



The Junkie

A short Story

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Part 1

Inside the Neighborhood, in spite of the night respite, a dark-haired man crept down the alley with bad intentions; intentions to rob a man who had little left to steal.

As he eased down the alley, he stopped and then peeked around the corner to where he knew the old man slept. To his surprise he saw that the old man was awake and that he was kneeling in front of a medium-sized, worn-out looking yellow dog. He hesitated. He hesitated and he listened. He saw that the old man was feeding the old dog. This was not a surprise, what however did surprise him was that after putting some of the dog food atop a cardboard plate which he placed in front of his companion, he then scooped a spoonful out of the bag and ate it himself. The robber was appalled as he contemplated the reality that the old man was reduced to eating dog food. The robber shook his head, not only at the harsh truth confronting him, but at the unbelievable idea that he could even contemplate robbing and/or potentially harming another person living in such dire circumstance.

However, the addiction, that thing which had overridden the compass of his morality, as if to remind him who the master was, shook him to the very foundation of his soul. His stomach lurched and he bent over in pain. Sweat poured from his skin and his teeth gnashed one against the other. He shook. He hurt. He resisted; when the pain reached what he thought was its threshold, he took a deep breath and slowly relaxed. He sat down and put his back against the brick wall behind. He felt a moment of relief.

He could beat this.

He squinted his eyes hoping that it might change something, but it did nothing except to temporarily cloud the reality of what he'd become. He closed his eyes and asked God to help him. He opened his eyes and exhaled a large and deep breath. He ran his hands through his dark hair. He looked at his hands the way a man looks at something he cannot understand; like someone searching for the origins of his actions, or possibly, some way to correct them. But in the predominance of his

addiction, there was no way to correct himself, to set right his life. There was no help for him, he was bent and ruined beyond all reasonable reconciliation.

He looked around the corner, the old man had his back against the wall, his left hand on the dog at his side. He scanned the alley for witnesses against him - he saw only one. A bum, a wino probably, sitting cross-legged on some cardboard with his hands folded in front of him and his back against the wall - maybe ten paces from the old man.

The pain in his stomach, the sweats, the headache, the shaking all returned with a vengeance to reshackle their slave. Under its whip, he stood to his full height, entered the old man's space, grabbed him by his shirt and shook him unreasonably.

"Give me your check," he growled menacingly.

The old man carefully reached into his pants pocket and pulled out a wrinkled envelope, it contained his monthly check. He handed to the other man. "Here," he said, then added, "please don't hurt my dog."

The thief snatched the envelope, pushed the old man aside and turned to the man sitting cross-legged. He leaned over to strike him, then he noticed his eyes were closed. He took a closer look and thought that maybe he was dead. He turned to leave, but the old man's voice froze him.

"This is the third month in a row you've robbed me, and every month you forget to check my pockets. Look," he said as he reached into his pants pocket. "here's another three dollars- take it." Then with a warm smile he held out his hand. In it were three crumpled-up bills.

"God knows you must need it more than me."

The dark-haired man snatched up the bills and left the alley, but not without remorse.

"May God help you," the old man whispered.

The thief cried as he approached the street. "Tomorrow I'll stop using," he vowed.

30 DAYS LATER

If you were standing in front of Trans Grocery and the Johnson Avenue Liquor Store, there would be an alley about seventy-five feet deep that separated them. It wasn't a wide alley, nope, it was only about five feet across; it was originally intended to be a buffer between the two old building in case one caught fire. At the end of this fire alley, you would find that it butted up against a larger alley, one that ran behind

the two buildings for delivery trucks and such. This larger alley actually paralleled Johnson Avenue for about a mile or so behind all the buildings fronting it from 1st Street to 10th Street. This alley was one part of a much larger alleyway system that serviced almost all of the buildings and business in this neighborhood.

This network alley system was used for the neighborhood trash pickup. It also served for deliveries of any kind and was home to a plethora of places for the homeless to shelter. It is also the place where an immutable amount of unspoken, often indecent, things took place. It was here in this fire alley between Trans and the Liquor Store, that the dark-haired man watched the old man and his yellow dog sitting next to a large dumpster about twenty paces away, in the larger alley.

The dark-haired man lowered his eyes indignantly as his need fought his conscious willpower. He was struggling. His body ached. He couldn't eat and there was this voice in his head hollering at him. "forget that old man!" It screamed. On top of those things, on top of this torture, he had no money, nor had he any prospects... except, this old man.

And there it was, the truth of the matter. And here he was again, watching the old man and his dog. He'd promised himself he wouldn't do this, but again he'd lied. He started to move, then stopped himself, argued within himself and eased back around the corner of the building. He could have sworn there had been a moment of recognition, that the old man had seen him before he ducked back. Why doesn't he run?

His heart gave a strange stutter and for a moment he almost turned around and walked away. Almost. Just then he felt something... He felt as if he'd been touched, pushed in the chest by an invisible hand. His body froze as if the engine of it suddenly switched off. He went very still as the voice in his head went silent and the buzzing behind his eyes abruptly stopped. He blinked hard like a man suffering a stroke. He couldn't move. He was frozen in space. His breath felt trapped in his lungs and a voice in his head softly assured him, "We don't have to live like this. You're a slave to nothing, unless you allow it. Let's end this suffering, today."

The moment of clarity passed. The voice went quiet, and his life, his present life, flashed like an old movie through his mind. The trembling in his stomach returned. The pain returned. The buzzing behind his eyes returned. Then came a pounding in his skull. "BAM, BAM, BAM!" It felt like someone was inside hammering in that infinitesimally small space between brain and bone.

In spite of the pain he took his knuckles of the ground and stood erect. Feeling a sudden resolve, a strength he hadn't known he possessed. It was over. He had made a decision. He knew that he couldn't fix all the mistakes he'd made, the wrong turns he'd already taken, but it was time to put right what he could. Then the pain

increased, but his fortitude held. With a deep breath of pain and and a long painful sense of guilt he rounded the corner and with purpose walked over to the old man.

"Give me your check," he said.

With a sad covenant, the old man reached into a worn out canvas bag and pulled from within it an envelope containing a government check. He reluctantly handed it to the dark-haired man who took it with intent. With shaking rheumatoid hands, the old man reached into his pants pocket for the two dollars contained there. He had earned them sweeping up behind the liquor store. The dark-haired man stopped him.

"I don't need it," he said as he pocketed the envelope.

For the first time in his multiple encounters with the dark-haired man, he felt fear. This was not the desperate, beaten down junkie who carried a look of defeat about him. Instead, this man looked frightful and dangerous. Different, like the goodness in him had fallen off a cliff, leaving another man in his place. The old man pulled his dog close, like a child does a blanket when expecting a slap.

The dark-haired man stood in front of the old man for a moment, as if deciding if he would, or wouldn't, deliver that slap. Then, much to the old man's agreement, he turned and left the alley through the gap between Trans and the Liquor Store.

After looking both ways, he crossed Johnson Avenue and entered the City Park.

Once in the park, he passed a handsome man and a young girl sitting on a park bench. "It's rehab. She'll make it this time," he heard the man assure the girl. No she won't, he said to himself. He walked past them, took the left-hand path around the duck pond and into the back 40. He looked around until he saw a man sitting on a bench; the man was watching him. Without reproof, the dark-haired man walked over to where the man was sitting and sat down beside him.

The man on the bench was a tall, gangly man with a square jaw and piercing green eyes. He wore high-topped, high-end sneakers and tight jeans with a blue and yellow Rams football jersey. He was a hard man, made so by a hard environment. The man in the sneakers glanced over at him, but his expression remained unchanged. He blinked his eyes as if he found the junkie's presence an invasion of his private world. He did not speak.

The man with the sneakers pushed back his unruly hair, exposing his wide skull, complete with a long scar that went from under his hairline to the top of his left eye. Finally he spoke.

"Somethin' on your mind, Jackson?" (Fuckin' junkie).

"Yeah," the dark-haired man answered. "I need a pistol and a bump," (you piece of shit).

A quiet hung in the air between the two men, the kind of dangerous quiet you get from the wings of a buzzard when you're on your last breath. "What kind of pistol?" He replied.

"It don't matter, long as it works," the dark-haired man answered.

"You got money?"

"Yeah, I got a government check for thirteen-hundred," he assured.

The buzzard circled again. "I know all about that check. It ain't worth but two hundred to me," (you fuckin' thief) answered the man in the sneakers.

The dark-haired man thought about what was said. Then in a questioning voice, "You gave me three-fifty last month," (You piece of shit, drug dealer).

"Yeah, well. That was last month... You want it, or not?"

The dark-haired man felt anger rise like bile in his throat. This punk had been robbing him for two years now. Slowly bleeding him, slowly stringing him out. Now he was robbing him. The voice in his head shouted at him, "Take it! Take it! Take it!"

He restrained his anger, "Ok," the Dark-haired man answered. (Some day you'll get yours, you piece of shit).

Together they left the park, walked a little ways into the employee parking lot and up to a black escalade with custom wheels. The man in the high-end sneakers used an auto-remote to pop the locks and told the dark-haired man to jump into the passenger seat. Once inside, the man in the sneakers took his door-alarm remote and pointed it at the airbag station in the dash of the Escalade. He pressed it and held it down. After a brief hesitation, the dashboard airbag cover popped open like a glove box. There was a secret compartment behind it. Inside were four pistols.

Part 2

The man in the sneakers reached inside the hidden compartment and with a bit of shuffling, pulled out an old, small caliber .25 automatic pistol and handed it to the dark-haired man. "That's what two hundred will get you," (Fuckin' junkie).

The dark-haired man took the pistol, looked at it, dropped the magazine. It was empty. He looked at the other man, questioningly.

"What!?" the man in the sneakers said. "You didn't think I was dumb enough to give a loaded gun to a junkie did you?" (Because you'd probably try to rob me, and I'd have to kill your dumb ass.)

"No matter," (If it was loaded I'd rob your ass). Then added with a smile, "I need a bump to go with it."

The man in the sneakers looked as if he were disgusted. Then as if coming to a life-altering decision, he reached into his pocket and pulled out a small packet. "That's a twenty. Take it or leave it," he said with haughtiness. (IF you still had a wife, I'd make you watch me fuck her for that twenty, fuckin' junkie).

The dark-haired man hesitated as if weighing out the benefits of Stocks verses Commodities (I'm going to come back and pop this fool). He nodded, handed the check over, put the pistol in his belt, pulled his shirt over it and took the small see-through bag.

With their business complete, the two men stepped out of the SUV. Then, like two men in a B-movie, looked suspiciously around as they adjusted their clothing, and went their separate ways. Think what you will about the man with the dark-hair, but know this; he's a man who knows how to survive, and along the way he'd learned the things necessary to make that happen.

The dark-haired man had been born, raised, street educated and addicted in this neighborhood. He knew every alley, every nook and cranny, every free meal, every unlocked window, every night watchperson, every patrol schedule, every Narc and every place to hide. He knew this neighborhood, like a leopard knows its territory. With this in mind, he moved furtively through it like a ghost, a ghost on a mission.

Close by set of apartments were being built. When he arrived at the construction site he went to the first trashcan he saw. He poked around and pulled out two brown paper bags, the type folks pack lunch in. He emptied the trash, smoothed them out as best he could, folded them up and stuck them in his back pocket. Watching him was a big man in work pants and a work shirt; a white hard hat on his head and a tape measure hitched on his belt. The job foreman.

He frowned as he walked over to the dark-haired man. He, the dark-haired man, lowered his eyes to appear docile. When the foreman stood directly in front of him, he stammered a little; one of those survival moves. He said to the foreman, "Uh, I was wondering if, maybe, you could give me a zip-tie. My shelter is falling apart," (Sorry, that's a lie).

The foreman sighed. He looked to his left, rubbed his chin, then looked directly at the dark-haired man. "Sure pal, come on." Together they walked over to plywood table with a set of blue prints, a thermos, a lunch box and some other stuff placed neatly on top.

"Have you eaten today?" The foreman asked.

The dark-haired man lowered his head, then shook it back and forth (This is a nice guy).

The foreman sighed, reached over, popped open his lunch box, pulled a six inch sub out and handed it to the dark-haired man. Without further words he pulled three zip-ties out of a tool bag hanging off a nail and handed them to the dark-haired man. "If you need some wood, come on back."

With shame and gratitude, the dark-haired man nodded and thanked him. As he walked away he put the zip-ties in his front pocket and left the way he'd come.

He ate the sub as he walked.

He took two left turns and a right, walked into a small branch bank, walked over to the security guard, pulled his pistol and told him to get on his belly. He did. The dark-haired man zip-tied his hands behind his back. He knew he had two, maybe three minutes before the police would arrive.

He yelled, "This is a robbery! all you tellers, empty your drawers into this bag!" He shook and popped the bag open with a snap. He put the bag in front of the teller furthest from the door, then added, "No dye packs! If I find a dye-pack, I'll kill all of you!"

The first teller quickly put the money in the bag. "Bottom drawer too!" he barked as he put the gun in the man's face. The man unlocked that drawer and pulled out more cash. The dark-haired man worked his way down the three tellers and walked out the door to the sound of sirens close by.

After leaving the bank, he took a series of back alleys in the direction of the park. Halfway there he walked into a satellite office for the City Water Department. An elderly lady was at the counter paying her water bill, a couple others were in line to do the same; he recognized most of them from the neighborhood.

Excusing himself to the woman paying her bill, he eased her out of the way and pulled his pistol, telling the woman behind the counter to give him all the cash and checks. He couldn't believe how much money she had. Even though they were small bills, it appeared to be more than he'd gotten at the bank.

He started to leave, then stopped. There wouldn't be a silent alarm here; he had time. He turned around and told the clerk to stamp everyone's water bill as paid. He waited until she was finished.

He left the water department and headed out the front door and into a near-by alley. As he walked, he thought about all the checks in the bag. When he came to the first dumpster, he stopped, sat the two bags down, fished around in the dumpster until he found something that would work; a large empty can that said "Green beans" on the outside. He sat the can on the ground, fished the checks out of the bag, dropped them into the can and with a lighter from his pocket, he set the checks on fire. Time was short, he knew that he was being hunted. Even so, he watched the can until he was sure the fire had taken, then continued down the alley. He thought about how happy some folks would be when the money those checks represented was never taken from their accounts. Small victory, but he felt good about it.

As he came to the break in the alley between 7th and 8th Street, he could hear police sirens everywhere. He took a deep breath and quickly crossed the street without incident into the alley behind the Goodwill store. He was home. This was where he lived, sort of. Actually he lived on top of the Goodwill store.

Once in the alley, he looked around and when he saw no one, he reached into a separation in the wall behind the dumpster. He pulled out a six-foot homemade ladder he had stashed there. Jumping on top of the dumpster, using the lid as his base, he leaned the ladder against the wall of the Goodwill store. He made sure it was in place. He climbed up and onto the top of the building. He laid on his belly, reached down and grabbed the ladder and pulled it up behind him. He laid it on the flat roof, concealed by the twelve inch vertical ledge of the building. He had made it. He was safe. He was home; the only home his addiction had allowed him.

Near the edge of the roof was a cardboard box folded to form a sleeping mat. Beside it was a good sized Tupperware type see-through plastic box with a duct taped lid, it held a spare shirt, a comb, some toiletries and a picture of his wife and children. He pulled the picture out of the box, put it in his shirt pocket, then patted the pocket as if to secure the picture there. With a deep sigh of relief he laid down, face up, on his pallet.

He put his hands behind his neck, looked into the bright cerulean sky and thought about his family and then about what he needed to do. "Today," he said to his wife, "Today is the day I kick this addiction."

For those who've never experienced such things, they cannot be understood. To sheltered, peaceful citizens who live in warm houses and comfortable beds, who sleep safely at night, there can be no understanding of the desperation of people fighting to survive the streets and an addiction to alcohol or narcotics. Not understanding this is not your fault, it is your blessing.

Imagine.

Imagine if you were born into a single-parent household, or one where your father or mother is a drug addict or even a drug dealer, usually both. Imagine being a child and watching your mother take men into an alley for sex, to support her addiction. Imagine how that experience can affect the maternal bond that all children instinctively have with what is supposed to be our mother goddess on Earth.

Imagine what happens to a child who's told they're stupid, or ugly. We know the answer to this; they grow up believing themselves to be stupid or ugly. They grow up scared, stunted and behind their peers. Imagine if you are raised in a culture where you are continually told that you cannot succeed, that the system won't let you. Again, what we are taught as children damages us, them, and so it is they grow up resenting the system that they believe held them down. Now imagine that you're born into a poor neighborhood, your father is in prison, your mother is a drug addict with prostitution as the only means to support her habit, and when you infrequently go to school, you see other kids in new clothes, fancy shoes, nice cars and going home to happy families. When you turn on the TV, you see movies and shows about happy and successful people, but when you look around at your life, you see none of this. Then you look around your neighborhood streets and you see some who appear to have things, nice cars, jewelry and girls. You want these things too. You already believe that the SYSTEM won't let you have them. So you do what the others do, after all, you've been programmed by Hollywood and taught by your environment to fulfill a failed destiny. But that way of living is hard, if you don't end up dead, you end up in prison.

Imagine.

Then try to understand that you, my reader, are none of these things because of where you were born. Imagine how lucky you are to be born, YOU, then try to understand why seemingly bad people do bad things and fail at life.

"But by the Grace of God..."

The man with the dark hair remembered his youth. He remembered being put on Ritalin when he was six. Later he learned that Ritalin was pharmaceutical meth. He and millions of other hyperactive children became meth addicts at the direction of their schools and doctors. He didn't know it, but he grew up a drug addict before he'd ever heard the word, meth. So later in life when he took his first taste of street meth, it slammed him like a wrestler in a ring.

His body immediately reacted, remembered his childhood addiction and he was hurled down a path of no return.

Yes, of course it's fair to say that he should not have taken that first hit of street meth, but he did. I refer you to the preceding two paragraphs...

Imagine...

Imagine if you'd been taught compassion instead of judgment. If you simply stopped and understood that the truth is that these people did not have the same opportunity as others, most others... as you.

All this he remembered.

Part 3

It was the first time he'd slept in three days. When he woke, the sun had retired, and the moon was out, faded by the nightlights of the city. Picking up an old and tattered hood novel he had pulled out of a trash can, he tried to read. When he was tired of reading, he tried to drift back to sleep, but he couldn't. The old ache had returned. The old voices were talking to him. When he could no longer stand the pain, he cried, pulled out the photo of his family and asked them for help. He promised them that he'd take the money he had and use it to leave the city, to start again, to kick his addiction and he truly meant it. He was through with dope... then with a promise that this would be the last time, pulled out the twenty piece and shot it into his veins. He spent the rest of the night spun out on top of the roof, pacing back and forth, hating himself for lying to his family. A few hours later he began to tweak.

"Can they see me?" Like a soldier peeking over a ridge, he ducked and looked over all four sides of the building. "They're out there," said the voice in his head, and his natural calm surrendered, revealing the other him. His self control was left, revealing itself to be leaves in a storm.

The old urge, the old pain, the old craving shook him to his bones. He touched his pocket and began to cry. In his heart, he suddenly admitted that he couldn't kick his addiction. He didn't have the courage or the strength it would take. He hated himself.

In his pain and in his failure, he pulled two hundred dollars out of the bank bag and climbed off the roof. He hid his ladder and eased down the alley. Finding what he was looking for, he bought two hundred dollars worth of meth. He took it back to his hideout on the roof of the Goodwill store. He felt like a loser, he hated himself as he watched his hands load the needle.

It was midday before he figured it was enough of a buffer. A safe time for him to make the walk to 6th Street. He picked up his pistol, put it in his belt and covered it with his shirt. He grabbed both paper bags and said in a low voice, "Today it ends. No more dope." He touched his family picture and told them that, today, he'd do the right right. As if to protest, the flames of his high and the ashes of his addiction burned his guts. His resolve and his eyes blurred and when his vision returned, he saw through two sets of equal yet obtuse eyes.

One old. One new.

With the old set he saw his life and what it consisted of these past five years. The struggle. The war addicts fight everyday. He saw with vivid clarity the pain he caused others.

When his new set of eyes took focus, he saw a different world where pharmaceutical and street drugs were non-existent. He cried and then made the hardest decision of his life. "I can't continue livin' the way I'm livin', and I have to stop punishing myself, going through my life looking at my mistakes. It'll kill me from inside out." With a newfound fortitude he made his final decision. He wanted this different drug free world.

Today, his addiction would end. Somehow, someday... and he prayed. "Lord, make it stop. Today!"

He stood at the edge of the alley and looked with awe, as if seeing his neighborhood for the first time. To his right, he saw three buildings taller than the others doing their best to grab the rising sun. The thick shade was welcome to the two men standing awaiting a bus. More important was the laughing children skipping rope in the shade's welcome embrace.

He watched.

In them he saw that happiness hung over their smiles and, that their laughter soared above them like a rainbow signaling the triumph of innocence over the reality of their ragged clothes and worn shoes. If we could just be happy in spite of our circumstance; if we could just be happy with what we have and what we are, he thought.

He paid little attention to what lay beneath the surface of those word concentrating instead on the coolness of the shade and the overpowering innocence of children. Then his vision reverted back to his old way of seeing, his old set of eyes and he saw a horrid, cold reality. More likely than not, those kids will end up addicted to the street life. After all, they were born here, predestined to become slaves to this neighborhood.

"Please God, if you're listening, take this drug habit from me. PLEASE GOD HELP ME!"

He let out a sigh, a long sigh. his eyes strained from lack of sleep and the lights of too much sun. His insides ached, but it was less painful than it had been one hour before. Again he sighed, waved at the kids, touched his pocket. Then, in an after-thought, he pulled out the picture and drank in the images. He kissed the picture as if kissing the people in it. He returned it to his pocket and while looking at the sky he said, "Today, sweetheart. Today, I'll do right."

He turned, walked back into the alley, crossed 6th Street and entered the alley behind Trans.

Watching him as he entered was an old man and a medium sized yellow dog.

When he stood in front of the old man, he lowered his eyes and told him that he was, or had been, a father and a husband. He told the old man that before his life was destroyed by meth, he'd been a hard working, good person. Then his voice broke under the weight of emotion and he apologized to the old man for robbing him and handed him the two bags of cash.

He turned and walked away. He turned into the alley between Trans and the liquor store. He briefly stopped and pulled the pistol from his belt and dropped it in a gutter pipe. He took a deep breath, pulled a pocket knife from his pocket, looked at it and with resolve crossed Johnson Avenue heading into the park.

The police saw him first.

"Stop or I'll shoot!" They hollered.

He kept walking.

"Mr. Jackson! Stop or I'll shoot."

"Well, sweetheart, this is it." He said with finality. But no one heard him. When he reached for the picture in his pocket, they pulled their triggers.

On this day, God had answered his prayers. He finally stopped craving meth.

Of course there's a philosophy to all this. But here in the dark neighborhoods of the inner-city, the choice is simple; survive as best you can.

There is a vast difference between those who debate these issues across a kitchen table or on talk radio, and the folks who live them from a cardboard shelter on some dark, cold, sidewalk in a far-off, underserved neighborhoods.

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