

Rain pounded the asphalt like a drunken step-father unleashing self-hatred against his unwanted child. I wrapped my jacket tight against my body as I walked down the pockmarked street. Savage, broken animals lined against the crumbling brick vibrated with a disquieting energy - shivering from cold, from hunger, from the need that drove them. Most with eyes down and closed. The few conscious cast their eyes towards me briefly, as I hunted the shadows for the face that brought me here, before flicking away. Incoherent voices called out to me, guttural and alien, for money, for drugs.

I pulled my jacket tight against the weather, warding off a rain that pounded down with the fury of a drunken step-father unleashing self-hatred on an unwanted child. A stretch of makeshift shelters pointed the way forward, cardboard and loading pallets backed against the crumbling brick and boarded-up windows of a long-abandoned building.

I skirted mud-filled potholes for what was left of the asphalt street, reached into shadows, prodding limbs, grabbing hair to turn faces to the light, gagging against rank and reeking air, searching for the face that had brought me to the crossroads of desperation and despair.

Rag-clad bodies huddled beneath plastic and broken eaves, shivering from cold, from hunger, from the need that drove them.

A conscious few flicked their gaze toward me as I neared.

Incoherent voices, guttural and alien, called out for money, for drugs.

“Heather, what happened to you kid?” I asked myself. “What were you trying to escape from that was so horrible that this seemed like the better option?”

I thought of the kid mixed in among these animals.

Sixteen-years-old, a good girl from a good family on the right side of the tracks.

[That's cliché, don't use it, I'm just putting it there for reference]

Heather.

What kind of horror made *this* hell scape seem like a better option?

What could have happened to a kid like that that she'd run here, what nightmare was she trying to escape? Unanswered questions were my torment.

I nodded **my head** at a **pair of officers parked off the alleyway**. A bedraggled, rail-thin creature danced **at the head of their car**, barefoot bandaged toes kicking up waves in a filthy puddle. His voice warbled a tuneless call, a miserable simulation of music. The **cruiser's headlights** glowed in the mist, casting a spotlight on the pop star. His shadow cut long unnatural shapes across the splintered ground.

The two officers laughed, clapping their hands inside the warm, dry environment. The driver's hand **emerged** with a cigarette **clasped between his fingers**. He waved it **in front of his face, eyes aglow** with **a** disgusting pleasure, and tossed it out the window. **The monkey getting his peanut reward.** **I felt sickened by both displays.**

I turned the corner.

Light bled from an alleyway into the street, casting an eerie glow against the rain.

A bedraggled, rail-thin creature danced in the spotlight, barefoot bandaged toes kicking up waves in a filthy puddle, his shadow cutting long unnatural shapes across the pitted ground. I moved forward, wanting to see those for whom he performed.

Two officers in their warm dry car laughed, mocking the performer with applause.

The creature's dance intensified and he warbled a tuneless call, a miserable simulation of song.

The displays—both of them—sickened me.

The driver lifted a cigarette, waved it for attention and, eyes bright with sadistic pleasure, flicked the smoke out into the street, peanut reward for the organ monkey.

The **bum** tried to catch the tumbling stick, **but** tripped over his **own** feet and **crashed** face **first onto** the street. **His** bony fingers clawed **at the ground,** broken glass and small bits of sharp gravel cutting, straining for **the cigarette.** **He waved it, wet and mangled, back at the officer.**

I stepped to the wretch, taking out my WWII-era Zippo. A parting gift from my deceased **father.** The battered lid flicked open with its distinctive click. **It lit easily with a roll of my thumb** despite the rain. I held it before his face.

The creature leapt to catch his prize.

Long limbs tangled and he tripped, stumbling face forward into asphalt. He crawled forward, bony fingers clawing over broken glass and sharp gravel.

He grasped the wet mangled cigarette. Hand cut and bleeding he waved it in triumph, and he searched bottomless pockets for a lighter that didn't exist.

I reached into my jacket for a WWII-era Zippo, a parting gift from my deceased father. The battered lid flicked open with a distinctive click.

I walked toward the creature.

A single thumb roll lit the flame, despite the rain, and I held the fire forward.

Dilated pupils stared **deeply** into the flame, **its light dancing** in the black pits. The smell of **cat urine** wafted off his breath. He put the bent cigarette in his mouth as crusty yellow scum crumbled off the corners of his wormy lips.

He **tried to steady his balance by grabbing** onto me but I **dodged** his grasp. “Hold still,” I **told him** **as** I placed the fire over the end of his cigarette. He inhaled and **breathed out a belch** of smoke.

Dilated pupils stared into the light.

Orange and yellow reflected off black pits.

He put the bent cigarette in his mouth. Crusty yellow scum crumbled off the corners of his wormy lips. He stood and tried to steady his balance by grabbing onto me.

I shoved his hand away and moved the flame closer.

He inhaled and belched out smoke.

The smell of cat urine wafted off his breath.

He turned **on his heels** and bolted down the street, howling at the rain and waving the lit cigarette over his head like an Olympic torch. Startled junkies came out of their haze **long enough to** screech back **before** **nodding back under the barbiturate spell.**

The officers **in the car** **gave me** cold, hard stares. **Angry with me** for ruining their evening show. The driver rolled up his window and raised his middle finger in full salute. The car rumbled to a start and peeled out of the alleyway, **nearly knocking me down**. The tires kicked a splattering of muddy filth onto my trousers and shoes. Those were the good guys.

He turned and bolted down the street, howling in the rain, waving the lit cigarette over his head like an Olympic torch. Startled junkies came out of their haze, screeching in reply, and drifted back under the barbiturate spell.

The officers stared at me cold and hard.

I'd ruined their evening show.

The driver rolled up his window and raised his middle finger in full salute. The car rumbled and peeled forward cutting perilously close.

Muddy filth splattered my trousers and shoes.

And those were the good guys.

As far as John Q. Public is **concerned** this was just **another part of town, run down and dangerous, but the law applied here as anywhere.** They were wrong. **This area had been surrendered to the dredge of society. Written off. An island of anarchy unto itself. The police rolled through for appearances. They did not engage.**

As long as the problem contained itself to these few blocks, it did not exist.

A cry for outrage only when **the** territorial lines were crossed. **Crime that spilled across the border glued eyes to TV screens and was difficult to overlook. Or that greatest of human**

tragedy—when a pretty, white, blond girl disappeared into the murk and was not heard from again.

I trudged toward another row of cardboard and scrap, searching again, torn between the hope of finding the kid and wishing she'd turn up somewhere else.

She didn't belong in this manmade hell.

Probably had no idea what she'd be walking into or what coming here meant.

How could she?

To those who paused long enough to think about it, these streets, rundown and dangerous, were a bad part of town to which—they assumed—the rule of law applied the same as it did everywhere else.

They were wrong, so wrong.

This was an island of anarchy, surrendered and written off.

Here, society's dredges were a law unto themselves.

The police rolled through for appearances but they didn't engage. And, as long as the problems remained contained within the borders, those problems didn't exist.

Public outrage rose only when territorial lines were crossed, when crime spilled over the border and T.V. screens held the city captive making it impossible to look away, when—greatest of human tragedy—a young blue-eyed blonde disappeared into the murk and wasn't heard from again. When that happened, when the cops couldn't or wouldn't do anything, men like me were brought in to pick up the slack.

I hated being here. I'd spent too much time on these streets. Running down bond jumpers, tracking dealers, and returning rich kids who'd lost their way back to their families. When the cops can't, or won't, do anything, men such as myself are brought in to pick up the slack. It's my job. I do it. But that doesn't mean I liked being here more than anyone else. I'm still human, though it doesn't always feel that way.

I hated being here.

I'd spent too much time on these streets, running down bond jumpers, tracking dealers, returning rich sons and daughters who'd lost their way back to their families.

It's my job.

I do it.

But that doesn't mean I enjoy hell on earth more than any of the rest of them.

I'm still human, though it doesn't always feel that way.