

ALL THE BASTARDS AND ME

by Eric Boyd

The wind blew in through the window of my writing room, a closet / storage space that I was able to fit a chair and a typewriter into. There was a lifted level in there for shoes or whatever else, and that was good for the typer. I tacked my rejection slips all around the room as encouragement; I kept my acceptance letters on the floor. On the ceiling I was able to screw in a hook to hang a paper lamp. A switch for the lamp was attached to a wall with chewing gum. The great writing space of Fredrick Anderson. Heh.

I sat in there, drinking cheap red wine, when I heard knocking. The apartment was a second-level place, so I went down the steps and looked through the stained glass window of the door. "Ah hell," I said to myself. Raymond Carver and John Fante and Charles Bukowski were outside. I opened the door.

"Guess every mutt needs a home," I grinned.

We all climbed the steps. I entered the kitchen and grabbed glasses, filled them with ice. I went in the living room and sat down on the couch. Charles was in the closet, looking around.

"I got glasses," I said to him. Raymond was sitting on a chair and John was sitting on the floor like a child.

Fredrick, the sky looks like something tonight, Raymond said. I'm not sure like what yet.

"Oh yeah?" I said, pouring the wine into everyone's glasses.

"Nice space you got here," Charles said from inside the closet.

"Thanks, Charles."

"Call me Hank," he said. Then he came in and plopped down on the far end of the couch. "Where's the wine from?"

Raymond said, Do *you* really care? and smirked.

"No, and neither did *you* before the divorce," Hank said with a sure, understated sarcasm.

Asshole, Raymond said.

"Yeh," Hank shrugged.

"I don't need ice for my wine," John said to me.

"And I thought that was how you Dagos drank it," Hank chuckled.

"Hey, I thought you liked me," John whined.

"Balls. I don't like *anyone*."

Then the four of us sat quietly for a long time, staring at one another. John bit at his nails in between sips at the wine; he kept staring at a nudie picture on my wall, then nervously at the bible on my bookshelf. Raymond was looking out of a window, at the sky, though he seemed to be thinking of something else. Hank looked at the floor, gagging as he drank and swallowing whatever came up.

"Ya know," I broke the silence, "no matter what anyone might say, this is the only thing any of us has in common," I said while holding up the wine bottle. Everyone nodded in agreement.

Raymond got up to leave first. He said, I believe I'll go outside and watch the weather. It feels like it might change.

And then he was gone. Ray was good company because he always left you with something to think about. The things he'd say were enigmatic and charming, but then I'd heard most of the stuff he said was edited down quite a bit.

John hadn't said a word most of the night. By the time it seemed like he was actually going to say something, I was too pissed to listen.

"I would imagine that you.."

"Just stop," I interrupted him. "All you do is imagine shit. I can understand you probably imagined a lot after you went blind, but then you only wrote one book after that. You rarely do anything. I love you, John; I love you but I get sick of you real quick. You don't do anything. That's why your first book didn't come out until after your last book was released."

"You know, Fredrick, sometimes I agree," John said, "but then I think: no. No: this is not the way. This is not who I am; I am a nobody, but I can be somebody, someday. I can..."

"Quit with the angst," I groaned. " You sound like an Italian Rimbaud."

"At least he writes from his gut," Hank said.

"His scared Catholic gut," I corrected.

"Yeh."

John got up and left without saying a word, though I'm sure he'd think of some terrific insults when he got back to his mother's apartment.

Then it was just me and Hank. We began to drink more heavily. I knew he'd outlast me, but I could fake it until he left.

"You think you're big shit," I said, "but you don't know how it is now."

"Huh?" Hank grunted between swallows.

"You were able to go to jail and come out, get jobs. Get drunk and work at a dog biscuit factory, be a mailman. All that shit."

"So? It was hard. It's hell just to pay rent."

"Don't I know it?" I said. "I did jail. But nowadays, that's all on file. It's all computerized and everything else. I can't even get a job as a dishwasher, Hank."

"Keep writing," he said.

"I'm too pathetic to keep going."

Hank said, "I'm always the hero of my shit, baby. You be the hero of yours."

"You're right," I said, then I put down my glass and smashed my fist into Hank's face. He fell, but got up quickly, growling.

"You get one free one, fucker," he said angrily.

"Deal."

Hank got back on the couch and I poured him more wine. He smiled at that and we happily drank again. "You'll get by, Fred," Hank said. "The harder it gets, the better it becomes."

I nodded.

"But I hear you meditate," Hank said matter-of-factly, which really meant accusingly. "You gettin' soft?"

"Don't give me that crap," I said. "You meditated too, after you got cancer."

"Shit," Hank muttered.

"If Céline knew, he'd cane your ass," I smiled.

"Where'd you hear about that, anyway?"

"Your wife has a big mouth," I said.

"That's why I love her."

"Why don't you go out and get us another bottle."

"Balls," Hank said. "I'd better go home."

"Figures."

Hank got up slowly and stumbled as he reached the doorway. He regained himself and shook his head. "Bad form," he said, walking downstairs.

I lifted my glass and drained it, tonguing at the bottom of the glass to loosen an ice cube. One finally freed up and fell into my mouth. I chewed at it.

"Oh fuck," Hank said, coming back up the steps.

"Huh? What?"

"Papa's here. He's drunk on absinthe and champagne. He wants to come in; he says you couldn't take him on his worst day."

"Ha!" I shouted, loud enough for the old man to hear me from outside, "Let the bastard in, I always wanted a piece of him."

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