

# 1.

“Another one for the brotherhood, Vicky!”

The woman behind the bar was still beautiful, time had been kind to her.

She looked up and smiled.

*Another one for the brotherhood!*

And Vicky poured another round for all the gentlemen gathered round the table piled with empty glasses. At two in the morning, we were still a dozen rounds away from making a move out of the place. The brotherhood was in session and tough business it was.

We were a band of middleclass misfits: comfortable in our respectable middleclass professions by day and raucous party animals the rest of the time.

The Brotherhood of the Drinking Glasses. Ours wasn't an original contribution to the palimpsest of brotherhoods and societies worldwide. We had read once, in a neat history book sealed by old dust at the university library, that there truly was an Order of the Drinking Glasses a few hundred years back. Knights given to drink and debauchery; our kind of thing, only that none of us had ever taken a vow of chastity. Most of our lot had taken another sort of vow, that of marital fidelity. A mere detail that receded from memory in direct proportion to the

alcohol intake and the proximity of luscious female flesh.

The Grasshopper was our den. Our temple, church, parliament, brothel, heaven and hell. You could fit fifty people in the place if you put them standing side by side and take their entrails out to save space. But for us that place was as wide as the fucking world. It was where all our major decisions in life had been taken. John divorced his wife over the third double clean vodka of the evening. Frank decided to risk a million and his family home to buy out a failed printing company after a night of Jack and Coke — good thing that through a legal hitch the deal could not go through and when the company was liquidated he didn't lose too much. At least he retained the family home, though not the family.

And I?

I went to the Grasshopper for the girls. And for my friends. But mostly for the girls. Okay, for my friends and the girls, because it doesn't sound nice to put the girls before the friends — though as a matter of fact for me it was that way round. Getting laid is a decent sport. It's all give and take. Playing alone spoils the game and I never was a lone player.

"So what progress have you made on that novel, Dan?"

"The same I made last week and the week before."

My novel, an affair in perpetual state of becoming, was a constant subject that intrigued the Drinking Glasses, particularly after the dirty jokes about virgins on first dates ran dry.

"How many words have you written till now?"

"One hundred fifty five thousand two hundred and seventeen in ... how many? Ah, yeah! ... six years. Yeah, six years of writing."

"Well, Dan, if you spent less time banging chicks and drinking shit you might actually finish it one day —"

"Don't worry Frank, I'll finish it. I'll finish it."

“Yeah, please do. Preferably before I die.”

The fact was that I hadn't written a single word, let alone a page or a line, in months. The novel had long died on me and writing, once a sport I enjoyed — at least on a par with getting laid — had turned into a chore I'd rather avoid. I would not admit that I was stuck in a dead end on that novel, but it wasn't the only thing I wouldn't admit at that time.

“Our own Henry Chinaski!”

“Shut the fuck up, Bojan. What has Hank to do with me? He fucking worked at the post office, I am a media director; he was a lowlife misfit, I'm a fucking middleclass bore. Just because I drink like a V8 engine and lose my reason over a piece of arse that doesn't make me a Henry Chinaski.”

“C'mon man, Chinaski is legend.”

“Chinaski is fucking fiction. Let's have a toast to him ... Hey, Vicky! Fuel please!”

And as new glasses replaced the empty ones we rose to our feet to toast Henry Chinaski in the manner we always did: quoting the 1987 Bukowski screenplay when, during the final scene of the film, Hank — part played by Mickey Rourke — offered drinks to all those sitting at the bar.

“To all my friends!”

“To all my friiiieendsssss!”

Charles Bukowski R.I.P.

It wasn't long before the conversation slid smoothly onto a new subject — as it usually does on evenings like that. No deep conversations upon drink; no risks of existential whirlwinds that would leave us all with the aftertaste of emptiness and defeat. That was only when we were really drunk. Blow-your-fucking-head-drunk. Then there was always that sense of risk, of looking life in the face with all its absurdities and shit. On a bad

night, following a said conversation, one wouldn't wash off the aftertaste of death even by drinking a tank of scotch.

That night, however, we didn't go there.

Otherwise the story would have been different. There mightn't even be one.

I remember well how my eyes fell on her, drinking by herself, while the Drinking Glasses were hotly arguing about the merits and demerits of Keats' poetry. It's funny how eventually there's always a she that crops up and turns the whole plot upside down. Sounds a bit Keats to me — though the bastard would say it in so many adjectives you'd lose the plot long way before he made the point.

She seemed oblivious to the rest of us. She sat straight, her eyes down, behind that naked scotch, looking proper. There was something sad about her. It could be that she looked too proper for that place. She didn't really belong there. Or anywhere in this world. She looked as if she had been forgotten by a bygone era, untouched by time, youth being her fatal flaw. Her flame-coloured curls, the pale freckled skin, her thin long fingers holding the lipstick-smearred glass: what would Keats make of such a sight?

What I know is what I made of it.

Having left behind any of my remaining inhibitions a couple of drinks earlier, I rose from my seat and parked myself beside her, my knee brushing against her thigh and my nose trying to figure out her perfume. Her eyes remained low. Mine rested on her. She had a very small nose, slightly pointed upwards. It made her look posh. A snob. She really didn't belong there. She could easily have been wearing Chanel no. 5, but her scent was definitely Dior. No doubt about it.

"What brought you to this place, lady?"

Shit. Wasn't that the crappiest introduction ever?

"I mean ... Yeah, you know ... you're, err, not a regular here ... you know what I mean?"

Not even I knew what I meant. Her head did not budge. And then she spoke:

"Lost for words, big boy?"

She had me disarmed in five words. Tough woman.

I retreated to safe grounds.

"Want a drink?"

"Get me another one of these," she replied still not raising her eyes.

What's with her eyes, I thought, why does she keep them low?

I signalled Vicky and placed the neat scotch in front of her and stood there, still looking for the right introduction. She didn't seem to mind me standing there making a fool of myself staring down at her with a blank face. I could feel sweat trickling down the back of my neck.

"Hey, big boy, do you want to fuck?"

It was then that she finally raised her eyes, slowly, until her gaze was fixed into mine. I felt drowning in the jade-green waters of those eyes. No wonder she kept her eyes low, she would have wreaked havoc inside any man's heart with just one look from those eyes. Words failed me and I stood there, before her invitation, like an idiot schoolboy falling in love with his teacher.

She stood up and smiled, had a shot at her scotch and then put her arms round my arm and walked me out of the place.

As we were leaving, I turned round to my friends. They had abandoned Keats and finally discovered John Fante, that great outsider of American literature. I flashed them a triumphant grin, and walked out, happy to leave them to a subject worth drinking on.

## 2.

Life is ruled by the randomness of happenings without purpose. Things happen. Just like that. By chance. There's nothing more to them.

History is but one long string of examples of this. And mine has been but a thread of that string woven by chance. As anyone else's life, after all.

It was by chance that we met. By chance that we fell in love and out of it and fell in love again over and over. It was by chance that we got married. By chance I got her pregnant with our daughter. Maybe it wasn't entirely by chance that she decided to move out once and for all. But it was always by chance when, despite being estranged, we got together and made love like when we were still kids, carefree of the world around us.

She wasn't like the other women. I wasn't *her* thing. That was why she left. She knew about the other women long before that day when she packed her things and moved out taking our daughter with her. She left because she refused to make me her thing. She didn't want to become jealous, to start making scenes and hate me for my kind of life even when with my foolhardy, reckless behaviour I was pushing her to do so. She knew I still loved her and she loved me too. Getting away from me was her way to preserve that love. She would love me from a distance,

but she would love me still. And, looking back, I guess I never ceased to love her. Despite all the other women who came in and out of my life.

She was eighteen when I met her. I was a young aspiring politician back then, steadily on the ascent, a promise for the future of the party. She was an activist and an idealist; the darling of older men who swarmed around her, smitten by her dark looks and generous curves. They liked her fiery temper less: she had an attitude and a brain which the older men didn't care much about, they did not want it to interfere with the sexual pleasures they tried seeking of her.

I met her at a conference I wasn't supposed to be attending following a speech I wasn't supposed to be giving. That night I took her to my hotel room for sex but the excitement at having her lying resplendently naked on my bed tricked me into submission and I was unable to have an erection. So I played with her pussy and made her come twice with my fingers. Women tell me that I'm damn good with my fingers. Maybe I would have made a good fiddler had I ever cared to give it a go. The following night she agreed to meet again and we drank, we danced and had sex till the early morning when I left her in bed and leapt to another session of the conference with my dick severely bruised and a burning sensation every time I peed. We came back from the conference and had sex again and again, until our bodies asked for a time-out and some respite.

When we got married we didn't think of having children. It was August and we had been to the beach. We made love in the sea and on the sand and in the car and when we arrived home we were still in the mood for more. It was the first time I came inside her. The liberty I took coincided exactly with that time of the month when her fertility was on happy-hour. Eight months

and two weeks later, Sarah was born.

Sarah was eight when her mother left our home. She wasn't given a choice to stay. So I watched Sarah and her mother walk away hand in hand towards a new home without me. And I stood behind the frosted window, in a suddenly silent house.

It was by chance I found myself on her street, in the heat of the afternoon. I hadn't seen her for some time. Traffic deviation, because of some freakish traffic accident, led me there. So I decided to stop my car in front of her house and ring her bell. I rang twice before she opened the door. It was as if she wasn't surprised at all to see me on her doorstep. She smiled and with her whole body she gestured to invite me in. I obliged.

"What brings you here?"

I shrugged and gave her a bland smile.

"Would you like a coffee? After all, it's always back to my coffee that you come to —"

She looked amused.

"I don't think any other woman brews coffee like you do."

As I waited for the coffee I couldn't take my eyes off her veiled nakedness. God, she *did* have a body. I felt about to explode in my jeans. I still lusted for her like I had on that first night. If sex was what first pulled us towards each other in the beginning, even in estrangement it remained the best way of finding each other and reconnect. It wasn't just the fucking—though I must admit I never met with a fuck of her calibre—it was the dimension she gave it: the pleasure, the loving, the playfulness, the adventure; she gave it all and took it all.

I stood up and walked behind her, grabbed her breasts and kissed her behind the ear. She laughed. I pressed my crotch against her arse and she laughed some more. She was playing to the overture.

"Hmm, Lolita left you dry last night?"

She was in the mood for teasing. She loved teasing, was good at it. I wanted her to tease me.

"No baby, Lolita was a good girl alright. But Lolita isn't half the woman you are."

"Am I? You know, I might not be in the right mood today and you'll have to go back to her or else make do with your right hand."

"You wouldn't do that to me baby, would you?"

She laughed me off and released herself from my hands. I leapt on her like a hungry animal. She turned and slapped me in the face. And then laughed. She was playing the hard game. I grabbed her by the hair and bit her along the neck. She moaned with pain-earned pleasure. I drew her closer and she slapped me again. I slapped her back. Again and again. It felt right and it felt good. A thin streak of blood ran from her nose, down her lips and into her mouth. Her pupils widened ready to devour me. She grabbed my shirt and tore it open, leaned against my chest and bit the nipple like a falcon tearing at its prey. My eyes swelled with tears. God, the *pain!* And she knew how to prolong it. Her fingers digging deep in the flesh of my back were burning. She knelt before me, opened my zippers and sucked me until I could almost feel her draining the blood out of me. I came into her mouth but the hard-on would not go down. I didn't want to end it there. Neither did she.

I knelt beside her and slid my hand into her cunt. It was hot and wet and swollen. She was ready to have me in. As I laid her down on the floor, I turned her and entered her from the rear. She let out a sigh of pain and then moaned with pleasure. Trickle of sweat glided down the small of her back. I grabbed her from the neck and pushed harder and harder. The air was hot, humid and sticky.