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GAG REFLEX

By Philip Davis

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*(The lights come up on a gray metal desk and two plain straight-back chairs. The stage is bare of any other décor. Behind the desk sits **MAJOR ARNOLD**, the interrogator. He is a middle aged career Navy man. In the other chair is **LIEUTENANT JEROME**, in the Navy for the war only. He is thirtyish and handsome.)*

ARNOLD

You're in a shitload of trouble, Lieutenant. With a capital "S".

JEROME

There has been some mistake.

ARNOLD

The Navy don't make mistakes. This part of the Navy. But somebody did. How you got through the induction screening.... They shoulda caught this.

JEROME

Caught what?

ARNOLD

Your tendencies. They have ways of picking you fellers out now. You know, sloping shoulders, fatty hips, lisping, prancing, general girlyness.

JEROME

None of that describes me.

ARNOLD

Gag reflex.

JEROME

Gag reflex?

ARNOLD

The doctor sticks his tongue depressor back down a feller's throat. See how far down there he can go before he gags. How far can you go before a feller fights back?

A man, you see, won't let anything get too far. He don't even have to think. His fightin' instinct kicks in. It ain't natural for anything to get anymore down a man's yapper than a woman's tit. Now I've had my mouth around some big old torpedo titties before, but nothin' that ever got all the way back to my throat. And if it did, I'd be gaggin'. Gaggin' with pleasure, but gaggin'.

Now, your fairy's throat muscles are like his morals: loose and flabby. He wants to be conquered. He welcomes the invading force. You can see why we don't want that in a fighting unit.

The lack of a gag reflex is one of the surest ways to weed out weenie gobblers. But you slipped through the cracks. Well, if you *had* slipped through a crack, maybe you wouldn't be here. (*He flips through his file.*)

JEROME

This is fascinating, but I don't know why you're telling this to me.

ARNOLD

New York City! Damn! Figures. A lot of you fellers got through there. They oughta investigate that place. Half the docs are probably pansies, too. What'd you do? Let the doctor slobber on your Willy? Finger fuck his asshole?

JEROME

Sir, with all respect, I am an officer! This is humiliating.

ARNOLD

I liked the old fashioned way, before all this psychiatrist bullshit. If a fairy pulled any folderol, we'd just slap him in the brig for 15 or 20 years and be done with it.

Son, I can make this easier for you.

JEROME

I wish you would, because I don't understand what's going on.

ARNOLD

I can get you a general discharge if you cooperate. Beats the hell out of a blue ticket. (*JEROME looks confused.*) A blue discharge! Undesirable. Ruin a feller's life. You don't want it. Just tell me the names of the other fairies you associated with so we can clean out this unit and this Navy. Help us out and do yourself a favor.

JEROME

I don't know any "fairies".

ARNOLD

Lieutenant, we've got you dead to rights.

JEROME

I'm a lawyer. You can't prove anything.

(Arnold rises and goes to the door. He comes back with MIDSHIPMAN SAM KENT, early twenties, hunky, standing at attention.)

ARNOLD

Counselor, Midshipman Kent here says you got a nice chin to rest a pair o' balls on.

(The all look at each other, then, after a period of silence:)

JEROME

Midshipman Kent is a liar.

ARNOLD

It looks like a nice chin to me. Course, I don't have any idea how big Kent's balls are – nor do I want to.

Now, why would a feller freely admit to such disgusting activity unless it was the truth? (*Referring to file*) Nine occasions of oral copulation, four anal penetration, masturbation, ejaculation... good God, man! Are you part rabbit?

JEROME

If Kent admits to all of that, then you should be charging him.

ARNOLD

Midshipman, why in the world would you admit to such vile shenanigans?

KENT

I was doing my duty, sir.

ARNOLD

Damn right! Midshipman Kent is part of an investigative unit tasked with running down perverts to collect information pertaining to cocksuckers and rectum receivers and any network of said fairies to prevent the spread of degeneracy in the beloved Navy of the United States of America, praise God, Amen!

JEROME

Doesn't that make him one of "said fairies"?

ARNOLD

As an investigator, Kent was immune from persecution. Besides, he was the one stickin' his weapon into you, not the other way around.

JEROME

What possible difference does that make?

ARNOLD

All the difference in the world! Don't you know anything?

JEROME

I have fallen down a rabbit hole.

ARNOLD

Goddamnit! Don't say things that don't make sense!

JEROME

Nothing here makes sense.

ARNOLD

Listen here, Jerome. I don't have all your education, therefore everything I say makes perfect sense! You're the one who's confused here... And damn close to insubordination. Kent here did his duty with courage and enthusiasm. He has put himself in situations that would make me so disgusted that I could not carry on. I would have to stop and puke. He has gone against his nature and done unspeakable things in the service of his country.

KENT

Permission to speak, sir.

ARNOLD

Speak freely, son.

KENT

I did not enjoy it, sir. It made me sick.

ARNOLD

Midshipman, I am in awe of you.

JEROME

Me, too. If it makes him so sick, how could he do it so many times - as he alleges?

ARNOLD

We have to establish a pattern to separate the full-bore perverts from the men who go astray. War is tough on the men who fight it. They're scared, lonely; sometimes they get weak and unable to resist predators they think are their friends. Many of those can get back on the straight and narrow.

But you. You crave it. You love it. You hide in the shadows, but I smell the stink of your moral decay and you are a danger to my Navy. It is my duty to clean this place out. You're three day old shit and I'm castor oil.

I have another turd to deal with in the next room. Kent, detail the evidence we have against this dingleberry and see if you can't get him to cooperate.

(ARNOLD leaves the room. A long silence ensues as JEROME and KENT alternate between looking at each other and avoid looking at each other.)

JEROME

Did the Navy give you some special training in betrayal?

(Pause)

How to lure someone in, gain his confidence, inflame his most intimate desires, then turn around and spit on him?

You stupid fuck, do you realize what you've done to me?

KENT

I'm sorry.

JEROME

You're sorry? Oh, well that makes it all better. After I get kicked out on my butt and get back to the states to find that my life has turned to shit, I have the comfort of knowing that the guy who stabbed me in the back is sorry.

KENT

I didn't know what I was getting into. They got me really confused.

JEROME

Then confuse them right back. Just tell them you made a mistake. It was dark. You were nervous. You have me mixed up with somebody else.

KENT

But it wasn't always dark. There were so many times. I wrote it all down. Too many details.

JEROME

Kiss and tell. Everything but kiss...

(Pause)

I wasn't even looking for anything that night, that first night. An innocent walk on the beach. Thinking about Teddy in Europe. Worried. No idea where he was. Probably Bastogne. Not sure if he was alive or dead. Still not sure.

Then there you were, like a beautiful cliché. Did they hire a special tailor to make your clothes just a little too tight? He had to be a queen. Every ripple and bulge. Accentuate the positive. Eliminate the negative. Then I had to go and mess with Mister In-between.

How did they teach you to be intimate with a man... even though it makes you sick?

KENT

I had to say that.

They told us to pretend we were with a girl. Just close your eyes and don't think about it.

JEROME

Who were you pretending I was? Rita Hayworth? Or someone darker, more mysterious like Marlene Dietrich? Maybe just plain old sweet little Mary Lou.

KENT

Who?

JEROME

Mary Lou, Betty Jean, whoever. Your girl back home.

KENT

I don't have a girl.

JEROME

How interesting. How did you get through the induction center? I know how you got through the seduction center.

KENT

They picked the guys they said were best looking.

JEROME

They were right about that, cupcake. Who decided who was best looking? Surely not Major Arnold?

KENT

They had a WAC officer come in. She looked us over.

JEROME

That explains why you're so butch.

KENT

And the ones who were willing to... do it.

JEROME

Ah, there's the rub, so to speak. Why were you willing to... do it?

KENT

Well... the unit hasn't seen much action lately. I didn't have much else to do.

JEROME

You were bored? So, you said "I think I'll go out and have sex with a fellow sailor and unleash the whirlwind."

KENT

It's more complicated.

JEROME

It's pretty simple for me. Two little words: I'm fucked!

KENT

Ricky, I don't want to do this to you.

JEROME

Then don't. Let's stop it before it goes any further, Sammy.

KENT

It's too late now. It's too big.

JEROME

Jesus! This will ruin my life. I'm so stupid. In six weeks the war would be over and I'd be back in New York with Teddy.

Nobody will hire me back home. My family... My father will kill me.

KENT

They told us we had to weed out perverts, that they were hurting the Navy. They told us where to go and how to attract guys. They promised us promotions. They called us investigators.

JEROME

They call it investigating. I call it sucking and fucking. Did it really make you sick? Please, tell me. I have to know.

KENT

(After some hesitation) I got used to it.

JEROME

You would get so hard. You can't fake that.

KENT

I'm twenty. I'm always hard.

JEROME

I thought we had something special. Maybe it wasn't love, but affection, at least. Tenderness.... Fun! We had fun! Admit it. You had fun with me.

KENT

I obeyed my superiors. Look, Ricky, if you tell them what they want to know maybe they'll make it easy on you. That's what I think.

JEROME

Try not to think, cupcake. It's not your strength. I should name names so when they throw me out you'll have somebody else to keep you company?

(Pause)

That was unkind. I'm sorry. There's too much unkindness in the world. We should all try to be a little more kind.

Be kind, Sammy. Be kind to me. Tell them it's a mistake. What can they do to you? You've got to help me. Please. Please, Sammy... please... please... *(JEROME is close to KENT, touching his arm as he pleads.)*

KENT

(His arm is on JEROME's shoulder.) Ricky, calm down. It's not gonna be so bad. You're a good person. They just want you to leave.

JEROME

You really think that, don't you? You're too sweet a guy to see what's really going on in the world. I love that about you. And I hate what they've done to you.

KENT

Do you hate what we did together?

JEROME

I love what we did together. It was warm and pure and beautiful like sunshine. And now comes this squall.

KENT

Squall? Like a baby?

JEROME

A storm. A squall. A squalid squall.

KENT

Squalid squall?

JEROME

Squalid, squalid squall.

KENT

Squal...

JEROME

Stop, or I'll squeal.

(They laugh. JEROME puts his head on KENTs shoulder.)

Did you really pretend I was somebody else?

KENT

At first.

JEROME

Rita or Marlene?

KENT

You know that lady in *The Wizard of Oz*? The Wicked Witch?

JEROME

Margaret Hamilton? That would have made you sick.

KENT

I'm kidding. Just a girl. Nobody particular.

JEROME

I don't believe you. If you really thought of me as a girl you would have let me kiss you.

KENT

We agreed. No kissing.

(They hear a noise from outside and jump apart from each other. Silence while they listen.)

JEROME

They don't just want me to leave, cupcake. They want me to wear the scarlet letter for the rest of my life. "C" for cocksucker. Anytime I try to get an apartment, a job, benefits of any kind, the question will be asked, "Did you serve your country in the war that defined your generation?" There's only one acceptable answer. Then they want to see your discharge papers. And it's all over. They'd have more respect for a heterosexual Nazi. Stripped of all decorations, all recognition. You served heroically, but in your off time you sucked a dick. So, you don't deserve a life. Sammy, my life won't be worth living after this.

KENT

I'm sorry, Ricky. Maybe if I told them I ...

JEROME

It won't work. It would get you into hot water. No point in that. Thanks for the thought, though. You're a peach. I'd be better off with a bullet through my head.

KENT

No, Stevie, don't.

JEROME

Stevie?

KENT

Huh?

JEROME

You said "No, Stevie, don't." Who's Stevie?

KENT

My buddy. When we were growing up.

JEROME

(Sings) My buddy, my buddy, no buddy quite so true.
Miss your voice, the touch of your hand,
Just long to know that you understand...

KENT

One time, he said he was gonna... kill himself.

JEROME

Did he?

KENT

No, he didn't. After we graduated, I joined the Navy and he joined the Marines. He died at Bloody Ridge.

JEROME

(Sings) My buddy, my buddy, your buddy misses you...

KENT

I got his last letter a week after he died. He always bragged about the risks he took in battle. He was trying to impress me.

JEROME

I'm sorry.

KENT

Yeah, me too.

JEROME

Why did he threaten to kill himself?

(Pause)

KENT

I did care for him. He didn't understand that. I couldn't show him the way he... I was afraid.

(JEROME comes to KENT and puts his hand on his shoulder. KENT cries as JEROME embraces him. KENT's crying subsides. JEROME pulls back; they are in a loose embrace. They stare at each other for a moment. The stare grows in intensity. Their lips meet. The kiss grows in intensity. There is the sound of a door opening as KENT pushes JEROME away.)

Get off of me!

ARNOLD

What the fuck? *(He starts hitting JEROME.)* Get the fuck off him, faggot!

KENT

(He also starts hitting JEROME, who doubles over.) Goddamn pervert!

(ARNOLD and KENT hit JEROME and yell "Faggot!" "Fairy!" "Pervert!" "Cocksucker!" with each blow. JEROME collapses onto the floor.)

He attacked me.

ARNOLD

I saw that. I was an eyewitness. He's going down. Kent, I'll see that you get a promotion and a decoration for this. Now clean him up and get him to the brig.

KENT

Yes sir!

(KENT salutes as ARNOLD leaves the room. He approaches JEROME, kneels to the floor, wraps his arms around him and sobs. LIGHTS FADE.)

The End