

Hungry for Desire

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I drove into the city on Monday mornings to get my Methadone. I used to go every day, but a four-month record of clean urine earned me the privilege of “take homes.”

I would wait in line among the scabby and the jaundiced, the dismembered and the disgraced. Outside they would try to bum cigarettes from me or sell me Klonopin. Their putty complexions and faded eyes begging me for anything, a nickel, a bus pass, a pager number.

The nurses would light up when they’d see me. They’d say “girl, your hair looks good.” They would scribble phone numbers of support groups and women’s shelters on

This is the second of two-part, autobiographical series by Karleigh Frisbie



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memo pads with sunflowers or puppies on them, tattoos in the crotches of their hands, nails acrylic and jewel-toned.

My dose was measured in small paper cups, topped off with fruit punch. The rest of my medication was dispensed into plastic bottles with yellow labels that stated: Poison. May be fatal to adult or child. The bitter sip was my favorite part of the day. It meant I was secure until the next morning. All the stray static energy that haloed me was contained. The volatile, nervy anxiety that I suffered (and unsure of whether it was just an

unfortunate characteristic of me, or a side-effect of long-term opiate dependency) would evaporate. I could take a deep breath. I would usually nod off approximately two hours after drinking my dose. A third dimension, the nod was, completely incognizant of my surroundings yet absolutely tuned in to the purr of narcotic-induced pleasure. One time I slumped into this state of sedation behind my steering wheel as I was trapped in gridlock on the Golden Gate Bridge. Fortunately for the screaming ambulance that startled me conscious, I didn’t cause another northbound, mid-morning accident.

Indeed, there had been the solitary event in which I didn’t make it to the rundown treatment center on the corner of Polk and Geary Streets by 10 o’clock. Jack swore the alarm went off, and that I got up and put my shirt on, only to crawl back in bed with him. When I woke I had only 20 minutes to spare, and resigned to the fact that, unless I could drive somewhere over 150 miles per hour, I wasn’t going to make it. I broke down into a terrific fit of cursing and crying. After several hours of tying up the lines at the shoe store, I finally got a hold of an old friend, Simmie, who agreed to meet me in front of the Four-Corners Feed Store out on Todd Road.

“I just need a crumb,” I told him, sitting in my parked car watching bulky men in tan Carharts and kiltie boots haul sacks of grain feed into pickup beds.

“I thought you was gittin’ yourself straight, missy.”

“Till morning, just to get me through, Simmie.”

He chuckled deeply. “It’s the devil. It sure is.”

I told him I could give him \$10. He clucked.

“\$10 ain’t worth nothin’ to me,” he said. “This here’s at least \$20, Brandi. Don’t be playin’ like that with me.” He rubbed my leg.

“Knock it off, Simmie. You’re gonna make me spill this all over the place.”

“I was just thinkin’... since you’re so pretty...”

“Dude, I’m not gonna fuck you. I can bring you 10 more bucks tomorrow.”

We negotiated for a bit and I agreed to buy him a twelve-pack of Natural Ice from Marty’s Mart up the road, where he had been 86’d on account of his liver, which I could tell was in its final stages by his yellow eyes and swollen ankles.

“Get me a flask of that cheap vodka while you’re at it,” he called from my car.

I never missed a single Monday after that.

I laid in bed with Jack one night. We were talking about the future.

“Babe?” I asked.

“What’s that, Love?”

“You ever wanna be normal?”

Pause.

“Like a normal person?”

Pause.

“Maybe not all the way normal, but just sort of?”

“I don’t know how to do it, Brand. I don’t know how to do it without changing who I am.”

“Me neither.” I faked a laugh. “I wonder if you can put hooker and thief on your job application?”

“Don’t say shit like that, Brandi.” He looked at me seriously.

“I was kidding.”

“It’s not cute. Don’t talk about that shit. We’ll get through this.” He put my head on his chest. “Now get some sleep. We gotta go take showers tomorrow.”

We went to Pop’s to take showers, which was only possible when Hanson was holding down the fort. He sauntered in early that morning, all gratuitous laughter and smug affectation, with two pudgy representatives from some innovative walking-shoe company.

“Get lost, Chicken-Boy. I don’t need you to ruin this deal I’m working out with these guys.”

My Pop leaped in his skin for a moment when we walked in. “You should knock first, Pumpkin.” He was hunched over a Danish cookie tin filled with shake, going at it with a pair of tweezers. His buddy Ron, a nervous sort, sat across the card table from him, drumming on his abdomen. I was equipped with an arsenal of body lotions and three-minute hair conditioner. Jack had our towels slung over his arm.

“You know the trick? You gotta let the hot water run awhile before you can turn on the cold,” Pop said, putting a meager-looking bud off to the side. “So how’s shoe-biz, Jack?”

“Hanson thinks he can make a fortune off these ridiculous shoes with springs on the bottom,” Jack said.

“Hmmm. Well, you’re brother’s a smart guy. A savvy businessman.”

“His brother’s a total douchebag,” I said. I watched as my dad packed his pipe. Ron was drumming more aggressively now, doing fills on his thighs and left shoulder.

“Pop, I need money.”

“That makes two of us,” he coughed.

“Three.” Ron laughed, exposing negligent dental hygiene.

Pop’s eyes were watering and he gasped for air. Then he cried “Who-o-eee!” He tried to offer Jack and I some, to which we put our hands up and shook our heads. “That’s right. You kids only like shit that’s

made in a lab.”

Pop referred to his marijuana as “his medicine” and carried a card around in his wallet to prove it. He suffered a back injury after falling from an elm tree—he was pruning, and hadn’t worked a day since. “If it weren’t for Gray Davis I’d be all hopped up on Vicodin,” he’d always say. Sometimes I wished he was hopped up on Vikes, just so he could kick some down to me.

Jack and I ate a sleeve of saltines and drank cranberry juice cocktail while Pop told Ron for the millionth time the story about how he had almost got eaten by a shark when he was scuba diving off Key Biscayne in 1973. This was before he married my mother, he’d say, before her worrying ways made him hang up his wetsuit for good. Before the unexpected and premature birth of me required him to take a straight job in the city working for KGO television, where he wore corduroy suit jackets and Ben Franklin glasses. Before his back-talk and his backlog backfired and he was next in line at the unemployment office.

“I just thought of something,” Pop said. I

“My God, you’re so grown up. You look just like Cathy!” Then she exhibited me to the mid-afternoon patrons, saying “Do you know who this is? This is Jimmy Strange’s daughter.” Her bar, Pete’s Trophy Room, was a 50-year-old watering hole that had the tang of water-damaged carpeting and stagnated cigarette smoke.

thought he was going to say he had to go down to Seven-Eleven and check his lottery ticket. “Remember Donna? Crazy Donna?” He made a pantomime that indicated she had large breasts. “She was before your mother...anyway, she runs a bar across town. A nice little joint, I forget the name of it. I ran into her at Grocery Outlet last week and she told me she wanted to start having musicians perform there. Now I’m not sure how much she’d pay you, but it’s worth lookin’ into. Cuz Jesus, Jack, You’re a real ace with the hammer, and you’re getting pretty good too, Pumpkin.”

“I fucked Donna once,” Ron said.

Donna was a hen of a woman, little and round with a ruffle of eggplant colored hair. She wore piles of noisy silver jewelry and had a tattoo of a lotus on her copper speckled arm. When I introduced myself to her she gave me a cushiony gin-scented embrace and cried, “My God, you’re so grown up. You look just like Cathy!” Then she exhibited me to the mid-afternoon patrons, saying “Do you know who this is? This is Jimmy Strange’s daughter.”

Her bar, Pete’s Trophy Room, was a 50-year-old watering hole that had the tang of water-damaged carpeting and stagnated cigarette smoke. Jack and I took seats at the counter and waited for her to finish pouring drinks.

“So,” she said to Jack, “I was a fan. 1989 at the Great American Music Hall, with L.A. Guns.”

“You were there?” Jack perked up.

“Hey kid, I never missed a one. I saw you even during your Sound of Music days.”

“What a shit hole that place was!”

“Tell me about it.”

She looked over at me. “How’s your Pop doin’?”

“Good. He still thinks he’s gonna win the lottery someday.”

“That Jimmy.” She shook her head pitifully.

“Your Pop tells me you guys are in a bit of a bind. Do you know how to pour drinks, Brandi?”

“I could learn.”

She suddenly brought her voice down a register, explaining that she wanted to get a younger crowd in there, make it more fun. She said Ricky was leaving for Portland, where it was cheaper to live, and that she wanted to fire the ditz she had working at night.

“I thought we were gonna play rock-n-roll,” Jack said.

“I want that to happen. If I can start bringing in more business I really want to look into doing live music.”

“I don’t know,” Jack said. “I’m not really good with normal jobs.”

“Babe, you don’t know that! You’ve never had a normal job. I think you’d be fuckin’ boss,” I said.

“I don’t know, man.”

“Babe, remember that time I asked you if you had ever smoked crack and you said you liked to try everything once?”

“Yeah, that has nothing to...”

“Yes it does. Try this once. If you don’t like it you can quit.”

People used to call Jack the “fallen star.” He was the “shoe-guy’s brother.” He was “Chicken-Boy.” Now Jack was the best booze-slinger this side of the bridge. He started ratting his hair again, borrowing my clothes, my makeup. To this sleepy, milk-and-eggs burg, Jack brought some of the trash and the glitter of the Sunset Strip’s glory days.

We moved into a small apartment that Donna’s friend managed. This was harder than I had anticipated. I knew I’d miss the late night walks to 7-Eleven for sweaty, cylindrically-shaped food from the roller grill. I’d miss the sidewalk guitar lessons, and watching weekenders with their boutique shopping bags and their expensive sunglasses. I’d miss the muffled jukebox hits oozing through the wall from the bar next door as I slept under a canopy of shoe racks and display tables. Fuck, I’d even miss Hanson and his condescending sass, his cheapskate economics, his sticks and stones despotism. But I also knew that new memories would be made, and maybe I would like these ones better.

Our first night at the new apartment we sat on our pile of blankets in the middle of the living room. Jack took a crumpled post-it from his pocket.

“We gotta go to your Pop’s tomorrow for showers.”

“Babe,” I laughed, “we don’t have to do that anymore.”

“I know. I just want to.”