From 69 BARROW STREET and STRANGE EMBRACE

From 69 BARROW STREET...

Ralph's fingers closed around the shot glass. He tried to remember how many drinks he had had so far but couldn't. Then he tried to remember how many drinks he had poured down his throat since he stopped bothering with beer chasers.

He couldn't remember that either.

He stared into the liquor. A face swam on top of the liquor. The face had short dark brown hair and no make-up. The face was not smiling. The face was also very beautiful.

The face looked familiar. It was, of course, the face of Susan Rivers. And a very lovely face it was.

He drained the glass and set it down gently on the top of the bar. The face was gone.

The liquor hadn't burned his throat on the way down. That was one of the good things about a drinking bout—after a few drinks the bilge didn't taste vile anymore. As a matter of fact it didn't have any taste whatsoever. It just worked its way down his throat and into his stomach, and the alcohol seeped into his stomach and nothing seemed to matter as much as it did when he was sober.

There was, he reflected, very little point in being sober. When you were sober you could see things quite clearly, much too clearly for your own good. And there was very little point in seeing things clearly. No point, actually. No point at all, not when your name was Ralph Lambert and you lived with a bitch named Stella and loved a lesbian named Susan Rivers. No point at all.

The bartender, whose name happened to be Charlie, came over and looked at Ralph with a puzzled expression on his flat face.

"Ya wanna nudder?" Charlie demanded.

"Ah," Ralph said. "Hello, Charlie."

"Hello."

"You don't mind if I call you Charlie, do you?"

"It's my name."

"Some people might mind."

"Live a little," Charlie suggested. "Call me anything you damn please."

"In that case I'll have another."

"Another double?"

Ralph nodded drunkenly.

"You drink like a goddamn fish," Charlie said.

"That's nothing. I swim like an alcoholic."

"Huh?"

"I drink like a fish and swim like a drunk."

"Oh," said Charlie. "I get it. Better it should be the other way around."

Ralph nodded.

"You do this often? Not that it's any of my business. I just wondered."

"Only when I fall in love with a lesbian."

"Huh?"

"A lesbian," Ralph explained, waving one hand at no one in particular. "I fell in love with a lesbian."

"That's a female fairy?"

"Precisely."

"Jeez," Charlie said. "And you're really in love with the broad?"

"Precisely."

"Ain't it a bitch. What are you gonna do?"

"I'm going to have another drink."

"That sounds like a wise move," Charlie said. "I mean what the hell else can you do?"

"Precisely."

"Jeez," Charlie repeated. "A lesbian."

Ralph nodded.

"She good-looking?"

"She's the most beautiful woman in the world."

"You getting anything?"

"Not a thing."

Charlie poured a double shot of the bar whiskey and pushed it across to Ralph. "Live a little," he said. "This one's on the house. This don't happen every day."

Ralph gulped the drink. "I should hope not," he said. "It would kill me."

From STRANGE EMBRACE...

Johnny Lane stood at a window and stared out over Central Park. He was a tall man with an athlete's build and a strong chin. Usually his gray eyes were keen, penetrating. But now they held a vacant expression as he viewed the dark expanse that lay beyond the bright lights of Fifth Avenue.

Central Park, he thought. Muggings, stabbings and rapes. Come and bring the kiddies and we'll all have fun.

He turned decisively from the window and walked with quick firm steps to a heavy Victorian wing chair beside a telephone. He sat down, hoisted the receiver to his ear, dialed a number. He listened impatiently to seven full rings, then slammed down the phone and slumped unhappily in the chair.

He heard the sound of a man clearing his throat.

Johnny turned his head. Ito was standing at his side, holding a small mahogany tray with a tumbler perched in its center. The slender man's face was impassive but his eyes twinkled merrily.

"Master appears troubled," Ito said. "This servant has prepared special potion of esteemed medicinal value. Potion especially useful when user is troubled."

Johnny Lane grinned in spite of himself. "Cut the honorable-son routine," he said. "Save it for company. But thanks for the therapy—it's just what the doctor ordered." He picked up the tumbler and sipped the straight bourbon it contained.

"The girl doesn't answer?"

Johnny shook his head. "The girl doesn't answer. The girl is supposed to be ready for two weeks of out-of-town rehearsals starting tomorrow, and it's a quarter to two in the goddamn morning, and the girl doesn't answer. Where in the name of hell the girl is, I do not know. Who in the name of Sarah Bernhardt the girl thinks she is..."

He broke off, shrugged angrily and drank more bourbon. Ito disappeared long enough to get rid of the tray, then returned. The perfect servant, Johnny thought. And every producer needed a perfect servant, just as every producer needed a well-stocked liquor cabinet. Both were essential safeguards against insanity.

He thought that over, tried to decide whether it was original on his part or a line from some play, and decided that it really didn't matter. What mattered was the rest of the bourbon in the glass. He finished it off. He dialed the girl's number again, listened to the phone ring its brains out, and replaced the receiver.

"Damn it," he said. "Now what in hell is the matter with that girl? Ito, it doesn't add up at all. This is the first real part Elaine James has even been within yards of. She's had a few small supporting roles off-Broadway but nothing worth a damn. Now she's set up for the lead in *A Touch of Squalor* with Ernie Buell directing and Carter Tracy for a co-star. The play is a honey and the part couldn't be better. And with all of seven hours before it's time to grab a train to the hinterlands where is she?"

"I give up," Ito said. "Where is she?"

"Who the hell knows?" Johnny stood up, walked once more to the window. "Maybe she's over there, Ito. Maybe she's necking shamelessly on a park bench. Maybe she's in some guy's bed having a going-away party."

"Is honorable master jealous?"

"Is honorable servant becoming nosy?" Johnny's face relaxed into a grin. "You should know me better than that, Ito. Business and pleasure can't be combined. Not in this racket, anyhow. A producer who sleeps with his leading lady before the show opens is going to end up with a turkey."

"And after the show opens?"

"She's a lovely girl," Johnny admitted. "Very sweet and very bright." He returned to his chair and sank into it. "And what happens after the show opens." he went on, "is none of your damned business."

Ito recaptured Johnny's empty glass and left the room. Not because he, Ito, was insulted—he had long since proved himself impervious to insult—but because he sensed that Johnny wished to be alone. He was right. Johnny took a cigarette from the pack in his jacket pocket, put it into his mouth and scratched a match. He dragged deeply and filled his lungs. He blew out smoke and again glanced at his watch.

Two o'clock. Two A.M. and Elaine was still out on the town. Well, what the hell was he worrying about? She was a big girl, old enough to decide when to go to bed. And with whom, he thought sullenly. Besides, why was he trying to reach her in the first place? To tell her not to miss the train? That was brilliant. Hell, even if he got her on the phone he wouldn't have a thing to say.

He closed his eyes—which was pleasant, and pictured Elaine James in his mind—which was even more pleasant. Twenty-two years old, five-and-a-half feet tall, with all the requisite curves in their proper places. A red rosebud of a mouth that was designed for gentle kissing. Soft light-blond hair in a Dutch cut, a hairstyle damned few girls could get away with, and in which she looked childishly magnificent. Light blue eyes, coo1 eyes. An amazingly beautiful girl, all things considered.

But why did he want to assure himself that she was home? He toyed with the idea that it was a purely glandular reaction. But that didn't make any sense. When you were busting your hump trying to get a show on the boards, just two weeks remaining before you were supposed to open in New Haven, you didn't make passes at your leading lady. And Elaine had not struck him as much of a pass receiver anyway; there was something annoyingly virginal about her.

Why, then?

He stood up. "Ito!" he yelled. And he strode to the hall closet, opened the door and grabbed a topcoat.

"I'm going out," he told his butler. "I'm chasing a wild goose."

"The girl?"

"Don't ask why, because I don't know myself. Just a hunch, I guess. Something doesn't seem right. I'm probably nuts but I want to make sure."

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A gray-faced, thin-lipped elevator operator piloted Johnny down sixteen flights from the penthouse to the lobby. Johnny was privately convinced that the man, whose name he had never managed to determine, had not spoken since the Spanish-American War. Now the operator maintained his clean record and Johnny matched him word for word. Then Johnny passed through the lobby and went out into the cool crisp air of nighttime New York, crossed Fifth and grabbed a cab headed downtown.

"Six sixty-one East Fifth Street," he told the driver.

"You sure that ain't in the East River, Mac?"

"Almost," Johnny admitted. "Between Avenue B and C. Take the Drive down."

"That's a long way from Fifth and Sixty-first," the cabby said.

Johnny agreed with him silently. It was a long way in more ways than one, he thought. A long way from a penthouse with a park view to a railroad flat on the fifth floor of a building that should have been condemned when Lindbergh crossed the Atlantic. But girls like Elaine James didn't live in penthouses. When you were a trying-to-make-it actress who worked fifteen weeks out of fifty-two you took whatever you could get. Which, nine times out of ten, meant the Lower East Side.

The cab made good time on the East River Drive. They left the drive at the Tenth Street exit, cut through Riis Project, followed Avenue D to Fifth Street and number 661. Johnny paid the cabby, waved him away.

Standing on the curb, looking up at the faded tenement, Johnny wondered how anyone could live in it. From Fifth Avenue to Fifth Street was a trip to

another world.

Well, Elaine James wouldn't be living here long, he thought. She had talent and now her break was coming. *A Touch of Squalor* was a hell of a play. It would put her name in lights for a good long time and the lights would be bright ones. She would move out of her cold-water flat the day the critics told the public just how great she was.

Johnny walked to the door, opened it. The vestibule needed sweeping and painting. There were no doorbells, just a row of rusted iron mailboxes with tenants' names scratched on them. He found one marked Elaine James—5D. He opened the inner door and walked into the building.

Inside the dirt was dirtier. The stairwell reeked of cooking, stale beer and human sweat, an irresistible combination. Penciled obscenities were misspelled on the walls. Johnny climbed four flights of stairs and cursed industriously all the way. He was breathing heavily when he reached the fifth and top floor.

I'll be damned, he thought. She's got the penthouse. And he laughed.

There were four apartments on the floor and he looked at all four doors before he found 5-D. A small card, carefully lettered, announced that Elaine James lived inside. There was no doorbell. He knocked.

No sound came from within. Well, what did you expect? he wondered. You damn fool, if she were home she would have answered the phone.

He tried the door on impulse. The knob stuck, but once he managed to coax it into turning the door swung open, creaking horribly as it did so. He hesitated in the doorway, looking at the darkness and wondering what the hell he was doing here. She was out and the door was open and he should close it and get the hell out himself. But it just was not like Elaine to leave a door unlocked. She was a careful, methodical person.

Which, come to think of it, was the reason it wasn't like Elaine to be out on the town at two-thirty in the morning when she had a nine o'clock train to catch.

And the door was open. Of course in that neighborhood it might mean simply that the lock was defective. Still, he wanted to check. It couldn't hurt.

He fumbled around on both sides of the door looking for a light switch. He gave up and struck a match. A metal chain dangled from a ceiling fixture in the middle of the room. He walked to it, yanked it, and the light went on.

The apartment looked as though it belonged in another building. The room—the living room, he guessed—was furnished inexpensively but well. It was small and at one end there were cooking arrangements—a two-burner hot-plate and an archaic sink—but the room was happily homey. The carpet on the floor was clean, if far from new. And the walls had been painted a pleasant beige.

Johnny closed the door, then surveyed the room again. Elaine's reading matter was stacked neatly on the coffee table. Copies of *Variety* and *Show Business*, a few numbers of the *Village Voice*, a hall-dozen paperbacks. He looked through the books, raised his eyebrows at titles like *The Jungian Approach to Dramatic Reality*, *The Cartesian Ethic in the Theatre*, and *Theatrical Gestalt in Twentieth Century America*. He replaced the books gingerly, wondering what in the world their titles meant, then took a cigarette from his pack, struck a match and scorched his throat again with smoke.

There were two doors at the far end of the living room. He walked to one, knocked carefully, and finally eased it open. He saw a small closet, containing an overcoat and a pair of galoshes. He wondered why he had knocked and thought how strange it would have been if the galoshes had answered him. He closed the closet door and knocked loudly on the other door.

The bedroom, he thought. And if nobody answers I should not—repeat not—

open the door.

Nobody answered.

So he opened the door.

The bedroom light was on. A soft yellow glow bounced off the beige walls and the dark carpet. The room was tiny, with space only for a single bed and a chest of drawers. One ancient suitcase stood at the side of the chest of drawers.

The blankets were bunched up at the foot of the bed. A sheet covered the mattress. Elaine James lay on top of the bed on her back. She was nude.

He looked at her. He studied her nakedness shamelessly, because neither he nor she had anything to be ashamed of now. He looked at the perfectly tapered legs, at the firm proud breasts.

His stomach turned over. His cigarette dropped from his fingers to the floor and he ground it into the carpet with his heel.

Elaine James was a lovely girl, she was lovely from the neck down. She was also lovely from the neck up.

But her neck was not lovely at all, because somebody had slashed a hole in it.

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