

Wilderness House Literary Review 19/4

Zachariah Tucker
The Bedroom

Rene lay back on the bed, and watched the cigarette smoke curl upwards towards the ceiling.

Anna was dabbing at a canvas with her brush. The posture Rene held was naturally, ungracefully, beautiful. She wanted to capture it while she could.

"You're thinking again, aren't you?"

Rene blew another puff of smoke. "Mm-hmm."

"You're always thinking." The color wasn't quite right. She started mixing again. "It's okay. I like painting you when you're thinking."

Besides the two of them, the easel, and the bed, there wasn't much else in the attic loft. The best pieces she hadn't sold yet adorned the blue walls. A small wardrobe spilled its overflowing contents onto the floor. They didn't have a shelf, so they piled their books around the bed. There was no table or chairs, they took most of their meals in the dining room downstairs.

"You're also cheaper than a model."

"Mn-hmn." More smoke.

"Are you going out this afternoon?"

"Hm...? Dr. Antonescue said to expect a letter. Someone approached him about a very curious project. He recommended me to them."

"Dr. Antonescue? He's the one you worked with during the war, isn't he?"

"Mm-hmm."

"Good, you need to get out more. The heat in here affects you, I think."

"Hmm..." Rene got off the bed and pulled on some clothes from the floor. "...we're out of cigarettes. I'm going down for more."

Anna tried to hold the pose on the bed in her mind, but lost it only a few moments later. The feeling in it was gone.

She'd catch Rene in it later and work on the painting then. She abandoned the piece for a still-life.

The two women were both the same size, and didn't distinguish ownership of their clothes. Rene dressed in a loose skirt and blouse.

"Mrs. Dupree caught me at breakfast to hold me up for the rent. There's only five crowns left," Anna warned her.

Rene took the bills from the tin beneath the bed. "It'll be enough."

They shared a kiss, and Rene left.

The boy who lived on the other side of the attic was playing on the landing, while his mother and step-father screamed at each other in Old Imperial from behind the door to their apartment. "Hiyah missus."

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"Mm." Rene passed him, but the boy followed along behind her.

"Going for smokes, missus? I can go get 'em for you, if you gimme one."

"No."

"Got anything else for me to do, missus? Jus' for a few pennies, all I want."

"Not today."

"Okay. You look very pretty today, missus." They had to go down three flights of stairs to reach ground level, and the boy showed no sign of stopping. "But you always look so pretty, missus Rene. You're such a pretty lady."

"I don't have any money to spare."

"That evil witch take it?"

They passed by the landlady's room, and Rene mumbled back non-committedly.

Once they were safely outside, the boy continued his tirade. "She's n' awful hag. Not at all nice like you n' missus Anna. Just shouts n' twists my ear. I hate the rotten bitch."

Rene opened the cigar store door, which responded by ringing a little bell over the entryway. Mr. Kaufman, the owner, nodded a greeting.

Rene returned it.

"Letter for you," he said. "Four for Anna. Wish you wouldn't keep having your mail sent here."

"Why not? I come in every week. If I have them sent to my building, the landlady opens them."

The boy confirmed her accusation. "She's a rotten evil bitch."

Rene opened her letter, while Mr. Kaufman prepared her usual order.

"Very interesting," she mumbled, mostly to herself. Then she folded up the letter and put it in her purse. "I only have five crowns. I'll pay you the other two next week."

"You still owe me a crown from three weeks ago."

"I know, but this letter is about a job. I'm sure I'll be able to clear my tab soon. I'd even be prepared to sign an I.O.U. for it, if you like."

Mr. Kaufman avoided her eyes. "That's alright. Don't worry about it."

Rene put her hand over his when she gave him the money. "You're very sweet, Mr. Kaufman. Your wife is a very lucky woman."

He blushed, and she left the shop with the boy.

"Pretty slick the way you snowed over that old man," the lad said, once they had distance.

"Expressing gratitude for another person's act of kindness is not 'snowing him over'."

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"That letter really about a job?"

Rene ruffled his hair. "You're cute. Don't ever grow up."

Anna loved Whitegate.

It was the most romantic city in the world, in her opinion. Even if it was sacrilege for a native resident of Vermillion to say so.

It was a shame that she was traveling with such a cold fish like Rene. She would have liked to have a rich and handsome gentleman, one with rippling muscles like the statues in those glorious galleries, serving as her escort.

Someone like that would take her out to shows, and out dancing, and out eating at the most luxurious restaurants. The only 'outs' Rene took her to were out to dull meetings in government or university board rooms.

A dull escape was still a welcome one though, anything to get away from their tiny rented room. This way out was only offered because they needed a secretary who knew shorthand to take notes, and Anna took advantage of it. She was eventually granted security clearance by the humorless government men, and things went forwards.

All the occult calculations the scientists worked with their infernal counting machines were completely beyond Anna. Numerology was Rene's field.

Eventually, Anna did get a chance to see those dug up artifacts everyone was so worried about; they were very beautiful. The shattered pieces of the pottery weren't dangerous, at least to look at them. The primitive work in the ancient runes adorning them was like nothing she had ever seen before. The angles and the pictographs spoke to her.

When she returned to their bedroom that night, Anna began to work those strange signs into her lover's portrait, as Rene slept angelically. Anna found it curious how those old runes bent space around them. They turned straight lines to curves before her eyes, and made the unseen spectrums of light bleed through natural colors.

Each canvas she drew became a wonderous portal into infinity. Anna believed she could hear her goddess, Creation, whispering to her through it.

The goddess spoke to her.

Anna asked.

Her goddess answered.