured impatiently. «Maybe,» I said. «It all depends. Do you love her?» And then, before he had a chance to answer, I went on: «Or do you think you're a clubmember too?»

He didn't answer the question about Della. «I don't know whether I'm gay or not,» he said, his head lowered. «Maybe I'm . . . a mixture.»

«A headshrinker couldn't have put it better,» I said sardonically. «We all are.»

We dropped it there since we couldn't settle it at all. But I moved Danny out and got him a room in a small hotel nearby. Then when the phone calls continued—from his wife, his mother, and JD, I said I didn't know where he was.

But every time I saw him, which was every day, I kept boring in a little deeper. He tried to find a job, and couldn't. And gradually the task was made easier for me, because working on my side were the hard facts of life in San Francisco, facts his irresponsibility kept him from thinking of: too many people, not enough jobs. His money dwindled, was gone. He was absolutely dependent on me, and that brought him over to my bed more often. Too often, in fact. I tired of his passivity, and longed for the pneumatic-drill personality that teenagers have in dirty stories. The burning of sex in him was hardly even a feeble glow. Some people catch fire when they hit the bed; they roar with flame; they consume themselves at the stake. Danny's lassitude and reluctance would never even singe his partner, and as the nights crept by, I began to experience something of what a necrophiliac must go through. The only difference was that at least Danny's skin was warm, not cold as corpse-flesh would be.

And then one morning he made his announcement. He showed up with a check, the last from his Chicago job. «I guess I'll go back,» he said. «Will you hold this for me?»

«I think you're doing the right thing,» I said. «It'll be hard, but your grandmother will be there to help you over the first difficult days. And Danny—put on an act. Pretend to knuckle under to your mother. Say you're sorry. But the big laugh on her will be that inside you can still keep your hard core of rebellion if you want. You can handle 'em that way.»

Once the decision was taken, he relaxed. He wanted to buy a Stetson hat, and have a tattoo. We designed a coat of arms for him, and then I went along to old Pete Swallow in Oakland to have it put on. And the last days were fun.

He decided to leave on a Monday. On the day before, we went visiting. I took him to the house of two far-out male whores, both painters, both living marginally—as so many did in the magic city. They put him in boots, levis, flannel shirts, and motorcycle jacket, and we all went to the Tool Box, and then to the Levee for dinner. We saw nothing but gay ones everywhere. Danny's eyes bugged out as if he had swallowed a billiard ball. A lot of people kneed him, and wanted him. He was a new face. But he always said no.

«Why?» I asked him at the Tool Box. «That's a goodlookin' young stud there. He wants you.»

Danny looked embarrassed, nursing his single bottle of beer. «It's the last night,» he said. «Guess I wanta save it for you.»

And wonder of wonders—that night he caught fire . . . just a little, true, but enough to be gratifying. He even put one of his lithe young arms around my neck, and in a world where hardly anyone kisses any more, he kissed me, full on the lips. And from then on—well, there was only a faint echo of the jack-hammer at work, but that night was the best of all.

*

The house seemed empty and cold when I returned to it. Even the stereo could not penetrate nor destroy the chill ball of vacuum that filled the room. As he got on the bus, he had hurriedly written down his phone number on a scrap of paper. And then, he was inside, and I was standing outside mouthing words at him through the window (and wishing the bus would leave because I hated farewells), I started to light a cigarette. The flame of the lighter nibbled at the scrap of paper and burned out the three middle numbers. The last I remember of him was his trying to signal me, with held-up fingers, what the number was. And then the bus pulled out, and I went home.

The fog rolled in, heavy that night. It blurred the street lights and swirled in ghostly waves up the windy street. And in the puddle of light from the floor-lamp, I sat alone, listening to Mozart, my fingers holding the charred paper. I could get the number again easily enough, but somehow the burning—accidental though it was—had been symbolic.

The house creaked in the wind. I pushed aside the curtain and looked out again. There were little waves on the flat surface of the fish-pond below my window. It felt like rain, and I was desolate. Everything worked in me to produce a kind of eighteenth century gothic mood—as if I had been invited out that night to sup with Lord Byron and the Lorelei in Count Dracula's castle, drinking from a chalice made of a polished skull-pan while the lightning flashed and the wolves howled among the Caucasus . . .

Never admit that you miss him, I thought. You must not ever fall in love. The heart is dead; it lies in a nothing-land, exiled from its hot and living chamber. Pull the antidots around him in your brain; seal him off from the rest of you. And comfort yourself with the thought that the men come on and on . . .

The sudden sound of the door-chime fell into the black pool of my loneliness like drops of silver. And who, this late at night . . . ?

I turned on the outside light. It was a man, but through the frosted glass I could tell only that it was not Danny. The shadow was shorter. I opened the door.

«Hello,» the guy said.

It was JD. The shock was great.

«I'm looking for Danny,» he said. «May I come in?»

I stepped back from the door. «By all means,» I said. «Give me your coat.»

He took it off and handed it to me. His black curly hair glittered with the cold diamonds of the fog that had settled in it.

«Sit down,» I said. «I'll get you a drink for a bad night. What'll you have?»

He had the grace, power, and balance of a well-trained athlete, as he settled his strong body into the black leather chair. «Bourbon, if you've got it,» he said.

My hands were trembling as I fixed the drink, but he couldn't see them behind the kitchen wall. I took it back to the living-room and handed it to him. He was the sexiest stud who had been in my house for a long time. An aura of physical magic flickered darkly around him.

«Thanks,» he said. «I need it.»

I sat down too. «So you came all the way to California for your baby brother,» I said, sardonic to the end.

«Yes,» he said. «Do you know where he is?»

Yes,» I said. And then I grinned. «What'll you give me to tell you?»

He scowled. «What do you mean?» he said. «Money?»

I laughed. «Nope,» I said. «Just a teaspoonful of nectar.»

He looked puzzled for a moment, and then he smiled—a broad smile, making his handsome square face even more appealing. The light gleamed on his white teeth. He set the drink down on the end-table and bent forward. He untied one shoe-lace and pulled his shoe off, wiggling his black-socked toes. Then he untied the other, and pulled it off too. He looked up then at me, still grinning.

«You'd make a heluva blackmailer,» he said. «You'd never get rich.»

He stood up slowly and untied his slim dark necktie and pulled it off, and after that his coat and shirt. I saw at his neckline the dark curling man-hair I had known would be there, the powerful shoulders and biceps, the nipples of his broad chest pointing against his tee-shirt.

There was a lazy sensuality to the movements of his strip-tease. And then he was finished—shorts, socks, everything. The powerful lean buttocks had a neat and almost oriental hair pattern, running down from the small of his back, growing darker as it descended.

He sat down again in the chair and picked up his drink.

«Why didn't you just come straight out and ask me before you left Chicago?» he said. «There's nothing I like better, if you really know how.»

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