

Hungry for Desire

This is the first of two-part, biographical series by Karleigh Frisbie



Karleigh Frisbie has been living in Portland off and on for six years. She recently finished her first collection of short stories, *Ventral Tegmental*, based on the experiences she had living outside of society as a heroin addict. Currently, she is working on her bachelor's degree in writing and is living with family in California.

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I moved in with Jack after our first kiss. That happened after I made him take a shower at my Pop's apartment across town. I bought him a new toothbrush because I had often caught him cleaning shoe polish out of fingernails with his old one. He borrowed a pair of Pop's boxer briefs and a T-shirt with the word "Vaurnet" on it. It was then I decided he was ready to be my boyfriend. Moving from my Honda Civic into the shoe store was ecstatically welcomed. I did not miss having rocks thrown at my windshield as I tried to sleep, snoopy pedestrians peering in at me balled up in insomnia in the back seat. "It's a girl!" they'd squeal. No, I did not miss this. Nor did I miss the middle-night urges to urinate which resulted in squatting curbside, hoping some night-owl or bar-fly wouldn't catch me.

Jack and I rarely left the shoe store that summer. At night we'd lock the front doors and pull our bedding out of the storage closet, arranging the thick mound of blankets in the far corner of the store. I'd fall asleep with the oscillating fan breezing over my face every 10 seconds, the smell of new leather sedating me.

The shoe store specialized in Scandinavian clogs and ergonomically-correct sandals. Most of the clientele were much different than me and Jack. Nurses and line cooks, yoga instructors and retired people. It also attracted the town misfits, who would come in before nightfall with change they collected from recycling bottles to buy shoe glue or anything with a propellant — rain-proofer and Meltonian Super-Shine.

Jack's older brother Hanson owned the store and would mosey in every morning to check invoices and re-merchandise. Usually he would come in yelling, since we were still asleep at the back of the sales floor.

"Goddamn it, Jack! It's quarter past 10 and you don't even have the sign out!"

"Asshole," I'd whisper to Jack, before he jumped up and slid into his jeans.

Jack did not get paid for watching the store all day. Instead, he got to live there. It was an agreement Hanson made with him after saving his life.

"You'd be huddled in a doorway without me," he would constantly remind him. "Not to mention, dead."

Jack would sit out front of the store with his guitar and a drippy Styrofoam cup of coffee. Sometimes weekend strollers up from Los Angeles to ride the wine train and eat at epicurean hot-spots would stop and listen politely, leaving him a dollar. But most of the town folk knew he was Hanson's "crazy" brother. The "fallen star" they'd call him. See, Jack wasn't always homeless and unemployed, at the mercy of his big brother. In fact, Hanson used to be quite jealous of little Jackie. Back in the late 1980s, when I was an awkward middle-schooler with a terrible perm, I used to stay up late at night and watch Jack's band, Steel Venom, shake their big hair and blow lipsticked kisses to the camera on Headbanger's Ball. Their one hit, "Hungry for Desire," had a video that featured both a junk yard and a boa constrictor. Well, according to Jack, by 1991 metal had taken a nosedive and Geffen Enterprises didn't renew Steel Venom's

contract. The other three members took ordinary jobs, like driving cabs and waiting tables. Jack refused to stop living like a rock star and blew the last of his money on powdered drugs and leather pants. Supposedly the Sunset Strip had become a ghost town, an embarrassment even. Jack trekked up north to Frisco where he said it was "easier to be homeless," and squatted above a closed service station on Guerrero Street, giving hand jobs in alleyways for dope money. A few years later Hanson got a call that Jack was in ICU at St. Francis Memorial Hospital. He had an abscess on his arm that had gone septic, and a critical case of Hepatitis B.

"Hey Chicken-Boy, let's sell some shoes! Let's get pumped!"

"Buy me some coffee and maybe I'll have the motivation," Jack said.

"Oh no, no, no. The motivation is, dear Jackie Chicken-Boy, whether or not you will have a place to lay your pretty head at night. And I see Brandi's staying here now, too. I might have to collect some rent from her."

"Oh whatever, Hanson! I sold three pairs of Danskos yesterday. You should be fucking paying me," I said. I was hunched over a foot-mirror, applying a thick layer of eyeliner, "and might I remind you Hanson, that without me and my trusty old Honda, you would've never had those orders delivered to Birkenstock on time."

"Damn. The fax is still broken."

I smirked at Hanson.

"I'm going to get coffee, and then I might go down to the pawn shop to see if I can find a deal on a fax machine. Jackie, two Sweet-n-Lows?"

"Three." Jack was tuning his guitar, a pick in his mouth. "And lots of milk."

Hanson was gone all day. He always was. I think he hated the shoe store. He always made excuses to leave. Customers would trickle in all day as Jack would take requests by the front door, "Somethin' Else," and "Good Golly, Miss Molly." I'd be trying on the old dead stock shoes I found in the crawl space above the backroom, granny loafers and Scholl's sandals. I considered them my payment.

"Babe!" Jack called to me. I was shaving my legs in the rusty cold-water sink. He wanted me to come play with him. He wanted to teach me some minor-seventh chords and a Rolling Stones song, a Cheap Trick song. Jack convinced Hanson to buy me a light, nonthreatening nylon-string acoustic since I had helped him and his family move from Lakeport to Petaluma. I had spent that afternoon wrapping dishes in sun baked pages of the Lake County Record Bee, and jimmying headboards and end tables into the U-Haul. Hanson only viewed me and Jack as cheap labor.

I rinsed my razor and went outside, dragging a stool and my guitar in one hand. Jack had patience. He positioned my fingers on the fret board, contorting them into impossible assignments. He'd take apart songs and wouldn't put them back together again until I had every note down. He'd count, keep the beat on his thigh. He'd smile when I'd get frustrated, and call me a rocker when I'd get confident.

"Wanna lock up and get din-din?" He asked

me. "We made ten dollars."

We got dinner from 7-Eleven every night. It was basically our kitchen. We closed an hour early; the sun hadn't even considered setting yet. We walked dreamily; a few folks passed us and smiled and said, "Hi." Some even talked to us for a bit. Small town life was a mumbling ongoing conversation. It was a long, extended family reunion, with family you didn't even know, family you had never met but you knew all about. They told you everything: their fears, their secrets, their plans. If they didn't tell you, someone else already had. You knew their habits, the ordinary ones, the embarrassing ones, even the disgusting unmentionable ones. You've heard the rumors and you've witnessed the

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We cut through the park, where a group of boys did skateboarding tricks off the gazebo, whirring and clacking. An old man, with slow, deliberate movements, wet his gossamer silvery-white hair in the fountain. "Hot one," Jack said as we passed. The man nodded, and then fumbled with a damp cigarette from his shirt pocket. Jack lit it for him.

We sat on the curb in front of 7-Eleven, where the smell of dryer sheets from the laundromat next door made my Hot Pocket taste better than it really was.

Jack held the faucet on for me as I sudsed my eyelids, purple-grey foam streaking my forearms.

"You have clinic tomorrow, babe," He said as he handed me a towel.

He was the organizer out of our coupling. He'd write lists on yellow post-it notes, his handwriting as bulbous and as blimpish as a third grader's. *Clinic. Shower. B string. Wild Horses-easy. Madeline-Birks-778-0264.*

"You gonna have a talk with them tomorrow?"

"Jack, I'll be done when I'm done. Probably three more months."

"They want you on that shit forever. You gotta just tell them 'I'm ready.'"

I was making a face. The face that happens when I chew on the inside of my mouth when I'm irritated.

"You're scared. They want you to be scared. They want to imprison you, Brandi."

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