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Autor: Wainwright, William
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AVILION

by William Wainwright

«Oh, but you *must* know it,» said the soldier in an unnaturally high-pitched, excited voice, as he fixed his companion with his eyes. The boy smiled vaguely, noting without mental comment the strange fusion of tenderness and intense excitement, almost cruelty, in the soldier's eyes. «No?» continued the soldier, incredulously. «But you've just forgotten. Wait—ah, yes:

«But now farewell. I am going a long way . . .
To the island-valley of Avilion;
Where falls not hail, or rain, or any snow,
Nor ever wind blows loudly; but it lies
Deep-meadowed; happy, fair with orchard lawns
And bower meadows crown'd with summer sea,
Where I will heal me of my grievous wound.»

The boy, perceiving by his companion's insistent smile that the quotation was finished, smiled again with a mixture of affection and faint mockery in his eyes. «You don't really expect me to believe in your Avilion, do you?»

«But why not? The Caribbean islands are like that: blue-skyed, with perpetual summer and easy living; and certainly in that climate belt around the world there must be other—»

«You know I'm not talking about geography.»

The sergeant smiled sheepishly. «All right,» he admitted. «You mean to say that Avilion is a state of mind. But still, why not? It's people who cause all our grievous wounds. People, civilization, and cities.» He waved his arm vaguely around the crowded room. «'Here do all sentiments decay; here may only rattle-boned sensations rattle.'»

«And so you are going away to some nice quiet place 'far from the madding crowd's ignoble strife' and there indulge in fine sentiments.—»

«With you!» exclaimed the sergeant. «For how can I indulge in fine sentiments, as you say, alone? The essence of Avilion is someone to share it with, and—»

«Nonsense», the boy laughed, «I don't believe it.»

The sergeant joined in his laughter, tentatively, uncertainly, but soon returned to the attack. «Really, don't other people spoil everything for us? If we could only get away from them and live just the way we are . . . But they take every fine and noble thing and drag it down to their own filthy pig-tracks. Then, when they smell their own upper lips, they say the world stinks . . . don't they really, now? But if we went away and said, 'To hell with them'—no, *don't* laugh at me, you know what I'm saying is true.»

«Nonsense,» the boy laughed again, «I know no such thing. You're just trying to trap me with your big beautiful words.»

«But you do believe me, don't you?»

«Maybe . . . yes . . . oh, no.»

«I heard you the first time,» said the sergeant resolutely. «I heard you the first time.»

«You're cute.» said the boy, laughing. «Why do you want me to believe all those silly things?»

The sergeant looked at him sheepishly.

«Here,» the boy pushed his empty glass across the table, «I've finished this already, let's get another.» For a moment they looked into each other's eyes; then the boy began to giggle.

«It's all too funny,» he said. «Like a dream that doesn't make sense but keeps coming back over and over again.»

The man reached across the table and touched his hand, as if to continue their tenuous entente; as if the boy were made of one of those materials that dissipates energy quickly into the surrounding air, and as if he, from his own vast reserves, must recharge him constantly.

Suddenly the boy was aware of being watched.

«How about that drink?» he said, looking away and growing casual. And while his friend, giving up for the moment, was trying to catch the attention of a passing waitress, the boy looked about the bar.

At the booths and tables there were groups of young men talking and gesticulating, some of them leaning forward in self-conscious interest, others leaning back in elaborate ease, and all (except the few who, like the boy and his friend, were in uniform) carefully dressed in strident blends of tweeds, stripes and checks, their hair swooped up and back in pompadours. They reminded the boy of small-town college students on a free night, except for the sudden birdlike lunging twists of their heads and hands, and the fever tempo and almost feminine pitch of their conversation; and again, of exotic birds during the mating season. Suddenly one of them in a booth across the room leaned across the table and impulsively squeezed the hand of a stout middle-aged man who had been talking to him with considerable animation.

The boy looked away quickly.

«Another scotch, Eddie?» asked the sergeant, who had at last got the attention of a waitress.

«Please,» said the boy self-consciously.

«Two. And make them double.» The sergeant began talking about something important, and as he did the boy let his eyes wander slowly around the room, smiling and nodding from time to time to convey his interest and attention to his friend.

Musik from a juke-box jinglejangled through a shallow tune full of false notes. Eddie seemed to have heard it before. Across the room at a small table a small tired-looking man with a pink wrinkled face and dull blond thinning hair fiddled nervously with a half-empty cocktail glass and gazed yearningly across the table at a drunken sailor.

«... and you say you'll be stationed in Washington indefinitely?» said the man in a small wheedling voice. The sailor avoided his companion's gaze and looked about the bar room in confusion, seeking the answer to a question as yet only half formulated. He was as young as Eddie, and Eddie winced as their eyes met briefly. He knew what was going to happen, and he did not want to be associated with the bar.

The sailor continued looking around the room, while the little man leaned forward anxiously and Eddie watched in helpless fascination. Suddenly the sailor seemed to come to a conclusion. He looked about the

room with both the question and the answer plainly written on his face—
«Say, what kind of joint is this, anyway?» he muttered aloud. He staggered up from his seat, almost upsetting the chair, and, without a backward glance or thought, lurched across the crowded room to the door. The tired looking little man sat back in his chair, smoothed out his face and began looking around the room again, while music from the juke-box jinglejangled through the same tired tune on a record worn with use. (Eddie could not think of its name, though it was very familiar to him.) The conversations rose a little in volume, and the supercilious superiority hitherto lightly etched on every face deepened and hardened into a mask, expressing contempt for the sailor, his sudden departure, and anything he might think. Then the song on the juke-box changed to one that Eddie had danced to at home before the war.

«Let's go, Bob,» Eddie said.

«To the hotel?» replied the sergeant with that special little smile that sometimes pleased Eddie, but now did not.

«No, just out. For a walk. It's awfully stuffy in here.»

«Oh-kay. Let's finish our drinks first.»

The sergeant paid for them, as he always did, and Eddie felt better about it only after he had drunk his rapidly. He tried to pay, as usual, but as usual Bob wouldn't let him. «I make more money than you,» Bob said, as he always said, «and I won't have you spending your money when you're with me. Besides . . .» he concluded, as he always concluded, with that special little smile. And the essence of the thing was in that smile. It made Eddie feel ill at ease and out of place—like a girl on a date. It made him feel as he had when the sailor was looking around and deciding to leave. But the warm familiar dizziness and pleasant blurring of things, quickly induced by a few drinks, spread through and around him, and when Bob smiled at him again he returned the smile. But the smile froze on his face when he saw a whole table of the boys looking at him and Bob with knowing nods. And because he was already a little drunk, he tried to be especially careful and casual, as though the others wouldn't know anyway.

«Let's go now,» he said to Bob in what seemed to him a cool enough voice, and he smiled inwardly at the coup he had achieved by refusing to say Bob's name in the presence of the boys, leaving them, he was certain not quite so sure about the exact nature of their relationship.

Outside a light snow was falling, and Eddie was temporarily braced and sobered by the cold December air. He breathed deeply, hoping his head would clear. The song he had danced to at home died away in the distance, and he noted with childish pleasure the light from the street-lamps slanting straight and sure through the falling snow. As they entered Lafayette Park, cleared by the snow and the sudden cold snap of its usual amorous sailors, girls and lonely old men, Eddie felt a sudden urge to be alone with Bob. «I wish we could fly to the hotel and not have to walk.»

Bob took his hand in the darkness. «Wasn't it strange how we met here,» he said, «two lonely strangers in the middle of the night? And yet we caught on at once.»

Eddie smiled. He noticed with equal and remote detachment the White House across the Park, where (who knows?) decisions were being made at that very moment that would force them apart; the Stage Door Canteen to the left, where soldiers other than they were dancing with girls; and the statue of Andrew Jackson straight ahead, which rose, lightly veiled with snow, in the center of the Park, like the conscience of the Republic.

«I wonder what Old Hickory would think if he could see us holding hands,» Eddie said. Then, after a moment, «To hell with Old Hickory.»

They left the Park on the side that faced the Canteen. As they neared its door Eddie heard again the strains of the song he had danced to before the war, in years that seemed ages ago, so remote they were, so few the connections; and as they passed it he fancied he could hear the shuffle of dancing feet. He looked at Bob, but it was clear that Bob had no thought of going in. «Well, why should he?» Eddie thought.

In the shadow of the Canteen Bob turned to him and said, «How about another?»

«Okay,» said the boy, and they each took a drink from the bottle. Eddie made a face as his went down, burning his throat and making the snow-blurred streets a little fuzzier.

«Like it?» said Bob with a grin.

«Um,» Eddie said, not sure. Then he saw a figure, as disturbingly familiar, yet strange and remote, as the song from the Canteen, approach through the falling snow and resolve itself, like the song, into something known and placeable out of a known and placeable past. *Julie, Julie, Julie, you could have saved me if you would.* Eddie braced himself for the encounter, but to his surprise, when Julie shouted his name, he found himself feeling suddenly free and light.

«Julie!» he shouted, grasping her hands in his.

«Eddie!» she smiled up at him, «what are you doing here—and in uniform, too?»

She was the same as she had always been, thoroughly feminine and quite intense. *Julie, do you remember the first and only time I kissed you goodnight at your door?* «But of course, you are stationed here, and you're coming to the Canteen to drown your sorrows in coffee, you wicked thing!» Julie was talking to him but she kept looking at Bob with such fascinated curiosity that Eddie was embarrassed.

Yes, of course you remember: how you backed away from me with that unbelieving expression in your eyes, then turned and ran into your house in tears. Eddie collected himself and introduced Julie and Bob. Then Julie turned back to him.

«Gee, I'm glad to see a familiar face,» she continued, though she kept looking back at Bob. «Since we moved here I haven't met a soul but the boys at the Canteen, and they're here today and gone tomorrow, poor things. Besides,» she giggled, «we're not allowed to date them. Oh, but tell me everything. How is your family? Where are you stationed? I haven't seen you since that awful Spring dance just before everyone went away.»

«Yes, it was awful, wasn't it?» Eddie said. They talked for a few minutes more, while Julie's eyes kept flicking from Eddie to Bob and

back. And as they were talking, two soldiers came out of the Canteen and slowly disappeared into the darkness, fading ever further down the street through the chilling snow, like Eddie's joy and new-found freedom, yet lingering a moment under the streetlight on a far corner, like Eddie's desire to go into the Canteen with Julie, before disappearing completely.

«Look, I'm a junior hostess,» Julie was saying, «so I have to run in and put on my apron, but I'll meet you in the foyer in about two shakes and we'll talk over old times. You are coming in, aren't you?»

«Well, really, we can't come in,» Eddie said with a sudden metallic breathlessness, smiling at Bob deprecatingly. «We have an engagement in just a few minutes, and...well, we just can't.» He paused, wondering if he ought to say something about girls, but Julie spared him that.

«Oh, Eddie,» she said, quite matter of factly, as if she had expected all along that he would refuse, «you're always so busy. I will see you again, though, won't I, now that I've found you? You'll call me at home?»

«Yes, of course. Tomorrow, maybe. Yes, tomorrow. Julie, I'm sorry.»

Julie shrugged and smiled and ran up the Canteen's steps, and as the two soldiers continued on their way, their footfalls drowned the music from the Canteen. They did not speak, and in the sudden absence of Julie, the pavement echoed and rang.

As they reached the corner of the block they heard a shout.

«She's calling you, Eddie,» said Bob, as the boy walked on without stopping.

«I know, but I don't hear her. She's just remembered that I don't know where she lives, or she wants to ask us to dinner tomorrow.»

«Well, for God's sake, let's go back and let her ask us!»

«No, I don't want to. And you don't either, really. At least you shouldn't.»

«Well, for God's sake, why not?»

«Oh, you know.»

They walked for a moment in silence. «Why did you tell her we had an engagement tonight?» said Bob at length.

«Well, we do in a way, back at the hotel. Besides, I didn't want to see her anymore. Not tonight, anyway. Did you?»

«Not particularly. I didn't mind, though. She's an old friend of yours, I thought you might want to talk to her.»

«Would you have, in my place?»

«Well, probably. Anyway, you should've.»

«Why?»

«For the effect.»

«Effect!» snorted Eddie.

After a moment Bob said, «Are you ashamed for Julie to see you with me?»

«No, don't be silly,» said Eddie, a little too quickly. Then he added, «But I *am* ashamed of all those...things...in that bar being able to smirk so familiarly at us...and of having to lie to Julie and push her off.»

«She'll never know about them.»

«Not about *them*, maybe...but I will...and do.»

«You mustn't say things like that, Eddie. They make it all impossible.»

«I know. But I can't help thinking.»

«Poor Eddie,» said Bob, touching his hand, as they walked, and for a moment it all seemed worthwhile.

Then they turned a corner and there, in front of a big hotel, a group of young men and women Eddie's age were getting out of an automobile. Laughing and talking, resplendent in evening dress and flushed with youth, they seemed an encouraging sight in the midst of a war, and passersby turned to look at them curiously. One young man in particular stood out for his handsomeness, and Eddie stared at him involuntarily as they passed, then guiltily noticed that Bob was also staring at him. Eddie was suddenly jealous and as suddenly realized that he had no right to be. «And Bob wanted me to see Julie,» he thought in confusion. «And I wanted to, too.»

«You really should get in touch with Julie again,» Bob said after a while. «There are lots of things in life that aren't exactly compatible, but people do them anyway, even at the cost of a little faking. Life isn't just you and me together.»

Eddie did not answer. After a moment he said, «Let's go to the hotel.»

The sergeant was aggressively poised and the private painfully shy as they arrived at the hotel, and both had masks of indifference glued to their faces as they passed the room-clerk's desk, for one can never tell what room clerks will think about two soldiers together on a weekend pass.

In the room Eddie flopped down on the bed while Bob drew the shades and mixed drinks.

«Let's drink to *them*,» said Bob, jerking his head toward the window. «May they all go to hell.»

Eddie said nothing but lay back on the bed shading his eyes and watching Bob through his fingers. The room was depressingly bright, and through the windows came confused night noises mingled with music from a juke-box jinglejangling through the shallow song whose name Eddie could not remember, the song full of false notes on a record worn with use, sobbing mechanically and tirelessly, by the simple insertion of a nickle.

«People can't be honest and straightforward and truthful at all in this world, can they, Bob?» said Eddie. «At least, we can't.»

«Probably no one can.»

«But they don't have to lie to *themselves* the way we do?»

«Hush, Eddie. Whatever our life may be, it's ours and it's all we have, and we either live it the way it is or not live at all.»

Bob sat down on the bed and began running his fingers through the boy's hair.

«Sometimes it seems like my life is all a lie,» Eddie began. «Like nothing in it is consistent or compatible . . . Like it's all faking, even me and you together. I don't know . . . as if I had taken a lot of pretty words and made a world of them. It isn't at all the world that most people see. It isn't even the world that's really me, but now it's my prison. I pace and rave in it, I play a part: the hero to me, to them outside, the fool;

but all the time I know it isn't real. The hero, the fool, the world, none of it real. Sometimes I storm the walls to break them down, but then I stop. I'm afraid . . .»

Bob did not say anything.

«I guess I'm pretty drunk, huh?»

«You can explain it a million different ways,» said Bob, «but it's still there.»

Eddie raised himself up on one elbow and looked around. «And we're still here,» he said. «Room seems awfully familiar. Seems like I've been here every night of my life. Like I'll keep on being here every night till I die, pulling the shades down so nobody else can get in.»

«Let's drink to that,» said Bob, in an unnaturally high pitched, excited voice. «Let's drink to being together till we die.»

Propped up on one elbow, his face close to Bob's, Eddie could barely focus on the strange fusion of two meanings in Bob's eyes, one tender as his words and as sincere, the other as cruel as pretty dreams that lie—or rather, it seemed at the moment, as love's old sweet song gone sour. He felt himself being pushed back down on the bed and kissed.

«May we be here alone together every night till we die, and the world go t' hell,» Bob said again—like the record on the juke-box, Eddie thought.

And suddenly Eddie remembered the name of the song.

«Avalon!» he said, laughing faintly.

«What, baby?» said Bob thickly.

As from a distance Eddie saw Bob bending over him, felt the fingers fumbling with necktie and buttons, smelled the whisky-sweet breath heavy around him.

«Avalon, Avilion,» thought Eddie, snickering a little, «where falls not hail nor rain nor any snow.» Then everything seemed to fade away except a paradoxical desire to want to respond.

About:

John Rechy, *City of Night*

(Grove Press, Inc. New York, \$ 5.95)

From a Subscriber's Letter

. . . Well, I have just finished reading John Rechy's *City of Night*, the longest saddest coldest 'gay'book ever written. I am quite sure that it is definitive, by which I mean that no one need ever write another word about hustlers in America, for he has said it all. In this sense it is a very discouraging book to read for those of us who have tried to write a little on the topic, for there seems to be no use in saying anything more, unless someone should write a sequel from the point of view of the 'score' himself . . . I called it 'cold' deliberately; it emits a light as hard and clear as diamonds, and there is no sentimentality anywhere in it, nor is homosexuality made an agreeable or attractive thing—and if the moralists have sense enough to realize that, they will leave the book alone. For