

The Naked Matador

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Running-waiting, actually - in Key West, I thought of a story I'd read in high school: Hemingway's "The Killers." The appearance of the diner did nothing to change my feelings.

All of the seats at the counter were occupied, except for one on either side of the woman near the middle. I moved to the one at her right.

"This seat taken?" I asked her.

"No," she said, so I sat down.

She wore a beige raincoat, a red and blue scarf completely covering her hair, and large, smoked glasses. It was a cloudy day.

"What's the soup?" I asked her.

"Conch."

I ordered some and a club sandwich.

She had several cups of coffee. She glanced at her watch. She turned toward me.

"Vacationing?" she asked.

"Sort of," I said.

"Staying near here?"

"Not too far."

She smiled.

"I'll give you a ride."

"All right."

We paid our checks. She was short. About five-two or -three. I couldn't really see much of her, except for her legs, and they were good.

We went out and turned left. She headed toward a small white car. I could smell thesea again.

We got in and she began to drive. She didn't ask me where I was staying. She looked at her watch again.

"I'm horny," she said then. "You interested?"

It had been quite a while, running the way I had been. I nodded as she glanced my way.

"Yeah," I said. "You look good to me."

She drove for a time, then turned down a road toward the beach. It was an isolated stretch. The waves were dark and high and white capped.

She stopped the car.

"Here?" I said.

She unbuttoned her coat, undid a blue wrap-around skirt. She wore nothing beneath it. She left it behind and straddled me.

"The rest is up to you," she said.

I smiled and reached for her glasses. She slapped my hand away.

"Below the neck," she said. "Keep it below the neck."

"All right. Sorry," I said, reaching up beneath her blouse and around behind for hooks. "You really are something."

I was out and up and in before too long. She did most of the work, with very

little change of expression, except near the end when she began to smile and threw her head back. A peculiar icy feeling crept along my spine then, and I looked away from her face and down at the rest of her, riding and flapping. When I was empty and she was full, she got off and rebuttoned her coat, not bothering with the skirt.

"Good," she said, squeezing my left biceps. "I was getting tense."

"I was kind of tight myself," I said, zipping and buckling, as she started the engine. "You've got a very good body."

"I know."

She got onto the road and headed back.

"Where you staying?"

"Southernmost Motel."

"Okay."

As we drove, I wondered why a girl like that didn't have a steady man. I thought she might be new in town. I thought maybe she didn't want a steady man. I thought it would be nice to see her again. Too bad I was leaving that night.

As we went down my street, I saw a blue car with a man I knew sitting in it, parked in front of my motel. I drew myself down in the seat.

"Go past," I said. "Don't stop!"

"What's the matter?"

"They've found me," I said. "Keep driving."

"The only person I see is a man in a blue Fury. He the one?"

"Yes. He wasn't looking this way. I don't think he saw me."

"He's looking at the motel."

"Good."

She swung around the corner.

"What now?" she said.

"I don't know."

She looked at her watch.

"I have to get home," she said. "I'll take you with me."

"I'd appreciate it."

I stayed low, so I didn't see exactly where she drove. When she finally stopped and turned off the engine and I rose, I saw that we were in a driveway beside a small cottage.

"Come on."

I got out and followed her in. We entered a small, simple living room, a kitchenette off its left end. She headed toward a closed door to the rear.

"There's whisky in the cabinet," she said, gesturing, "wine on the kitchen counter, beer and sodas in the refrigerator. Have yourself a drink if you want.

I'm going to be back here awhile."

She opened the door. I saw that it was the bathroom. She went in and closed it.

Moments later, I could hear water running.

I crossed the room and opened the cabinet. I was nervous. I wished I hadn't quit smoking. I closed the cabinet again. Hard liquor might slow me if trouble came.

Besides, I'd rather sip. I went to the kitchen and located a beer. I paced with it for a time and finally settled onto the green sofa next to a casually draped serape. The water was still running.

I thought about what I was going to do. It began to rain lightly. I finished the beer and got another. I looked out of all the windows, even those in the bedroom in the rear to the left, but there was no one in sight. After a time, I wanted to use the bathroom, but she was still in there. I wondered what she was doing

forso long.

When she finally came out, she wore a blue terrycloth robe that stopped at midcalf. Her hair was turbaned in a white towel. She still had on her dark glasses.

She turned on a radio in the kitchen, found music, came back with a glass of wine and seated herself on the sofa.

"All right," she said, "what do you want to do?"

"I'm leaving tonight," I said.

"When?"

"Twoish."

"How?"

"Fishing boat, heading south."

"You can stay here till then. I'll take you to the dock."

"It's not that simple," I said. "I have to get back to my motel."

"What's so important?"

"Some papers. In a big manila envelope. At the bottom of my suitcase."

"Maybe they've got them already."

"Maybe."

"It's very important?"

"Yes."

"Give me the room key. I'll get them for you."

"I'm not asking you to."

"I'll get them. Make yourself at home. Give me the key."

I fished it out and passed it to her. She nodded and walked back to the bedroom.

I went to the kitchen and started a pot of coffee. A little later, she emerged

wearing a black skirt, a red blouse and a red scarf. Boots. She drew on her raincoat and moved toward the door. I went to her and embraced her, and she laughed and went out into the rain. I heard the car door slam and the engine start. I felt badly about her going, but I wanted the papers.

I went back to the bathroom. A great number of unlabeled jars filled a section of the countertop. Some of them were open. Several had very peculiar odors which I could not classify, some of them smelled vaguely narcotic. There was also a Bunsen burner, tongs, test tubes and several beakers and flasks - all of them recently rinsed.

I was not certain what I would do if someone followed her back. I felt like a naked matador without a sword. They had been after me for a long while, and there had been many passes. I was not carrying a gun. I had had to go through too many airline security checks recently, and I had not had time to obtain one locally. If I could just make the boat everything would be all right.

I went to the kitchen to check on the coffee. It was ready. I poured a cup and sat to drink it at the table. I listened to the rain.

Perhaps half an hour later, I heard a car in the driveway. I went to the window.

It was hers and she appeared to be alone in it.

When she came in, she withdrew the envelope from beneath her coat and handed it to me. She gave me back the key, too.

"Better check and be sure the right stuff is still there," she said. I did, and it was.

"Think they knew which room?" she asked.

"I don't know. They wouldn't recognize the name. Did he see you go in? Come out?"

"Probably."

"Do you think you might have been followed?"

"I didn't see anybody behind me."

I returned to the window and watched for a time. There was nothing suspicious.

"I don't know how to thank you," I finally said.

"I'm tense again," she said.

We went back to the bedroom and I showed my gratitude for as hard and long as I could. It was still a hands-and-mouth-below-the-neck proposition, but we all have our hangups, and it was certainly wild and interesting country. Afterward, she broiled lamb chops and I tossed a salad. Later, we drank coffee and smoked some small black cigars she had. It was dark by then and the rain had stopped.

Suddenly, she placed her cigar in the ashtray and rose.

"I'm going back to the bathroom, for a time," she said, and she did.

She'd been in there several minutes with the water running when the telephone rang. I didn't know what to do. It could be a boyfriend, a husband, someone who wouldn't like my voice.

"Hello?" There was the crackle of long distance and bad connection. "Hello?" I repeated, after several seconds.

"Em . . .? Is Em . . . there . . .?" said a man's voice, sounding as through a seashell. "Who is . . . this . . .?"

"Jess," I said, "Smithson. I'm renting this place for a week. It belongs to some lady. I don't know her name."

"Tell her . . . Percy's . . . called."

"I don't know that I'll see her. But is there any message?"

"Just that . . . I'll be . . . coming."

There was a click, and the echoes went away.

I went to the bathroom door and knocked gently.

"You had a phone call," I said. The water stopped running.

"What?"

At that moment, the doorbell rang. I rushed to the kitchen window and looked out. I couldn't see who was there, but there was a car parked up the street and it was blue.

I returned to the bathroom door.

"They're here," I said.

"Go to the bedroom," she said. "Get in the closet. Don't come out until I tell you."

"What are you going to do?" The doorbell rang again.

"Do it!"

So I did. She seemed to have something in mind and I didn't.

Among garments in the darkness, I listened. Her voice and a harsh masculine one.

They talked for about half a minute. It sounded as if he had come in. Suddenly there was a scream – his - cut short in a matter of seconds, followed by a crash.

I was out of the closet and heading for the bedroom door.

"Stay in there." Her voice came steady. "Until I tell you to come out."

I backed up, almost against my will. There was a lot of authority in her voice.

"Okay," she said, a little later. "Come out, and bring my raincoat." I returned to the closet.

When I entered the living room, there was a still figure on the floor beside her. It was covered by the serape. She wore nothing but a towel about her head and the glasses. She took the coat and pulled it on.

"You'd said 'they.' How many are there?" she asked.

"There were two. I thought I'd left them in Atlanta."

"There's a car out there?"

"Yes."

"Would the other one be in it, or out prowling around?"

"Probably prowling."

"Go back to your closet."

"Now wait a minute! I'm not going to have a woman . . ."

"Do it!"

Again that compulsion as she glared at me, and a return of that strange tingling along my spine. I did as she told me.

I heard her go out. After maybe five minutes, I left the closet and returned to the front room. I raised the serape for a look.

Another five minutes, perhaps, and she returned. I was smoking one of her cigars and had a drink in my hand.

"Make mine wine," she said. "The other one . . .?"

". . . will not bother you."

"What did you do to them?"

"Don't ask me. I did you a favor, didn't I?"

"Yes."

"Get me a glass of wine."

I went and poured it. I took it to her.

"If we take them down to the dock . . . Your friend won't mind losing some dead weight at sea, will he?" she asked.

"No."

She took a large swallow.

"I'll finish in the bathroom now," she said, "and then we'll get them into the car. We may have to hang around awhile before we can unload them."

"Yes."

Later, after I had disposed of the blue Fury, we got them into her car and she drove slowly to the place I told her. It was after midnight before we were able to unload them and stow them on the boat.

I turned toward her then, in the shadow of a piling.

"You've been very good to me," I said. She smiled.

"You made it worth a little effort," she said. "You up to another?"

"Right here?"

She laughed and opened her coat. She hadn't bothered dressing.

"Where else?"

I was up to it. As I held her, I realized that I did not want it to end like this.

"You could come with me," I said. "I'd like it if you would. I'd like to have you around," and I kissed her full on the mouth and held her to me with almost all of my strength. For a moment, it seemed that I felt something wet on her cheek against mine. Then she turned and broke my embrace with a single gesture and pushed me away.

"Go on," she said. "You're not that good. I've got better things to do."

Her scarf seemed to be blowing, though there was no wind. She turned quickly and started back toward the car. I began to follow her.

Her voice became hard again, harder than I'd ever heard it.

"Get aboard that boat now," she said, her back to me. "Do it!"

Again the compulsion, very real this time.

"All right," I said. "Goodbye, and thanks," and then I had to go.

Much later that night, Joe and I pushed the two limestone statues over the side into the Gulf Stream. I leaned on the rail for a long while after that, before I realized I had forgotten to tell her that Percy was coming. Later, the sun rose up at my back, turning the sea to a fleece of gold in the west.