

The Life

*Baggy pants listen closely, hear some patent shit,
Knowing nothing, cry aloud, hear the graveyard tout,
Smoothly bristle, sharpened silence, blows rain down at night,
Breasts heaving, drama spindles, death with jerky steps,
Breaking chains, walking yellow, curse and stone the gods,
Pointed arms, black remanders, carbine killers all,
Weeping, soiling, scowling, shiny, all of life ablaze,
Kingly pimping, men lay barking, bilious green and tame,
Cots and cocks, raging fury, twisting metal into knives,
Running bare, tragic trodden, felonious despair,
Bouncing Betties, buddy fuckers, little reels of life,
Turning south, dripping needles, cold eyes turn into black,
Misty morn brings callow troops, some dirty mounds of flesh,
Walk you fool, the world is gone, and mother knows you're dead.*

Head down, hands in the pockets of his thin coat, Jack made long strides along the street where old cars and wine bottles lay strewn along the gutter. In Hough where Jack lived, old boarded up houses and storefronts stood a lonely vigil, like forgotten soldiers of an ancient army. Jack turned the corner and walked into Delaney's store, a place with the smell of musty furniture and vomit, and a testament to the neighborhood's condition.

"Jackie, my man, where you been?" Delaney slapped Jack's hand, his large black face contrasted sharply with Jack's.

"Them faggot cops picked me up, and the judge bounced me into Whitmore to detox."

"Were you carrying?"

"Just had dice in my pocket, but the cops called them criminal tools. You know, same old bull shit."

Delaney was a former member of the Kings, an old street gang in the neighborhood, one with a nasty reputation for cutting whores and such. Jack thought that Delaney had probably been a typical street pimp in his day, good at rolling drunks and putting girls out on the corner, but not tough enough for things now. Here in 1960 America, drugs were what people wanted. Those who were holding kept tight control; it was sellers market. The Dallas Hotel was where you could get a fix, with twenty or thirty dollars you could get high on H with a clean needle. Paulie and Fatso provided the smack for a price. They would even let you hang around in the back room for a while after you got turned on. Junkies were repeat customers who paid, got high, then did it all

over again. At least they did until they overdosed, or started doing jail time. Jack had seen Paulie more times than he wanted to count. He didn't feel like he was a street junkie. He thought of himself as a player and his habit was part of the Life. He avoided the straight world, had only done a little jail time, and was rarely strung out. But Jack had the needle marks on his arms, a sickly worn visage, and looked like death in cheap clothes. Jack was twenty-one, but in reality he was an old man.

Jack paid Delaney for a bottle of Thunderbird, then went outside and sat on the curb. He watched the traffic go by, mostly delivery vans, cabs, an occasional citizen on his way to a job downtown. Jack had been on his own since he was sixteen, but he had never held a job. The neighborhood consisted of old taverns, cheap hotels, diners, old decaying houses, and decrepit tenements. Jack had lived in a tenement with the old lady and his younger brother Ricky, but that was a long time ago. Jack had been using for five years, almost from the day the old lady threw him out. Jack looked up from his bottle to see a police car turn the corner. It slowed in front of Delaney's store.

"Hey punk!" one of the cops yelled out. Jack recognized this cop as the one who had busted him recently. Jack held back his fear and anger, not wanting another trip to jail.

"If I see you in this neighborhood again I'll break your fucking neck, there ain't nothing that I hate more than a stinking punk junkie," the cop spat this through clenched teeth. He glared at Jack for a second, and then the car left the curb and turned down the alley beside Delaney's Store.

"Yea, go on down to Luanda's and get your take out — pay for those ribs and find your whores, you worthless bags of shit!" Jack's taunt didn't reach the cops, but those on the corner in front of Delaney's could hear him. Jack jumped up and went across the street. He cut through some back yards and headed downtown. His need and hate made him light of foot. Jack looked across Park Avenue toward downtown; crowds of people lay in front of him, his pace quickened. He needed a fix now. He needed money to get high. As sure as he knew his mothers name, as sure as he knew any God, Jack was going to rob somebody and get high. He needed to satisfy the craving he felt welling up inside him, nothing else mattered.

Jack walked down the busy street, head down, looking closely at the people who hustled past him. Jack was an accomplished purse-snatcher. He knew the kind of woman who carried cash. She was an old bitch, clutching a purse under her arm, probably wearing a fur. Snatching purses was an easy way for a junkie to get some quick cash. Jack saw his victim out of the corner of his eye. He slowed down to get a few steps behind her. Jack grabbed the purse from the old girl in the fur coat. She tried to grab it back, succeeding in catching Jack by his coat sleeve. She held on as Jack dragged her down onto the sidewalk. She fell hard; her screams pierced the sound of the traffic. Jack didn't hear the screams; he was already in an alley and clawing through the bag.

Jack had scored about seventy bucks from the robbery, this was a lot of bread, and he

wouldn't need to rob anyone else for a while. He put the money in his shoe and circled around the block and got on a bus. He didn't care where the bus was destined. Jack counted the stolen money until he saw a bank. Signaling the driver he wanted off, Jack was on the street again, looking warily around him before going into the bank. Walking in a bank always seemed to make him a little nervous, but he had to get smaller bills to give to Paulie. He didn't want Paulie to wonder where he had picked up the money; smaller bills produced fewer questions.

Jack wished he could see his old lady and Ricky as he walked past the housing projects toward the Dallas. The old lady had moved to the projects after their tenement building had burned down. A lot of buildings burned down in this neighborhood. But Jack felt sick with need, he needed horse, smack, heroin, and he needed it now. Going into the back room of the Dallas, Jack gave Fatso a tight wad of cash, and sat down to wait for Paulie. Then Jack only remembered seeing the glow of the candle as Paulie heated the spoon of heroin, and feeling the H as it entered his vein — washing away his need. In a couple minutes Jack was right with the world.

Later that night Jack emerged from the nods and checked to see if the money from the robbery was still on him. He stumbled down the street to where he had a room. Opening the door he flicked on the lights and turned on the radio; he was on the bed still nodding when Donna walked into the room. She was Jack's girl, also a junkie, and she was coming down from being high.

"Bastard, you could have told me where you were for the last week, where the fuck were you?" Donna spoke while she was going through Jack's pants, looking for cash. She checked his shoes and found the remains of the money Jack had stolen.

"I'm going down to the Dallas to see Paulie, he owes me a hit, you better be here when I get back, you fucking junkie." Donna slapped Jack's face on the way out, more to keep him aware of her, not simply to hurt. She came back in the morning, high and nodding out. They lay there together, not sleeping, not making love, they were high, and at peace with their jones.

Jack was retching, puking into a sink when he heard Donna let someone in.

"Who is it?"

"Ricky," a familiar voice answered.

"The old lady's sick - they took her to Saint Vincent's," Ricky stammered. Later, when everything unraveled, Jack remembered that Donna had been staring at Ricky intently right then. Although the look she had on her face quickly disappeared, Jack couldn't help thinking that the skank was hiding something.

"Can I stay here?" Ricky asked shakily.

"Well, don't get caught truant from Saint Pete's, and look after the old lady. When you visit the hospital let her know you're staying with me," Jack said with a hint of concern.

"Maybe he should say that he's eighteen when he goes to the hospital. That way he'll have the run of the hospital," Donna said a little too eagerly. Jack looked at Donna again, but her face was cold and revealing nothing.

“Don’t bring any shit in here Donna, you know what I mean.” Jack was warning Donna not to buy any dope from street dealers and stash it in Jack’s place. He distained street junk, it was unreliable and dangerous, cut with all kinds of shit. Smack bought on the street was plentiful and usually cheaper than the junk from Paulie, but it was cut so many times that you never knew what kind of high to expect. A user could bring street smack to Paulie and Fatso, but they would only dispense a fraction of what a junkie brought in, a match head at most. They kept most of the smack, taking it as payment for a place to shoot up. Donna did that a lot. Jack didn’t want to be a street junkie. He always bought the dope from Paulie. Jack and Donna had fought over this, but it was Jack’s place, and that meant not keeping smack at his flop.

In the dirty crack between decaying buildings Jack lay on a grate watching three young black dudes pitch pennies against the wall. Jack had stolen a bottle of Mogan-David from the A&P store and was sucking it dry. The broken glass around him occasionally caught the meager sunlight that reached the alley. He listened to the voices around him. The sounds comforted him like a warm fire, making his bed of glass and urine soaked newspapers a restful place to drink wine and fight off the shakes. Jack needed a fix, but mind and body were exhausted; only the wine kept him from going into full withdrawal.

The sounds of the boys in the alley with him suddenly ceased. Jack lifted his head in time to see two men in blue walking up the alley. He tried to crawl to his feet but his legs were shaky and stiff.

“This is the junkie I told you about,” one of the cops said.

“He pissed himself already, and we got to take him to Woodruff in the squad car, Christ!” the other cop said.

“Go call for an ambulance.”

“What for, he’s just a filthy drunk? When they get here they’ll complain and leave without him.”

“No, they’ll take him, I’ll make sure of it.”

“OK, it’s your call.”

Jack felt the cop’s foot on his stomach, holding him down. Then the cop flipped him over and yanked down Jack’s trousers. Jack lurched forward to run, but the cop held him by his hair and throat.

“Alright punk, I’ll show you who’s the pussy.”

Jack’s heart raced but he could do nothing, the cop was on top of him, pulling his Billy club around Jack’s neck and cutting off his breathing. The cop had his fly open now, preparing to assault the junkie. Jack blacked out as he began to realize what was about to happen. Waking up in a hospital bed, he was ashamed and angry without knowing why.

Looking around Jack saw he was in a large brightly lit room. Down each side of the room were hospital beds. He watched as a nurse carried bedpans down to a door. The door was opened for her from the outside, and then quickly closed. A big man wearing the uniform of a

hospital attendant walked toward Jack.

“Hey man, where am I?” Jack croaked, his throat tight and sore.

“Boy, you’re in Woodruff Hospital,” the attendant replied.

“When do I get out?”

“Ask the judge in ninety days.”

Jack realized that he had been committed to a mental ward, this knowledge made him feel panicky, he needed to get back on the street where he could get a fix. He looked around and saw a black dude with a bandage over his eye sitting on a nearby bed.

“Hey man, what kind of deal is this?” Jack said with a horse voice, barely audible.

“Ain’t you heard? The police are picking up all the users and bringing them here.”

“What the fuck for?”

“Shit man, I don’t know, but they got themselves a list. If you on it they’ll grab you off the street and here you be.”

“How long they means to keep us?”

“I ain’t heard for sure, but if you wants out you had best get a lawyer, we locked in this shit hole like it was jail.”

The conversation between the two men seemed to have caught the attention of the nurse who had returned through the locked door. She had a tray and walked up to Jack. Taking a carton of milk from the tray she started to open it.

“You feel like having something to eat?”

Jack felt bile in his throat, waves of nausea shook his thin frame, he started to heave, leaning over he saw a bedpan. The nurse already had it ready for him, holding it up to him while he vomited. The nurse took the bedpan away after Jack had finished, returning with a syringe on a tray; she motioned for Jack to turn over.

“This will help you some, you can have an injection twice a day, no more,” she looked at Jack; a look of pity seemed to appear on her face.

“They found you in an alley beaten up, do you remember what happened?”

“Do you remember what they did to you?” the nurse said softly, almost pleading for an answer. But Jack said nothing, he turned away from the nurse, his face tight and warm, his heart racing. Fear and loathing had replaced need for a moment. Jack tried to sleep, his body restless, his mind tortured, he could find no peace. He lay awake, thinking only of escape from this place.

Jack heard the footsteps of hard-soled shoes come toward him, the footsteps stopped at his bed.

“Hey boy, wake up.”

He saw two cops standing at the end of his bed.

“Are you Jack DeRue?” one cop said while looking down at a notebook in his hand. He was dark with short gray hair; his expression suggested that he would rather be elsewhere. He didn’t try to hide his discomfort. “Boy, you were picked up in an alley, kind of beaten up, do you

remember what happened?"

"No."

"You must have seen who beat you up, tell us what they looked like," the cop was impatient now. "Listen, either you tell me what you saw or I'll drag your butt downtown."

Jack slowly looked up at the cop's belt where a Billy club dangled, then looked over at the holstered revolver, and then up to face the cop.

"Fuck you junkie, who cares what happens to trash like you, I don't give a shit who beat your sorry ass."

The cop doing the talking walked away, but his partner leaned over for a moment and spoke quietly to Jack.

"If you remember anything tell the nurse." Jack felt the cop pat him on the knee, it was a fatherly gesture, but Jack recoiled from his touch. The cop shook his head as if to pity a dead thing, then followed the other cop to the locked door. Jack waited for the day to end. Curled up in the hospital bed he laid tormented, nauseous, quaking with fear and need, and wishing that he had died in that alley. The cop had done something to Jack in that alley, something he couldn't think about as he trembled on that cold hospital cot. And now Jack was all twisted inside, feeling something beyond the need for escape, beyond the craving for heroin. All that Jack had left was a fervent hatred for cops, and a longing for death.



photo by Rachael Johnson