

Lower Than the Angels

by Keith Spence

WHAT PEOPLE FAIL to understand, of course, is that boy-lovers are caring, concerned people. We don't put pressure on kids. We don't use power over them – no bribery or coercion. If a kid wants a bit of fun, that's fine, but if he doesn't then we just go on being friends with him. It's entirely his decision. We never try to persuade him against his will.

Never.

Well, not often.

Once or twice, maybe...

Hell, listen, angels we're not. I mean, caring concern and respect for the boy's wishes is all very fine, but I'm not a monk. There are situations that would make an archbishop sweat.

Like Mark.

I MET MARK straddled bored on his B.M.X. one hot summer-holiday afternoon in July. About 13, ragged black hair, ragged blue cut-offs; a broad, tough little face and a broad, well-muscled chest; long, tanned, strong legs and eyelashes so soft that they were almost a blemish on such an aggressively masculine creature. And, yes, he was bored. No, his mates were all away. No, home was boring. No, his mum didn't care where he went. Yeah, alright, he'd come round my place for a few hours, why not.

So it began, with his bike in the boot of my car and himself stretched out on the passenger seat beside me with his cut-offs riding up his strong, smooth thighs so that my heart hammered with want and my hands sweated on the steering-wheel. And so it continued, back at my flat, beer and cigarettes, computer games, promise of a trip to the cinema, and it was too soon, too early, I'd lost so many by rushing it, so he left on his B.M.X. at 6.00 and I hadn't laid a finger on him. Anywhere.

He came again the next day. We went to the cinema.

And the next. Swimming. Strong brown body in absurdly brief swimming-trunks. Respectable bump in the front of them. Smooth, flat belly. Muscles like a juvenile stevedore.

And the next. Talking. More open, now, more friendly, the boy emerging from behind the street-wise street-arab. Hobbies. School. Girls? – Naow, was going out with one, not now. Would you like to see

some magazines? How d'you mean. You know – girls. What – porno? Yeah. Shit – look at her tits! My hand casually, oh, so casually, on his shoulder. Can you...? Yeah, of course! How often? Most nights: but it's difficult, 'coz my brother sleeps in the same room. He turns the page. Bump in the cut-offs now appreciably bigger. It's a pity you can't stay here one night – you could take these mags into my spare room. Could I? Really? Yes, of course: I'd like you to come very much. And now – now – sliding the hand over the shoulder, down the chest inside the shirt, over the belly...

“Ere! What you doing!”

“You don't mind, do you?”

“Yes I do! Get off!” Shocked. Angry.

And he threw down the magazines and left, slamming the door.

And that was it. Blown it. Again. Loneliness creeping back like nightfall.

BUT NO. He was there the next day. With a difference. Wary, defiant, moving away when I came close to him. Always out of reach. Until...

“Can I see them mags again?”

“Yes, O.K.”

“Can I take them in the other room, like you said?”

“Can I come?”

“Fuck off!”

And away he went into the spare room, to emerge twenty minutes later, slightly sweaty and out of breath, with the bump de-tumescing inside his shorts, leaving my spare bed rumpled and redolent of pistoning climaxing boy. Then a can of beer, a cigarette, monosyllabic conversation, and a distant and wary farewell.

He came again the next day.

And the next.

I tried to salvage it. We went out. We talked – casually, superficially. I bought him a couple of presents. Mended his B.M.X. Every so often he would disappear into my spare room with the magazines – door firmly locked. I never tried to interfere. But always, in his eyes when he looked at me, was the hard, uncompromising accusation: “I know what *you* are. I know *exactly* what you want. And you're not going to get it.”

I changed tactics. We talked about sex, about how it didn't matter who you did it with so long as it felt good. How you could get different

pleasures doing it with men from those you got with girls. Not better, just different. Well, I say we talked. Actually I talked, and he stared at the floor looking sullen and angry and beautiful, and changed the subject as soon as he could.

And still he came round. Almost every day. Until it got so that I dreaded his visits. It was too much, being with him, looking at him – worse, knowing what he was doing with those bloody magazines in my bedroom – it was torture. I started finding things to do that would take me away from home even making appointments up so that I could tell him not to come. But I work from home. There were still three or four days every week when he would be there, lounging on the sofa with his long bare legs and his scruffy hair and that pugnacious “don't-you-touch-me” glare in his ridiculously beautiful eyes...

I had accepted, now, that I was never going to get anywhere. What to do? Yes, sure, I know – be a friend. It's the boy's decision. You can't reject him because he isn't the kind of person you want him to be. But, Christ! I had to live too! I was losing sleep over him. And he was always there...

So I did it. Callously, selfishly, to save my own peace of mind, I decided to kick him out. For good.

“Mark – look. I don't know how to say this kindly. You've got to stop coming round here.”

Silence. Disbelief, anger, something else? Fear? Unhappiness? Well, they would both be understandable.

“What – Don't you want to see me no more?”

“Mark, it's not that. But – hell – you know how I feel about you. And I understand that you don't want to do it, truly I do. But you don't realize what you're doing to me. And you don't honestly want to be friends with me – you just want to go out to places, and have somewhere you can sit around. You'd be just as happy if I wasn't here. Happier, probably.”

More silence. Then –

“I do want to be friends. But not – you know – like that.”

“Mark, I know. It's not your fault, it's mine. But you're making me so unhappy.”

“I can't come round any more, then?”

Bastard, Spence. Cold, hard-hearted bastard. Never again dare to claim that you love children. And I nearly weakened. But it was self-defense: I had to do it.

“I'm sorry, Mark. Really sorry.”

He stood up slowly. Walked towards the door. Stopped. “If I did it – just once – could I go on coming?”

NO! logic screamed at me. It'd be worse. He'd have a hold over you. You'd never escape him. And to do it once, but never again... Losing something you've had is fifty times worse than wanting something you haven't known!

I opened my mouth to say “No.”

And said, hoarsely, “Yes – I suppose so.”

Still he hesitated, kicking one foot into the carpet.

“I'd pay you...” I muttered.

“How much?”

A hundred pounds. Don't be a fool. “Ten pounds?”

“Fifteen.”

“Twelve, then.”

“Fifteen.”

Oh, Christ, yes. “O.K. – fifteen.”

Still he didn't move.

“But only once, mind. I'm not a bender.”

“Nor am I, Mark. I do it with girls, too.” After all, I'd blackmailed him, bribed him, betrayed his friendship, what did a little lie matter on top of that?

He picked up the magazines from the sofa and turned brusquely. “Come on, then,” he said, and marched into the bedroom.

WHEN I GOT in there, I found him lying on his back on the bed, one of the magazines held open in front of his face, his legs stretched wide. I sat on the edge of the bed, not speaking, keeping it as impersonal as possible for his sake. Gently I placed my hand over the bump in his cut-offs. He was hard already. I rubbed him through the coarse material for a few moments, then unclasped the waistband and pulled down the zip. Without taking his eyes off the pictures, he raised his hips so that I could ease the cut-offs and briefs down his legs and off. His shirt was unbuttoned already, and I spread it wide, not wanting to disturb his concentration by taking it off.

And then... then...

I'd thought that as it was a once-and-only I would please myself first – but I'd reckoned without my own sexuality. I should have known that I invariably got my greatest pleasure from watching theirs. His shoulders, and the arms holding the magazine, never moved – but soon the rest of his body was bucking and twisting until soon – surprisingly soon – his

back arched, his legs tensed convulsively, the magazine, I swear, shook just a little, and it was wonderfully, copiously over.

HE DIDN'T turn up the next day. I spent the time mooching morosely round the house, not knowing whether to be relieved or sorry. Wondering, if he did turn up again, how in hell I was going to cope with having him there but not touching him. Remembering – vividly, poignantly – the brief fifteen minutes it had taken. Was the memory worth it? I supposed so. Anyway, I'd given my promise. I wasn't going to go back on that on top of everything else I'd done to him.

The day after – Sunday – he was there. Half shy, half defiant. “You said I could go on coming round. Alright?”

“Yes, of course alright. Come in. Have a beer.”

But it was different again. Worse – much worse. The conversation back to monosyllables. My fault, I knew. I'd really made a mess of this one. But more than that – no energy, no interest in things we used to do.

“Want to go bowling?”

“Too hot.”

“Swimming, then?”

“No.”

“O.K. Shall I put on the computer for you?”

“No. 'S boring.”

Then a long pause. And there was something else.

Something he wanted to say. Recrimination? Anger? I deserved them. And whatever it was, it was better if he got it out of his system.

“Mark – what is it?”

He shifted uncomfortably, staring at the floor.

“Is it about what happened the other day?”

A shrug. Then – “No. Well – yes, sort of.”

“Go on. Tell me.”

“It's that money. The fifteen quid you gave me.”

“Yes?”

“Well – I spent it.”

“Good.”

“And now I haven't got any left...”

“Mark, I can't give you any more. Anyway, I've only got a few pounds.”

“You could get some from the bank.”

“It's Sunday. Anyway – look, I know I gave you that money two days ago, but that was because of what we did. I can't go on giving it to

you.”

“Don't you want to do it again, then?”

Thunderbolt. Earthquake. I steadied myself against the chair.

“You'd – do it again?”

“Yeah. For fifteen quid. O.K.?”

“Oh, yes, Mark, yes! Tomorrow. I'll get some from the bank...”

“Haven't you got it now? I need it today.”

“Mark, I haven't.”

“How much have you got, then?”

I counted. “Only four pounds and twenty-three pence.”

“O.K.”

“Is that enough?”

“What for?”

“Whatever it is that you need it for.”

“I don't need it for anything special.”

“But you said – just now – you said: 'I need it today'.”

He looked up at me. Blushing furiously, right down inside his shirt.

And it was there, in his eyes. Not anger. Not defiance. Just want.

“I didn't mean the money,” he said.

And got up.

And walked towards the bedroom.

Without the magazines.

And taking off his shirt.