

KISSING CHARLES BUKOWSKI

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THE TWO of them walked into the place and sat down on the red captain's chairs at the north corner of the bar. She took off her coat and tucked her feet into the rungs of the chair and propelled her body from left to right. He tucked his feet too, legs spread over the red leather seat, but remained still. The bartender came over to them.

Can I see your ID?

Yeah. She pulled it out of a pocket and handed it to him.

I appreciate it. You never know these days if someone is seventeen or twenty-two. Now what can I get for you two.

He ordered a double shot of Wild Turkey over ice with a beer back and she got a cup of coffee black.

Their drinks came and the bartender started a tab for them. She was watching the granules of sugar pour and swirl around the spoon in her cup and the hot steam smelled like morning.

She leaned close to him.

Are you going to get drunk, she said.

Thought I might, he said. Are you?

No, I just don't feel like it.

Probably for the best.

Yes, she said. For the best.

But you're feeling all right though? I mean, you're ok and everything.

Yeah, she said. As good as I can get, I guess.

Oh.

I mean, I'm not going to break or anything. You can say anything you want to me. I'm as fine as I can be.

What would I say to you, he said.

I don't know, anything you want, nothing. I'm just telling you.

Well, I don't have anything to say. I mean, what could I say to you?

She looked down at her hands and he could not see her face.

Nothing, she said, nothing. Unless –

What? What? What would you have me say?

Well, you could ask me anything, any question, and I would answer it. I would tell you the truth.

I don't want to ask you anything. I don't want to know anything. Can't we just sit here? Can't I just be with you and we don't have to get into anything? I could drink my drink and we could just sit.

She said, You could tell me that you love me.

You know I do.

I know that you do.

I do.

Why do you love me?

Because I do. You're my girl.

But what, what do you love about me?

He was silent and he knew that he could say the very right thing or the wrong one and he didn't want to be wrong. He had to think.

He said, I'll tell you one thing.

Okay, she said.

The curve of your arm. I love the curve of your arm.

The curve of my arm makes you love me?

I said it's just one thing.

No, it's good, it's good to love the curve of my arm. She smiled.

He took a drink from his glass and reached to put his hand on her thigh beneath the bar.

Come on, now, he said.

She relaxed her shoulders and put her hands flat on the bar, arms bent at the elbows, she turned and looked at him full.

That and what else?

He laughed and leaned close to her, touching his lips to her face below the ear, and whispered.

Your arm is not the only thing I love the curve of, he said.

She raised her eyebrows, then smiled and said, Well.

The late afternoon turned itself dark. The light shifted around the bar, rested finally and was only the red neon window sign that said "Open." He was fishing in the bottom of his fifth rocks glass. It was empty except for his finger stuck into the hollow side of ice.

She said, I should call my mother. She might worry.

She was made to worry, he said. Let her worry.

That's not what I mean, she said. I mean, if she doesn't know where I am –

She didn't know where you were a week ago, it didn't kill her.

Everything's different now, she said.

It is, it really is.

I'm going to call her.

Don't. Wait a while. Sit and talk to me.

What will we talk about. Anything you want.

She looked at him. In the dim red light of the bar, he

looked like a child facing the sunset. The lines around his mouth were softened with the liquor, and for a moment she felt the pure shock of wanting him to fold into his body, of wanting to live only from the inside of him.

She reached to touch his face.

What is it, baby? he said.

Nothing, she said. It's nothing.

The bar began to fill as they drank, smoke and voices rising in the air around them, and for a while they did not talk but watched the people mill around, listening to the juke box and to the loud crack and heavy roll of cue balls breaking in the back room.

I could tell you about the dream I had, she said.

What's that?

About the dream I had, she said. The other night.

Was I in it?

Yes.

Tell me about it then.

Well, she said, it started out we were at my house, in the back, but then it sort of moved around. It was about Charles Bukowski.

Really?

Yeah. Well, first, you lent him your car, only it wasn't your car, it was white, and anyway, he crashed it.

Was I mad?

No, you weren't mad. It was Charles Bukowski.

Yeah, I guess I wouldn't be, then.

And then three of us went dancing at that bar around the corner. We danced and we all got real drunk, and then he took both my wrists and pulled me toward him and then he kissed me.

On the mouth?

Yeah, I guess it was on the mouth.

Was I mad about that?

No, you weren't mad about that either, no one was mad about anything because we were all having such a good time.

What were we drinking?

Red wine out of a jug.

Sounds about right, he said.

Yeah, she said, a big old jug of red wine, you and me and Charles Bukowski.

He laughed. That's a good dream, he said.

He reached over and rubbed her shoulder and shook his head, smiling.

The strange thing was that, after he kissed me, he looked at me straight and he said, 'I'm dying.'

Well, he's already dead, that's true.

That's what I said, I said, 'But you're already dead.' And do you know what he said?

What did he say?

It was so strange, he smiled at me and he said, 'So there you have it.'

So there you have it?

Yeah, she said, he wasn't put out at all, it was like

I wasn't even telling him something new, and he just kept dancing. 'So there you have it.' It blew me away.

That's a great dream.

Yes.

Do you want a beer or anything? It's not like you not to drink.

Yeah, she said. I'll have a beer. Anything.

He ordered a beer and the bartender set it down on a napkin in front of her and she thanked him. She took a sip of it and then went to work, pulling on the label and making lines with her fingers on the side of the bottle.

Bukowski was really good, he said, you could take a lesson from him.

Really, she said, I don't know if I'd want to. He was a drunk.

He wasn't a drunk, he said. He enjoyed himself.

When he did readings, sometimes he'd have a refrigerator on stage stocked with beer. Sometimes he'd throw up.

That was part of the act. He was great.

His writing was great, but he drank himself to death.

Do you have any idea how hard that is to do?

It's a coward's death, if he really wanted to die, he would have done it right. A gun in the mouth, a razor.

I'm talking about the man's writing, he said.

He took a sip of her beer and then stretched the fingers of his left hand and turned the hand over to look at his palm. He picked the skin on a callus that was there.

Do you know what I think, he said, I think that life is like Bukowski.

You're drunk, she said. You don't even know what you're talking about.

Can't you humor me, can't you be nice?

All right.

Because I don't think you want to talk about who is a coward and who is not.

Don't, she said.

Do you?

I said all right. Why don't you tell me why life is like Bukowski?

All right. It's like this.

He leaned close to her like a girlfriend telling her a secret and she could smell the hours of liquor that were wrapped around his tongue and the cigarette he held in his hand.

He said, You have to wade through all this shit, see, but then once in a while, just once maybe in a whole half of a book –

He leaned back and nodded his head, pointing his cigarette toward her.

What? she said.

Then you find it, there's like this little piece of total clarity, like a little piece of gold, or I don't know, like this, this fleeting moment of pleasure, of humor that reeks of truth.

She reached for his cigarette and brought it to her

lips, inhaled deeply and exhaled long, nodding her head.

Yes, she said.

You see what I mean?

I do.

If you could think like that about things, you wouldn't be so –

So what?

So desperate.

Jesus, she said. I didn't know this was going to be some kind of sermon.

It's not, he said, it's not a sermon.

Can't you just leave it?

I will if you will.

I have.

All right, then.

She lit a cigarette and looked around the bar.

It's getting late, she said. I'd better call my mother.

If you're so worried about it, you'd better.

Listen, she said, I know you don't get on with her.

It's not that, he said.

Well what is it, then?

It's this, he said.

He picked up another cigarette and lit it and watched the smoke drift toward her.

He said, it's just, I'm worried about you, too, but I'm not about to act like I've cornered the market on it, on you.

But she has, she's my mother.

Then call her and stop talking about it. Ask her how it feels to have a daughter who suddenly worries that she might be worried.

Listen, she said, I didn't do what I did because I wanted anyone to worry.

So now we have to talk about it. We're going to talk about it now?

I want you to understand. I was so sad, just so sad.

You weren't thinking.

No, I wasn't thinking. I was tired.

We tired you out. Me and your mother.

No, she said. It wasn't like that either.

Then how was it? Tell me how it was.

I thought you didn't want to know. I thought I told you, you could ask me anything about it, and you said you didn't want to.

Well, I don't. I don't. I guess it's your business. I guess it's something I just don't understand.

If you'd let me try.

If you wanted to try, you never would have done it, and we wouldn't have to talk like this. I almost wrecked my car coming down here, he said, do you know that?

She looked away from him, toward the back of the bar where the phone was.

He said, Nothing's good anymore, nothing is.

I'm glad you came, she said.

You are.

I was alone when I did it. I was alone, and I was scared.

You shouldn't have done it. You should have called me. I would have come. I would have held you, things would have been better.

But it's done. I was tired. I had convinced myself.

Everyone gets tired. I've thought of doing it myself.

When?

Right after my father died. I got the feeling that nothing I could do –

He looked down and then at the bartender, he wanted another drink.

Anyway, thinking about it, it's different, you did it.

I tried. But I'm still here, right? I'm still sitting here next to you. I wish –

And you wanted to.

I did, she said, I wanted to.

Go call you mother, he said.

I was about to.

She started to walk back where the phone was and then stopped. Please, she said, please, don't be angry. Then she turned and went over to the phone and he saw her lift the receiver and dial the numbers and he ordered another shot and drank it down. It made him cough.

When she got back she sat down again and ordered them both a shot of tequila and he looked at her to see if she was sure and she was so when the bartender came with the drinks they drank them empty and he looked straight ahead and squinted.

He said, Can we talk about something else now?

Yes, she said. But both of them were silent.

She rubbed the top of his leg with her hand and then leaned back.

Everything is going to be all right, she said.

All right, he said.

Do you love me?

Yes, he said, I do.

All right then. Order us another round, I'm going to pick some music.

He watched her go up to the jukebox, and then he called the bartender over and ordered them each a perfect Manhattan up.

And add a drop of grenadine in hers, he said. She likes them red.

She picked an old blues song on the jukebox and then she was back sitting beside him. He had calmed down, and she ran her hand along his forearm and put her hand on top of his, thanking him.

Perfect, she said.

You said it, he said.

She said, One thing I'll say is that, for an old dead guy, he sure was a good kisser.

Who?

Bukowski.

He laid one right on you, then.

Yeah, he sure did.

Did he slip you the tongue?

She thought about it. No, but that would have been something, Bukowski slipping me the tongue. I bet he had a good tongue, I mean, all those women.

He was hard on women.

He was like you, then, she said, and he was hard on your car, too.

Yeah, but that didn't stop you from kissing him.

Baby, I couldn't pass up the chance.

He laughed a little and rocked back, head tilted, and she knew he was already drunk, and that she was on the way. She looked at the lines below his eyes and the way his skin was brown and tight when he smiled and she knew the next morning he wouldn't remember what they had been talking about, or any of the conclusions they might have come to. But it didn't matter to her then, when she had time to make it up to him. And she was tired.

She leaned toward him so that her face was close to his neck and she inhaled deep and long. He was warm and he smelled like the air between sheets or trees, an intermingling of both. She signaled to the bartender to bring their check.

Then he said, Baby, give me a kiss.

And she did, because after everything he loved her. And they paid for their drinks and put on their coats and walked out into the night and toward home.