LOVE-BUDS

NORMAN MAILER

"Love-Buds," a short story, was written in Mailer's senior year at Harvard (1942–43) and it was never published. A transcription of the story follows the images. The Norman Mailer estate has graciously given permission to reprint the story. Images are courtesy of the Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas at Austin.

–Phillip Sipiora

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Love-Buds

They were both seventeen and they had never had a woman. All that summer at the hotel on the New Jersey seashore to which their parents had brought them, they talked about it, they made plans, they discussed the few girls they knew, and they cast about for some way to enter the state of manhood. They were not big boys, they were somewhat small even for seventeen, one short and inclined to be fat, and one short and rather thin, they were named respectively Harold and Lester; their nicknames Al and Eppy.

Al, who was the stocky one, and rather romantic, often hinted that he had slept with a girl. She had been fifteen, he claimed, and he had been sixteen, and she had been beautiful. He was always poetic and never offered the details which Eppy's practical mind desired. It had been a tragedy, it seemed; the girl had died. After a time Eppy no longer believed the story, and in the face of his disbelief, Al began to disbelieve it too. Once in a while he would still talk about the girl, as though the falsehood were too pleasant to be lost so easily, but Eppy with a skinny utilitarian look of disgust, would hardly listen. He had no desire to live in the past. He was seventeen, and he felt he could not keep his self-respect if he were still a virgin at the age of eighteen.

There were youths at the hotel who were in their second or third year at college, who smoked pipes, and belonged to fraternities. Occasionally they would condescend to speak to Al and Eppy, and they would relate in bored tones, how in their freshman year at college, the fraternity brothers had accompanied them to the attractions of a brothel. Since then, they implied, it was their habit to make such visits frequently as they wished.

What is it like? is it as good as they say? Al and Eppy would always ask.

They were never answered directly. The college men would puff on their pipes, they would smile mysteriously, they would suggest a state of bliss which language could not communicate.

Eppy became determined that before the summer was over, Al and he would go to a brothel. Al was agreeable, and they talked about their project for many hours.

They were obliged, first of all, to find a place. They asked guarded questions of the college men, they listened to gossip, they sifted evidence, they tried to determine which rumors were valid. It seemed when all the material was accumulated, that the nearest brothel was in Scranton, Pennsylvania, approximately one hundred and twenty-five miles away.

This did not bother them. Out of their need for the symbolic and the portentous, a trip of a hundred and twenty-five miles seemed just about perfect.

Same ¶ Step by step, they made their plans. They would hitch-hike, and in advance of their parent's objections, they had prepared the explanation that they were going to visit a friend who was junior counselor at a boy's camp in Northeastern Pennyslvania. They would each carry five dollars. They would wear tee-shirts and dungarees so that they would be tough and imposing and no hoboes on the way would dare to rob them. They would carry a change of tee-shirts in a beach-bag together with two towels, four apples, and a pound bar of chocolate. They would leave the hotel at six o'clock in the morning, and they would allow two days to reach Scranton, and two days to return. If they ran out of money they would sleep in a farmer's barn, or else they would go to the police station of whatever town they found themselves in, and ask the police to allow them to sleep in the jail for the night. Last, they each knew what type of girl they would pick. They would be very careful and deliberate in their choice. Al was going to select a Spanish girl because Spanish girls were passionate, and Eppy was going to find a cuddly plump little girl with red hair.

They were determined, and they overcame their parent's protests. On a summer morning at eight o'clock, they set out upon the road, two hours late in humiliating concession to their mothers' demand that they begin with a good night's sleep. Loaded with advice, admonitions, and worried sighs, they marched

out down the highway, each of them carrying the beach bag for five minutes. The bag was hardly heavy, but they had agreed in advance that the lightest bundles could become onerous if portered for too long, and they must conserve their strength.

At those places where they waited for automobiles, they took great pains to lie down beside the road in order to dirty their shirts and smudge their arms and faces. In anticipation, Neither of them had shaved for a week, and they had succeeded in sprouting a downy shadow beneath their noses and upon their chins. They thought to look tough and impregnable and somewhat sinister, and they managed to come out so unappetizing that they quite disqualified themselves for any rides in fast passenger automobiles. Even then, with ten short rides in as many small trucks and flivvers, they reached Scranton by four in the afternoon, and were altogether pleased with themselves. They were a day ahead of schedule.

They searched out a cheap rooming-house where they were given a double bed for a dollar and a half, and then they had nothing to do but wait for evening. It never occurred to them that they might enter a brothel in the daytime. Instead, they walked the streets. They had been told that anyone in Scranton could inform them where the houses of prostitution were to be found, and therefore, after walking for some time, Eppy approached a milkman, and in a diffident voice asked him directions.

"What do you want to go there for?" the milkman asked.

"Well, you know," Eppy scuffled his feet, "we're new here."

"Listen," said the milkman, grasping him by the arm, "just pick up a couple of girls. Any girls. Just pick them up on the street."

"Yeah, thanks, we'll do that," Eppy muttered, with determination.

No advice could have been more depressing. They had spent the last of their seventeen years trying to stir enough courage for just such an act, and the thought of doing this in a strange city was quite beyond their ken. Chastened, dejected, convinced of failure, and certain that the trip to Scranton would be without issue, they walked sadly down the street. Somehow, they had felt from the beginning that nothing could happen. How could it? It was imposs-

ible to conceive what it would feel like to awaken the next day. Privately, they were each convinced they would die without ever having known a woman.

Evening came on, and they ate a cheap meal in a lunch-wagon.

Once more, Eppy girded himself to ask directions. The counterman was more informative than the milkman. He told them to go to the center of the city, and there in an alley behind a building he named, they would discover any number of establishments.

They followed his instructions. They sauntered slowly to the center of the city, they looked around, they tried to stare people in the eye, and then they came to an alley which seemed to be the one described. ~~[illegible]~~ It looked ordinary enough. An automobile lane ran between the backs of brownstone houses for perhaps a hundred yards.

The boys turned into it. They had walked not a third of the way when they started like men caught in ambush. They had unnested a ferocious activity. Women seemed to appear in every ground floor window; calls were hissed at them, and purred, and shrieked, and murmured. They had a dim impression of partially dressed women at every window and ~~xx~~ in the aperture of each half-opened door. Fingernails beat upon glass; perfume, evil and thrilling, seemed to flood the alley. Their hearts responded like fire engines, clanging a ~~xxx~~ siren inside the body of the fat little boy and the thin little boy.

Their heads down, their hands in their pockets, they walked the length of the alley, and came out at the other end.

"Wow," said Al.

"That's real stuff," said Eppy. "You got a butt?" Their voices had become husky.

"Should we go back?" asked Al.

"I'm willing if you're willing."

"Well, I'll go if you will."

They dared each other like children trying to muster pluck to dive into freezing water. Neither of them wanted to enter the alley again; they would much have preferred to go back to their rooming-house and return home the next day, but they were halted by the thought of how depressing would be their cowardice. "Well, come on," said Eppy at last, and he stalked into the alley with Al behind him.

The voices called to them again, fingernails tapped at window-panes, women caressed themselves in invitation. The two boys knew they must pick a place for that was easier than to run such a gauntlet again.

Eppy found himself stopping at a window.

"Come on in, dearie," a woman with heavy make-up said to him.

He stared at the window-sill, and attempted to look bored. In a deep solemn voice, he blurted, "What's the tariff?"

She looked at him. "What, dearie?"

"What's the tariff?" he repeated numbly, stricken that she could not understand him. "What does it cost?" he asked weakly.

"Oh. Oh, two bucks, dearie."

Al and Eppy looked at each other. They tried to appear wise and shrewd as though they were evaluating a business proposition.

"Okay on the price," Eppy muttered.

Almost instantly the door was opened, and the boys were ushered into a shabby living room with cheap chromium chairs and a faded rug. The woman who had spoken to them stood to one side, and the boys looked at each other, swallowing from time to time, and grinning weakly. There was something utterly graceless and damp about them; they looked like recruits on their first day in the army, waiting to be handed uniforms.

Upon a signal four females entered the room. The boys had a vague impression of four grown women wearing tropical costumes and standing upon four pairs of very high heels. They could never have described any more, for they were glowering resolution at the floor. It would have taken more than they possessed to stare these women in the face.

Eppy felt himself putting out an arm to indicate one of them. Galvanized by the gesture, Al bobbed his head at another. The two boys stood in the center of the floor, and shook hands formally. "I'll meet you on the street," Eppy said loudly, testing his voice to see if it would function.

"Follow me, dearie," the woman Eppy had chosen said over her shoulder, and the boys were separated.

Ten minutes later, they met on the street. Al was waiting for Eppy, and the two

lit cigarettes and strode along in silence, not noticing the people who passed.

"Well, we did it," Eppy sighed.

"Yeah, it's done."

"How was it?" Eppy asked tentatively.

"It was wonderful," said Al.

"Yeah, just wonderful."

They looked at each other, they dropped their cigarettes and stamped upon them, lit new ones immediately.

"I was really scared," Al muttered, "but it turned out okay."

"I wasn't too scared," Eppy mumbled in return.

"The girl I saw told me to come back."

"Mine did too," Eppy said quickly.

They walked along, their footsteps lagging.

"Did your girl have ~~blond~~ red hair?" Al asked.

"No, but she was just right, she was ~~just~~ what the doctor ordered," Eppy said in a swaggering voice.

Still, their footsteps lagged more and more. They came at last to a halt beneath a street lamp, and looked into each other's faces.

"Eppy?" Al asked.

"Yeah?"

"Were you able to do it?" Al squeaked.

"No. Were you?"

"No."

~~[illegible]~~ Al let out a whoop of laughter, and Eppy pummelled him on the back. ~~They laughed, they turned~~ they hugged one another, they jumped up and down on the city street beneath the light of a street lamp, and roared with laughter at themselves and at each other. ~~What a relief!~~ what a relief! Soon, they were busy describing the thundering details of incapacity, each trying to defeat the other in the enormity of his failure. They laughed until they were weak, sensing the balm of such laughter, applying it in broad sweeps of unguent. As they walked back to their room, they swore with profound seriousness that never, never, would they tell on one another.

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