

Charles Bukowski

The Most Beautiful Woman in Town

5 Cass was the youngest and most beautiful of 5 sisters. Cass was the most beautiful girl in town. 1/2 Indian
with a supple and strange body, a snake-like and fiery body with eyes to go with it. Cass was fluid moving
fire. She was like a spirit stuck into a form that would not hold her. Her hair was black and long and silken
and whirled about as did her body. Her spirit was either very high or very low. There was no in between for
Cass. Some said she was crazy. The dull ones said that. The dull ones would never understand Cass. To the
10 men she was simply a sex machine and they didn't care whether she was crazy or not. And Cass danced and
flirted, kissed the men, but except for an instance or two, when it came time to make it with Cass, Cass had
somehow slipped away, eluded the men.

15 Her sisters accused her of misusing her beauty, of not using her mind enough, but Cass had mind and spirit;
she painted, she danced, she sang, she made things of clay, and when people were hurt either in the spirit
or the flesh, Cass felt a deep grieving for them. Her mind was simply different; her mind was simply not
practical. Her sisters were jealous of her because she attracted their men, and they were angry because
they felt she didn't make the best use of them. She had a habit of being kind to the uglier ones; the so-
called handsome men revolted her- "No guts," she said, "no zap. They are riding on their perfect little
20 earlobes and well- shaped nostrils...all surface and no insides..." She had a temper that came close to
insanity, she had a temper that some call insanity. Her father had died of alcohol and her mother had run
off leaving the girls alone. The girls went to a relative who placed them in a convent. The convent had been
an unhappy place, more for Cass than the sisters. The girls were jealous of Cass and Cass fought most of
them. She had razor marks all along her left arm from defending herself in two fights. There was also a
25 permanent scar along the left cheek but the scar rather than lessening her beauty only seemed to highlight
it. I met her at the West End Bar several nights after her release from the convent. Being youngest, she was
the last of the sisters to be released. She simply came in and sat next to me. I was probably the ugliest man
in town and this might have had something to do with it.

30 "Drink?" I asked.
"Sure, why not?"

35 I don't suppose there was anything unusual in our conversation that night, it was simply in the feeling Cass
gave. She had chosen me and it was as simple as that. No pressure. She liked her drinks and had a great
number of them. She didn't seem quite of age but they served her anyhow. Perhaps she had forged i.d., I
don't know. Anyhow, each time she came back from the restroom and sat down next to me, I did feel some
pride. She was not only the most beautiful woman in town but also one of the most beautiful I had ever
seen. I placed my arm about her waist and kissed her once.

40 "Do you think I'm pretty?" she asked.
"Yes, of course, but there's something else... there's more than your looks..."
"People are always accusing me of being pretty. Do you really think I'm pretty?"
"Pretty isn't the word, it hardly does you fair."

45 Cass reached into her handbag. I thought she was reaching for her handkerchief. She came out with a long
hatpin. Before I could stop her she had run this long hatpin through her nose, sideways, just above the
nostrils. I felt disgust and horror. She looked at me and laughed, "Now do you think me pretty? What do

you think now, man?" I pulled the hatpin out and held my handkerchief over the bleeding. Several people, including the bartender, had seen the act. The bartender came down:

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"Look," he said to Cass, "you act up again and you're out. We don't need your dramatics here."

"Oh, fuck you, man!" she said.

"Better keep her straight," the bartender said to me.

"She'll be all right," I said.

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"It's my nose, I can do what I want with my nose."

"No," I said, "it hurts me."

"You mean it hurts you when I stick a pin in my nose?"

"Yes, it does, I mean it."

"All right, I won't do it again. Cheer up."

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She kissed me, rather grinning through the kiss and holding the handkerchief to her nose. We left for my place at closing time. I had some beer and we sat there talking. It was then that I got the perception of her as a person full of kindness and caring. She gave herself away without knowing it. At the same time she would leap back into areas of wildness and incoherence. Schitzi. A beautiful and spiritual schitzi. Perhaps some man, something, would ruin her forever. I hoped that it wouldn't be me. We went to bed and after I turned out the lights Cass asked me,

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"When do you want it? Now or in the morning?"

"In the morning," I said and turned my back.

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In the morning I got up and made a couple of coffees, brought her one in bed. She laughed.

"You're the first man who has turned it down at night."

"It's o.k.," I said, "we needn't do it at all."

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"No, wait, I want to now. Let me freshen up a bit."

Cass went into the bathroom. She came out shortly, looking quite wonderful, her long black hair glistening, her eyes and lips glistening, her glistening... She displayed her body calmly, as a good thing. She got under the sheet.

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"Come on, lover man."

I got in. She kissed with abandon but without haste. I let my hands run over her body, through her hair. I mounted. It was hot, and tight. I began to stroke slowly, wanting to make it last. Her eyes looked directly into mine.

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"What's your name?" I asked.

"What the hell difference does it make?" she asked.

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I laughed and went on ahead. Afterwards she dressed and I drove her back to the bar but she was difficult to forget. I wasn't working and I slept until 2 p.m. then got up and read the paper. I was in the bathtub when she came in with a large leaf- an elephant ear.

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"I knew you'd be in the bathtub," she said, "so I brought you something to cover that thing with, nature boy."

She threw the elephant leaf down on me in the bathtub.

100 "How did you know I'd be in the tub?"
"I knew."

Almost every day Cass arrived when I was in the tub. The times were different but she seldom missed, and there was the elephant leaf. And then we'd make love. One or two nights she phoned and I had to bail her out of jail for drunkenness and fighting.

105 "These sons of bitches," she said, "just because they buy you a few drinks they think they can get into your pants."

"Once you accept a drink you create your own trouble."

"I thought they were interested in me, not just my body."

110 "I'm interested in you and your body. I doubt, though, that most men can see beyond your body."

I left town for 6 months, bummed around, came back. I had never forgotten Cass, but we'd had some type of argument and I felt like moving anyhow, and when I got back I figured she'd be gone, but I had been sitting in the West End Bar about 30 minutes when she walked in and sat down next to me.

115 "Well, bastard, I see you've come back."

I ordered her a drink. Then I looked at her. She had on a high-necked dress. I had never seen her in one of those. And under each eye, driven in, were 2 pins with glass heads. All you could see were the heads of the pins, but the pins were driven down into her face.

120 "God damn you, still trying to destroy your beauty, eh?"

"No, it's the fad, you fool."

"You're crazy."

125 "I've missed you," she said.

"Is there anybody else?"

"No there isn't anybody else. Just you. But I'm hustling. It costs ten bucks. But you get it free."

"Pull those pins out."

"No, it's the fad."

130 "It's making me very unhappy."

"Are you sure?"

"Hell yes, I'm sure."

Cass slowly pulled the pins out and put them back in her purse.

135 "Why do you haggle your beauty?" I asked. "Why don't you just live with it?"

"Because people think it's all I have. Beauty is nothing, beauty won't stay. You don't know how lucky you are to be ugly, because if people like you you know it's for something else."

"O.k.," I said, "I'm lucky."

140 "I don't mean you're ugly. People just think you're ugly. You have a fascinating face."

"Thanks."

We had another drink.

145 "What are you doing?" she asked.

"Nothing. I can't get on to anything. No interest."

"Me neither. If you were a woman you could hustle."

"I don't think I could ever make contact with that many strangers, it's wearing."

"You're right, it's wearing, everything is wearing."

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We left together. People still stared at Cass on the streets. She was a beautiful woman, perhaps more beautiful than ever. We made it to my place and I opened a bottle of wine and we talked. With Cass and I, it always came easy. She talked a while and I would listen and then I would talk. Our conversation simply went along without strain. We seemed to discover secrets together. When we discovered a good one Cass would laugh that laugh- only the way she could. It was like joy out of fire. Through the talking we kissed and moved closer together. We became quite heated and decided to go to bed. It was then that Cass took off her high-necked dress and I saw it- the ugly jagged scar across her throat. It was large and thick.

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"God damn you, woman," I said from the bed, "god damn you, what have you done?"

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"I tried it with a broken bottle one night. Don't you like me any more? Am I still beautiful?"

I pulled her down on the bed and kissed her. She pushed away and laughed, "Some men pay me ten and I undress and they don't want to do it. I keep the ten. It's very funny."

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"Yes," I said, "I can't stop laughing... Cass, bitch, I love you...stop destroying yourself; you're the most alive woman I've ever met."

We kissed again. Cass was crying without sound. I could feel the tears. The long black hair lay beside me like a flag of death. We enjoined and made slow and sombre and wonderful love. In the morning Cass was up making breakfast. She seemed quite calm and happy. She was singing. I stayed in bed and enjoyed her happiness. Finally she came over and shook me,

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"Up, bastard! Throw some cold water on your face and pecker and come enjoy the feast!"

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I drove her to the beach that day. It was a weekday and not yet summer so things were splendidly deserted. Beach bums in rags slept on the lawns above the sand. Others sat on stone benches sharing a lone bottle. The gulls whirled about, mindless yet distracted. Old ladies in their 70's and 80's sat on the benches and discussed selling real estate left behind by husbands long ago killed by the pace and stupidity of survival. For it all, there was peace in the air and we walked about and stretched on the lawns and didn't say much. It simply felt good being together. I bought a couple of sandwiches, some chips and drinks and we sat on the sand eating. Then I held Cass and we slept together about an hour. It was somehow better than lovemaking. There was flowing together without tension. When we awakened we drove back to my place and I cooked a dinner. After dinner I suggested to Cass that we shack together. She waited a long time, looking at me, then she slowly said, "No." I drove her back to the bar, bought her a drink and walked out. I found a job as a parker in a factory the next day and the rest of the week went to working. I was too tired to get about much but that Friday night I did get to the West End Bar. I sat and waited for Cass. Hours went by. After I was fairly drunk the bartender said to me, "I'm sorry about your girlfriend."

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"What is it?" I asked.

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"I'm sorry, didn't you know?"

"No."

"Suicide. She was buried yesterday."

"Buried?" I asked. It seemed as though she would walk through the doorway at any moment. How could she be gone?

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"Her sisters buried her."

"A suicide? Mind telling me how?"

"She cut her throat."

"I see. Give me another drink."

200 I drank until closing time. Cass was the most beautiful of 5 sisters, the most beautiful in town. I managed to
drive to my place and I kept thinking, I should have insisted she stay with me instead of accepting that "no."
Everything about her had indicated that she had cared. I simply had been too offhand about it, lazy, too
unconcerned. I deserved my death and hers. I was a dog. No, why blame the dogs? I got up and found a
205 bottle of wine and drank from it heavily. Cass the most beautiful girl in town was dead at 20. Outside
somebody honked their automobile horn. They were very loud and persistent. I sat the bottle down and
screamed out: "GOD DAMN YOU, YOU SON OF A BITCH ,SHUT UP!" The night kept coming and there was
nothing I could do.

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