

TANGERINE

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One night about a year ago I was having a late dinner, alone, in a fine restaurant, feeling good about myself and my place in the world (a nice feeling to have when you're in your seventies), when, sipping my second glass of wine, I glanced at my waiter, whose presence until now had been over my shoulder or at a distance.

It was like those moments in a movie when the film jerks in the projector and freezes a single image. I felt my breath catch.

I knew this waiter from another year. And knew that I hadn't seen him for a lifetime. My age, yet he was recognizable, so when he came forward to pour the rest of my wine I dared to speak.

"I think I know you," I said.

The waiter glanced at me and said, "No, I don't think—"

But, closer now, the same forehead, same cut of hair, ears, the chin, same weight as half a century back, so his face hadn't changed.

"Fifty-seven years ago," I said. "Before the war."

The waiter's eyes slid to the side, then back. "No, I don't believe—"

"1939," I said. "I was nineteen. You must've been the same."

"1939?" The waiter's gaze checked my eyebrows, ears, nose, and finally my mouth. "You don't look familiar."

"Well," I said. "My hair was light then, and I weighed forty pounds less, and I had no money for clothes, and I used to go downtown on Saturday nights to listen to the soap-box orators in the park. There was always a good fight."

"Pershing Square." The waiter nodded and half-smiled. "Yeah, yes. Sure. I went there once in a while. Summer of '39. Pershing Square."

"Most of us were just wandering young men, kids, lonely."

"Nineteen's lonely. You'll do anything, even listen to a lot of hot air."

"There was plenty of that." I saw I had him hooked. "There used to be a little gang, not really a gang, like today, but five or six guys got to know each other, we had no money, so we kind of wandered around town, sometimes dropped into a beer parlor. They'd ask you for your ID so all you could get was Cokes. Twenty-five cents I think it was for a Coke you could nurse for an hour and watch the crowd at the bar and the tables."

"Petrelli's." The waiter touched his mouth as if

the words were a surprise. "I haven't thought of that place in years. But I don't remember being there with you," he said nervously. "What's your name?"

"You never knew. We just called each other 'hey' or 'you.' We might have made up some names. Carl or Doug or Junior. You could've been Ramón."

The waiter rolled his towel into a ball. "How did you know that? You must've heard—"

"No, it just came to me. Ramón, right?"

"Keep your voice down."

"Ramón?" I said quietly.

He nodded abruptly. "Well, it's been nice—"

He might have gone but I said, "We prowled around town, five or six of us, and one night one of the gang treated us to French Dip sandwiches down near City Hall. The young man who did it sang everywhere we went, sang and laughed, laughed and sang. What was his name?"

"Sonny," the waiter said suddenly. "Sonny. And there was a song he sang a dozen times a night that summer."

"'Tangerine,' " I said.

"Ohmigod, what a memory!"

"Tangerine."

Johnny Mercer wrote it. Sonny sang it.

Leading us through the night, a small crowd of six or seven.

"Tangerine."

Sometimes we called him Tangerine, for that was his favorite song the summer of that year before everyone went away to war. Tangerine was it. We never found out what his last name was nor where he lived now or where he came from. He was Friday nights late and Saturdays later, singing as he got off the streetcar like a great lady with refined manners and a look that said the world should have more flowers, but sadly did not.

Tangerine. Sonny. No name. He was tall for that year, just this side of six feet, with more skeleton and less flesh than the rest of us. He claimed that he was not thin but svelte and when he alighted in our midst one warm summer night the weather changed because he bade it to do so with a wave of a languid arm and pale fingers in which he held a long cigarette holder that he pointed at buildings, skylines, the park, or us, as he talked, or laughed. There was nothing he didn't laugh at, and after a while, fearing you might miss out, you joined his laughter. Life was pretty damned funny and you had best find that out now, rather than later.

Tangerine. Sonny. He drifted like a countess from a suddenly royal streetcar, swept through the park, gathering as he went all the lonelies, who, pulled by his gravity and grace, their eyes never off him, rarely speaking, followed.

It was as if they had been waiting all summer for something, anything, to happen. For someone to

tell them where and who they were, and where to go. Taking it for granted, Sonny poised in the center of the red-bricked plaza, glanced about with disdain, and stabbed his cigarette holder toward those men shouting the virtues of Stalin or Hitler, choose one, choose none.

When Sonny arrived at the sound and fury, there were half a dozen aliens, wanderers in his wake. He did not glance back but accepted them, like a cape to be worn at this strange opera. He stood, eyes shut, listening to the shouts. His new friends did likewise, shut their eyes to accept the noise.

I was one of them.

And all of us nameless. Oh sure, there were Pete and Tom and Jim. But the giveaway was a young punk who claimed to be H. Bedford Jones. I knew he lied. I had read H. Bedford Jones's novels in *Argosy* when I was ten.

But who needed names when Sonny dubbed and redubbed us weekends? This one was "Squirt" and that one "Tad," and yet another "Elder Statesman," and someone—me—was from another world, or he led our late-night parades, calling out "cohorts" or "chums" or just "pals" and "lonely hearts."

I never found out much about those friends who were really not friends but late-night tourists from various cities. In later years I described L.A. and its eighty or ninety towns as eighty-five oranges in search of a navel. But in late 1939 there were only

two places to socialize: Pershing Square, where the temperature rose from political explosions, or Hollywood, where people walked up and down in search of liaisons like ectoplasm that melted long before taking shape.

So it was with L.A. before the Second World War, when young men minus cars wandered in dead certain that by nine some fabulous woman would grab and hustle them home to deliriums.

It never happened. Which did not stop the young men the next weekend from shouting "Tonight's the night" at their mirrors, knowing that when they turned away their glass images died. Thus a conglomerate gang gathered by instinct rather than intellect.

And there was Sonny.

His mirror was probably just as accurate as ours at showing defeat with nicely knotted ties and clean collars. But then mirrors are Rorschach tests; you can read anything in them that enhances your myopia or threatens your self-belief. Leaving on Saturday, you always checked the mirror to see if you were really there.

That being so, most Saturday nights were long and Sonny peacocked us around, buying hot dogs or Coca-Colas in bars full of strange men or stranger women. The men seemed to have broken wrists. The women had biceps. We nursed our

Cokes for hours, stunned by the scene, until the managers threw us out.

“Okay,” cried Sonny in the doorway, “if that’s how you feel!”

“That’s how I feel!” the managers replied.

“Come on, girls,” said Sonny.

“I wish you wouldn’t say that,” I said.

“Sorry.” Sonny left. “This way, chaps.”

Some Saturday nights ended early. Sonny disappeared. And without Sonny the gang disintegrated. We didn’t know what to talk about without him. We never knew where Sonny went but once we thought we saw him duck into a cheap hotel on Main Street with an old white-haired gentleman, but when we got there the lobby was empty. Another time we saw him on a bus that cost ten cents rather than a trolley that cost seven, standing by a tall slender colored boy. Then the trolley was gone. That did it. We said so long and rode home to addresses we never gave.

One Saturday night it rained without stopping and since most of the guys didn’t have enough money to hide in the bars, they went home, which left Sonny and me staring at each other, until he said:

“Okay, Peter Pan, you ever had a real drink? Booze, hooch, scotch, wine.”

“Nope.”

"C'mon, it's time."

He dragged me into the nearest bar and ordered a Coke and a double Dubonnet. When it came, he slid it over. "Try this."

I sipped it and smiled. "Hey, not bad."

"Not bad, he says!"

"Reminds me of the grapes when I was nine that me and my dad crushed in a wine press with lots of sugar. Dubonnet."

"God! The child genius describes his first drink. When will you stop being Joan of Arc making the rounds?"

"No, no," I said. "I'm the blacksmith who made her armor."

"Give me that!" Sonny slugged the Dubonnet down. "Joan of Arc's blacksmith! Christ! Out!" Sonny paid and we were on the street, where he stopped and teetered on the curb, staring.

I looked to where he was looking. She was there. A woman of, I would say, middle years, handsome rather than beautiful, with her hair neatly combed and pulled back in a bun. She should have been wearing a hat but she only stood with the rain falling on her face and running down the front of her black raincoat, her hands folded across her breast. When she saw us, one hand came up in a gesture as if she might call. Instead, she pulled back, as if alarmed that we might run.

"Dear God," Sonny whispered.

He sighed but did not nod to acknowledge her. "Wait!" He ducked back inside and came out a minute later, wiping his mouth. "One more for courage."

Still he made no sign of recognition, nor did he move to cross the street. The handsome middle-aged woman stood, dabbing at her eyes with a handkerchief.

"She knows you," I said.

"None of your business."

"But you're crying, too!"

"Am I?" He touched one eye and looked at the wetness on his fingertip. "Damn."

"She's crying, you're crying. Is someone dead?"

"A long time ago."

"She a relative?"

"No. Dumb woman. Crazy lady."

"What does she want?"

Sonny laughed, a crazy kind of broken laugh.

"Me."

"Beg pardon."

"Me. Me. Me! Don't you get it? She wanted me. Past tense. She wants me. Present tense. She will want me tomorrow and the day after. Some joke!"

"You're not so bad," I said lamely.

"Not so bad as what?"

"Not as bad as you think you are," I said, looking away.

"You don't know a damn thing about me!"

"I know that on Saturday nights if you left town the gang would break up."

"Some gang, a bunch of lonely half-starved idiot intellectuals with no guts and no future so they follow me like dogs peeing on fireplugs."

"It gives us something to do. You help do it."

"What does that make me?"

"A leader."

"A Christ-awful what?"

"Leader."

"Give me that head." He grabbed my skull and twisted my head. "Go have it examined."

"Sure we're nuts," I went on, with his fingers still clutching my skull. "But if you weren't around we'd all go home and stay. If you can lead us you can lead others, in some job, someplace. You're funny. You're an actor. You make us all feel good and you cover up how bright you really are."

"How bright am I?"

"You probably went to college and dropped out. Maybe you got in trouble at the men's gym. Right?" A silence. "Right?"

"You're pretty damn smart."

"Why did you never go back?"

"They wouldn't let me."

"What about some other schools?"

"You got to be kidding. This is 1939. There's a war coming. The army would claim I wear perfume and shave under my arms. Bang! I'm on the street!

‘And stay out!’ they’ll say. Colleges pass the word. No fairies, please, at the bottom of our gardens.”

“Don’t talk that way about yourself.”

“They do. Why not me?”

I glanced across the street, and the woman, seeing this, gave a small gesture and a half-smile, as if she guessed our discussion. Yes! I could almost read her lips. Tell him!

“How did that lady want you?”

“God, she proposed marriage!”

“Why didn’t you say yes?”

“What is this, a police lineup? You got your lie detector on?”

“It’s running. You can’t lie to me.”

“Why not?”

“Because you like me and I like you.” I took a deep breath and went on.

“Do you mean to tell me that if you crossed the street now she would take you home and marry you?”

“More fool she.”

“No, damn fool you.”

Sonny wiped his eyes with the backs of his hands. “I thought you were my friend.”

“I am.”

“If I walked over you’d never see me again. The gang would break up. Where in hell would they go without me?”

“To hell with the gang. Get over there.”

"It's too late." Sonny stepped back, watching her to see if she moved. "I'm drowning. No. I've gone down for the third time."

"No you haven't!"

"Besides, if I married her, she'd catch my cold. I haven't been warm in years."

I hesitated and said, "Do you want me to talk to her?"

"Nut, why would you do that?"

"Because I can't kick you downstairs. I don't like the way you're living."

"Then why the hell are you with me?"

I almost had an answer. "It's to fill time. I won't be here forever. I'll be gone in a year."

"You going to be a famous literary person?"

"Something like that."

He studied me for a long moment. "Son of a bitch. I really think you will."

"Then come on. I'll go over with you."

"The blind leading the blind? How come you're always right?"

"Because I just let things fall off my tongue and I'm surprised to hear me say them."

"You believe that crud?"

"I better. Or I won't have a life."

"Then get on with it. Take her home. I'm too old for her, for you, for everyone."

"How old are you?"

"Twenty-six."

"That's not old."

"Yes it is, if you're me and a thousand men behind me. I've got four more years, then I'm gone."

"You'll only be thirty."

"Wake up! No one wants a thirty-year-old fairy godmother!"

I blurted it out:

"What's going to happen to you?"

Sonny froze in place and without looking at me, in a cold voice said, "I hate people asking what's going to happen to me!"

"I just mean, what? I'm asking as a friend."

"Let me look at you. Yes, poor sap, you really think you are my friend. Why," said Sonny, staring into the rain, "when I hit thirty, three-oh, I'll buy some rat poison."

"You wouldn't."

"Or a gun. Or maybe I'll defenestrate. Fine word, eh? It means jumping through a window. Defenestrate."

"Why would you do that?"

"Silly boy, someone like me, thirty's the end. No more. *Finis*. That old song: Nobody wants you when you're old and gray."

"Thirty's not old."

"Are you telling granny? Thirty's when you have to pay for it, right? All the things you once had free,

now you dig out the wallet and peel off the green. I'm damned if I'll shell out for what now is my divine right."

"I bet you talked like that when you were five."

"I was born talking. Only one way to stop me. Out the window!"

"But you have a whole life ahead."

"You maybe, dear chum, not this lady on the piano bar singing the blues. I've got fingerprints all over my skin. Not an inch isn't an FBI file of bounders, cads, and the criminally insane."

"I don't believe that."

"Poor naive sap." But he said it gently and chucked me under the chin. "You ever been kissed by a man?"

"Nope."

"I'm almost tempted." He loomed, then pulled back. "But I won't."

I fixed my gaze at that woman, it seemed, a mile away.

"How long have you known her?"

"Since high school. She was one of my teachers."

"Oh."

"Don't say 'Oh.' I was Teacher's Pet. She was never mine. She told me I was headed for great things. Pretty great, huh, downtown Saturday nights leading a dog pack of gutless wonders."

"Did you ever try to be great?"

"Jesus!"

"Well, did you?"

"Try what? Being artist, writer, painter, dancer?"

"You should have picked one."

"That's what she said. But I was busy at wild parties in Malibu or Laguna. She still hung on, and there she is, a whipped cur."

"She doesn't look whipped to me."

"No? Wait there."

I watched him through the bar-room window as he ordered another Dubonnet and made a phone call. When he came back out he said, "Just talked to Lorenzo di Medici. Know anything about the Medicis?"

"Venice, right? Formed the first banking systems? Friend of Botticelli. Enemy of Savonarola?"

"Sorry I asked. That was one of his great-great-grandsons, just asked me to live in his Manhattan penthouse in September. Secretarial work. A little light housekeeping. Thursdays off. Weekends on Fire Island."

"You going to accept?"

"She can't follow me there. Come on!"

Sonny walked off.

I looked at the woman across the street. Half an hour of rain had made her older.

I stepped off the curb. That did it. She turned away in a fresh downpour.

* * *

Summer was over.

Of course you can't tell in Los Angeles. No sooner do you think it's finished than it comes back full-blast for Thanksgiving, or spoils Halloween with 98 degrees instead of rain, or a strange hot Christmas morn with snow melted that never fell, and New Year's Eve a Fourth of July.

Anyway, summer was over, not because of season's change but just people going away, packing their grips, stashing photographs, ready to vanish in a war that was clearing its throat just beyond the ocean. You could tell summer was over in the voices of your lost and never quite found friends, whose names, if they had some, stuck in your throat. Nobody said goodbye or farewell, it was just so long, see you, with a deep sad sound to it. We all knew that whatever bus or trolley we took, we might never come back.

With the park empty on a final Saturday night, I walked Sonny to his streetcar. Just before it arrived, Sonny, not looking at me, said, "You coming along?"

"Where?" I said.

"To my place, silly."

"It's the first time you ever asked."

"Well, I'm asking now. Hurry up. I'm going away."

I looked at his profile, the pale flesh drawn over

the hidden cheeks and nose and moonlit brow. He felt me examining him and turned his head to really look at me, like a discovery, for the first time.

"Thanks a lot." I hesitated and had to shift my gaze. "Thanks, but I don't think so, Sonny."

Sonny gasped.

"I'll be damned, rejected by a Martian!"

"Is that what I am?"

"Yes, yes," Sonny laughed. "But someday you'll marry another Martian and raise a dozen kids for John Carter, Warlord of Mars."

I nodded weakly. "I think you're right."

"I am. Well, here goes, home to a lonely bed and off to the Medicis *mañana*. Sure you won't change your mind?"

"Thanks."

The trolley had stopped. He climbed up and looked down at me and the park and the city skyline, as if drinking it in, trying to remember it all.

"Sonny," I said, on impulse.

He fixed me with his liquid gaze.

"God bless," I murmured.

"I sure as hell hope so." And the trolley was moving with him in the open doorway, giving one last wave of his cigarette holder and an uplift of his slender chin.

"How does that song go?" he called. And the streetcar was lost in thunders. "Tangerine"? Johnny Mercer's song. All the rage that year. Tan-

gerine,' ” said my waiter back in another year, his face a blank on which memory wrote itself. “That strange guy, Sonny? Had a nice sweet soprano. God, I can hear him now. And the laughter. I think that was why we all followed him. No money, no jobs, no love life. Just Saturday nights to stay busy. So he sang and laughed and we followed. Sonny and ‘Tangerine.’ ‘Tangerine’ and Sonny.”

The waiter stopped, embarrassed.

I finished my wine. “What,” I said at last, “what ever happened to Tangerine?”

The waiter shook his head but then hesitated and shut his eyes for a moment. “Hey. Hold on. Right after the war, in 1947, I bumped into one of those crazies, the old gang. He said he had heard, didn’t know for a fact, probably true, Sonny had killed himself.”

I wished my glass was full but it was empty.

“On his birthday?” I said.

“What?”

“Did he die on his thirtieth birthday?”

“How did you know that? Yeah. Shot himself.”

“Thank God it was just a gun,” I said at last.

“Beg pardon?”

“Nothing, Ramón. Nothing.”

The waiter backed off to go get my bill, then paused.

“That song he was always singing. What were the words?”

I waited to see if he might still remember. But it didn't show in his face.

The music rose in my head. And all the old words, right on to the end.

"Don't ask me," I said.