

The Ones Who Lived
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It was the year the lights went on at Wrigley Field. The year the Sears Tower opened. The year Gerald Ford took office after Nixon resigned. The Godfather was the best picture and “Kung Fu Fighting” and “The Way We Were” were top songs, although that’s not what was playing in this apartment on Ridge Avenue on August 19th, 1974. There was more “Midnight Rider,” and “Cat’s Cradle.” If the TV was on it played All in the Family, Saturday Night Live and Wolfman Jack, even General Hospital.

The sun blared on this 90° day, but inside it was overcast and dreary as always. Junkies like it that way. And there were junkies in this apartment. Not the average garden variety heroin addicts of the day with dirty teaspoons (although they were there), or eyedroppers with rusted needles attached. These were FDA approved, pharmaceutical junkies, complete with sterile packaged needles in bulk so everyone could have their own if desired, however it rarely was. Needles were conserved, shared and re-used, reducing the necessity to leave the cave. Venturing outside, amongst the living, wasn’t enticing – in fact was abhorred – transforming those beyond the nicotine stained walls into the diseased.

The narcotic itself though, was sterile, in glass vials, and shrink wrapped to preserve its purity. It was what Vietnam Vets were prescribed; it was a savior and a lover, mother and blanket. It was synthetic morphine, prescription written freely and then filled easily, and the name brand was Talwin. There were others that flowed through the veins of these people; amphetamines - diet pills that are Class A narcotics now, but were then

prescribed to anyone who said they even felt fat. But Talwin was the king. Talwin woke up with them after the three, four or seven days of frenzied amphetamine wakefulness, and curled round their shriveled frames into fractured dreamland. Not life. None of these people lived. They existed in a haze that swirled, permeated their brains and seeped out of their pores.

All except one, Rob. It was his apartment; the 8'x10' tie-dyed peace sign that draped across the windows belonged to him. The Panasonic stereo system (top of the line then) with speakers that had belonged to Iron Butterfly (gotten from their Electric Theater performance); the Motorola console color TV; the gray speckled Formica and chrome kitchen set surrounded by puke green appliances and counter tops. The green and yellow polka dot curtains on the window that overlooked, on the inside, moldy and crusted dishes, empty pizza boxes and stub filled Coke and Old Style cans; and a red brick wall on the outside. All this was his.

His thick, shiny long brown hair, bright brown eyes and muscular 6' torso was in stark contrast to the ashen, oily, stringy haired, emaciated young men that flopped regularly in his abode; one being his blood brother Max. The others were boyhood friends from the neighborhood, schoolyard chums he'd grown up with, which made them all his "brothers." If it wasn't for Rob, they'd sleep in alleys or parks and never shower, eat real food or have clean clothes. It was up to him, a responsibility he easily accepted; reminiscent of when he and Max were young and had cared for their aunt who had MS. Anyway, if he didn't take care of them who would?

Rob didn't smoke cigarettes, rarely smoked weed, drank only an occasional rum and Coke, and never, not even once, stuck a needle anywhere in his body. He was the

only one with a job – bouncer for the newly founded Jam Productions; so along with the necessities he also provided top name entertainment Live at the Aragon Ballroom. Shows such as Jimi Hendrix, Mott the Hoople or Grateful Dead, free of charge to his brothers, and sisters, and there was great debate over which were actually the true necessities.

August 19, 1974 was no different for those inside. Rob's girlfriend, Sarah; a sleek, long haired brunet with vibrant, sparkling blue eyes, when they weren't glazed, was passed out on the brown leather sectional in her typical flowing, sunflower sundress. Sarah loved the downer effect of Talwin, but she wasn't as particular as the others; she'd do any thing, any time. This day it was Quaaludes. Lots of them. Sarah did everything in excess. Everyone did. On the floor around the wooden wire spool coffee table that held a five-hit wine bong, more of those stub-filled cans, as well as some newly popped ones, overflowing ashtrays, a couple pounds of weed and scales; sat Ray, all of twenty-four years and 90 lbs, with Stilts, slightly larger but no less grungy, and Fats. Fats, who displayed quite an array of tracks on his own arms, claimed alcohol as his drug of choice, apparent by the flab of tomato redness that was his face and the 200lb roll of his belly. He was the only blond, but this is not readily noticeable. His girlfriend Charlene and Stilts' girlfriend Glenda were in the kitchen, smoking and chattering incessantly at each other across the table that their elbows stuck to and schlopped off of when they leaned back. They'd been there for three days now, but the numbness of Talwin whispered to them to ease the crash of the amphetamines they'd been cooking and firing into their veins.

And in the bathroom was Max, Rob's brother, the catalyst of this road show and by far the worse for the wear. Max had violated repeatedly every vein of his body so severely, even the thick, pulsing one in his penis, that the only way he could get the drug

in was by shooting it in a muscle. And this had been done so frequently that the skin of his biceps, buttocks and thighs were so roughly calloused that the action was more of a stabbing. He would hold the hypodermic like a dagger and slam it in. Muscling was not the preferred method because the rushing immediacy of the drug to the brain didn't occur, but one must do what is needed to get it there somehow.

This was a typical Monday or Thursday or Saturday. Nothing was new under the blazing August sun except Rob. Today something was different. Something inside that he couldn't quite put a finger on, but a kind of nagging acceptance. He'd done his usual bout at the gym after wrangling all night with drunk, high, rowdy and sexually explicit teenagers at the Aragon Ballroom, and normally his head would be lifted high into the sun as he walked down Ridge toward home. This day his head hung and his eyes watched his feet drag along the sidewalk, without their normal bounce. He unlocked the half glass, half wood door of the house turned apartments and he heard the music, smelled the reefer, felt the crushing desolation as soon as he pushed the door open.

Normally he would bound right through it, but today the weight was oppressing. He pulled himself up the stairs lined with frayed, dusty red Oriental carpeting, sliding his hand along the mahogany railing, not wondering what he would find, he knew, wondering only, as usual, why. Why did they waste every moment in nothingness? He'd asked this question of each of them, at different times and it was always the same answer, "Why not? What else is there to do?" And so when he pushed open the door to the 2nd floor apartment this day he wasn't shocked at the sight of Ray weighing and bagging weed, nor of Stilts slouched against the couch staring trancelike at All My Children while

Fats slurped the bong, and he definitely wasn't surprised at the love of his life passed out, dress hiked high.

He turned down the long hallway that separated the front from the back, unlocked his bedroom door and stepped in to grab clothes for after his shower. He sighed at the king sized bed with its jumbled purple crushed velvet bedspread and the huge yellow happy face painted on the purple walls behind it. It'd be nice to just curl up with his girl and talk about their night, their futures, maybe try to make some babies, but he'd suggested that plenty and been rejected just as much. Sarah was a partier and he loved her, so he lived with it. That day though his sigh was loud and clear and heard by others. Others who looked at each other questioningly but quickly dismissed it in light of other, more pressing issues, such as the next hit.

“Owwww, what the fuck you asshole,” shrieked Max from behind the bathroom door.

Ray met Rob in the hallway; *side by side in crisis, same as the schoolyard days*, he thought, until they pushed open the bathroom door and burst into gut wrenching laughter. Even Rob tittered a bit in his melancholy mood. What they saw in reality was more sad than funny, but how many times do you see someone with the tip of a hypodermic broken off in their ass cheek?

“I didn't even get the fucking hit in, man. It spilt all over the floor. Ray, man you got more?”

Ray was laughing so hard he slumped against the door frame holding his sides. Rob shook his head.

“What the fuck you need more for? You got no veins to hit. And what are you even doing here? You’re supposed to be at work, ya know, work release? Plus, the gun locker is open. Why?”

“Aww, don’t start your shit now, man. We did a deal for your ole’ lady’s Quaaludes, and quit your fuckin’ laughin’ Ray. Help me get this thing outta my ass.” So Ray went off to find tweezers while Rob scrubbed Max’s ass cheek with a packaged alcohol swatch. Ray returned with the tweezers that he sterilized by heating them under a lighter flame, and then he began to dig and twist in Max’s cardboard buttocks. Charlene and Glenda had vacated their post at the kitchen table and stood in the doorway owwwing, and eeeeing, and uggging until Rob told them to shut up and go away, slamming the door in their faces. He turned back to apply more alcohol to what was becoming a rather large hole in Max’s ass from Ray digging around with the tweezers.

“Man why don’t you go to the hospital before your whole ass gets infected?”

“No, man I got it, see,” and Ray held up the bloody tweezers but no one saw the hypodermic tip. Max said he could feel that it was gone and Ray laughed, “yeah it’s either out or shoved all the way in, whichever, you’ll know in a couple of days.”

He returned to the task at hand of bagging more weed. Rob straightened and turned away saying, “hurry up man. I wanna take a shower. And take some B12 and some penicillin, just in case.” It was another thing he did for them, kept the medicine chest stocked, had to. You never knew what was going to happen around there. It certainly didn’t look like Max would last much longer, the way he was going, and Rob was struck with that calm acceptance again. Nothing seemed to matter anymore because he realized that nothing was going to change.

So later, after his shower, after Max had found another hit somewhere and “Can’t Get No Satisfaction” was blasting through the air, when they were all sitting around the pool table, Sarah still passed out on the sofa, and Max produced a Colt .45 from that deal for her Quaaludes, and suggested they play Russian Roulette, Rob just nodded. It wasn’t the first time and they always used blanks, so what the hell. They pushed aside the bean bag chairs and oversized pillows. He took notice of the peace sign’s glow under the black light and its ripple with the breeze from the air conditioner and how Stilts’ head bobbed with it in a wah-wah motion that gave him a dizzy feeling. Charlene and Glenda got scared and disappeared back to the Formica tabletop. Rob coughed slightly and shook his head to clear it from the cloud of cigarette and reefer smoke that hung heavy in the room, and the smell of bad breath, unwashed bodies and sour beer and wine.

Max slipped the blank into the gun. They would go the one round and then stop as usual, so Max went first since he had it in his hand already, and everyone laughed at the click of the empty chamber. They all took a hit off the bong and passed the .45 like a joint, next to Ray who pulled the trigger to an empty click. More hits off the bong and then to Stilts who was always jerky quick grabbing the .45, sticking it to the front of his forehead and pulling the trigger, then to Rob. He drank long from his Pepsi bottle, took hold of the cold steel and raised it to his temples. He thought about how cool it would be for everyone to go play some softball or race their cars like they used to. How nice Sarah looked the first time he met her running down Cricket Hill in her flowing flowery dress with a huge sunflower stuck in her long hair, and he pulled the trigger and he didn’t think of anything anymore.