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LOS ANGELES



"ONCE SHE SAW HIM GIVE A CRIPPLED SPIDER TO THE ANTS
AND WATCH THEM CUT IT TO PIECES ALIVE."

A KIND, UNDERSTANDING FACE

By CHARLES BUKOWSKI

THE PARENTS DIED YOUNGER THAN IT IS USUAL
TO DIE, THE FATHER FIRST, THE MOTHER SOON
AFTERWARD. HE DIDN'T ATTEND THE FATHER'S
FUNERAL BUT HE WAS AT THE LAST ONE. SOME

OF THE NEIGHBORS REMEMBERED HIM AS A BOY AND HAD THOUGHT HIM A "NICE CHILD." OTHERS ONLY REMEMBERED HIM GROWN, ON SPORADIC ONE OR TWO WEEK STAYS AT THE HOUSE. HE WAS ALWAYS IN SOME FAR OFF CITY, MIAMI, NEW YORK, ATLANTA, AND THE MOTHER SAID HE WAS A JOURNALIST AND WHEN THE WAR CAME WITHOUT HIS BECOMING A SOLDIER, SHE EXPLAINED A HEART CONDITION. THE MOTHER DIED IN 1947 AND HE, RALPH, ENTERED THE HOUSE AND BECAME A PART OF THE NEIGHBORHOOD.

HE BECAME THE VICTIM OF SCRUTINY, FOR THE NEIGHBORHOOD WAS DECENTLY AVERAGE, HOME-OWNED, HOME-LIVED RATHER THAN RENTED SO THAT ONE WAS MORE AWARE OF THE PERMANENCE OF THINGS. RALPH SEEMED OLDER THAN HE SHOULD HAVE BEEN, SO QUITE WORN. AT TIMES, THOUGH, IN FAVORABLE SHADES OF LIGHT HE WAS ALMOST BEAUTIFUL, TOO BEAUTIFUL, AND THE LEFT LOWER EYELID WOULD SOMETIMES TWITCH BEHIND AN ALMOST GAUDILY LIT EYE. HE SPOKE LITTLE AND WHEN HE DID HE SEEMED TO BE JOKING, AND THEN HE WOULD WALK OFF, EITHER TOO FAST, BRISKLY, OR HE WOULD SLOUCH-SWAGGER OFF, HANDS IN POCKETS AND FLAT-FOOTED. MRS. MEERS SAID HE HAD A "KIND, UNDERSTANDING FACE." OTHERS THOUGHT HE SNEERED.



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THE HOUSE HAD BEEN WELL CARED FOR — THE SHRUBBERY, THE LAWNS AND THE INTERIOR. THE CAR DISAPPEARED, AND SOON IN THE BACKYARD WERE THREE KITTENS AND TWO PUPPIES. MRS. MEERS, WHO LIVED NEXT DOOR, NOTICED THAT RALPH SPENT MUCH TIME IN THE GARAGE BREAKING THE SPIDER WEBS WITH A BROOM. ONCE SHE SAW HIM GIVE A CRIPPLED SPIDER TO THE ANTS AND WATCH THEM CUT IT TO PIECES ALIVE. THIS, BEYOND ONE INCIDENT,



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GAVE VENT TO THE MOST EARLY CONVERSATIONS. THE OTHER: COMING DOWN THE HILL HE HAD MET MRS. LANGLEY AND HAD SAID, "UNTIL PEOPLE LEARN TO EXCRETE AND COPULATE IN PUBLIC THEY WILL BE NEITHER DECENTLY SAVAGE NOR COMFORTABLY MODERN." RALPH HAD BEEN INTOXICATED AND IT WAS UNDERSTOOD THAT HE WAS GRIEVING. ALSO, HE SEEMED TO GIVE MORE TIME TO THE KITTENS THAN THE PUPPIES, ALMOST TEASINGLY SO, AND THIS, OF COURSE, WAS STRANGE.

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He continued to grieve. The lawns and shrubs began to yellow. He had visitors, they kept late hours and were sometimes seen in the mornings. There were women, stout, heavy - laughing women; women too thin, shabby women, old women, women with English accents, women whose every other word referred to the bathroom or the bed. Soon there were people day and night. Sometimes Ralph was not to be seen for days. Somebody put a duck in the back - yard. Mrs. Meers took to feeding the pets and one evening Mr. Meers, in an anger, attached his hose to Ralph's faucets and gave the place a good soaking down. He wasn't stopped, wasn't even noticed, except by "a thin, terrible - looking man" who came out of the screen door with a cigar in his mouth, walked past Mr. Meers, opened the incinerator, looked into it, closed it, walked past Mr. Meers and back into the house.

Sometimes at night the men fought in the backyard and once Mrs. Roberts (on the other side) called the police, but by the time they arrived everybody was in the house again. The police went into the house and remained some time. When they made their exit they were alone.

IT BEGAN TO BE ALMOST TOO MUCH WHEN SUDDENLY THE NEIGHBORS NOTICED THAT THE PEOPLE WERE GONE. THE DUCK WAS GONE TOO. IT BEGAN TO BE QUIET NIGHTS. IN THE DAYS THERE WAS ONLY ONE WOMAN, THIN-FACED, WITH AN ENGLISH ACCENT AND RATHER SNOBBISH, THOUGH CLEANLY-DRESSED AND YOUNGER THAN THE OTHERS HAD BEEN. RALPH WAS SEEN COMING HOME WITH LIBRARY BOOKS AND THEN LEAVING EVERY MORNING AT 7:15 A.M. IN OVERALLS. HE BEGAN TO LOOK BETTER, THOUGH MRS. MEERS SMELLED WHISKEY ON THE WOMAN THE FEW TIMES SHE SPOKE TO HER. RALPH BEGAN TO WATER AND TRIM THE YARD. THE LEFT LOWER EYELID WAS IMPROVED. HE SPOKE MORE. "PEOPLE ARE GOOD. EVERYBODY'S GOOD. I HOPE WE CAN BE GOOD FRIENDS," HE SPOKE TO MRS. ROBERTS. "I GUESS I'VE BEEN A KID MOST OF MY LIFE. I GUESS I'M JUST GROWING UP. AND DON'T MIND LILA. SHE'S... SHE'S REALLY..." HE DIDN'T FINISH. HE JUST SMILED AND WAVED A HAND AND TURNED THE HOSE ONTO A BUSH.

SOMETIMES ON WEEKENDS THEY SAW HIM INTOXICATED, AND HER, OF COURSE; BUT HE ALWAYS MADE WORK AND WAS VERY KIND, REALLY A GOOD-NATURED PERSON. "IF SHE COULD ONLY BE LIKE RALPH. OH, I KNOW

HE TAKES A DRINK! BUT HE'S A BRILLIANT BOY —
AND THAT JOB, YOU KNOW! HE IS SO NICE. BUT
I GUESS HE NEEDS HER."

HE MUST HAVE NEEDED THEM TOO. THEY STARTED
COMING BACK, FIRST A FEW, AND THEN THE REST.
THE WOMAN, LILA, SEEMED TO DISLIKE IT MOST.
SHE WAS IN A FURY BUT RALPH JUST LAUGHED.
THEN THE DUCK CAME. WHEN THE DUCK CAME LILA
WENT INTO SILENCE. THE KITTENS AND PUPPIES WERE
ALMOST FULL GROWN AND THE POOR DUCK, ONCE
MASTER, HAD ITS TROUBLES. THE "THIN, TERRIBLE —
LOOKING MAN WHO WENT TO THE INCINERATOR"
WAS SEEN BUILDING A PEN AND THEREAFTER
THE PENNED DUCK WAS UNDERSTOOD BY THE
NEIGHBORS TO BELONG TO THE "THIN, TERRIBLE —
LOOKING MAN WHO WENT TO THE INCINERATOR."

ONE OF THE DOGS DIED. THEY BOUGHT
A PIANO AND PLAYED IT ALMOST CONTINUALLY,
DAY AND NIGHT, FOR A WEEK THEN LEFT IT
ALONE. THEY BURIED THE DOG BEHIND THE
GARAGE, SETTING UP A CROSS IN THE NECK
OF A WHISKEY BOTTLE HALF SUNKEN IN THE
SOIL. BUT THEY HAD BURIED THE HOUND
SHALLOW AND IT SET UP AN ODOR. ONE
NIGHT A HUSKY WOMAN INVADED THE GRAVE



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AND BURNED THE REMAINS IN THE INCINERATOR,
CUSSING LOUDLY AND VIOLENTLY, LAUGHING AND
THEN VOMITING AND CRYING. "IT'S NOT DEATH
THAT ACHES US, IT'S THIS GETTING OLDER,
OLDER ... WRINKLED HANDS, WRINKLED FACE ...
CHRIST, EVEN MY KEESTER'S WRINKLED! CHRIST,
CHRIST, OLD AGE: I HATE IT, HATE IT!"

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THEY EVIDENTLY SOLD THE REFRIGERATOR. EVERYBODY TRIED TO HELP THE MOVING VAN MEN GET IT INTO THE TRUCK. THERE WAS MUCH LAUGHING. THE PIANO WENT TOO. IT WAS UNDERSTOOD THAT LILA HAD TRIED A SUICIDE AND FAILED. FOR SEVERAL DAYS SHE WAS VERY DRUNK, DRESSED IN AN EXTREMELY SHORT SKIRT AND FOUR INCH SPIKED HEELS. SHE SPOKE TO EVERYBODY, EVEN THE NEIGHBORS.

SOME OF THE CROWD THINNED OUT. IT WAS UNDERSTOOD THAT RALPH WAS CHARGING RENT. HE WAS GETTING THINNER AND ~~QUIETER~~ QUIETER. HE BOUGHT SOME SEED AND PLANTED A LAWN, FENCING OFF THE NEW SOIL WITH STAKES AND STRING. HE WAS SEEN LEAVING EARLY EVERY MORNING IN HIS SUIT, AND SEVERAL WEEKS LATER HE WAS LEAVING AT 7:15 A.M. IN HIS OVERAULS. THE CROWD REMAINED, THOUGH, BUT WEREN'T QUITE AS NOISY. IN A FASHION, THE NEIGHBORHOOD HAD ACCEPTED THE HOUSE. THE LAWN CAME UP FINE, AND IT WASN'T UNUSUAL TO SEE RALPH, IN THE EVENINGS, SPEAKING TO MR. MEERS AS THEY WORKED ABOUT THE YARDS. THE OTHER INHABITANTS SEEMED TO HAVE A CERTAIN DISDAIN AND CENTRAL FANCY IN MIND, BUT RALPH WAS NICE,

EVEN ON THE WEEKENDS WHEN HE DID TAKE A DRINK. HE WAS JUST TOO EASY-GOING PUTTING UP WITH THOSE PEOPLE; AND YOU COULD SEE, HE DID CARE MUCH FOR LILA.

THE PIANO CAME BACK. THE REFRIGERATOR CAME BACK. LILA BEGAN TO WASH RALPH'S CLOTHING, THOUGH MRS. MEERS STILL SMELLED WHISKEY WHEN SHE SPOKE TO HER. LILA HAD SOMETHING THOUGH. SHE WAS REALLY AN UPPER CLASS GIRL MEANT FOR RALPH. SHE WASN'T, IN SPITE OF IT ALL, AS MRS. ROBERTS SAID, QUITE LIKE THOSE OTHERS. THEY BOTH HAD EDUCATION AND GOOD UPBRINGING. YOU COULD SEE THAT. RALPH HAD BEEN A JOURNALIST...

SO RALPH'S SUICIDE WAS A REAL SURPRISE. OF COURSE, THEY ALL ARE, THOUGH THEY SAY IT'S OLD STUFF, NOTHING NEW. THE NOTE SEEMED WRITTEN IN A MOMENT OF AGONIZED FRENZY. AND ON THE BACK OF THE NOTE WERE SOME DISCONNECTED NOTATIONS TAKEN FROM HIS READINGS, AS STRANGE AS EVERYTHING ELSE HAD BEEN: I SAW SOME MANTICORES, A MOST STRANGE SORT OF CREATURES, WHICH HAVE THE BODY OF A LION,

RED HAIR, A FACE AND EARS LIKE A MAN'S, THREE
ROWS OF TEETH WHICH CLOSE TOGETHER, AS IF
YOU JOINED YOUR HANDS WITH YOUR FINGERS
BETWEEN EACH OTHER: THEY HAVE A STING
IN THEIR TAILS LIKE A SCORPION'S AND A
VERY MELODIOUS VOICE. -- RABELAIS.

THE ABSOLUTE LOVE OF ANYTHING INVOLVES
THE LOVE OF UNIVERSAL GOOD; AND THE LOVE
OF UNIVERSAL GOOD INVOLVES THE LOVE OF
EVERY CREATURE. -- SANTAYANA.

WARCOLLIER ESTABLISHED HIMSELF BEFORE
WORLD WAR I THROUGH AN INVENTION FOR
THE MANUFACTURE OF ARTIFICIAL JEWELRY
FROM THE SCALES OF FISH. FACTORIES WERE
OPENED IN FRANCE AND THE UNITED STATES...

THE LAWN WENT TO POT.