

Wilderness House Literary Review 8/1

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Crazy

Riva's pantyhose sagged at the knees. I never knew where she found pantyhose that still did that. This was the 21st century; pantyhose had too much lycra in them to sag. Hers were black, no seams, and come to think of it they sagged at the ankles too. No, I never did know where she got them, though I'd shake my head and wonder each time I saw her sashaying down the street on the lookout for Bukowski – yes, The Charles Bukowski.

If she was told once she was told a hundred times by unceremonious bypassers, Bukowski's dead, Woman. "Heinrich!" she'd yelp Bukowski's original given name, "No, no, nonononono Heinrich's gonna meet me for a drink, who'm I gonna tell my stories to, who'm I gonna see at The Drawbridge?" And she'd wander off in a daze, never stopping to pull up the sagging panty hose, smoke curling from her nose, the fingers of one hand pinching a lit cigarette, the fingers of her other hand black and grimy.

She'd become a fixture in the Square, one of the handful of eccentrics that the local urban dwellers had gotten to know well during the warm seasons when the sidewalk cafes overflowed with people watchers.

A group of us often got together at the very bar she whined about, The Drawbridge, named for the bookstore in Bukowski's legendary "Women." We'd opt for a pint or two or three, and then the local characters would enter into our conversation as fodder for our poetry or fiction. We surmised that she had wanted to be Lydia Vance, the character based on Bukowski's long-time lover. Above those saggy black pantyhose she always wore a short skirt and a halter top tied over a nude, long-sleeved T. She mumbled a lot and we were never sure if she was drunk or demented. The rumor was that she had also been a poet, but we never heard her read, though we attended most of the open mic events in the area. We never saw her write either, never saw her sit at a bench on the esplanade, pen in hand, or hunch over a notebook at the Au Bon Pain, though she always had a tote slung over her shoulder stuffed with tattered paper, the sheets filled with typing – deep, dark ink like that impressed upon the page by an old manual typewriter. You had to hit the keys hard on those old manuals, fuss a lot with the ribbon, maybe that's what had stained her fingers black. If you attempted to pass the time of day with her, ask about the papers, she'd shy across the sidewalk, head down. No one that we knew of had ever read the papers in the tote and, despite her scattered manner, she did not let the tote out of her sight.

We'd gossip about the stories those old papers may hold, wonder if she'd been a beauty when she was a young girl, figure that if she was anything like Lydia she'd been only average at best, but with a nice rack and rear. On occasion we'd even consider that she had really known Bukowski and we'd spend hours constructing scenarios that spun around Riva and Bukowski getting it on in a sleazy apartment, the counters lined with empty bottles, the entire place reeking. We'd giggle, then wrinkle our noses like high schoolers when we'd talk about how Riva still wore Emeraude like our grandmothers had and how the scent of Emeraude, stale

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beer and semen would make a person vomit in the mornings the same way Bukowski's Chinaski, did in "Women," the same way Bukowski did after his pint of whiskey and six packs of beer in the evening while his fingers slurred out pages and pages of life.

Our faces would fall back to sober, though, when we remembered that Chinaski was lonely and self-loathing. We'd remain somber thinking about the way we'd seen Riva stumble off down an alley when it got too late to be tripping in her clunky heels down the street. She was always alone except for the tote bag filled with its black-inked paper, her grimy nails, nicotine stained teeth, and her hair, box-colored a dark auburn and teased into a messy coif. She'd be mumbling some nonsense about it being time to join Bukowski, how there had never been anyone else but his drunk ass in her sorry life. Then she'd break into a low, deep melancholy imitation of Patsy Cline, while she ambled down the alley propping herself up occasionally along the brick walls. *I'm crazy, crazy for loving you.*

Somewhere at the end of the alley a light always flickered on for a moment and then there would be nothing, but the black hole of the alley, the lingering smell of Emeraude and, we'd swear, a ghostly, male figure standing beneath the streetlight, tipping a bottle, then staring into that black and vacant tunnel, leaning in toward the opening, wondering whether or not to follow.