

SETH

The warm, thin spray wet the two, then trickled down the rusty shower drain. Though it was early in the morning, there was no water-pressure, nor a hint that the faucet marked hot, would achieve anything more than tepid. Still, this large truck stop shower room, intended for the use of long-haul drivers, was better than the minuscule plastic stall in their rented trailer.

They soaped themselves down and shook the last drops from a tube of shampoo onto their sandy colored hair. The younger one, Seth, kept his body turned away, answering over his shoulder as the older one, Racey, reviewed the work they had done the last few days, the work done yesterday and, like the good list maker he was, the work to be done today.

“But,” he continued, stepping from the shower, turning off the water, “we hafta get new rings in the truck, she's smokin' terrible. Mr. Pierson complained we smell up his driveway.” The boy, shaking water from his shoulder length hair, replied with a few low “Uh-huh”'s and reached back for the towel.

Racey looked at the outstretched arm. He noted the lean emerging muscles.

“Hey, boy, you want this, you want the towel? Here you go!” And with a wide grin he snapped it at the youth's bottom leaving a pink welt on the smooth white skin of the boy's ass. Seth yelped, faced around and lunged for the towel, covering his exposed groin with his other hand.

“Ha,” Racey crowed, “You don' have to be shamed, I seen what you got. No different from no other man, so don't be such a little girl about it.”

Laughing, striding across the room to his clothes, leaving puddles, he tossed the damp towel back to the boy.

Seth's mother had left Rayce when Seth was four years old. Of her, Seth had only his given name and faint memories; the scent of Lilac, a gentle touch. There had been times in his young life when that scent...a woman at a house where they asked for work, a waitress leaning over their

table, her damp skin perfuming the air with Lilac...brought his youthful breath to a momentary stop.

Racey was twenty-three and unemployed when she left. They were living in the small South Carolina mountain town where he himself had been raised. He took on day labor in order to take care of the boy and himself.

Now at thirty-six, he had an established routine. At the onset of early frost, he and the boy headed south through Georgia for Florida and Route 1, the Dixie Highway, and what old timers called the "Florida Gold Coast." There he could find work. At winter's end, before Florida cooked up with humidity and heat, he drove back to the cool Carolina hills, the backwoods as it was commonly known, where he was the local handyman. He would enroll Seth in school, but it was usually too late in the term for any real impact on the boy. Seth liked school but were it left to the flip of a coin, he'd rather be outdoors with his father than in a stuffy classroom.

Sturdy, tightly built, Racey was a strong, short man with muscular legs. Feet planted, he could turn his torso in any direction and like a machine bend to any angle; a perfect workman's body. And, there was plenty of work...light carpentry, yard work, sometimes picking oranges or grapefruit, his least favorite.

After their shower they worked the morning cleaning up their client's property and were now slouched in their pick-up truck eating lunch. Racey had parked at the ocean in one of the limited spots reserved for locals--those who could not even dream of owning a house facing the sea but had the right to use the beaches. Seth was absorbed in a book while Racey scraped at his fingernails, glancing over every few moments seemingly trying for Seth's attention.

As Seth read--a sea-going adventure by someone named Patrick O'Brien set in the 19th century and bought for a dime at a yard sale--a movement caught Racey's eye. Nodding toward the beach, he said, "Look-ee there."

A well put together young woman had leisurely risen from her mat

and was walking slowly down to the water's edge. Racey made a kissy sound and looked at Seth with a grin. Seth glanced up, murmured, "Mmm," and went back to the book.

The story puzzled Seth. A sea captain and the ship's surgeon, best friends, both in love with the same woman, yet addressing one another as "My Dear" in ordinary private conversation. Was it the language of the time, Seth wondered? Was there something else?

The woman Racey was eyeing looked up toward the road. Her gaze touched momentarily on Racey who reflexively stretched himself, clasped his hands behind his neck and raised his elbows high. It was a stunt that tightened and spread his torso, forcing his biceps to swell, his nipples to press against his T shirt. But, the image of his badly cut and messy hair, his grimy arms and hands came sharply to mind and he eased out of the pose.

Glancing again at the boy next to him he un-wrapped a sandwich and popped open a can of beer then asked, "About yesterday? What took so long to finish the Pierson job?"

"Nothing, it didn't take that much time."

"Longer than usual on clean up." Racey crumpled the wax paper wrapper and tossed it overhand from the truck window, sinking it clean into a nearby wire mesh basket.

"Pierson invited me in for a soda...so I went."

Racey looked at the boy, who had looked away. He rubbed his stubbled beard with callused fingers, looked out the truck window at the trash-filled basket then dropped his glance to his boots. Finally, he asked, "What else did he want?" To break the silence. he kicked his boots together knocking loose the caked mud.

In a nervous voice edged with unease Seth said, "What do you mean, 'What else did he want?'"

"Well," drawled Racey, "did he try to touch you? Try to git in your pants?" He gave a little laugh, as though he might be joking, although he wasn't.

Seth faced away not wanting Racey to see him flush red despite his tan.

The fronds of the tall palms lining Ocean Drive brushed against each other, languid in the heated air. Distant cheers from a volley ball game sounded from down the beach. Looking up at the trees, Racey said quietly, "Look, boy, there are some guys, guys like Pierson, who go after other guys. Some are even married with kids, but what they really like best is to fool around with another guy--sometimes they even have a regular buddy for it." Here he paused as if choosing his direction.

"So...if it gives a guy pleasure to look at your dick, maybe touch it, what's wrong with that, who's hurtin, huh?" He glanced at Seth.

Seth was silent then stammered out, "I dunno...nobody I guess." He locked his eyes on the horizon, on a distant steamer trailing smoke. The sound of surf thundered in his ears though today the sea was gentle. He and Racey shared everything, were open with one another. But this was different. Seth almost didn't recognize Racey's voice.

"O'course there're some that make you want to look away, those you don't wanna know, they's different."

Reaching over, Racey took a fresh pack of Marlboros from the open glove compartment. Breaking the seal, he tapped the pack on the steering wheel, pushing a single cigarette out and up. His lighter lay on the dashboard. He flicked it twice, lit up and sat back. A bit of breeze, smelling of salt and coconut oil, wafted across the beach. It mixed with the cigarette smoke in the truck cab then swirled out and up the Drive.

"It don't hurt nobody, just a bit of life experience...right?" And with dirty thumb and forefinger, Racey picked a fleck of tobacco off the end of his tongue.

Seth stared at the dashboard, at the open glove compartment door which served as a shelf for his sandwich and soda. He rubbed his fingers hard along the seam of his jeans making white moon-like circles on their dirty tips. His mind was churning.

"So...anyways, if this Pierson guy tells you he wants to fool around, wants to see your dick, I don' see no problem." Racey turned, looked straight into Seth's face and, with a tight smile, added, "We can always use the extra bucks!" then leaned back, sprawled in his seat. Seth suddenly felt

frozen in place, his arms and legs rigid.

“No sittin’ around havin’ drinks while they’s talkin and talkin like you all gonna be best friends,” he added heatedly, “you ain’t gettin’ paid for sittin’ around yakkin.’ They usually have pretty fancy places, fancy stuff.” Racey gave a brief snort, looked out into the harsh white sunlight watching some grass clippings spin up in a tight, tiny wind devil. “But don’t you take nothin,” he added. “That’s real trouble.”

Seth tightly swallowed the remains of his sandwich. He glanced at his father, heartsick at the implications about his father, insulted at the suggestion that he, Seth might steal. He doubted that Racey had been attracted to men, certainly not in the way Seth suspected that he was. His fledgling sense of judgment had flared at the mention of Pierson. He wanted to keep yesterday private; he didn’t want to hear about any adventure of his father’s.

Pierson, late thirties, athletic, had come out onto the lawn where Seth was cleaning up the last grass clippings. Seth had noticed Pierson watching from the windows of the house from time to time as he worked the yard.

“Where’s your father?” Pierson asked Seth, who had been watching from the corner of his eye, his pulse quickening, as the husky, good looking man, hands in pockets, ambled over.

“He’s setting up at our next job. I’m cleaning up here.” Seth said, eyes now on the lawn, his face flushed as he continued raking.

Pierson smiled and glanced around. “It looks like you’re nearly finished. When you’re done why don’t you come up to the house for a cold drink? A tall chap like you should drink a lot of liquid in this heat. You don’t want to sweat it all away. You come on up now as soon as you’re done.”

Then he strolled off to the back of the property.

In about half an hour, the work completed, tools put away, Seth tucked the tails of his sleeveless blue work shirt into his jeans, ran fingers through his unruly hair and went up to the door. Pierson answered with a smile and a big, “Hello,” inviting him into a cool foyer. Seth could see large

wood paneled rooms opening from it. Pierson gestured to one lined with books and Seth went in, Pierson following. Pierson asked what he would like to drink and from a small bar at the side of the room quickly brought Seth a Pepsi and what looked to Seth like a gin on the rocks for himself. They sat silently in the airy room, the wood paddles of a fan turning slowly above.

“Tell me about your work?” Pierson finally asked and Seth made short, shy replies as he glanced around at the various objects and furnishings which Pierson was quick to observe. Seth had never been in such a well-appointed room or such a large, roomy house for that matter.

“Go and take a look at those old flintlocks on the table. They came off a shipwreck out by the Bahamas. English man-o-war they claim. War of 1812.”

Though the guns brought to mind the novel he was reading, Seth resisted, somehow sensing that what Pierson really wanted was for Seth to stand up and move about the room. However much this realization both surprised and excited him, he didn't budge.

Seth was 17 and looked much like his father--the same wide shoulders and narrow waist. Even the same coppery skin and blond hair. But Seth's limbs were longer. His appearance was more that of a swimmer than a laborer. He suspected he was attractive.

Unable to get the boy out of the chair, Pierson switched topics and talked about New York and his summer home on Fire Island. He asked if Seth had ever been there, hinting that Seth might enjoy working there for the summer. There was always a need for 'landscaping' as he put it. He mentioned other trips he had made remarking to Seth that travel was "Broadening."

Seth had been waiting for the reason he was invited into the house. Now, thrown off, he tried to understand. Did Pierson want him to work for him? To drive him somewhere? Why should he, Seth, want to go somewhere...and where? He looked openly at the man, the confusion that tumbled through him showing on his face.

Responding to the unasked question Pierson smiled, got up and walked to the window as though examining the grounds. Then slowly, still

talking, he came around behind Seth's chair. He touched Seth's shoulders.

Seth stiffened, tucked back his legs beneath the chair but didn't pull away.

After a moment of lightly resting his hands on the shoulders, Pierson began kneading.

"You must get sore muscles the way you work," he said, spreading his fingers wide on Seth's upper back, massaging through the faded blue shirt. "How does this feel? Good?"

Seth twisted, bent his head back, his hands clasping tight to the chair arms, eyes nervously seeking Pierson's eyes which would tell him, stay or run.

"Uh...yeah, good. It feels good."

Pierson continued the massage while rambling on about the different places in the world that he had been, what he had seen and the people he had met, young men like Seth.

Seth told himself to relax and tried hard to listen to Pierson's words.

Leaning over Seth's shoulder, Pierson carefully undid the top buttons of the shirt, then slipped his hands down under it, down onto Seth's shoulder blades, caressing them, then around to Seth's chest, his fingers brushing Seth's taut nipples, causing the start of an erection.

Seth, stunned, quickly covered his crotch with his hands.

Pierson stopped massaging and came around the chair to face Seth. Reaching out, taking Seth's hands in his own, he pulled him to his feet and lightly kissed his lips. Then slowly, gently he covered Seth's lips with his mouth.

Seth struggled to pull away, but then, wildly aroused for the first time ever, he thrust himself forward in a trembling, overwhelming rush of want and confusion ramming his own body tight against Pierson's. Hungrily he opened his own mouth. They remained entangled, Seth's tongue probing, hands skidding wildly over Pierson's firm body, unsure of where they should land, what he should touch.

Pierson gently broke away. Putting his arm around Seth's shoulder, he led him deeper into the house.

Now here in the truck, Seth was struck by how distanced he felt from his father. He stared out through the windshield. Everything beyond had somehow shifted, blurred, changed form.

Afterward in the foyer, Pierson had taken out his wallet and offered some bills. "A pair of cowboy boots?" he had said, laying the money on the hall table. But Seth turned away and left the house ignoring the money.

As a boy and into his teens he had "fooled around" with other boys. It seemed innocent, all the boys did it. But now he was unsure of himself around men. He was attracted to them but, until Pierson, he hadn't known how to act, what to do.

Seth knew, if only through intuition, he would not see Pierson again. He was pleased that he had left the money. He saw clearly the difference between Racey and himself. A long held breath slipped from him in a soft expulsion.

Racey heard it and asked nervously, "So...what d'ya think, boy? There's no problem is there? You see any problem with what I said, you jus say so and we forget the whole thing."

Seth shook himself, then answered his father, who was clearly waiting for a reply. "No, Pop, no problem...don't worry about it. Let's go, let's get back to the job and finish up at Miz Cook's."

He began to gather up the lunch scraps, his book. He'd best keep Pierson to himself, he thought. He'd tell Racey someday, not now but someday. Maybe.

"When we get there do you want me to bag up the leaves in the backyard?"

"Yeh," replied Racey, smiling at Seth as he started the engine and backed out of the parking slot. "Yeh, boy, you do that. I'll gather up our tools and then go up to her house for our money."

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