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SHORT STORY WORKSHOP 7813

Margarita G. Smith

second story:

SPARK IN THE SAND

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*I have hunted long years for a spark in the sand;-
My eyes have hugged beauty and winged life's brief spell.
These things I have:- a withered hand;-
Dim eyes;-a tongue that cannot tell.*

Hart Crane

A wizened, unshaven old man was buying several newspapers; inebriately joking with the news dealer, permitting the handful of people waiting for various commuter buses to watch him amusedly. The commotion allowed Ralph Lundstrom, a man who was nearly thirty-five, to stare at a younger man, a boy really, without feeling guilty. Ralph had seen the boy before, but couldn't place him. Perhaps he was another commuter, going to take the same bus, and Ralph had seen him on it before; or he could be one of those boys who are always just hanging around the Washington Bridge bus station. Then again, maybe the boy worked as a messenger; many messengers went past his office to the mail room, some repeatedly. Ralph looked at his watch. Ten minutes more. He picked a small piece of skin off his right index finger. His fingerprints were exaggerated from Platex and Blanketwash solutions, the deepest cracks permanently blackened from sixteen years of offset printers' ink. He put the piece of skin in his mouth as he looked back at the boy, bit it, and spit it out.

The boy must have recognized Ralph, too, because he obviously let Ralph stare at him. The boy, who Ralph thought must be sixteen, stood in such a position as to ostensibly be watching the old wino, but apparently was really watching Ralph, only peripherally, so as not to make Ralph nervous. The boy put his hands in his blue jean pockets, spreading open the front of his red windbreaker, a move which afforded Ralph an

enervating view of the boy's flat tummy and a little bulge at the crotch that really did seem to get less little as they stood there.

Ralph realized the boy was beautiful. Only slightly taller than Ralph, the boy would have to be called slender, for the word skinny just couldn't apply. Ralph thought of the difference between the two words as poetic. There was a boyishly masculine aggressiveness about him, capped by a smudge on his cheek and by his soiled blue jeans. On the other hand, the boy also had an androgynous childlike quality, capped in turn by the way his flannel shirt opened three buttons down to reveal a hairless pale chest; and by his hair – long straight blond hair – which fell directly to his shoulders and then turned, some tips pointing inward to his throat and chest, others pointing outward to his softly squared shoulders. The beauty that Ralph saw and felt in his heart and mind was informed with a simplicity which suggested the boy was sculpted by a Praxiteles, or composed by a Satie. To Ralph, such a monument would be unapproachable, but his long suppressed desire to sleep with one of his own sex had been aroused. It was as if such a night might be somehow greater, more significant, more felt, than the women he had slept with.

The boy finally moved, to go over and sit on a waiting bench, while Ralph watched a video monitor to see if his bus had arrived on the loading platform upstairs. When he looked around to the waiting bench, he saw the boy stared at him now, unashamedly wide eyed, eye to eye. Ralph felt embarrassment and the need to look away. He knew he was making a mistake creating a monument out of a boy, an incident so insignificant. If his whole life span were to be seen as the nothing it really was, then what could this tiny possible sexual encounter be measured as? A grain of sand. Unimportant to the world, but of glowing eternal pleasure to him. Ralph looked back to the source. The boy still sat there, still stared at Ralph. Their eyes locked until Ralph, perceiving a smile, began to feel dizzy and turned away. His mind already made the boy's smile more radiant as he looked up to the video screen. The bus had appeared on the platform upstairs and he wanted to go up right away. Perhaps the boy would follow, if he were riding the same bus; perhaps not, but Ralph couldn't afford to wait another half hour for the next bus. Not for a phantasy, not tonight. After paying his fare, he waited for the boy, who never came. Resolving to be different the next time, he feared his unlikely adherence to his resolve. As the bus rode across the George Washington Bridge into New Jersey, Ralph Lundstrom resented his haste.

He had always resented or disliked himself. As a teenager, he had despised his attraction to other boys, and so had dated and courted boyish girls. Then, over the years

and without being aware of it, his hatred had turned to his attitude of inaction. Now he accepted his desires, but still he hated himself, and he wanted to like himself, be proud of himself.

The darkness of the autumn air flowing past the bus windows, and the tiny stars when he looked up, mingled with his thoughts. How could he like himself more? Why did Kay like him? She wanted to marry him. Ralph liked her, too, even loved her, but he was afraid of her because he wasn't honest with her. He wondered what she would say if he told her how he felt about the young men in his dreams, or what she would say if he told her he felt apart from her, even when they were completely together and when it was ending and she seemed to be holding her breath and then sometimes, only sometimes, she would make short, very short, abbreviated noises, almost like popping,"uh, uh, uh."

As the bus rounded the first corner turning off of the unendingly straight highway, Ralph Lundstrom was roused, as he always was from whatever reverie he might be in, for he lived not far from the highway himself, and he got off the bus at the first stop past that corner.



Ralph thought Kay might stay Saturday night, after the savory chicken dinner she had prepared while he had watched the World Series game. During dinner, however, she told him of some preparations for a birthday in her office on Monday which she had to initiate. There always seemed to be some birthday or anniversary going on and Kay was always involved. After dinner Kay sat on the thick forest green carpet in Ralph's overwhelmingly green and wood-toned living room, trying to rearrange Ralph's lp record collection alphabetically, by composer. Ralph began to feel moody as he watched her during a commercial in a *Twilight Zone* rerun he was watching on TV.

"If you stay tonight," Ralph began, in a voice barely louder than the television, "we could make babies."

"Oh, Ralph," Kay replied, only slightly angry, "I wish you'd stop using that euphemism, because you know I don't want to make babies. I'm somebody in that office, not just a secretary, and I want more before I give it all up for babies."

"I didn't mean to be euphemistic," Ralph said, in the same tone as before.

“Of course not, you’re very tricky, and precise, with your euphemisms and allusions. You should be a poet.”

“I’m a printer, not a writer,” Ralph said, turning back to his program, which concerned a small boy whose thoughts controlled the world around him, thereby terrifying his parents and neighbors. Ralph wished he could control people by his thoughts. He smiled as he enjoyed the impishly evil characterization of the child actor Billy Mummy. Ralph tried to see every program Billy Mummy was in. He thought the boy was a natural actor, besides being very cute – the kind of boy he’d like for a son. “We could go to ball games together,” he said aloud.

“I prefer a sonata to a ball game,” Kay replied as she slid the last stack of records into the last gap of shelf space. “In fact, I would prefer the Barenboim-Chopin number two, which is not here, I notice.”

“Oh, that’s an import record. I’ll get it at *Discophile*, in the Village, Monday. I just didn’t have time last week.”

Kay stood up, straightening her beige pants suit as she spoke. “Well, if you’re sure you’ll have it, I just might come over Monday evening and let you take your turn cooking for me. But right now, I have to get going,” she grinned, poking Ralph on the nose with her finger, “or I’ll never finish in time tomorrow.”

“One of these days,” Ralph said, in a put-on cowboy accent, “I’ll be able to figure on you staying for good.”

“As soon as you can figure on a date, partner,” Kay responded, in the same spirit.

Ralph quickly enjoined in his normal voice, “One can figure that easily, by subtracting nine months from the date of the blessed event.”

Kay laughed, “You set me up for that. I’m getting out of here before I get tricked again. I’ll see you Monday.”

“See you.” After Kay had gone and Ralph saw that *Twilight Zone* was over, he decided to go directly to bed. He could do the dishes sometime Sunday.



Ralph was glad to get out of the office Monday afternoon. Legal had insisted on the cheaper electrostatic masters on a job for two thousand copies even though he had told them they would get tone. Now they wanted it done over with Itek masters at Printing's expense. Being a "service" department, he had to cope with the "customer's always right" philosophy, but he remained adamant, because he had warned them. At any rate, it was a pleasure to leave for the day at four-thirty. With all the pressure, he had forgotten to call Kay, to remind her he'd be an hour late on account of the record. Well, he thought, he could always call her at his place after five from a pay phone in the Village.

Arriving at *Discophile* on West Eighth, they were out of the Barenboim-Chopin record. "Oh yes, we had it, but we sold it. We shan't be getting another copy, unless you'd like to order it."

"How long will that take?" Ralph asked.

"Usually about six weeks."

After Ralph had left his name and address, he realized how little time it had taken. Kay would not be at his place yet, so he couldn't call her for fifteen minutes or so. He decided to walk around the Village to check it out. He had heard that young gays hung out around Christopher Street near Sheridan Square, and he wanted to see for himself. Not that he could take advantage of any situation tonight, but he wanted something... to know... about the quality of life. Christopher was across from West Eighth at Village Square, and the northernmost entrance to the West Fourth IND station was just south of Eighth at Village Square. Ralph headed up to Christopher, then started west towards Sheridan Square. He walked too close to a spindly tree to avoid a pair of bearded hairy hippies and stepped on a piece of dried dog poop. "Shit!" he exclaimed, and the hippies looked back at him.

One of them said, "Exactly what it is, man." and they laughed. Ralph cleaned it off on the curb easily enough, but it was annoying – and to be castigated by a pair of neuter hair-balls! As he got to Sheridan Square he saw one figure of interest, but otherwise it seemed rather dull. Of course, he could go further west on Christopher, and it was very early. They only come out at night, the expression went. Ralph made up his mind. He would look at this one up close, and then go. The one lone boy was about seventeen, with short bleach-blond hair, a silky gray shirt, and pink trousers that were tight around his round little ass, and very baggy around his ankles. Ralph looked at his eyes as he

walked slowly past, over to a shop window with steaming knishes and corn on the cob. The gay boy looked in the window, too, and then at Ralph, all of a sudden saying, “Hi, Superman,” an apparent reference to Ralph’s resemblance to the late actor George Reeves.

“Hi,” Ralph said, turning to leave.

“Don’t you want a blow job, Superman?” the boy said, stepping in front of Ralph.

Ralph didn’t like this. The boy was wearing pancake make-up and acting swishy. Ralph didn’t want this to happen. “No.” he said, trying to avoid the boy. But the boy persisted.

“You’re a closet queen if I ever saw one,” the boy shouted.

“Don’t call me that,” Ralph growled, pushing the boy out of his way. The gay boy fell on his pretty pink ass.

“That fool accosted me!” the boy yelled to a cop who had just appeared.

“You shutup and move,” the cop bellowed at the boy, “and you come with me,” They walked to the north side of Sheridan Square, stopping on Christopher. “Sorry I had to yell at you. You don’t have to tell me about that guy. I know him.” the cop said to Ralph. “I feel the same way you do about these people, but I’ll tell you something. I got to keep the peace around here. You remember the riots these people had a few years ago?” the cop asked, pointing his arm eastward, “right up there, half a block. Now look at the sign on this door.” The sign read MATTACHINE. “That’s their club, they think this is their turf and I got to keep the peace here. So why don’t you just go home, okay?”

“Yes. Yes sir. Sorry,” Ralph mumbled, and he walked back towards the IND station. After he was on the A train, he remembered that he didn’t call Kay. She would have to wait. He could call her from the Bridge bus station. He’d still make the six-o-five, still be home by six-thirty. They could go Chinese, and then he would tell her that they could get married. No kids yet, no babies, her way. He would give in, he decided. They would get married soon. That was what she wanted.



[Commentary by the instructor, Margarita G. Smith]

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I felt a tension in this. I think Ralph Lundstrom must be one among so many, many more men. I believe this because I believed Ralph Lundstrom, although he could have been pretty incredible. I think of the MATTACHINE SOCIETY as being highly respectable but perhaps the cop would not – but cops are not all such clichés now. Also, I have always suspected the men who are the harshest toward homosexuality are the ones who feel threatened. However, the effect that comes through to me with that scene is Ralph's inability to speak up or rather at this juncture, he decides that he can't face "coming out of the closet."

I find this a compassionate and effective story. I just have a little trouble believing that Ralph can't confront his bisexuality or possible homosexuality in this day and age. I know of at least three happy marriages where the husband's bisexuality is a secret from no one – and maybe oneday won't be even from the children. In all cases, they are good fathers and good husbands.

MGS