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Big Talk

Alf was no psychiatrist, but it was easy to figure out a guy who was always boasting about all the women in his life.

WHEN Gil Bratcher, the photographer, first came on the night shift, he told Alf Sweeney, the reporter, "We'll get along all right, Sweeney. Just don't go around covering flophouse cuttings. I hate them scabby winos. And stay out of fag joints. I hate them swishes even

worse than the bottle babies. They make me sick in the gut." On each shift, from his first one four nights ago, he usurped the wheel of the radio car and clung to it with his huge, meaty hands until morning. "I'll tell 'em where they can stuff it if they think I'll stay on this damned night shift," he said.

BY KRIS NEVILLE

The city — lying beyond the car like a smoked-out cigar butt, stale and dead — was wholly without compassion. Only in tomorrow's headlines would the crimes and accidents and domestic tragedies of the night assume color and depth and the breath of life.

As if in answer to some obscure problem he had been silently considering, Gil announced emphatically, "They ought to put all them pansies and winos on an island out in the Pacific somewhere, and then drop one of them hydrogen bombs on 'em. Blast their damned guts halfway across the ocean."

The emotionless voices from the police radio murmured above the monotonous rhythm of the motor.

"You agree?" Gil demanded.

Alf Sweeney spat through the window. "I thought you were going to get off the night shift," he said.

"I'll get off it. Give me time."

Alf shrugged heavily. "I've been on it for two years."

The collar of the white shirt Gil had worn for three shifts was unbuttoned beneath his crudely knotted tie. Above damp lips, his tiny eyes were heavy. During conversations, he scrutinized defiantly the texture of the speaker's skin, the movement of the speaker's lips, the pulsing of the breath in the speaker's nostrils. When he entered unfamiliar buildings, his dark eyes darted about suspiciously, marking out avenues of retreat in the event he were set upon by superior force.

When the "woman screaming" call came over the radio, the photographer grunted, "Want it?" His tone was surly. His face was bloated from lack of sleep.

Alf, the reporter, was watching the darkened buildings flow past from shadows and silence into shadows and silence. He wore a green sports jacket over a solid blue sports shirt. On his bony, loose-jointed frame, the jacket seemed no better than a hand-me-down from an elder brother, and the pencil and yellow copy paper that bulged from the pocket gave his whole body an appearance of desolation and futility.

His sensitive, unhandsome face was colorless but for the heavy black of his eyes and beard and eyebrows. Without looking around, he said, "Not one a week are copy."

Gil bent forward slightly. "You want it?"

Alf blinked myopically. "Let it go."

"It's up to you," Gil said. "Whatever you want to do."

"Go over there if you want to."

"You give the orders. What do you want to do?"

"Let it go, go over there," Alf said. "I don't care."

"Okay," Gil said disgustedly. "Let it go."

"Not on my account," Alf said, still watching, beyond his reach, the city slide past the car. "It's over on Temple, that's all. It'd be gone anyway."

"You give the orders."

“Let it go, then.”

The car moved two blocks.

“You want me to drive now?” Alf asked.

“I’m all right,” Gil said.

Calls were coming in on the radio with increasing frequency. There was a prowler at 3971 Highland; a fight outside a Hill Street bar; a drunk down at 6th and Manton; a minor traffic accident on La Brea. Car 302 out for coffee.

“I thought you might be tired,” Alf said.

Wearily, Gil said, “I’m all right.”

“Small stuff tonight.”

“Bars close in a little while. Maybe we’ll have some bloody damned traffics.”

There was a drunk in a car at Wilshire and Burlington; there was a missing child, seven years old, blue eyes, brown hair, dressed in a pink frock, last seen in the Vermont area; there was a suspect number three who had a felony record but who was not presently wanted; there was a speeder heading south on Santa Monica Boulevard pursued by car 97. There was a suspect number one: no record, no want.

The car telephone began its muted whirr.

Alf’s skinny neck craned alertly. He unhooked the instrument. “Yes? . . . Yes, uh-huh. Right away, right . . . Yeah, okay, I will.” He returned the receiver to its prongs. “Mulvey Hospital, Gil.”

Gil made a U-turn on the deserted street and headed back downtown.

“Some woman just been beat up,” Alf said.

“That was the Temple Street call a while ago,” Gil said. “I told you we should’ve gone over.”

Alf spat a shred of tobacco off his tongue.

“She won’t want her picture in the paper,” Gil said, and laughed softly to himself. “Motel row. Maybe if she acts right, I’ll see to it that she don’t get any publicity.”

Alf said nothing.

“They don’t mind you asking. Take it from me; they don’t mind.” The photographer’s tone was aggressive to forestall contradiction. He made moist, kissing sounds. “Maybe this one’s one of them bobby-soxers. Hot stuff. I covered a motel row back in ’49. Regular little tiger. The guy with her was wanted on the Bronson stick-up. She played ball, so I played ball.”

“The Old Man don’t go for that,” Alf said.

Gil, mouth open, snorted heavily. “What the hell? What’s one picture more or less?”

To the left, the bare bones of a projected apartment house cast an insubstantial shadow.

“You got a wife,” Alf said quietly.

Gil chuckled confidentially. “What she don’t know won’t hurt her.” He tilted his head and winked at the reporter. “I keep Loreen happy, see? I keep Loreen *real* happy.”

Alf shrugged and lit a cigarette. The skeleton of an incompleted speedway — as yet connected to

nothing and no more than a scratch on the surface of the land — lay across the site of the old Bank of America building.

"The *Times* crew's over in the Valley," Gil said. "The *News* bunch is at the train wreck. We'll be the only ones on this one. Yep, I don't think she'll want her picture in the paper."

Alf blew smoke at the windshield. "The Old Man'll be sore as hell if the other car didn't shoot the train."

Gil ran a light at 8th. "You worry too much."

"Julian's probably out drunk," Alf said. "They said he hasn't phoned in for over an hour."

"He's at the wreck, for God's sake. Don't worry — it's his headache." He took his hands off the wheel long enough to dismiss Julian with a gesture of disgust. "Man, you're eager. All the time, eager. I could have got that leaper story last night in five minutes. What'd you want to hang around so damned long for?"

"I had to wait for the medical examiner," Alf said.

Gil laughed softly, deep in his throat. "The cop really come boiling back when I lit that firecracker right behind him, didn't he? You see him?" He patted the wheel and snorted in amusement. "Purple, by God. He was so mad he nearly busted a gut. What the hell could he do? He think he could run in a newspaperman? Huh?" He waited for approval and appreciation.

"Take it easy, Gil," Alf said.

Gil gunned the motor for a second and then eased off the accelerator. "This slow enough for you, Alf?" he said when they had gone another block. "You're the boss." The car was going fifteen miles an hour.

"Yeah," said Alf wryly.

Gil, the master, huge, sweaty, solid, snickered to himself. "Maybe this one tonight's one of them short-socks kids, huh?"

"Why don't you give somebody a break once?" Alf said curtly.

Gil stared around at the reporter in surprise. "I give 'em a break," he said. "They don't want their picture in the paper —" He rubbed his soft, heavy hands caressingly over the steering wheel. "So I ask 'em. 'Hey, babe,' I say, 'what's your phone number?' The smart ones get it right off. 'Call after eight,' they tell me, 'when the old man's at work.' Just ask anybody on the paper; they'll tell you how Gii gets it. I get all of it I want. They all take lessons from me, by God."

"I know."

"And you know what's the hottest stuff there is? Two-toned blondes. Not bottle blondes, mind you. Real blondes with brown eyes. You ever get any of that two-toned stuff?"

Alf said nothing.

"You're damn right," Gil said. "They're all nymphomaniacs. You see a real blonde with brown eyes, and you've got a nympho every time."

"Yeah, Gil," Alf said. "Sure."

Gil swung the sedan around the corner of Mulvey Street.

"I forgot," he said. "Your wife's a two-tone job, ain't she?"

Alf made a soft, small sound deep in his throat. "We can go faster than this."

"Slow down. Speed up. What the hell do you want?"

"Gil," Alf said, "you know what's wrong with you?"

"Huh?"

"You just don't like women," Alf said.

Gil sniggered softly. "That's a lot of crap." And then, more emphatically, "That's a lot of crap!"

"You trying to kid people, Gil? You think the guys on the paper didn't tumble the first time you started yapping about how many scores you make? You ever figure out exactly what it is you're trying to prove? You think yapping about what a man you are is going to fool anybody?"

"Shut your goddam mouth!"

"Or maybe," Alf said evenly, "maybe you're just trying to fool yourself."

"Shut up!" Gil yelled. He fed gas savagely. "And what the hell do you know about it? What the hell gives you the right to tell me what's wrong with me? You one of them goddamned psychiatrists or something?"

Alf let his breath out slowly. "All right," he said. "Skip it, Gil."

"What you so damn smart for? You ain't able to get anything but

home stuff. What the hell you know about it?"

Alf snubbed his cigarette out in the ash tray and turned to stare out the window. His lips trembled.

Gil watched the reporter out of the tail of his eye. "I'll show you, by God. You take this one tonight. From motel row. She'll holler her number right away. I'll have my bare feet on her back in a couple of days." He snorted again and made the moist, kissing sounds.

"Anybody ever tell you that you're a louse, Gil?"

"I told you twice to cut that kind of crap," Gil said. "Some day I'll beat your damned face in, Alf. Sure as hell."

Alf's lips drew into a thin, taut line.

There was an ambulance traffic at 124th Street; a prowler on 9th; a drunk down in a yard on Bonnie Brae. An attempted suicide on Sherbourne.

"Just don't get so damned smart," Gil said. "You want to stay on the good side of me, Alf."

He guided the car into the driveway of Mulvey Receiving. He cut the wheel sharply to the right and slammed on the brakes at the last moment, stopping the car with a jolt inches short of the retaining wall of the Press Section.

The reporter opened the door and waited half in the car and half out for Gil to get his Speed Graphic from the back seat. After the hollow, explosive sound of car doors closing,

the two of them walked in silence up the dimly lighted steps of the hospital. In the tile and white-washed corridor, Gil exchanged laughing insults with two uniformed policemen. They stopped in front of the metal guard doors of the elevator and Gil jabbed the Up button with the meaty ball of his thumb. When there was no response, he said, "Stinkin' city ought to put in a Press elevator."

The elevator announced its arrival with the metallic click of uncoupling doors. The young man responsible for its delay wore a white silk scarf as a sling for his right arm. As he stepped into the corridor he moved his left hand apologetically and nodded with a faint, self-effacing smile at the sling.

"Goddamned fairy," Gil said loudly as the doors closed behind them. He slammed his thumb at the red button for the third floor. "I can tell fairies a mile away. Ugh. They make me sick."

He jostled Alf in order to be the first out of the elevator. He sniffed importantly and hitched his camera more comfortably on his hip. Beside the drinking fountain, a white-clad orderly was finishing a cigarette. The reception hall smelled sharply of sterilization and soap and sickness, and a child was crying monotonously in one of the curtained rooms.

"Where's the dame?"

Startled, the orderly looked around. He shrugged and nodded toward the emergency room on the left.

Gil put a plate in the camera and aimed it at the door. "I'll get it from here when they wheel her out."

"How is she?" Alf asked.

"Couple of pretty bad cuts."

The high, flat table in the emergency room was partially concealed by the half-drawn curtain. The woman was lying on her side, facing away from the hall. Only the back of her head was visible above the covering sheet. Some of her hair lay in a damp pile on the floor. What had not been shaved hung in straight, blood-drenched, ropy strands that revealed a little of the natural yellow near the unstained ends. She was whimpering softly.

Smiling faintly, Gil ambled toward the doorway. The intern treating the woman came to the head of the table. When he noticed the photographer, he jerked the curtain closed savagely.

Gil reddened. "Who the hell he think he is?"

"Aw, skip it, Gil," Alf said.

"By God, I ought to go in there. I'll take my goddamned pictures while he works if I want to."

"Cut it out," the orderly said. "The doc's new."

Alf looked around the room and then started toward the policeman leaning against the coke machine.

"It's time he learns the city runs this place, then," Gil said indignantly. "Why, God damn, I ought to phone the superintendent. That punk sawbones'll learn damned quick he can't push around the press."

The crisp, starched nurse at the reception desk looked toward Gil, her face a frown of annoyance.

When Alf brought out the folded sheets of copy paper, the policeman straightened. "You bring her in?" Alf asked quietly.

"You the press?"

"Yeah. The *Star*."

"Oh, the *Star*. Yeah, me and Mick — that is, Sergeant McCabe."

Alf took their names. "When did you get the call?"

"About one o'clock. Me and Mick."

Alf nodded.

"We found her on the sidewalk. You want the address? It was — I think it was 916 Temple. In the nine hundred block — motel row. There was already a crowd when we got there. From the blood, you'd have thought she was dead."

"Uh-huh . . ." Alf said, writing.

"Well, this guy — she'd been at the Air Flow Motel — this guy she was shackled up with sent her out for a pint. The drug store was closed, there in the nine hundred block, but there's a liquor store three blocks up. She starts up to the liquor store, and this car — a Ford, she thinks, an old-looking coupe — well, this car pulls up. The driver tries to drag her inside and she starts screaming. He must have had the tire iron in his hand. He hits her with it. He hits her maybe half a dozen times. And then she gets up and starts to run for the motel. She falls down there at the corner — in front of the drug

store that was closed. There was already a crowd when we got there."

"She didn't recognize him, is that right?"

"Just one of them crazy bastards. You know — picks on the first dame he sees."

"Well. . . ." Alf closed the notebook. "Thanks, officer. They have her name at the desk?"

"I think they got it."

"A real looker, huh?", said Gil, as he came up to the policeman.

The officer shrugged. "She had blood all over her."

Gil nudged him. "She's out cheating, huh? Not gettin' enough at home?"

"You from the same paper?"

"Yeah. Gil Bratcher." Gil wet his lips. "Didn't get to see what she looked like, huh? One of them anytime, all-the-time babes, I bet?"

The policeman stared coldly at him, said nothing.

Gil nudged him again, and chuckling, shook his upper arm. "Maybe her husband's a fairy, huh?"

Alf cleared his throat. "Well . . . ah . . . Thanks, officer," he said, and moved quickly away.

At the reception desk across the room Alf asked the nurse, "Do you have a card yet on the assault case?"

The nurse began to hunt through the new admission slips on her desk. "You from the press?"

"Yeah."

Gil strolled over. "Where's Jean, hey, baby?"

"She's transferred to Surgery."

“You be here from now on?”

“Probably,” the nurse said.

Gil made kissing sounds loudly.

“We’ll get to know each other real well. I’m with the *Star*. Gil Bratcher.”

“That’s nice,” the nurse said. She found the card and passed it to Alf. He put it on the corner of her desk and, bending over, placed his copy paper beside it and prepared to write down the information.

“What time you get off, baby?” Gil asked.

Alf straightened up, very slowly, his eyes still on the card. “We don’t

want this one, Gil,” he said. “Let’s go.”

“Huh?”

“I think we better . . .

“Hey! What the hell is this? Let me see that card!” He reached out and scooped it up in his soft, meaty hand. “I’m looking for her phone number.”

Alf glanced toward the room where Gil Bratcher’s wife was being treated for scalp wounds. “I’ll see it’s killed on the city desk,” he said. “No one has to know about it. Just you and me.”

