

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.

“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 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.

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.

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.

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.

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 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.