

Dennis

by John Bishop

“Hell! Another damn love affair!”

The two causes of this irritation were strolling blissfully through the garden. A youngish pale European, perspiring in the fierce heat, hand-in-hand with a slim early-adolescent youth in T-shirt and tight white shorts that might have been sprayed on were it not for the perceptible lightening of his coppery skin where he had outgrown them. The shorts were almost indecent, but Dennis refused to surrender them, knowing their effect when combined with his long straight legs and lighter than average coloring.

The exclamation brought the cook-and-man-of-all-evil, as his employer was wont to call him, hurrying to that gentleman's side. Together their eyes followed the slow progress of the couple through the garden. Surely they didn't come along the road like that! Dave wondered, not for the first time, whether it had really been such a good idea to take in paying guests of a sympathetic kind when the official hostelry in this Third World backwater had started to impose restrictions on a guests's visitors – and not infrequently to report them unless handsomely bribed. Money, though, there's the rub, Dave thought. It was a commodity of which he stood permanently in urgent need.

“Any other boy, I'd say no, but with Dennis you can't be sure,” his cook replied sadly.

Damn love affairs. Damn Dennis.

Dave-Uncle, as he was called by the boys, though known by a different and quite accurately obscene name behind his back, waited for Dennis to appear in the kitchen. His knowledge of adolescent imperative need for sustenance was as shrewd as his incredulous grasp of their psychology, and had been honed by years of exposure to the nature and habits of those strange creatures. Impelled by the tyranny of his stomach, Dennis duly appeared in the kitchen, and proceeded to offer extravagant violence to a loaf of bread. There was a certain shiftiness about him.

“Dennis, why were you holding hands in the road?”

“That’s not my fault! Anyway, only from the gate, Dave-Uncle, not in the road. I know it’s no good to go in the road like that.”

Too cold to spread, the butter was applied in thick slices. The cook winced.

“This man seems to be very fond of you. I hope you are not going to bring trouble here for him.”

“Oh no. I tell him everything like you say, Dave-Uncle, always carefully.” He rummaged in the refrigerator like a large bird scrabbling through undergrowth.

“Trouble for us means trouble for you,” Dave said ominously.

“I never bring trouble. Can I have a drink?”

“There’s only Coca-cola.” A tomato and marmalade sandwich made its uneasy debut. Dave waited while it disappeared, thankfully in less time than it had taken to contrive.

“Don’t worry, Dave-Uncle, I specially look after this man like my own father.”

Dave knew Dennis’s own father. The man had tried to throw Dennis out after he had sold the roofing sheets off the single-room structure that was home to a family of six. Dennis was then almost thirteen. Only about half the sheets could be recovered, and for months the family slept under the half of the house that had roof, while tropical storms flooded in through the rafters. There was an unsuccessful attempt to persuade Dave to take Dennis as a houseboy, but the difficulty of getting him to go to school seemed insurmountable, so he had him shipped off to various aunts and uncles in turn, returning from each after a few weeks. From time to time he lived at Dave’s house, when nobody would take him in, and had to be locked out when there was no one to supervise him. Sometimes he would disappear for two or three months; none knew where, nor cared to ask. Once, a year or so back, he had returned with new clothes, a watch, money; once in an old torn shirt, ragged shorts, and an unmistakable prison haircut. His explanations stretched the credulity of his listeners beyond the breaking point.

Over the last year he had calmed down in the maturity of his middle teens, and Dave had felt spontaneous friendship and warmth in him, born, he assumed, of their long association. He had grown beautiful. His body had a more finished look about it, an elegant economy of line and form; his skin had kept its lighter shades, and its childlike silkiness. Sexuality burst upon him; insistent, adventurous, insatiable. Dave had allowed him more often around the house, and inside it. This roof is

tiles, he thought – he can't drag *them* away in a wheelbarrow.

Later Dave spoke to his guest.

“I hope Dennis is looking after you properly.”

“Marvelously. You know, it's incredible, in just these few weeks little Dennis seems to have fallen completely in love with me. I'd never expected anything like it. It's amazing, really.”

“Incredible, yes.”

“Of course, it's nothing unusual here. Dennis told me boys often have these romantic friendships – well, they do everywhere, of course. Boys are *so* romantic. Haven't you found that?”

Teenage boys are often romantic, Dave thought, and it expresses itself in sudden and strange ways, but holding hands in the street is not one of them.

“Actually, things aren't *so* different here, in some respects anyway. In public, for instance. People may think it's a little odd, holding hands.”

“Well, nobody said anything. Dennis so wanted to do it, he knew it would please me. It's so nice. And the people all smiled.”

I bet they did. Lucky for you you don't understand the language.

“Dennis says he always walked like that with his father, before he died.”

“He died?”

“Yes, a shipwreck. Very tragic. He was a fisherman. Now there's no one to look after Dennis. The worst of it is, he was doing so well at school. He wanted to be a doctor.”

“Oh? Dennis?”

“Yes. I'm going to help him, after all he *is* helping me. I don't know whether you realize it, but most of the youngsters who come here are thieves. Dennis hasn't a good word to say for any of them. He's so careful about me, and even jealous, but that's a compliment, I suppose.”

“You are going to help with his schooling?”

“It will be expensive, of course, but bound to be worth it. He's sure to do well, he's so clever.”

“He is that. How expensive is it going to be, exactly?” “Well, the fees, of course. He want-s to take lots of subjects, that's another good thing. He needs a uniform, three actually. Bus fare, though he says it's cheaper to get a bicycle. Books, pens, the usual things. Do you think he needs a watch? – he says so. Food, lodging, all sorts of expenses. I honestly think he sees me as his father. It's rather touching.”

“This is a very heavy investment to make in a boy,” Dave said

cautiously. "Wouldn't it be better to wait a little, and get to know him?"

"There's hardly the time. The school term starts soon after I go back. Anyway, when a boy falls for you, you can't go on telling him to wait, and be patient, and I'll do it later. His whole future is at stake. I wanted to arrange something today, but after the funeral there wasn't enough time."

"The funeral?"

"His grandmother. That's partly what decided me. His whole family are disappearing one after the other. If I don't help him, who else is going to?"

Smitten, Dave thought. Another one bites the dust, or will do shortly. It's their problem. Let the kid make his killing. They see what they want to see; a boy, a hallucination. They hear what they want to hear; lying truths, truthful lies. Who wouldn't be taken with Dennis, taken *by* Dennis? Perhaps for a very long ride indeed. Maybe the first boy; charming, complete, sensual, above all present in the flesh, not a dream. *This* may work out an expensive nightmare, but then wisdom was never bought cheaply where the subject is boys. Dave put out the light, and prepared to sleep.

A soft knock at the door. He waited. The door opened for a young shape.

"Dave-Uncle?" Dennis closed the door and sat on the bed. "He's sleeping nicely, he's very tired."

"After the funeral."

Dennis clambered across the bed. He arched his back to slip off his gaudy underpants with a deft, fluid boy's movement that momentarily brought his knees to his chin, then dove under the sheet. Dave extended his left arm, knowing that Dennis would only be comfortable with his head on a shoulder, and with one smooth arm and leg across whoever was next to him. When this had been arranged, including the careful placing of Dave's hands on his waist and thigh, Dennis relaxed.

"You talked to him today. I know."

"Yes, Doctor Dennis, I did."

"What did you tell him about me?"

"Nothing. He talked. I listened."

A pause. Then Dennis turned his head upwards and kissed Dave lightly on his cheek.

"I didn't tell him anything because he didn't ask. You told him a lot of

lies. Your poor dead fisherman father. Those good school reports. How is your father?"

"He's alright."

"And how many grandmothers have you got? Whose funeral did you take him to?"

"Some village lady. I don't know her name."

"Dennis, Dennis, Dennis."

Dave pondered the awesome potential for mischief of the slim little bundle wrapped around him. The great thing about boys, he thought, is that they are never boring. Dennis idly stroked his chest.

"Dave-Uncle, let me get this money. He wants to give it to me. He's going to send it every month! Please, Dave-Uncle, don't say anything about me. I'll never tell any more lies. I'll stay here and do everything you want."

"Heaven forbid! You already do everything I want, and a lot of things I don't. We can make a deal, though. Don't lie to this man any more. Don't walk in the road holding hands, scandalizing the neighborhood. Don't take him to any more funerals. Is that a deal?"

"Promise!" Dennis agreed. "And you promise not to say anything about me."

"I promise not to tell the dreadful truth, unless you force me to."

"Thank you, Dave-Uncle."

Dennis shifted his position, his gently wandering hands adding their own subtle testimony to his gratitude.

In the morning the cook-and-man-of-all-evil called Dave into the kitchen. Two boys were breakfasting riotously off what seemed to be a dozen raw eggs, pepper and chilli powder.

"They're very hungry," the cook explained miserably, "you said to give them breakfast."

"Less eggs, more bread," Dave said. "What did you want?"

The cook drew him aside conspiratorially. "Dennis went out today with a big parcel. I asked him to show me what's in it, like you said. There was a lot of that man's clothing in there. Dennis said he was going to the laundry with them. He took it and went, I couldn't stop him."

"Only clothes? If Dennis wanted to steal he wouldn't just take clothes. Furniture, the roof, that's more his line. I think Dennis is going to behave himself better from now on."

"Dennis behave himself?" asked the cook, stunned.

"I spoke to him," said Dave airily. "You'll see – he'll be good now."

The cook looked at Dave as though he might be still asleep, or hallucinating. "I didn't think to look in his pockets," he said thoughtfully.

The boys finished their breakfast, and wanted a shower. It was a school holiday, one of the hundreds of National Holidays that helped to reduce still further the innate unproductiveness of the local work force. The local schoolboys, however, were apt to use the time in the most productive way they could devise. The boys stripped off quickly, and invaded the bathroom with the usual joyous noise of youngsters in water. Dave marveled again at their lack of morbid modesty, so characteristic of schoolboys in his own cold country. It was a small difference, but one that gladdened the heart and eye, and something profoundly to be grateful for in a world rapidly flattening out to a grim bleak uniformity. One of his worst fears was that he might awake someday to find his youngsters as shy and maidenly as those of the liberated West. Leaving the boys to enjoy their shower in a profusion of soap bubbles and flashing brown limbs, he returned to the kitchen in time to catch Dennis further depleting the egg stock. At least he hasn't stolen anything, Dave thought.

As the days and weeks went by, Dennis stayed on his best behavior, to the complete confusion of the cook and everyone else. There were lapses, small ones, noticed only by Dave. The 'pregnant older sister' ploy briefly appeared, requiring urgent taxi-fare to a distant hospital, and Dennis's benefactor was calmly plundered of enough money to send a hundred pregnant sisters on a guided tour of the country. Dave found out about it, and Dennis cornered him in the kitchen before he could say anything, thrusting a wad of currency at him, promising never to do it again; pleading, whining, hugging for forgiveness.

"You just couldn't resist it, could you?" Dave said, holding the boy away from him.

"I never, never try again, Dave-Uncle. Don't tell. Take the money, please."

"Give it to your family. I won't tell on you. Now let me go."

"I'll be very very good, Dave-Uncle, I promise. I don't want the money."

Dennis offered it again, and it was refused, so he offered it to the cook, who had been watching open-mouthed at this astonishingly un-Dennislike performance. The cook took it without hesitation, a reflex action between his eyes and hands and the money, seemingly with no

reference to his brain. It is the sort of reflex that only cooks can develop. He had understood nothing of the scene that had taken place in his kitchen, except that it had suddenly enriched him by a sum he was too superstitious to discover. He thrust it in a pocket, and spent the rest of the day warily expecting someone to demand it back. But no one did.

In one respect, Dennis was quite determined and ruthless. No other boys got within winking distance of his new friend. He variously slandered them as thieves and rogues, and hinted that they were suffering from an assortment of weird tropical diseases, with ill-effects as colorful as they were unpleasant. The only common factor was their apparently highly infectious nature – so much so, in fact, that even looking too long at a boy so afflicted could transmit the disease which would probably be quite incurable for a foreigner even though the boys somehow survived. To dampen the other boys' interest, Dennis spread dark stories about his new friend's tastes and habits. Dave had formed the impression of a quiet, gentle and considerate man, undoubtedly energetic but hardly dangerous, and these lurid tales gave him a momentary unease until he realized their origin and purpose. After a few blatant attempts to separate Dennis from his friend the other boys gave up, receiving in return an assurance that they would share in any good fortune that came Dennis' way, without specifically knowing what that might be.

The days passed. Dennis started to carry school books conspicuously around the house, and had a school uniform made. At least it was uniform shape and material, but so stylishly cut, with shorts so tight and revealing, that any school principal would have felt obliged to object. The visual effect was, of course, stunning and as there was no chance of Dennis' pert little bottom ever gracing a school bench, or his long and shapely legs ever hiding their glory under a desk, it hardly mattered that this particular uniform was destined never to see the inside of a school.

All seemed fair on Dennis' horizon. His friend was happy, and Dave had kept his promise. The boy glowed with anticipation. He volunteered help in the kitchen, to the great surprise and suspicion of the cook, who nevertheless accepted. His laughter rang in the garden. He made a kite, a glorious affair of colored paper on a bamboo frame, humming to himself busily with scissors and glue and paintbrushes. At times his eyes shone with happiness.

A new beauty radiated from him, illuminating his perfection from within: caught in a tangle of long limbs, glowing in the hollows of neck and elbows and knees, flashing brilliant in dark opal eyes. Dave

suspected a strange drug, but it was only youth and joy and contentment, that strangest intoxicant of all, and the only one not confined to the user in its effects. His sometimes sly and cunning nature seemed to recede, to retreat, almost, before this new Dennis of laughter, and song, and sudden warmth.

It couldn't last. After a long trip to visit a famous temple, during which, Dave discovered, there had been a reckless consumption of wayside foods, Dennis' friend fell ill. The boys were always unreliable guides in this respect, knowing nothing of the likely effects on foreigners of local delicacies. A doctor was called, though Dave felt sure that nature would take its course in the usual way, with or without medication. The doctor, perhaps unsure of any differences between foreign and local digestions, played for safety, and prescribed a bewildering array of pills and capsules to deal with any contingency – and also, Dave suspected, to produce a significant swelling and contusion in the region of his bill. Dennis hovered wretchedly in attendance, and, as the patient was in no mood or condition to absorb the instruction for this cornucopia of medicine, assumed control of both patient and potions. His dismay was unfeigned, however, and he jealously guarded his responsibility and took care that the doctor's instructions were followed to the last pill.

Dave noticed that where another boy might have quietly made himself scarce during his friend's confinement, Dennis displayed genuine concern and care, reluctant even to leave his friend's side for a moment. Dave almost had to fight his way into the bedroom to check on his guest's condition which was improving slowly, as he had expected it would. It was unfortunate, he felt, that this uncomfortable affliction should have occurred so close to the time of his guest's departure, but advice was advice, and he had given it, and could hardly be blamed if it was ignored.

However, far from bemoaning his sad condition, his guest seemed quite at peace with his new immobility. "I shall soon be alright," he told his host, "with Dennis looking after me." This was no misplaced confidence, Dave had to admit. Dennis attended to every tiny detail. The ripest and freshest fruit was peremptorily commandeered for the sickroom; despite the cook's testy assurances, every drop of drinking water was boiled again before it left the kitchen, and thrown away after a couple of hours, in case it had mysteriously become contaminated. Dennis traveled into town to buy magazines and newspapers, and even

fresh flowers. A bowl of them appeared suddenly on the dining table, reminding Dave how much he enjoyed them, and how easily he had forgotten to provide them in this all-male household.

Dennis paid another nocturnal visit to Dave's bedroom during this time. Dave gradually became aware that he was being carefully woken up, and was not surprised to find the boy by his side. He raised his arm to allow Dennis access to his shoulder.

“What do you want?” His voice and mind were furry with sleep.

“Nothing.”

There was a pause, while Dave considered this unlikely answer from various perspectives to try and discover its meaning.

Eventually Dennis continued, “Everything was good, and then I made him eat those things. Is he going to die?”

“No. He would have eaten them sometime anyway, probably.”

“Not unless I told him to. I don't want him to die.”

“He is not going to die. Not here. Not just yet, anyway.”

“I don't want him to die anytime. He says I am being a very good doctor.”

Dave felt himself drifting off to sleep again. The boy had only wanted reassurance, and a shoulder to sleep on. Invalids should be allowed to sleep unencumbered with boys, however much they may enjoy them at other times. It made sense. Dennis never slept alone if he could avoid it.

“How long does it take to be a doctor?”

“Oh, a long time.”

He felt the boy's hand move on his chest, a gentle ripple of breath across his shoulder, the sharp musky adolescent tang of his raven-black hair, and succumbed to the deep shades of sleep tugging at the edges of his mind.

No sooner than his guest recovered, it seemed, it was time for him to leave. A new lightweight racing bicycle occupied the boys' attention in the garden. In a few months he'll sell it, Dave thought ruefully, and then there will be lies and recriminations, as usual with these love affairs.

“Have you got everything?” Dave asked.

“Yes, I think so. I'm leaving Dennis my watch, so he can get to school on time.”

“Oh, yes.” Some hope of that!

“I'm so pleased about Dennis. I never expected it. Well, you know how it is.”

Do I? Thought Dave.

"I really am going to support him. It may be foolish, but I think it might be the best thing – might turn out to be the best thing." An awkward pause. "I really want to do it."

"Sometimes it's hard for a boy to keep all his promises," Dave cautioned as gently and blandly as he could. "There are pressures on them. With the best of intentions, they don't always realize the problems. You will have to make allowances if he doesn't get it all right the first time."

"Oh, he'll manage. I'm sure he'll manage. I really know Dennis."

"Let's hope you're right," Dave muttered, more to himself, and without a great deal of conviction.

Dennis secured his bicycle, and dragged himself away from it. He would accompany his friend to the last possible point, despite Dave's warnings about over-emotional farewells in public places.

Three months went by before Dennis returned to the house. Dave was surprised to notice that he still had the bicycle and the watch. Still as beautiful as ever. Dennis had apparently given up the skin-tight shorts, in public at least.

"Can't wear them to school, Dave-Uncle;" he laughed, when Dave wryly commented on his respectable appearance. "Next time I come I'll wear them for you, seeing as you *so* much like my legs."

"School? You?"

"Yes, today is a holiday, remember. I knew you wouldn't believe me, so I brought my books."

The evidence was overwhelming. He really is going to school, Dave thought. I'll be damned! Aloud he asked, "How about your Uncle? Is he pleased?"

"He is very pleased. He asked me to come and see you.

He is coming next month, when the big holiday starts. He wants to stay here. Is that alright?"

"Yes, of course."

"Good. Thank you, Dave-Uncle. Another thing. You know he is like my Uncle, and brother, and friend all in one? Well, I have to look after him, don't I? To see that nobody *robs* him, and things like that. Yes?"

"Naturally. So what?"

"I told him, seeing that we met here, with you and everything, I told him you will be very happy to let him stay for half-price. Goodbye Dave-Uncle. See you next month."

“Half-price! Dennis, come back here. Dennis!” Half-price! Damn love affairs! Damn Dennis!