
Charles
SOUTH
OF NO
NORTH
Bukowski

Charles Bukowski

South Of No North. Stories of the buried life

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LONELINESS

Edna was walking down the street with her bag of groceries when she passed the automobile. There was a sign in the side window:

WOMAN WANTED.

She stopped. There was a large piece of cardboard in the window with some material pasted on it. Most of it was typewritten. Edna couldn't read it from where she stood on the sidewalk. She could only see the large letters:

WOMAN WANTED.

It was an expensive new car. Edna stepped forward on the grass to read the typewritten portion:

Man age 49. Divorced. Wants to meet woman for marriage. Should be 35 to 44. Like television and motion pictures. Good food. I am a cost accountant, reliably employed. Money in bank. I like women to be on the fat side.

Edna was 37 and on the fat side. There was a phone number. There were also three photos of the gentleman in search of a woman. He looked quite staid in a suit and necktie. Also he looked dull and a little cruel. And made of wood, thought Edna, made of wood.

Edna walked off, smiling a bit. She also had a feeling of repulsion. By the time she reached her apartment she had forgotten about him. It was some hours later, sitting in the bathtub, that she thought about him again and this time she thought how truly lonely he must be to do such a thing:

WOMAN WANTED.

She thought of him coming home, finding the gas and phone bills in the mailbox, undressing, taking a bath, the T.V. on. Then the evening paper. Then into the kitchen to cook. Standing there in his shorts, staring down at the frying pan. Taking his food and walking to a table, eating it. Drinking his coffee. Then more T.V. And maybe a lonely can of beer before bed. There were millions of men like that all over America.

Edna got out of the tub, toweled, dressed and left her apartment. The car was still there. She took down the man's name, Joe Light-hill, and the phone number. She read the typewritten section again. "Motion pictures." What an odd term to use. People said "movies" now. *Woman Wanted*. The sign was very bold. He was original there.

When Edna got home she had three cups of coffee before dialing the number. The phone rang four times. "Hello?" he answered.

"Mr. Lighthill?"

"Yes?"

"I saw your ad. Your ad on the car."

"Oh, yes."

"My name's Edna."

"How you doing, Edna?"

"Oh, I'm all right. It's been so hot. This weather's too much."

"Yes, it makes it difficult to live."

"Well, Mr. Lighthill . . ."

"Just call me Joe."

"Well, Joe, hahaha, I feel like a fool. You know what I'm calling about?"

"You saw my sign?"

"I mean, hahaha, what's wrong with you? Can't you get a woman?"

"I guess not, Edna. Tell me, where are they?"

"Women?"

"Yes."

"Oh, everywhere, you know."

"Where? Tell me. Where?"

"Well, church, you know. There are women in church."

"I don't like church."

"Oh."

"Listen, why don't you come over, Edna?"

"You mean over there?"

"Yes. I have a nice place. We can have a drink, talk. No pressure."

"It's late."

"It's not that late. Listen you saw my sign. You must be interested."

"Well . . ."

"You're scared, that's all. You're just scared."

"No, I'm not scared."

"Then come on over, Edna."

"Well . . ."

"Come on."

"All right. I'll see you in fifteen minutes."

It was on the top floor of a modern apartment complex. Apt. 17. The swimming pool below threw back the lights. Edna knocked. The door opened and there was Mr. Lighthill. Balding in front;

hawknosed with the nostril hairs sticking out; the shirt open at the neck.

"Come on in, Edna . . ."

She walked in and the door closed behind her. She had on her blue knit dress. She was stockingless, in sandals, and smoking a cigarette.

"Sit down. I'll get you a drink."

It was a nice place. Everything in blue and green and *very* clean. She heard Mr. Lighthill humming as he mixed the drinks, hmmmmmmm, hmmmmmmmm, hmmmmmmmm . . . He seemed relaxed and it helped her.

Mr. Lighthill -- Joe -- came out with the drinks. He handed Edna hers and then sat in a chair across the room from her.

"Yes," he said, "it's been hot, hot as hell. I've got air-conditioning, though."

"I noticed. It's very nice."

"Drink your drink."

"Oh, yes."

Edna had a sip. It was a good drink, a bit strong but it tasted nice. She watched Joe tilt his head as he drank. He appeared to have heavy wrinkles around his neck. And his pants were much too loose. They appeared sizes too large. It gave his legs a funny look.

"That's a nice dress, Edna."

"You like it?"

"Oh yes. You're plump too. It fits you snug, real snug."

Edna didn't say anything. Neither did Joe. They just sat looking at each other and sipping their drinks.

Why doesn't he talk? thought Edna. 'It's up to him to talk. There *is* something wooden about him. She finished her drink.

"Let me get you another," said Joe.

"No, I really should be going."

"Oh, come on," he said, "let me get you another drink. We need something to loosen us up."

"All right, but after this one, I'm going."

Joe went into the kitchen with the glasses. He wasn't humming anymore. He came out, handed Edna her drink and sat back down in his chair across the room from her. This drink was stronger.

"You know," he said, "I do well on the sex quizzes."

Edna sipped at her drink and didn't answer.

"How do you do on the sex quizzes?" Joe asked.

"I've never taken any."

"You should, you know, so you'll find out who you are and what you are."

"Do you think those things are valid? I've seen them in the newspaper. I haven't taken them but I've seen them," said Edna.

"Of course they're valid."

"Maybe I'm no good at sex," said Edna, "maybe that's why I'm alone." She took a long drink from her glass.

"Each of us is, finally, alone," said Joe.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, no matter how well it's going sexually or love-wise or both, the day arrives when it's over."

"That's sad," said Edna.

"Of course. So the day arrives when it's over. Either there is a split or the whole thing resolves into a truce: two people living together without feeling anything. I believe that being alone is better."

"Did you divorce your wife, Joe?"

"No, she divorced me."

"What went wrong?"

"Sexual orgies."

"Sexual orgies?"

"You know, a sexual orgy is the loneliest place in the world. Those orgies -- I felt a sense of desperation -- those cocks sliding in and out -- excuse me ..."

"It's all right."

"Those cocks sliding in and out, legs locked, fingers working, mouths, everybody clutching and sweating and determined to do it -- somehow."

"I don't know much about those things, Joe," Edna said.

"I believe that without love, sex is nothing. Things can only be meaningful when some feeling exists between the participants."

"You mean people have to like each other?"

"It helps."

"Suppose they get tired of each other? Suppose they *have* to stay together? Economics? Children? All that?"

"Orgies won't do it."

"What does it?"

"Well, I don't know. Maybe the swap."

"The swap?"

"You know, when two couples know each other *quite* well and switch partners. Feelings, at least, have a chance. For example, say I've always liked Mike's wife. I've liked her for months. I've watched her walk across the room. I like her movements. Her movements have made me curious. I wonder, you know, what goes with those movements. I've seen her angry, I've seen her drunk, I've seen her sober. And then, the swap. You're in the bedroom with her, at last you're knowing her. There's a chance for something real. Of course, Mike has your wife in the other room. Good luck, Mike, you think, and I hope you're as good a lover as I am."

"And it works all right?"

"Well, I dunno . . . Swaps can cause difficulties . . . afterwards. It all has to be talked out . . . very well talked out ahead of time. And then maybe people don't know enough, no matter how much they talk . . ."

"Do you know enough, Joe?"

"Well, these swaps ... I think it might be good for some . . . maybe good for many. I guess it wouldn't work for me. I'm toomuch of a prude."

Joe finished his drink. Edna set the remainder of hers down and stood up.

"Listen Joe, I have to be going ..."

Joe walked across the room toward her. He looked like an elephant in those pants. She saw his big ears. Then he grabbed her and was kissing her. His bad breath came through all the drinks. He had a very sour smell. Part of his mouth was not making contact. He was strong but his strength was not pure, it begged. She pulled her head away and still he held her.

WOMAN WANTED.

"Joe, let me go! You're moving too *fast*, Joe! Let go!"

"Why did you come here, bitch?"

He tried to kiss her again and succeeded. It was horrible. Edna brought her knee up. She got him good. He grabbed and fell to the rug.

."God, god ... why'd you have to do that? You tried to kill me . . ."

He rolled on the floor.

His behind, she thought, he had such an *ugly* behind.

She left him rolling on the rug and ran down the stairway. The air was clean outside. She heard people talking, she heard their T.V. sets. It wasn't a long walk to her apartment. She felt the need of another bath, got out of her blue knit dress and scrubbed herself. Then she got out of the tub, toweled herself dry and set her hair in pink curlers. She decided not to see him again.

BOP BOP AGAINST THAT CURTAIN

We talked about women, peeked up their legs as they got out of cars, and we looked into windows at night hoping to see somebody fucking but we never saw anybody. One time we did watch a couple in bed and the guy was mauling his woman and we thought now we're going to see it, but she said, "No, I don't want to do it tonight!" Then she turned her back on him. He lit a cigarette and we went in search of a new window.

"Son of a bitch, no woman of mine would turn away from me!"

"Me neither. What kind of a man was that?"

There were three of us, me, Baldy, and Jimmy. Our big day was Sunday. On Sunday we met at Baldy's house and took the streetcar down to Main Street. Carfare was seven cents.

There were two burlesque houses in those days, the Follies and the Burbank. We were in love with the strippers at the Burbank and the jokes were a little better so we went to the Burbank. We had tried the dirty movie house but the pictures weren't really dirty and the plots were all the same. A couple of guys would get some little innocent girl drunk and before she got over her hangover she'd find herself in a house of prostitution with a line of sailors and hunchbacks beating on her door. Besides in those places the bums slept night and day, pissed on the floor, drank wine, and rolled each other. The stink of piss and wine and murder was unbearable. We went to the Burbank.

"You boys going to a burlesque today?" Baldy's grampa would ask.

"Hell no, sir, we've got things to do."

We went. We went each Sunday. We went early in the morning, long before the show and we walked up and down Main Street looking into the empty bars where the B-girls sat in the doorways with their skirts up, kicking their ankles in the sunlight that drifted into the dark bar. The girls looked good. But we knew. We had heard. A guy went in for a drink and they charged his ass off, both for his drink and the girl's. But the girl's drink would be watered. You'd get a feel or two and that was it. If you showed any money the barkeep would see it and along would come the mickey and you were out over the bar and your money was gone. We knew.

After our walk along Main Street we'd go into the hotdog place and get our eight cent hotdog and our big nickel mug of rootbeer. We were lifting weights and our muscles bulged and we wore our sleeves rolled high and we each had a pack of cigarettes in our breast pocket. We even had tried a Charles Atlas course. Dynamic Tension, but lifting weights seemed the more rugged and obvious way.

While we ate our hotdog and drank our huge mug of rootbeer we played the pinball machine, a penny a game. We got to know that pinball machine very well. When you made a perfect score you got a free game. We had to make perfect scores, we didn't have that kind of money.

Franky Roosevelt was in, things were getting better but it was still the depression and none of our fathers were working. Where we got our small amount of pocket money was a mystery except that we did have a sharp eye for anything that was not cemented to the ground. We didn't steal, we shared. And we invented. Having little or

no money we invented little games to pass the time -- one of them being to walk to the beach and back.

This was usually done on a summer day and our parents never complained when we arrived home too late for dinner. Nor did they care about the high glistening blisters on the bottoms of our feet. It was when they saw how we had worn out our heels and the soles of our shoes that we began to hear it. We were sent to the five and dime store where heels and soles and glue were at the ready and at a reasonable price.

The situation was the same when we played tackle football in the streets. There weren't any public funds for playgrounds. We were so tough we played tackle football in the streets all through football season, through basketball and baseball seasons and on through the next football season. When you get tackled on asphalt, things happen. Skin rips, bones bruise, there's blood, but you get up like nothing was wrong.

Our parents never minded the scabs and the blood and the bruises; the terrible and unforgivable sin was to rip a *hole* in one of the knees of your pants. Because there were only two pairs of pants to each boy: his everyday pants and his Sunday pants, and you could never rip a hole in the knee of one of your two pairs of pants because that showed that you were poor and an asshole and that your parents were poor and assholes too. So you learned to tackle a guy without falling on *either* knee. And the guy being tackled learned how to be tackled without falling on either knee.

When we had fights we'd fight for hours and our parents wouldn't save us. I guess it was because we pretended to be so tough and never asked for mercy, they were waiting for us to ask for mercy. But we hated our parents so we couldn't and because we hated them they hated us, and they'd walk out on their porches and glance casually over at us in the midst of a terrible endless fight. They'd just yawn and pick up a throw-away advertisement and walk back inside.

I fought a guy who later ended up very high in the United States Navy. I fought him one day from 8:30 in the morning until after sundown. Nobody stopped us although we were in plain sight of his front lawn, under two huge pepper trees with the sparrows shit-ting on us all day.

It was a grim fight, it was to the finish. He was bigger, a little older and heavier, but I was crazier. We quit by common consent -- I don't know how this works, you have to experience it to understand it, but after two people beat on each other eight or nine hours a strange kind of brotherhood emerges.

The next day my body was entirely blue. I couldn't speak out of my lips or move any part of myself without pain. I was on the bed getting ready to die and my mother came in with the shirt I'd worn during the fight. She held it in front of my face over the bed and she said, "Look, you got bloodspots on this shirt! Bloodspots!"

"Sorry!"

"I'll never get them out! NEVER!!!"

"They're *his* bloodspots."

"It doesn't matter! It's blood! It doesn't come out!"

Sundays were our day, our quiet, easy day. We went to the Bur-bank. There was always a bad movie first. A very old movie, and you looked and waited. You were thinking of the girls. The three or four guys in the orchestra pit, they played loud, maybe they didn't play too good but they played loud, and those strippers finally came out and grabbed the curtain, the edge of the curtain, and they grabbed that curtain like it was a man and shook their bodies and went bop bop bop against that curtain. Then they swung out and started to strip. If you had enough money there was even a bag of popcorn; if you didn't to hell with it.

Before the next act there was an intermission. A little man got up and said, "Ladies and gentlemen, if you will let me have your kind attention . . ." He was selling peep-rings. In the glass of each ring, if you held it to the light there was a most wonderful picture. This was promised you! Each ring was only 50 cents, a lifetime possession for just 50 cents, made available only to the patrons of the Burbank and not sold anywhere else. "Just hold it up to the light and you will see! And, thank you, ladies and gentlemen, for your kind attention. Now the ushers will pass down the aisles among you."

Two ragass bums would proceed down the aisles smelling of muscatel, each carrying a bag of peep-rings. I never saw anybody purchase one of the rings. I imagine, though, if you had held one up to the light the picture in the glass would have been a naked woman.

The band began again and the curtains opened and there was the chorus line, most of them former strippers gone old, heavy with mascara and rouge and lipstick, false eyelashes. They did their damndest to stay with the music but they were always a little behind. But they carried on; I thought they were very brave.

Then came the male singer. It was very difficult to like the male singer. He sang too loud about love gone wrong. He didn't know how to sing and when he finished he spread his arms, and bowed his head to the tiniest ripple of applause.

Then came the comedian. Oh, he was good! He came out in an old brown overcoat, hat pulled down over his eyes, slouching and walking like a bum, a bum with nothing to do and no place to go. A girl would walk by on the stage and his eyes would follow her. Then he'd turn to the audience and say, out of his toothless mouth, "Well, I'll be god damned!"

Another girl would walk out on the stage and he'd walk up to her, put his face close to hers and say, "I'm an old man, I'm past 44 but when the bed breaks down I finish on the floor." That did it. How we laughed! The young guys and the old guys, how we laughed. And there was the suitcase routine. He's trying to help some girl pack her suitcase. The clothes keep popping out.

"I can't get it in!"

"Here let me help you!"

"It popped out again!"

"Wait! I'll stand on it!"

"What? Oh *no*, you're not going to *stand* on it!"

They went on and on with the suitcase routine. Oh, he was funny!

Finally the first three or four strippers came out again. We each had our favorite stripper and we each were in love. Baldy had chosen a thin French girl with asthma and dark pouches under her eyes. Jimmy liked the Tiger Woman (properly The Tigress). I pointed out to Jimmy the Tiger Woman definitely had one breast larger than the other. Mine was Rosalie.

Rosalie had a large ass and she shook it and shook it and sang funny little songs, and as she walked about stripping she talked to herself and giggled. She was the only one who really enjoyed her work. I was in love with Rosalie. I often thought of writing her and telling her how great she was but somehow I never got around to it.

One afternoon we were waiting for the streetcar after the show and there was the Tiger Woman waiting for the streetcar too. She was dressed in a tight-fitting green dress and we stood there looking at her.

"It's your girl, Jimmy, it's the Tiger Woman."

"Boy, she's got it! Look at her!"
"I'm going to talk to her," said Baldy.
"It's Jimmy's girl."
"I don't want to talk to her," said Jimmy.
"I'm going to talk to her," said Baldy. He put a cigarette in his mouth, lit it, and walked up to her.
"Hi ya, baby!" he grinned at her.
The Tiger Woman didn't answer. She just stared straight ahead waiting for the streetcar.
"I know who you are. I saw you strip today. You've got it, baby, you've really got it!"
The Tiger Woman didn't answer.
"You really shake it, my god, you really shake it!"
The Tiger Woman stared straight ahead. Baldy stood there grin-ning like an idiot at her. "I'd like to put it to you. I'd like to fuck you, baby!"
We walked up and pulled Baldy away. We walked him down the street. "You asshole, you have no right to talk to her that way!"
"Well, she gets up and shakes it, she gets up in front of men and shakes it!"
"She's just trying to make a living."
"She's hot, she's red hot, she wants it!"
"You're crazy."
We walked him down the street.
Not long after that I began to lose interest in those Sundays on Main Street. I suppose the Follies and the Burbank are still there. Of course, the Tiger Woman and the stripper with asthma, and Rosalie, my Rosalie are long gone. Probably dead. Rosalie's big shaking ass is probably dead. And when I'm in my neighborhood, I drive past the house I used to live in and there are strangers living there. Those Sundays were good, though, most of those Sundays were good, a tiny light in the dark depression days when our fathers walked the front porches, jobless and impotent and glanced at us beating the shit out of each other, then went inside and stared at the walls, afraid to play the radio because of the electric bill.

YOU AND YOUR BEER AND HOW GREAT YOU ARE

Jack came through the door and found the pack of cigarettes on the mantle. Ann was on the couch reading a copy of *Cosmopolitan*. Jack lit up, sat down in a chair. It was ten minutes to midnight.

"Charley told you not to smoke," said Ann, looking up from the magazine.

"I deserve it. It was a rough one tonight."

"Did you win?"

"Split decision but I got it. Benson was a tough boy, lots of guts. Charley says Parvinelli is next. We get over Parvinelli, we get the champ."

Jack got up, went to the kitchen, came back with a bottle of beer.

"Charley told me to keep you off the beer," Ann put the magazine down.

"'Charley told me, Charley told me' . . . I'm tired of that. I won my fight. I won 16 straight, I got a right to a beer and a cigarette."

"You're supposed to stay in shape."

"It doesn't matter. I can whip any of them."

"You're so great, I keep hearing it when you get drunk, you're so great. I get sick of it."

"I am great. 16 straight, 15 k.o.'s. Who's better?"

Ann didn't answer. Jack took his bottle of beer and his cigarette into the bathroom.

"You didn't even kiss me hello. The first thing you did was go to your bottle of beer. You're so great, all right. You're a great beer-drinker."

Jack didn't answer. Five minutes later he stood in the bathroom door, his pants and shorts down around his shoes.

"Jesus Christ, Ann, can't you even keep a roll of toilet paper in here?"

"Sorry."

She went to the closet and got him the roll. Jack finished his business and walked out. Then he finished his beer and got another one. "Here you are living with the best light-heavy in the world and all you do is complain. Lots of girls would love to have me but all you do is sit around and bitch."

"I know you're good. Jack, maybe the best, but you don't know how *boring* it is to sit around and listen to you say over and over again how great you are."

"Oh, you're bored with it, are you?"

"Yes, god damn it, you and your beer and how great you are."

"Name a better light-heavy. You don't even come to my fights."

"There are *other* things besides fighting. Jack."

"What? Like laying around on your ass and reading *Cosmopolitan*?"

"I like to improve my mind."

"You ought to. There's a lot of work to be done there."

"I tell you there are other things besides fighting."

"What? Name them."

"Well, art, music, painting, things like that."

"Are you any good at them?"
"No, but I appreciate them."
"Shit, I'd rather be best at what I'm doing."
"Good, better, best . . . God, can't you appreciate people for what they are?"
"For what they *are*? What *are* most of them? Snails, blood- suckers, dandies, finks, pimps, servants . . ."
"You're always looking down on everybody. None of your friends are good enough. You're so damned great!"
"That's right, baby."
Jack walked into the kitchen and came out with another beer.
"You and your god damned beer!"
"It's my right. They sell it. I buy it."
"Charley said . . ."
"Fuck Charley!"
"You're so god damned great!"
"That's right. At least Pattie knew it. She admitted it. She was proud of it. She knew it took something. All you do is bitch."
"Well, why don't you go back to Pattie? What are you doing with me?"
"That's just what I'm thinking."
"Well, we're not married, I can leave any time."
"That's one break we've got. Shit, I come in here dead-ass tired after a tough ten rounder and you're not even glad I took it. All you do is complain about me."
"Listen. Jack, there are other things besides fighting. When I met you, I admired you for what you were."
"I was a fighter. There *aren't* any other things besides fighting.
That's what I am -- a fighter. That's my tile, and I'm good at it. The best. I notice you always go for those second raters . . . like Toby Jorgenson."
"Toby's very funny. He's got a sense of humor, a real sense of humor. I like Toby."
"His record is 9, 5, and one. I can take him when I'm dead drunk."
"And god knows you're dead drunk often enough. How do you think I feel at parties when you're laying on the floor passed out, or lolling around the room telling everybody, 'I'M GREAT, I'M GREAT, I'M GREAT!' Don't you think that makes me feel like an ass?"
"Maybe you are an ass. If you like Toby so much, why don't you go with him?"
"Oh, I just said I liked him, I thought he was *funny*, that doesn't mean I want to go to bed with him."
"Well, you go to bed with me and you say I'm boring. I don't know what the hell you want."
Ann didn't answer. Jack got up, walked over to the couch, lifted Ann's head and kissed her, walked back and sat down again.
"Listen, let me tell you about this fight with Benson. Even you would have been proud of me. He decks me in the first round, a sneak right. I get up and hold him off the rest of the round. He plants me again in the second. I barely get up at 8. I hold him off again. The next few rounds I spend getting my legs back. I take the 6th, 7th, 8th, deck him once in the 9th and twice in the 10th. I don't call that a split. They called it a

split. Well, it's 45 grand, you get that, kid? 45 grand. I'm great, you can't deny I'm great, can you?"

Ann didn't answer.

"Come on, tell me I'm great."

"All right, you're great."

"Well, that's more like it." Jack walked over and kissed her again. "I feel so good. Boxing is a work of art, it really is. It takes guts to be a great artist and it takes guts to be a great fighter."

"All right. Jack."

"All right, Jack, is that all you can say? Pattie used to be happy when I won. We were both happy all night. Can't you share it when I do something good? Hell, are you in love with me or are you in love with the losers, the half-asses? I think you'd be happier if I came in here a loser."

"I want you to win. Jack, it's only that you put so much emphasis on what you do . . ."

"Hell, it's my living, it's my life. I'm proud of being best. It's like flying, it's like flying off into the sky and whipping the sun,"

"What are you going to do when you can't fight anymore?"

"Hell, we'll have enough money to do whatever we want."

"Except get along, maybe."

"Maybe I can learn to read *Cosmopolitan*, improve my mind."

"Well, there's room for improvement."

"Fuck you."

"What?"

"Fuck you."

"Well, that's something you haven't done in a while."

"Some guys like to fuck hitching women, I don't."

"I suppose Pattie didn't bitch?"

"All women bitch, you're the champ."

"Well, why don't you go back to Pattie?"

"You're here now. I can only house one whore at a time."

"Whore?"

"Whore."

Ann got up and went to the closet, got out her suitcase and began putting her clothes in there. Jack went to the kitchen and got another bottle of beer. Ann was crying and angry. Jack sat down with his beer and took a good drain. He needed a whiskey, he needed a bottle of whiskey. And a good cigar.

"I can come pick up the rest of my stuff when you're not around."

"Don't bother. I'll have it sent to you."

She stopped at the doorway.

"Well, I guess this is it," she said.

"I suppose it is," Jack answered.

She closed the door and was gone. Standard procedure. Jack finished the beer and went over to the telephone. He dialed Pattie's number. She answered.

"Pattie?"

"Oh, Jack, how are you?"

"I won the big one tonight. A split. All I got to do is get over Parvinelli and I got the champ."

"You'll whip both of them, Jack. I know you can do it."

"What are you doing tonight, Pattie?"

"It's 1:00 a.m. Jack. Have you been drinking?"

"A few. I'm celebrating."

"How about Ann?"

"We split. I only play one woman at a time, you know that Pattie."

"Jack . . ."

"What?"

"I'm with a guy."

"A guy?"

"Toby Jorgenson. He's in the bedroom . . ."

"Oh, I'm sorry."

"I'm sorry, too. Jack, I loved you ... maybe I still do."

"Oh, shit, you women really throw that word around ..."

"I'm sorry. Jack."

"It's o.k." He hung up. Then he went to the closet for his coat. He put it on, finished the beer, went down the elevator to his car. He drove straight up Normandie at 65 m.p.h., pulled into the liquor store on Hollywood Boulevard. He got out and walked in. He got a six-pack of Michelob, a pack of Alka-Seltzers. Then at the counter he asked the clerk for a fifth of Jack Daniels. While the clerk was tabbing them up a drunk walked up with two six-packs of Coors.

"Hey, man!" he said to Jack, "ain't you Jack Backenweld, the fighter?"

"I am," answered Jack.

"Man, I saw that fight tonight. Jack, you're all guts. You're really great!"

"Thanks, man," he told the drunk, and then he took his sack of goods and walked to his car. He sat there, took the cap off the Daniels and had a good slug. Then he backed out, ran west down Hollywood, took a left at Normandie and noticed a well-built teenage girl staggering down the street. He stopped his car, lifted the fifth out of the bag and showed it to her.

"Want a ride?"

Jack was surprised when she got in. "I'll help you drink that, mister, but no fringe benefits."

"Hell, no" said Jack.

He drove down Normandie at 35 m.p.h., a self-respecting citizen and third ranked light-heavy in the world. For a moment he felt like telling her who she was riding with but he changed his mind and reached over and squeezed one of her knees.

"You got a cigarette, mister?" she asked.

He flicked one out with his hand, pushed in the dash lighter. It jumped out and he lit her up.

POLITICS

At L.A. City College just before World War II, I posed as a Nazi. I hardly knew Hitler from Hercules and cared less. It was just that sitting in class and hearing all the patriots preach how we should go over and do the beast in, I grew bored. I decided to become the opposition. I didn't even bother to read up on Adolf, I simply spouted anything that I felt was evil or maniacal.

However, I really didn't have any political beliefs. It was a way of floating free.

You know, sometimes if a man doesn't believe in what he is doing he can do a much more interesting job because he isn't emotionally caught up in his Cause. It wasn't long before all the tall blond boys had formed The Abraham Lincoln Brigade -- to hold off the hordes of facism in Spain. And then had their asses shot off by trained troops. Some of them did it for adventure and a trip to Spain but they still got their asses shot off. I liked my ass. There really wasn't much I liked about myself but I did like my ass and my pecker.

I leaped up in class and shouted anything that came to my mind. Usually it had something to do with the Superior Race, which I thought was rather humorous. I didn't lay it directly onto the Blacks and the Jews because I saw that they were as poor and confused as I was. But I did get off some wild speeches in and out of class, and the bottle of wine I kept in my locker helped me along. I was surprised that so many people listened to me and how few, if any, ever questioned my statements. I just ran off at the mouth and was delighted at how entertaining L.A. City College could be.

"Are you going to run for student body president, Chinaski?"

"Shit, no."

I didn't want to do anything. I didn't even want to go to gym. In fact, the last thing I wanted to do was to go to gym and sweat and wear a jockstrap and compare pecker-lengths. I knew I had a medium-sized pecker. I didn't have to take gym to establish that.

We were lucky. The college decided to charge a two dollar enrollment fee. We decided -- a few of us decided, anyhow -- that that was unconstitutional, so we refused. We struck against it. The college allowed us to attend classes but took away some of our privileges, one of them being gym.

When time arrived for gym class, we stood in civilian clothing. The coach was given orders to march us up and down the field in close formation. That was their revenge. Beautiful. I didn't have to run around the track with my ass sweating or try to throw a demented basketball through a demented hoop.

We marched around and made up dirty songs, and the good American boys on the football team threatened to whip our asses but somehow never got around to it. Probably because we were bigger and meaner. To me, it was wonderful, pretending to be a Nazi, and then turning around and proclaiming that my constitutional rights were being violated.

I did sometimes get emotional. I remember one time in class, after a little too much wine, with a tear in each eye, I said, "I promise you, this will hardly be the last war. As soon as one enemy is eliminated somehow another is found. It's endless and meaningless. There's no such thing as a good war or a bad war."

Another time there was a communist speaking from a platform on a vacant lot south of campus. He was a very earnest boy with rimless glasses, pimples, wearing a black

sweater with holes in the elbows. I stood listening and had some of my disciples with me. One of them was a White Russian, Zircoff, his father or his grandfather had been killed by the Reds in the Russian revolution. He showed me a sack of rotten tomatoes. "When you give the word," he told me, "we'll begin throwing them."

It occurred to me suddenly that my disciples hadn't been listening to the speaker, or even if they had been, nothing he had said would matter. Their minds were made up. Most of the world was like that. Having a medium-sized cock suddenly didn't seem the world's worst sin.

"Zircoff," I said, "put the tomatoes away."

"Piss," he said, "I wish they were hand grenades."

I lost control of my disciples that day, and walked away as they started hurling their rotten tomatoes.

I was informed that a new Vanguard Party was to be formed. I was given an address in Glendale and I went there that night. We sat in the basement of a large home with our wine bottles and our various-sized cocks.

There was a platform and desk with a large American flag spread across the back wall. A healthy looking American boy walked out on the platform and suggested that we begin by saluting the flag, pledging allegiance to it.

I always disliked pledging allegiance to the flag. It was so tedious and sillyass. I always felt more like pledging allegiance to myself, but there we were and we stood up and ran through it. Then, afterwards, the little pause, and everybody sitting down feeling as if they had been slightly molested.

The healthy American began talking. I recognized him as a fat boy who sat in the front row of the playwriting class. I never trusted those types. Sucks. Strictly sucks. He began: "The Communist menace must be stopped. We are gathered here to take steps to do so. We will take lawful steps and, perhaps, unlawful steps to do this . . ."

I don't remember much of the rest. I didn't care about the Communist menace of the Nazi menace. I wanted to get drunk, I wanted to fuck, I wanted a good meal, I wanted to sing over a glass of beer in a dirty bar and smoke a cigar. I wasn't aware. I was a dupe, a tool.

Afterwards, Zircoff and myself and one ex-disciple went down to Westlake Park and we rented a boat and tried to catch a duck for dinner. We managed to get very drunk and didn't catch a duck and found we didn't have enough money between us to pay the boat rental fee.

We floated around the shallow lake and played Russian Roulette with Zircoff's gun and we all lucked through. Then Zircoff stood up in the moonlight drunk and shot the hell out of the bottom of the boat. The water started coming in and we ran her for shore. A third of the way in the boat sank and we had to get out and get our assholes wet wading to shore. So the night ended up well and hadn't been wasted . . .

I played Nazi for some time longer, while caring for neither the Nazis nor the Communists nor the Americans. But I was losing interest. In fact, just before Pearl Harbor I gave it up. The fun had gone out of it. I felt the war was going to happen and I didn't feel much like going to war and I didn't feel much like being a conscientious objector either. It was catshit. It was useless. Me and my medium-sized cock were in trouble.

I sat in class without speaking, waiting. The students and the instructors needled me. I had lost my drive, my steam, my mox. I felt that the whole thing was out of my hands. It was going to happen. All the cocks were in trouble.

My English instructor, quite a nice lady with beautiful legs asked me to stay after class one day. "What's the matter, Chinaski?" she asked. "I've given up," I said. "You mean politics?" she asked. "I mean politics," I said. "You'd make a good sailor," she said. I walked out . . .

I was sitting with my best friend, a marine, in a downtown bar drinking a beer when it happened. A radio was playing music, there was a break in the music. They told us that Pearl Harbor had just been bombed. It was announced that all military personnel should return immediately to their bases. My friend asked that I take the bus with him to San Diego, suggesting that it might turn out to be the last time I ever saw him. He was right.

NO WAY TO PARADISE

I was sitting in a bar on Western Ave. It was around midnight and I was in my usual confused state. I mean, you know, nothing works right: the women, the jobs, the no jobs, the weather, the dogs. Finally you just sit in a kind of stricken state and wait like you're on the bus stop bench waiting for death.

Well, I was sitting there and here comes this one with long dark hair, a good body, sad brown eyes. I didn't turn on for her. I ignored her even though she had taken the stool next to mine when there were a dozen other empty seats. In fact, we were the only ones in the bar except for the bartender. She ordered a dry wine. Then she asked me what I was drinking.

"Scotch and water."

"Give him a scotch and water," she told the barkeep.

Well, that was unusual.

She opened her purse, removed a small wire cage and took some little people out and sat them on the bar. They were all around three inches tall and they were alive and properly dressed. There were four of them, two men and two women.

"They make these now," she said, "they're very expensive. They cost around \$2,000 apiece when I got them. They go for around \$2,400 now. I don't know the manufacturing process but it's probably against the law."

The little people were walking around on the top of the bar. Suddenly one of the little guys slapped one of the little women across the face.

"You bitch," he said, "I've had it with you!"

"No, George, you can't," she cried, "I love you! I'll kill myself! I've got to have you!"

"I don't care," said the little guy, and he took out a tiny cigarette and lit it. "I've got a right to live."

"If you don't *want* her," said the other little guy, "I'll take her. I love her."

"But I don't want you, Marty. I'm in love with George."

"But he's a bastard, Anna, a real bastard!"

"I know, but I love him anyhow."

The little bastard then walked over and kissed the other little woman.

"I've got a triangle going," said the lady who had bought me the drink. "That's Marty and George and Anna and Ruthie. George goes down, he goes down good. Marty's kind of square."

"Isn't it sad to watch all that? Er, what's your name?"

"Dawn. It's a terrible name. But that's what mothers do to their children sometimes."

"I'm Hank. But isn't it sad . . ."

"No, it isn't sad to watch it. I haven't had much luck with my own loves, terrible luck really . . ."

"We all have terrible luck."

"I suppose. Anyhow, I bought these little people and now I watch them, and it's like having it and not having any of the problems. But I get awfully hot when they start making love. That's when it gets difficult."

"Are they sexy?"

"Very, very sexy. My god, it makes me hot!"

"Why don't you make them do it? I mean, right now. We'll watch them together."

"Oh, you can't make them do it. They've got to do it on their own."

"How often do they do it?"

"Oh, they're pretty good. They go four or five times a week."

They were walking around on the bar. "Listen," said Marty, "give me a chance. Just give me a chance, Anna."

"No," said Anna, "my love belongs to George. There's no other way it can be."

George was kissing Ruthie, feeling her breasts. Ruthie was getting hot.

"Ruthie's getting hot," I told Dawn.

"She is. She really is."

I was getting hot too. I grabbed Dawn and kissed her.

"Listen," she said, "I don't like them to make love in public. I'll take them home and have them do it."

"But then I can't watch."

"Well, you'll just have to come with me."

"All right," I said, "let's go."

I finished my drink and we walked out together. She carried the little people in the small wire cage. We got into her car and put the people in between us on the front seat. I looked at Dawn. She was really young and beautiful. She seemed to have good insides too. How could she have gone wrong with her men? There were so many ways those things could miss. The four little people had cost her \$8,000. Just *that* to get away from relationships and *not* to get away from relationships.

Her house was near the hills, a pleasant looking place. We got out and walked up to the door. I held the little people in the cage while Dawn opened the door.

"I heard Randy Newman last week at The Troubador. Isn't he great?" she asked.

"Yes, he is."

We walked into the front room and Dawn took the little people out and placed them on the coffeetable. Then she walked into the kitchen and opened the refrigerator and got out a bottle of wine. She brought in two glasses.

"Pardon me," she said, "but you seem a little bit crazy. What do you do?"

"I'm a writer."

"Are you going to write about this?"

"They'll never believe it, but I'll write it."

"Look," said Dawn, "George has got Ruthie's panties off. He's fingering her. Ice?"

"Yes, he is. No, no ice. Straight's fine."

"I don't know," said Dawn, "it really gets me hot to watch them. Maybe it's because they're so small. It really heats me up."

"I know what you mean."

"Look, George is going down on her now." ' "

"He is, isn't he?"

"Look at them!"

"God o mighty!"

I grabbed Dawn. We stood there kissing. As we did her eyes went from mine to them and then back to mine again.

Little Marty and little Anna were watching too.

"Look," said Marty, "they're going to make it. We might as well make it. Even the big folks are going to make it. Look at them!"

"Did you hear that?" I asked Dawn. "They said we're going to make it. Is that true?"

"I hope it's true," said Dawn.

I got her over to the couch and worked her dress up around her hips. I kissed her along the throat. "I love you," I said.

"Do you? Do you?"

"Yes, somehow, yes . . ."

"All right," said little Anna to little Marty, "we might as well do it too, even though I don't love you."

They embraced in the middle of the coffeetable. I had worked Dawn's panties off. Dawn groaned. Little Ruthie groaned. Marty closed in on Anna. It was happening everywhere. I got the idea that everybody in the world was doing it. Then I forgot about the rest of the world. We somehow walked into the bedroom. Then I got into Dawn for the long slow ride. . . .

When she came out of the bathroom I was reading a dull dull story in *Playboy*.

"It was so good," she said.

"My pleasure," I answered.

She got back into bed with me. I put the magazine down.

"Do you think we can make it together?" she asked.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, do you think we can make it together for any length of time?"

"I don't know. Things happen. The beginning is always easiest."

Then there was a scream from the front room. "Oh-oh," said Dawn. She leaped up and ran out of the room. I followed. When I got there she was holding George in her hands.

"Oh, my god!"

"What happened?"

"Anna did it to him!"

"Did what?"

"She cut off his balls! George is a eunuch!"

"Wow!"

"Get me some toilet paper, quickly! He might bleed to death!"

"That son of a bitch," said little Anna from the coffeetable, "if I can't have George, nobody can have him!"

"Now both of you belong to me!" said Marty.

"No, you've got to choose between us," said Anna.

"Which one of us is it?" asked Ruthie.

"I love you both," said Marty.

"He's stopped bleeding," said Dawn. "He's out cold." She wrapped George in a handkerchief and put him on the mantle.

"I mean," Dawn said to me, "if you don't think we can make it, I don't want to go into it anymore."

"I think I love you. Dawn."

"Look," she said, "Marty's embracing Ruthie!"

"Are they going to make it?"

"I don't know. They seem excited."

Dawn picked Anna up and put her in the wire cage.

"Let me out of here! I'll kill both of them! Let me out of here!"

George moaned from inside his handkerchief upon the mantle. Marty had Ruthie's panties off. I pulled Dawn to me. She was beautiful and young and had insides. I could be in love again. It was possible. We kissed. I fell down inside her eyes. Then I got up and began running. I knew where I was. A cockroach and an eagle made love. Time was a fool with a banjo. I kept running. Her long hair fell across my face.

"I'll kill everybody!" screamed little Anna. She rattled about in her wire cage at 3 a.m. in the morning.

LOVE FOR \$17.50

Robert's first desire -- when he began thinking of such things -- was to sneak into the Wax Museum some night and make love to the wax ladies. However, that seemed too dangerous. He limited himself to making love to statues and mannequins in his sex fantasies and lived in his fantasy world.

One day while stopped at a red light he looked into the doorway of a shop. It was one of those shops that sold everything -- records, sofas, books, trivia, junk. He saw her standing there in a long red dress. She wore rimless glasses, was well-shaped; dignified and sexy the way they used to be. A real class broad. Then the signal changed and he was forced to drive on.

Robert parked a block away and walked back to the shop. He stood outside at the newspaper rack and looked in at her. Even the eyes looked real, and the mouth was very impulsive, pouting just a bit.

Robert went inside and looked at the record rack. He was closer to her than and sneaked glances. No, they didn't make them like that anymore. She even had on high heels.

The girl in the shop walked up. "Can I help you, sir?"

"Just browsing, miss."

"If there's anything you want, just let me know."

"Surely."

Robert moved over to the mannequin. There wasn't a price tag. He wondered if she were for sale. He walked back to the record rack, picked up a cheap album and purchased it from the girl.

The next time he visited the shop the mannequin was still there. Robert browsed a bit, bought an ashtray that was moulded to imitate a coiled snake, then walked out.

The third time he was there he asked the girl: "Is the mannequin for sale?"

"The mannequin?"

"Yes, the mannequin."

"You want to buy it?"

"Yes, you sell things, don't you? Is the mannequin for sale?"

"Just a moment, sir."

The girl went to the back of the shop. A curtain parted and an old Jewish man came out. The bottom two buttons of his shirt were missing and you could see his hairy belly. He seemed friendly enough.

"You want the mannequin, sir?"

"Yes, is she for sale?"

"Well, not really. You see, it's kind of a display piece, a joke."

"I want to buy her."

"Well, let's see . . ." The old Jew went over and began touching the mannequin, touching the dress, the arms. "Let's see ... I think I can let you have this ... thing... for \$17.50."

"I'll take her." Robert pulled out a twenty. The storekeeper counted out the change.

"I'm going to miss it," he said, "sometimes it seems almost real. Should I wrap it?"

"No, I'll take her the way she is."

Robert picked up the mannequin and carried her to his car. He laid her down in the back seat. Then he got in and drove off to his place. When he got there, luckily, there didn't seem to be anybody about and he got her into the doorway unseen. He stood her in the center of the room and looked at her.

"Stella," he said, "Stella, bitch!"

He walked up and slapped her across the face. Then he grabbed the head and kissed it. It was a good kiss. His penis began to harden when the phone rang. "Hello," he answered.

"Robert?"

"Yeah. Sure."

"This is Harry."

"How you doing. Harry?"

"O.k., what you doing?"

"Nothing."

"I thought I'd come over. Bring a couple of beers."

"O.k."

Robert hung up, picked up the mannequin and carried her to the closet. He pushed her back in the corner of the closet and closed the door.

Harry really didn't have much to say. He sat there with his beer-can. "How's Laura?" he asked.

"Oh," said Robert, "it's all over between me and Laura."

"What happened?"

"The eternal vamp bit. Always on stage. She was relentless. She'd turn on for guys everywhere -- at the grocery store, on the street, in cafes, everywhere and to anybody. It didn't matter who it was as long as it was a man. She even turned on for a guy who dialed a wrong number. I couldn't go it anymore."

"You alone now?"

"No, I've got another one. Brenda. You've met her."

"Oh yeah. Brenda. She's all right."

Harry sat there drinking beer. Harry never had a woman but he was always talking about them. There was something sickening about Harry. Robert didn't encourage the conversation and Harry soon left. Robert went to the closet and brought Stella out.

"You god damned whore!" he said. "You've been cheating on me, haven't you?"

Stella didn't answer. She stood there looking so cool and prim. He slapped her a good one. It'd be a long day in the sun before any woman got away with cheating on Bob Wilkenson. He slapped her another good one.

"Cunt! You'd fuck a four-year-old boy if he could get his pecker up, wouldn't you?"

He slapped her again, then grabbed her and kissed her. He kissed her again and again. Then he ran his hands up under her dress. She was well- shaped, very well-shaped. Stella reminded him of an algebra teacher he'd had in high school. Stella didn't have on panties.

"Whore," he said, "who got your panties?"

Then his penis was pressed against the front of her. There was no opening. But Robert was in a tremendous passion. He inserted it between the upper thighs. It was smooth and tight. He worked away. For just a moment he felt extremely foolish, then his passion took over and he began kissing her along the neck as he worked.

Robert washed Stella with a dishrag, placed her in the closet behind an overcoat, closed the door and still managed to get in the last quarter of the Detroit Lions vs. L.A. Rams game on T.V.

It was quite nice for Robert as time went on. He made certain adjustments. He bought Stella several pairs of underpants, a garter belt, sheer long stockings, an ankle bracelet.

He bought her earrings too, and was quite shocked to learn that his love didn't have any ears. Under all that hair, the ears were missing. He put the earrings on anyhow with adhesive tape. But there were advantages -- he didn't have to take her to dinner, to parties, to dull movies; all those mundane things that meant so much to the average woman. And there were arguments. There would always be arguments, even with a mannequin. She wasn't talkative but he was sure she told him once, "You're the greatest lover of them all. That old Jew was a dull lover. You love with soul, Robert."

Yes, there were advantages. She wasn't like all the other women he had known. She didn't want to make love at inconvenient moments. He could choose the time. And she didn't have periods. And he went down on her. He cut some of the hair from her head and pasted it between her thighs.

The affair was sexual to begin with but gradually he was falling in love with her, he could feel it happening. He considered going to a psychiatrist, then decided not to. After all, was it necessary to love a real human being? It never lasted long. There were too many differences between the species, and what started as love too often ended up as war.

Then too, he didn't have to lie in bed with Stella and listen to her talk about all her past lovers. How Karl had such a big thing, but Karl wouldn't go down. And how Louie danced so well, Louie could have made it in ballet instead of selling insurance. And how Marty could really kiss. He had a way of locking tongues. So on. So forth. What shit. Of course, Stella had mentioned the old Jew. But just that once.

Robert had been with Stella about two weeks when Brenda phoned.

"Yes, Brenda?" he answered.

"Robert, you haven't phoned me."

"I've been terribly busy, Brenda. I've been promoted to district manager and I've had to realign things down at the office."

"Is that so?"

"Yes."

"Robert, something's wrong ..."

"What do you mean?"

"I can tell by your voice. Something's wrong. What the hell's wrong, Robert? Is there another woman?"

"Not exactly."

"What do you mean, not exactly?"

"Oh, Christ!"

"What is it? What is it? Robert, something's wrong. I'm coming over to see you."

"There's nothing wrong, Brenda."

"You son of a bitch, you're holding out on me! Something's going on. I'm coming to see you! Now!"

Brenda hung up and Robert walked over and picked up Stella and put her in the closet, well back in one corner. He took the overcoat off the hanger and hung it over Stella. Then he came back, sat down and waited.

Brenda opened the door and rushed in. "All right, what the hell's wrong? What is it?"

"Listen, kid," he said, "it's o.k. Calm down."

Brenda was nicely built. Her breasts sagged a bit, but she had fine legs and a beautiful ass. Her eyes always had a frantic, lost look. He could never cure her eyes of that. Sometimes after love-making a temporary calm would fill her eyes but it never lasted.

"You haven't even kissed me yet!"

Robert got up from his chair and kissed Brenda.

"Christ, that was no kiss! What is it?" she asked. "What's wrong!"

"It's nothing, nothing at all . . ."

"If you don't tell me, I'm going to scream!"

"I tell you, it's nothing."

Brenda screamed. She walked to the window and screamed. You could hear her all over the neighborhood. Then she stopped.

"God, Brenda, don't do that again! Please, please!"

"I'll do it again! I'll do it again! Tell me what's wrong, Robert, or I'll do it again!"

"All right," he said, "wait."

Robert went to the closet, took the overcoat off Stella and 'if led her out of the closet.

"What's that?" asked Brenda, "what's that?"

"A mannequin."

"A mannequin? You mean? . . ."

"I mean, I'm in love with her."

"Oh, my god I You mean? That thing? That *tiling*?"

"Yes."

"You love that *thing* more than me? That hunk of celluloid, or whatever the shit she's made of? You mean you love that *thing* more than me?"

"Yes."

"I suppose you take it to bed with you? I suppose you do things to ... with that *thing*?"

"Yes."

"Oh . . ."

Then Brenda really screamed. She just stood there and screamed. Robert thought she would never stop. Then she leaped at the mannequin and started to claw and beat at it. The mannequin toppled and fell against the wall. Brenda ran out the door, got in her car and drove off wildly. She crashed into the side of a parked car, glanced off, drove on.

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