

Damn Junkies

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There was a different feeling to the air in Seattle in the autumn of 1985. The feeling in the air wasn't coming in from the ports, or the forests, or the waves on the Puget Sound. It was coming in on cramped middle seats in smoky coach sections of passenger planes. It was coming in on worn bench seats in beat up hand-me-down pickups. The air was the cool breeze of life that rolled off of sherpa wool collars on denim jackets of young people from the north, south, east, and west corners of the United States and every square mile in between. They had come for the mountains and the evergreen trees, but they stayed for the taste of a cold dollar beer, the sound of a distorted guitar, and the warm embrace of a stranger who was just as happy to be found and validated as you were. It was the best feeling, with the best people, in the best place that I've ever been in my life. At least, that's how it was then.

Now it was 1995 and the record needle was no longer the only needle that spun the people of Seattle around. I stepped out of the rotted wooden lobby door of my apartment and stepped on a flier. "There is no WIN in Heroin! Get help now! King County Health Services." I chuckled at the corny Boy Scout rhetoric on the flier. I lifted the hood of my rain jacket over my head, and I lit the first cigarette of the day. Rain in Seattle was like wind in Chicago or traffic in New York City. It wasn't anything abnormal. It just *was*.

There was a young man and a young woman on the wet sidewalk to my left. The window ledge of a Chinese dumpling spot that was attached to my apartment building supported their visibly soaking heads. I began to approach them to check for a pulse. *Please don't be dead. The phone booth here smells like dog piss, and I need the rest of my quarters for smokes anyway.* I noticed two used needle syringes that ended a stream of dried blood. The stream began at the inside of their swollen elbow joints and led down toward a crevice in the sidewalk. The arms had been constricted with what I assumed were the leashes of the bony Labrador Retriever that laid upon the wet cement at their feet. The dog shivered and looked up at me with hungry dark eyes. I crouched and stepped slowly toward the dog. The dog loaded its weight onto its hind legs and snarled and growled as I approached. I sighed and exhaled slowly. *Well, my bad for trying to help them, Boy.*

I backed away and looked over toward the man and woman that huddled under the window and on the cold wet cement. The woman was short and thin. She had a blonde pixie cut. Her face was sunken and gaunt and her complexion was pale. Her right cheek filled with rain water as she rested her head on the shoulder of the man. His chin rested firmly upon his sternum and a rain jacket hood obscured all but his stubbled chin. I didn't know *who* they were, but I knew *what* they were. They were addicts. Junkies. Dopeheads. Burnouts. Maybe they were those kids like me, in those passenger planes and pickup trucks. Maybe they

went left when I went right. Maybe they zigged where I zagged. But here they were, cold and wet, on a dirty Seattle sidewalk. And here I was staring at them like animals at a zoo.

I looked through the window of the restaurant and stared at an elderly East Asian man who I knew only as “Mister Li.” He nodded at the couple and threw up his hands like Pontius Pilot had before Christ. I couldn’t hear him through the glass. I pointed to my ear, prompting him to repeat what he had said. He nodded to the two people in front of his restaurant. He shook his head and mouthed the words “damn junkies.” He shrugged his shoulders as if to say “*not my problem.*” *Next customer.* I turned away from the soaking addicts and from Mister Li. *They’re probably just knocked out from the smack. I’m sure the old man will wake them up once he closes shop for the night. Or at least some cops or someone will come by.* I slouched under the hood of my rain jacket and hid myself from the rain and the sullen eyes of the thin woman. I watched the rain flow into the drains, and I pretended that I hadn’t seen anything.

I walked to meet the other members of my band at our makeshift recording studio. It was above the coffee shop that our lead guitarist, Mark worked at during the day. The Pacific Bean Coffee Shop was only two blocks away from my apartment and so it was a short walk.

I pressed the foam earpieces of my Walkman cassette recorder firmly against my ears. I thought that perhaps the music would calm my nerves, but my cigarette had come to its butt and I still saw the shivering dog and the bloody needle syringe on each square of sidewalk. I saw the man and woman in the heads and faces of shoppers, blue-collar tradesmen, and white-collar professionals. I should have done something. But I couldn’t. There was the dog. The *dog*. Who was I anyway? I was a record store clerk and not a paramedic. After all, I’m sure that the old man was right with what he said. Right? *Damn junkies.*

I approached the coffee shop. The sign on the door read CLOSED, but I knocked on the door and nodded through the murky glass to Carlo, the closer. He put down his mop and opened the door. “Drummer Danny! What’s up, man? Thank God, we are closed. I need a damn joint, like yesterday.” He lifted a chair that he had set down between the door and its frame. He pulled a tightly-wrapped joint out from his crumpled pack of cigarettes. “Want to smoke this with me, man?”

I patted his shoulder as I stepped over the chair and into the coffee shop. “No thanks, man. Someone other than Mark has to be on time in this band.”

The Pacific Bean was a small and intimate corner shop. It was not unlike the other several small coffee shops that had opened up in Seattle in the last ten years. There was a dirty coffee bar and dozens of framed photographs of third-world coffee exporters. They were the kind of photographs you’d see in National Geographic magazines. The tables and chairs were all second-hand pieces of furniture that had been acquired from restaurants and bars that had gone out of business for one reason or another. There was a door next to the coffee bar that

was painted black with the exception of a small rectangle that had once been covered with a restroom sign. There was now a paper sign just below it. The words “Employees Only. PERIOD!” were scribbled in blue ink on a tattered scroll of receipt paper. The restroom had once been open to the people of Seattle until a third person was found dead in the restroom from an apparent drug overdose. *Damn junkies.*

Mark was upstairs in the studio tuning his guitar. He sighed and looked around the studio and then back to me. “Johnny is... wherever in the hell Johnny is these days. You know how it is, man. To Hell with it, Carlo knows most of our shit. I’ll ask if he can cover for Johnny. It wouldn’t be the *first* time anyway.” He was right, and where “Johnny was” was probably on someone’s floor, asleep next to some woman that he had met the night before surrounded by empty bottles and a spilled ashtray. That was Johnny.

Johnny used to be my best friend. He had been like me. He had been one of those young kids in those passenger planes and in those pickup trucks looking for a place to find himself. I don’t know if Johnny found himself. But he found barrooms, liquor stores, and people who might feel sorry for him. There were no words more romantic to Johnny than “this one’s on me John Boy.” I used to feel sorry for Johnny too. I used to say those words too. I used to say it before Johnny murdered our friendship. He had murdered it with the lies, the pity party, and all of the other bullshit. His choice, not mine.

The band was what real musicians would refer to as a “quintet.” Mark, Johnny, Johnny’s brother Matt, Tommy, and me. “Willie Pete” was the name of the band. I came up with the name after my old man’s stories about the old white chemical bombs from ‘Nam. We toured the country and opened up for big-label bands every week.

Then in 1988, Tommy got paralyzed in a drunken car accident.

Four years later Matt hung himself in the kitchen that he and Johnny shared in their apartment. Johnny cut him down and held him in his arms on the linoleum floor until the paramedics arrived. The Johnny that I knew died that day. He lost his smile somewhere in the liquor stores and in the dive bars and sadly, he never found it.

Johnny was always coming in late to rehearsals, late to gigs, late to anything with an agreed-upon time. We had started telling Johnny that we were meeting an hour before the actual time so that he would arrive on time. He still arrived at the shop one, two, or even three hours late. Mark referred to the beginning of rehearsal as “Johnny Time,” because it was whatever time that Johnny decided that he would come to rehearsal. “I’ll see you tomorrow for rehearsal at Johnny O’ Clock. Pacific Standard Time. Same as always.” That was the joke that Mark and I made to somehow get a chuckle or a smile out of the reality that our friend was slowly flowing down a drain like rainy sludge.

The band was a three-piece band now, and we sure as hell were not traveling the country and we sure as hell were not playing big shows anymore.

Now, in 1995, a headlining show in Spokane or Olympia was a big deal. Hell, we jumped at the opportunity to play shows in local ballrooms and barrooms, places that we would have laughed at as recently as five years ago.

I lit another cigarette and began tuning my drums and rearranging my cymbal stands. Anything to pass the time and kill the silence. I didn't think that I would still be rehearsing in a converted apartment above a coffee shop at twenty-eight years old. The other bands that we had played with in the early days had all gone on to sign record deals and play shows in countries that I couldn't even point out on a map. But those bands didn't have Johnny, at least that's what I told myself each time that I heard one of those bands on the radio or on T.V. I didn't know if that was the reason, but it helped.

Our best shows and our best days as a band were behind us. It wouldn't be long before we were playing dive bars and musty basements, playing covers and accepting cases of shit lager beer for payment. Mark sat down on an old velvet Ottoman and thumbed the chorus to a post-punk song with his amp turned down low.

Mark was now to me who Johnny used to be. He was my best friend. He was with me when my old man died of an accidental overdose from all the pills that the veteran's hospital loaded him up with. Johnny had sat there with me in that funeral home with my old man's casket. The funeral home was not crowded. The room in the funeral home had been vacant other than for a few distant relatives and some of the veterans that had been with my old man in Vietnam. Man. I hated pills, powders, and booze. I hated that shit and what it did to people.

I watched Mark shift anxiously on the Ottoman and tap his fingers on the back of his guitar. "Screw it," he said. "I'm getting Carlo. I don't care. I'm not Johnny's damn babysitter." He laid down his guitar against the nearby coiled furnace and stood up. He descended down the creaky stairs. The creaks provided a melody on top of the rhythmic thud of the floor tom that provided the only sound amongst the loud silence in the dirty apartment. I struggled to find the tune of the large floor tom. The drum was like Johnny. It struggled to find its sound. It struggled to find its identity amongst the other drums. It was either way too high or way too low, and like Johnny, it was always on the floor.

Mark and I had agreed to take a few weeks to ourselves and get away from the music and away from the bullshit, Johnny's bullshit, that is. Mark and I had thought that maybe time away from the music would help Johnny find himself, find his smile, and find the old Johnny, our Johnny. *Oh, Johnny. What the hell happened to you pal? Where did my best friend go? Where is he?*

Sirens wailed in the distance. There were three distinct sets of horns that wailed louder and louder. I stood up from my drum seat and looked through the set of broken blinds. I looked through the window and down onto the street below. Police cars, fire engines, and ambulances sped past the window and down the street. I waited a few moments for the wail of the sirens to wane as the vehicles drove further away down the street and on to whatever shithole they were headed

to.

The sirens didn't wane though. They rang in place like an unanswered telephone or like a knock from an expecting landlord or bill collector. I looked out the window again and saw the faint red pulsing flash of the siren lights around the corner. The vehicles had stopped. *Shit! Did Mister Li set that damn kitchen on fire again?* In all the years that Mister Li had been making dumplings, he had not mastered the unappreciated art of not turning your kitchen into a pyrotechnic show. I saw no smoke billow into the sky. I heard no sound of hydrant water cascade against the brick exterior of a burning building. It wasn't a fire.

"Matt?! Carlos?! What the hell is going on down there?" I yelled down the stairs, but there was no response. We all had somewhat impaired hearing from all the years of roaring amplifiers, crashing cymbals, and from the once screaming crowds of people.

I sighed. "Jesus Christ. I swear you two need hearing aids. Hey! Assholes!" I shouted down the stairs. Again. No response.

I walked down the stairs and leaned into the right-side railing. The coffee shop was empty. The chair that had kept the door open was now inside the shop. I opened the door and the sirens were now almost deafening. I walked back toward my apartment building that had now become the feature attraction of Seattle.

A crowd of people circled the perimeter of the emergency vehicles that parked in the street. People stood on their toes with crossed arms and phony frowns of concern. They leaned from left to right, jockeying for position for the best view. Man, people are so full of shit. They don't give a damn about what happened or who it happened to. They just want something to gossip about tomorrow in the breakroom at the office with "Jen in Accounting."

I stepped through the crowd of people. I shifted through the crowd of denim and flannel shoulders and past the dirty looks and the mumbled scoffs. *Hey asshole. I live here.* I reached the inside perimeter of the crowd. It had been secured with yellow caution tape and a series of orange traffic cones. Seattle's finest stood with their arms extended as they motioned to the crowd of mostly assholes to step back.

I bumped the shoulder of someone on my right. "Hey asshole. Learn to walk." I turned to my right. I looked into Mark's red eyes that flooded with tears. "Mark. What happened man?"

"Johnny," Mark cried. "It's fucking Johnny. He's dead," he sniffled.

I shook my head. "No. No. No. No way! What happened?" I shouted. *How could Johnny have died?* He had started seeing a shrink during his time away from the band and he had told me that he had cut back on his drinking when I had talked to him on the phone two weeks ago. I didn't understand for the life of me how Johnny could have died at twenty-seven.

Mark closed his eyes and winced as he took a deep breath. "I still can't really believe it. They found a used heroin needle next to him and a dog leash

around his arm. He OD'ed man. He overdosed. He's dead! Heroin. It was *heroin*. Who even knew Johnny was doing that shit?"

My breath began to shake and my eyes grew even wider. I stared back into Mark's glossy eyes. I knew that Johnny used to hang around some shady characters, but he had told me that he had told them all to get lost when they started using needles and smack. I opened my mouth to speak but no words came out.

Mark grabbed my shoulder as if to comfort me or maybe to comfort himself. "The worst part is," Mark paused, "The old man from the dumpling place watched him all day. He said that dozens of people walked past him and that girl for hours. He did nothing! *They* did nothing! How much of a piece of shit does someone have to be to let someone die before their eyes and do *nothing*? What is wrong with people? Johnny had problems. Sure man. We know that. He had issues. But he was a *person*! A human being! He was our friend! He wasn't just some, some *damn junkie*!"