

## ABOUT AFTERMATH

Whit Burnett's Story had discovered William Saroyan and many others and although they only paid \$25 per story there was something about getting into Story which was much better than getting into the Atlantic or Harper's or the New Yorker.

I wrote two or three short stories a week and sent them all to Story. I even liked their standard rejection slip which began: "This, alas, is a rejection slip . . ."

I drank, starved, moved from city to city and kept writing two or three stories a week and mailing them to Story. My typer was in and out of hock, and then finally I couldn't get it out. I hand-printed my stories in ink. I hand-printed so many stories that I was able to print faster than I could write in the standard manner. It was stamps before food, envelopes, paper before food. But not before drink.

Each time I moved to a new city I had dozens and dozens of rejected stories which I boosted into roominghouse trash cans. I only had one suitcase and when you fit in the radio, the extra pair of work shoes, shirts, underwear, shorts, stockings, bathroom stuff, towels and the like, there wasn't much room for unwanted pages.

There were new cities and new hand-printed stories. And Whit Burnett was no snob. He read them. And often there was a personally typed note: "This one almost made it. Please send us more . . ."

Any typed reject was an immense miracle for me. I think I continued writing just for typed rejects . . .

It was a night in St. Louis. I had been working overtime as a packer in the cellar of a lady's dress shop. As I was leaving, the boss called me into his office. He sat behind his desk smoking a cigar and a friend sat in an overstuffed chair near him. They both looked very fat and healthy, rather imperial, almost intelligent.

"I want you to meet a friend of mine," my boss said, "he's a writer too."

"Hello," I said.

We didn't shake hands. He just sat in his overstuffed chair. Both of them sat smoking expensive cigars. They were totally relaxed. My whole day and evening had been eaten away uselessly for a pittance, for the barest of a survival, never enough money to escape, let alone endure. Slavery had not been abolished, it had been extended and enhanced to include the black and the white and any other usable color.

My boss exhaled a wondrous plume of rich smoke, leaned back a bit in his leather chair and said, "My friend has had many books published, he makes much money writing . . ."

I had put down on my application form: Writer. Mainly as an excuse to cover my long gaps of unemployment.

I stood there. There was nothing I could say. I finally asked my boss if I might leave. He told me that it would be all right . . .

I always walked home to my room and it was Autumn and the trees had no leaves, just dozens of bare branches sticking out, and it was dark already. My feet hurt, my back hurt, my eyes felt sucked dry. My clothing was cheap and rumpled, there was a button missing from my shirt down near the waist, the front pulled open revealing a dirty undershirt. I was 24 years old and already three-quarters murdered but still dedicated to the short story.

As I walked along, my mind changed. It was easy, it just went the other way:

I thought, I'm going to go out and get it. I may not have a dime now but somehow I'll get money. I'll hire and fire men just for my own entertainment, I'll buy furs and autos for women and toss them aside when the first wrinkle appears. I'll re-invent the word 'ruthless.' I'll become colder than the coldest cold and I'll love it! And if I can't rule factories, I'll hold up banks, I'll set fire to half the universe! I'm tired, I'm tired, let all this writing be damned!

I walked along, found my roominghouse, went up the stairway, opened the door to my room and there on the rug, via courtesy of my landlady, was the same old manila envelope. It was fat, a returned story.

I opened the window, took the bottle of chilled wine from the sill, opened that, poured one. The cold St. Louis Autumn air chilled my wine perfectly. I took a hit, sat down, lit a smoke. I sat on the edge of my bed and undid the clasp, as per custom, slid the pages out.

At least it was a typed reject.

"Dear Mr. Bukowski:

We are sorry but this one didn't quite do. But we very much liked "Aftermath of a Lengthy Rejection Slip" and we will run it in our March-April issue. We have been much interested in your work and we are happy to . . ."

Signed, "Whit Burnett."

I walked over and put the note on the dresser top. Then I had a good drink. I sat on the bed looking at the walls. I took my shoes off and threw them across the room. I looked at my shoes. I looked at the dresser. I noticed each knob on the dresser drawers. I poured another drink. I drank that. Then I got up, walked to the dresser, picked up the note and read it again. Then I put the note in a dresser drawer and went back to bed and drank some more. Then I got up, opened the drawer and read the note again.

Whit Burnett, he had class.

I finished the bottle of wine, found my spare in the closet, opened that, drank that . . . listening to my one Mozart album on my record player a couple of times. . . .

In the morning I awakened without a hangover, found the note and read it all over again.

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