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ARE YOU AVAILABLE?

by JAMES H. RAMP

(Conclusion)

Hank smiled, not pretending to misunderstand. «Lou is my lover . . . and my business partner,» he explained gently. «This is in confidence, of course.»

«But I don't understand!» Jason protested. «I've never heard . . .»

«Oh yes you have. You read newspapers. You know the law.»

«All right, so I know, but I don't know of any men made it work on a permanent basis.»

«Want to meet some?» — — «Why should I?» Jason countered.

«For the good of your soul. A man loves you. Think on it. A *man loves you!* Here's Lou with Martinis.»

After dinner Jason tried to argue, but Hank said: «Go home and think about it. Remember the stevedore who offered you his life by giving you my name and address. I know you won't do anything to injure him, because he is a divorced man—like yourself, and, like yourself, he is lonely. You have much in common. He is not just a common stevedore, believe me.»

«But I couldn't associate with him!» Jason protested.

«How do you *know?*» Hank grinned. «And who's to know? He has a home of his own where he has weekly poker sessions. You do not need to identify.»

«You're talking about Jack Andersen, of course?»

«Who else? Fine package of a man, isn't he? Jason, must both of you grow into sour, frustrated old men? Go home and lie awake on it. If nothing else, be gentle with Jack. Remember, he loves you. Oh, I know, at the moment that seems impractical, but savor the idea. Look him over once or twice. He's all man and a yard wide.»

After a restless night, Jason decided not to wait until his assignment to a ship Jack's gang was loading. That might be a week, two weeks, and it wouldn't wait. He remembered Jack's statement: «I need you. You need me!» and it clamored, even in his uneasy dreams. Finally he reached for the bedside phone and called Hank.

«Your friend, Jack Andersen didn't give me his telephone number . . . What is it? O.K., thanks! I've got it.»

A sleepy voice answered his dialing «Hello?» — — «This is Jason Smith.»

«Oh yes Jason . . .» — — «Davidsen gave me your telephone number. Andersen, I think we should talk about . . . this.»

Jack hesitated. «Guess you must know how important this is to me?»

«All or nothing?» Jason suggested. «Maybe it is the same with me. Anyway, this demands exploration. Are you willing—without commitment?»

After a long silence Jack said: «No, I'm not willing. You come to me, sure and willing. No experiment. Sorry. This means too much to me. Make up your mind.» He cradled the phone.

Jason tried to go back to sleep. Something strange here, he thought. Men *dedicated* to a way of life and love. It didn't make sense . . . or did it? He tried to shut Jack out but he remembered the husky guy on the dock who said: «Will you be my friend?» He groaned and flopped about in bed, unwillingly conscious of his sexual desire. Why did the big bastard have to be so stubborn? They could at least get to know each other better. How in Hell could you say you loved a man without knowing any more about him than that he was physically desirable? Life is not built on sex alone. Temperament, habits, attitudes, intelligence. No, he couldn't accept a crash union with Jack. On impulse he telephoned again. «Hope you'll pardon my waking you again . . .»

«Who's asleep?» Jack muttered.

«I called to say I've been bending my brains and have decided needing each other is not enough for a workable union. We need to know much more about our personalities. Don't you agree?»

Jack hesitated. «What do you suggest?»

«That we live together without commitment or sex while exploring the possibilities of success.»

«You're right, of course. I have a house. Three bedrooms. We could get a houseman to cook and clean.»

«We can discuss that later. Personally I think we should have total privacy, so that we can talk frankly without whispering,» Jason suggested.

«And I might want to kiss you,» Jack chuckled. «When will you move in?»

«Tomorrow evening about seven, if that's convenient.»

«Roger!»

*

When Jason arrived in a taxi with two bags, he said: «Left my car in the apartment house garage. Forgot to ask if you had housing for it.»

«Yes, I have a garage, off the alley, but no car. In fact, here's the key—and a house key. Your bedroom and bath are upstairs on the right. Excuse the cook. Dinner in half an hour.»

Jason, entering the kitchen, sniffed appreciatively. «Dinner smells good!»

«The test is in the eating. Liquor's in that cabinet. Choose your poison. I want a Scot on a rock.»

When the meal was over, Jason patted his midriff. «How a big ox like you learn to be a chef extraordinaire?»

«I married a broad who couldn't scorch water without boiling it,» Jack explained.

«Well, let's cleanse the dishes. I think the subject of conversation should be our exwives—or how to be castrated without knives.»

At bedtime, Jason stirred and stretched. «Not being a head-shrinker, after all this revealing talk, were we inadequate husbands, or were our wives bitches?»

Jack grinned. «I think we were reluctant dragons. We tried to conform to heterosexual standards . . . and couldn't.»

«You continue to amaze me! How do you know so damned much . . .»

«Without a formal education?» Jack interrupted. «I'm a reading, thinking guy. May I kiss you goodnight?»

Jason shook his head. «I want you to, but I refuse to be stampeded. Instead, I'll lie awake with Balzac.»

«I have first claim on him,» Jack protested.

«Then I'll have a fistula,» Jason said ruefully.

*

The next evening they talked about boyhood and high school adventures into sex, parents, lets and hindrances—all the conditioning that leads a budding man into the restrictions of society.

«It wasn't a sense of morality that made me conform,» Jason confessed. «I wanted to be successful, and I realized I couldn't go against established mores. Not that they were right, in my mind, but because they were practical.»

«When I left high school I entered the Merchant Marine for two years. Men away from women, except in the ports of the world. Must confess I am—was not a whore enthusiast. Still, the casual sex between hungry men at sea wasn't attractive, either,» Jack said. «I wanted something more than a furtive fuss-up in the fo'c'stle. Fact is, I wanted love.»

«Same here, at the University,» Jason confessed. «In my last year I was Captain of the football team. I shared beds with various men when we were traveling, but never ventured anything, even when invited. Or propositioned.»

«Right about there you should have been psychoanalyzed,» Jack opined.
«Maybe, but I bulled ahead, dedicated to succes. Now it seems rather unimportant.»
«What is more important?» Jack said gently.
«You, and what you offer me. Think that is a sudden decision? It isn't! I have been looking for you—all my life long. Forgive my doubts, but I had to be sure!»
«And are you sure?» Jack demanded.
«Most important to me right now is: are you *sure*?»
«You wouldn't be here if I wasn't sure,» Jack said quietly. «Now—will you kiss me goodnight?»
«Let's have the good night first. A goodnight kiss means: 'sleep well'. Who wants to sleep?»

THE FRONTIER

by O.F. SIMPSON

Wild horses won't drag from me the name of the mountain pass, though some of you may recognize it—and recognize Mario, whom this story is about. All I will say is that it has Italy on its south side, and is one of those where the two frontier stations are adjacent; the collection of passport and customs controls, petrol coupon offices, money changers, filling stations, carpark cafés and all is a confusing one—we poor English, who don't have such things in our own country and are unversed in the exact shades of uniform worn by the officials of different countries must be forgiven for being terribly muddled by the general bustle of it all.

In 1964, driving alone over this pass from the north, I had parked my car and gone to one of the cafés to buy a postcard of the place for a friend of mine who «collects» passes. Standing in front of the postcard stall, evidently also intent on postcards, was a swarthy young Italian of about 25 in very old scrubbed russet-coloured jeans and a blue lumber jacket. He stood casually with his weight on one foot, back to me, presenting to the world in general a supremely good pair of full muscular dimpled buttocks. I believe in acting on the spur of the moment, so as I passed him I brushed the back of my right hand gently across his bottom—he could notice it or not, as he liked. He did like, and turned on me at once a most attractive white-toothed smile, then arranged gracefully and cunningly for me to see his front—his chest was bare under the lumber jacket—in a pose which showed me quickly all I need to know. I am lucky enough to be able to be very choosy over the young men I use for sex, but I doubt if I have ever achieved a pick-up quite so instantaneously; I thought him a young animal of very fine natural athletic grace, and there was something about his directness and self-confidence, which had an element of modesty and dignity about it as well, which answered my own tastes exactly. To cut a long story short, I drove him in my car over the pass down to a mountain village on the Italian side where he had hired a room in a farmhouse; and here under the low ceiling, on a huge floor divan which took up nearly all the space, we made male love together with no holds barred for what I will always consider