

IN CASE WE DIE

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ours is a story
written on hotel room walls
with fifty cent words

1. SLIP INSIDE THIS HOUSE

Had you not spent five nights a week in there like I did, upon entering the Champ Arcade, your senses might have been overwhelmed by the prurient cacophony of it all. Tits and asses; cocks and snatches; eyes come-hither, eyes rolled back. Blinking lights everywhere — beckoning you to phallic monstrosities too gruesome to imagine handling, much less inserting; directing you to unguents and salves, lotions and greases; assaulting your higher mind to abandon ship, to leave and trust your dirty little lizard brain to call the shots.

You might have tried to subdue this onslaught by limiting your gaze to the glass enclosures immediately to your left. Here, coach whips, blindfolds and handcuffs — articles of confusion when discovered in a well-hidden shoebox in your mother's closet — were nostalgic, romantic even. But this was no place for sweetness. A closer inspection would reveal so many other trinkets and tchotchkes that you would be overwhelmed all over again. Single-serve packets of flavored lube, canisters of amyl nitrite, Spanish fly, French ticklers, cock rings, enema kits, latex gloves, medical face masks, ball gags, dental dams, paddles, rectal thermometers, forceps, nose clamps, an

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assortment of stainless steel speculums and a box of X-Acto blades. Utensils for the truly depraved.

You might have sought shelter in the uniform predictability of more than 10,000 VHS tapes on racks, their covers of deep reds and soft focus promising blonde Scandinavian maidens, erotic courtesans of the Orient, black chicks.

Maybe you were like me. Maybe you'd never forgotten your hairier and greasier first loves — *The Devil in Miss Jones*, *Talk Dirty to Me*, *Taboo II* — and found some perverse feeling of home just looking at these boxes. You might browse the new releases purely for shits and giggles — no, scratch that. Careful what you wish for here. Best to say you might browse the new releases *on a whim*. You might even find yourself engaged by these excessively fit stars and starlets with lives built around salons and tanning beds, pills and enemas. You might appreciate the perfectly retouched droplets glistening on perfectly retouched skin, a touch of marketing class belying the jabbing and squirting waiting within.

But then maybe you weren't like me. Maybe you were a dilettante stopping by only because you drew the short straw and were assigned to fetch the entertainment for your co-worker's bachelor party. You would probably gravitate to the light-hearted fare of the novelty section, selecting a copy of *Edward Penishands* or *All That Jizz* or the midget porn classic, *Naughty Napoleon*. This would show your workmates that you didn't take your smut too seriously, that this was foreign terrain for you.

Hopefully, you weren't interested in our bargain bin, that haphazard graveyard for skin flicks at their worst. Most of these videos had been brought back by UPS after attempted returns to producers no longer in business. In the fly-by-night world of adult film, today's queen could be tomorrow's victim of a business manager with a coke habit and access to the production company's bank account. While we'd rather not have had these taking up valuable floor space, a sidewalk sale on the tourist-laden corner of 1st and Pike would have been frowned upon. Dropping off volumes 1–50 of the *Lick My Butthole*

series at the Salvation Army was likewise out of the question. Marking down merchandise to move and throwing it into a crudely constructed bin wasn't necessarily fantastically inventive, but it was our best option.

Many among us, after completing our first visit, have craved the confessional, a hot rape shower, 15 minutes of keening, or some combination of all three. Yet, if you, like me, were somehow to find yourself employed there — slogging the midnight to eight shift, no less — you'd have gradually found the place and the work challenging, complete with moments to up-sell when feeling ambitious. “Do you want butt-plugs with that?” “This version costs a little more, but if you're serious about watching Filipino women eat food out of each other...” We ran our own line of the thirty-one fucking flavors of Baskin-Robbins. The implements of semi-torture were our Pralines 'n Cream; the latest issue of *Blowjob Bonanza* our Daiquiri Ice. We would serve up either without rolling our eyes because we knew full well that the cock's heart wants what the cock's heart wants. If a sick freak felt the urge to consult with me about what they wanted to do with another consenting sick freak, it only made the evening go faster. We might even find ourselves downright sick-freak-helpful.

“You're gonna want to pick up some of these absorbent pads to put under your sheets if you're gonna buy that, mister,” we might suggest.

Of course, to be fair, there were also the other times.

“Do I look like the kind of fuckwit who scours *Consumer Reports* researching products you'd enjoy sticking up your ass?” This to a perfectly polite couple who asked for an opinion regarding my preference on the two most popular models of butt plug. It all depended on the mood, and the mood depended on a simple equation: a high Charlie equaled a happy Charlie.

I might meander in a skoche drunk at a quarter to midnight. Job security? Not an issue, as the responsibilities of the position were somewhere near “slight.” Bob and Randy, the swing shift guys, would be packing up their belongings and counting out the register and would tend to overlook any whiskey on my breath. Many a previous employee had left them hanging with a

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last-minute sick call or a plain old no-show. They considered me, if not a model employee, someone they could at least count on to be corporeally present.

“You know, Charlie, your one-year anniversary is coming up,” Randy might inform me. Both Randy and Bob were proud of their 20-plus years of shop employment, Randy a little more so.

“Yeah, they’re gonna buy you a fucking gold watch,” Bob would bleat, cigar to one side of a squalid mouth.

In truth I was hired as temporary Christmas help a couple of months shy of a year past today. You might be questioning the increase in porno store traffic around the holidays, as I was at the time, but let me assure you, it is extraordinary. Also remarkable were the customers’ assumptions.

“Sorry sir, you’re going to have to wrap that vibrator yourself when you get home,” you might have said to the nervous junior bank teller. You might have informed the pomaded cook from the corner breakfast place about the gift-wrapping booth at Macy’s that the Girl Scouts were running for charity this year.

Randy and Bob took me under their broad and experienced wings and showed me the ropes of the adult retail industry. Randy, a 60-something confirmed bachelor with a precisely trimmed mustache and high, womanish voice, was very hands-on. He very much enjoyed quizzing the clientele about their likes and dislikes, making recommendations in his god-awfully cloying and spooky way. Bob, on the other hand, was the perfect bulldog-human hybrid. With a constantly unlit cigar stuck between fleshy gills, and what I assumed were two bags of bloodshot behind permanently affixed Ray-Bans, Bob’s approach to the mercantile was more subdued. His speech consisted of a variety of mutt grunts. He was there to sell “stag films,” not make friends. The one time I did hear him laugh aloud was the night I arrived for my shift with a freshly blackened eye and several bleeding claw marks on my face after being ferociously assaulted by a Jagermeister-fueled ex. He bent at the waist, hands on his knees, howling till he up-coughed half a lung.

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“Are you dating a fuckin’ werewolf, Hyatt?” he cried between hacks.

We would supervise the entire operation from a perch behind the retail counter, a good foot higher than the clientele, as they perused rows and rows of magazines, blow-up dolls and Mephistophelian toys. It was here where we could truly survey our domain. If you, like me, were somehow preternaturally able to ignore the TV monitors with the giant genitalia smashing into each other and the cigarette smog, the retail section was as well-lit and organized as any other corner shop. Dreggy content aside, the place was aseptic and impeccably managed. But if you were in the market for debasement or aberration or debauchery, then the front of the store was a mere appetizer, a simple finger food, a quick way to wet your whistle. It was the back of the house where things got enchanting. The Champ Arcade in the very back was more of a scabrous wonderland than a dirty bookstore. A heavy red velvet curtain separated the pros from the amateurs, the wheat from the chaff, the men from the boys.

If you were to purchase two dollars’ worth of tokens, like I on occasion did, and walk through that red curtain, past the sign that read “Private Dances/Video Booths,” you would have been abused by the smell of Lysol as you paused to allow your eyes to adjust to the near darkness. Then, with music louder than need be, you might have made your way past the first row of booths. The moans and lascivious screams of dozens of videos playing simultaneously could have given you the impression that you had just buckled in for a ride through a carnival’s haunted house. You might not have been scared, exactly, but a nausea of unease would not be far off. What might jump out from the murk to try and forcibly mate with you would be a thought hard to dismiss.

You might then have thankfully noticed Wayne Newton — a 6½-foot-tall redheaded monster whose mother had an unnatural love of the Vegas entertainer — unleashing his flashlight for his hourly walk-through. His wasn’t the worst job in the joint. The twelve inches between the floor and the bottom of each video booth’s door offered plenty of room to detect any attempts at partnering up inside or any attempted defilement of the working

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ladies. One person per booth was pretty much the only rule strictly enforced here. Anything else was Masturbator's Choice.

A dozen red booths lined the walls on either side as you would make your way through the maze, unsure of just what your cock's heart was desiring. One booth might contain a single video monitor with 20 channels of filth to whack to. Another might open directly onto the main stage where one token opened a window for 30 seconds of live nude girl. Along one wall were the fish tanks: 4 x 4 foot glass enclosures containing dancers waiting their turn to hit the main stage. Each tank contained a fetish, a taste, from Catholic schoolgirl to leather dominatrix to girl-next-door-freshly-home-from-drill-team — all forms of fantasy on the fluffer buffet, available back of house.

Go in, drop a token. A curtain is pulled and negotiations begin. Up close and personal, dirty talk and adult toys are all available, as long as you have a generous amount of folding cash, the dexterity to slip that cash through the slot and the capacity to suspend your disbelief that the glass wall impedes anything from bobbing on your fractured libido. Crumpled tissues decorate the floor as if the jackoff Hansel had left a trail of cum rags to find his way out after releasing on the Plexiglas of his cubicle sex doll Gretel.

My shift began at midnight, but it was after two in the morning when the place would become a whirlwind of activity, with dancers leaving after a hard night of shaking it on the main stage or giving it up in private booths for the reprobate. Some might wait for their drug dealer or soon to be next big thing, rock-star boyfriend, others might load into their regular cab driver's back seat or, on some nights, into an awaiting police cruiser.

"Good night, Lexi."

"G'night, Angel."

The girls would tease me on the way out, mock-begging me to come home with them, knowing damn well I was stuck in paradise until morning.

"One of these days, ladies, I'm gonna disappoint you sexually like no one quite has before."

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You might have sized them up as they paraded by, the ghostly spawn of missing fathers and wayward moms. Junkie, mentally disturbed, cutter, molested as a child, molested, molested.

A is for Angel, touched as a child
B is for Betty, burned, scarred and defiled
C is for Cassandra, angry with Dad
D is for Dixie, born just plain bad
E is for Eva whose self-worth is low
F is for Felicity who does too much blow
G is for Ginger, kids taken away
H is for Honey, secretly gay
I is for Izzy, she fucks married men
J is for Jasmine who nips at sloe gin
K is for Kat, the Queen of them all
L is for Lexi who turns tricks at the mall
M is for Madison who never does smile
N is for Nadine, locked away for a while
O is for Olivia who cuts herself deep
P is for Precious who married a creep
Q is for Quinn who fucked her babysitter
R is for Roxy whose dad used to hit her
S is for Sasha with nothing to lose
T is for Trixie who can't handle booze
U is for Ursula, addicted to meth
V is for Violet, her mom beat to death
W is for Willa who wasted her life
X is for Xenia who carries a knife
Y is for Yolanda who's just not that bright
Z is for Zoe who won't make it home tonight.



2. DON'T SLANDER ME

It wasn't the pounding headache or the all-too-familiar taste of blood in my mouth that woke me that morning, but the stink of cat piss. They all have cats. Cats and bad tattoos and mops of dyed black hair that reek of cigarettes and watermelon Bubblicious. They all have ripped fishnets and dark red lips and daddy issues. What starts out as a seemingly innocent walk home from the bar turns into a seemingly innocent kiss in her foyer and quickly degenerates into a whirling dervish of teeth and hips and torn shirts and pulled hair.

But you couldn't just let a young lady wander the mean streets of Capitol Hill unescorted, now could you?

I surveyed my front teeth with the tip of my tongue to assess the damage. I got lucky this time. I tried to calculate the odds of sunlight before opening my eyes, but it was useless. As I lay in the darkness a couple of questions came to mind: Where the fuck was I? How the fuck did I get here? The wretched idea of raising my head at that moment was overruled by the depth of my curiosity. I was on a mattress on the floor with my clothes and most of hers lying next to me. A single strand of blue Christmas lights

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lined the ceiling and several defaced prayer candles were strategically placed around the bed. On her milk-crate nightstand was a half-empty bottle of Bushmills whiskey, a spoon, two syringes, my wallet and a Radio Shack alarm clock that read 5:30. Two more questions came to mind: a.m.? p.m.?

The spoon and syringes told me nothing further — heroin was my steady accomplice now — but the bottle told me this was Tuesday, Wednesday at the latest. My boss, you see, is ex-military. His men get paid every Monday. That way, be it Vietnam or the dirty bookstore, his grunts were always so broke by the weekend we could never put together enough cash to buy a plane ticket back to Indiana or Cleveland or wherever the fuck we came from. Furthermore, it curtailed many a barroom brawl and all but quashed impulsive AWOL episodes. I, Charlie Hyatt, was his midnight-to-eight man, a soldier on the front lines of filth.

While I knew well enough that there is no such thing as leftover drugs, I did a quiet recon of the area while my hostess lay face down in her pillow. I rifled through her purse and pocketed a wad of dollar bills. Experience told me she was either a cocktail waitress or a dancer, one or the other or both. Under black hair, over pale skin and just above the sheet, I could make out a tattoo of an inverted cross between her shoulder blades. This may have revealed Satanic alliances, it may have explained the defaced prayer-candle configuration, it may have indicated she was the type of woman who could get so fucked up she'd get tattooed upside down. No matter, this was my kind of girl.

I lifted the arm that had been draped over me all night; it fell limp to the mattress. Her wrist was wrapped in a bandage and my inquisitive nature could not resist the temptation. I carefully peeled back the medical tape; the bloody gauze stuck to her skin but still she lay undisturbed. One last quick tear exposed the words "HELP ME" carved deeply into her flesh. It might as well have just said "YOUR TYPE." I was aroused. Wistfully, now, I do recall the days when irony could give me an erection. I leaned in closer to

examine the wound. I wanted to taste it but stopped myself. Still, I saw no reason why a little medicinal hangover sex would be out of order.

“Hey,” I whispered.

I nudged her hard. Nothing.

“Honey?”

I saw a stack of mail on the small kitchen table, so I decided to try and put a name to this shapely mess inert on the mattress before me. There were a half-dozen bills, a wedding invitation and a Victoria’s Secret catalog all addressed to my maladjusted bachelorette #1.

Returning to her side I said sternly, “Nicole!”

Then, softly and still to no avail, “Nicky?”

I slipped on my jeans and negotiated my way through the bedlam, a strange landscape of empty bottles and full ashtrays, and located the bathroom. I was startled when I switched on the bare bulb that hung above the grimy, littered sink. The fluorescent glare, bright white walls and the explosion of girly smells sucker-punched the throb in my skull. Looking into the mirror, I pushed back greasy dark hair and focused on the mess I had become. Now, I couldn’t be called classically good-looking — unless Alice Cooper was your idea of a classic — but I could muster a killer smile when the situation called for it, and if you were in the market for a creepy someone to bring home to scare the shit out of your parents, I was your man. This morning I had none of that charm, more closely resembling the aftermath of a car accident.

I fingered my nostrils, which were thickly encrusted with dried blood, as were the corners of my mouth, my chin, neck and collarbone. My heart-beat quickened. I could see the prone reflection of Nicole in the mirror. She hadn’t moved. I listened for her to stir, snore, anything.

I filled the sink with warm water and dunked my head in, holding my breath for as long as possible. Already formulating an escape plan, I stood up dripping wet and took the longest piss of my life. Oh, that was interesting:

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my pubic hair was matted with dried blood as well. I frantically searched my torso and scalp for lacerations or cuts. Nothing. I squeezed the bridge of my nose to check for trauma. Nada. An idea I'd later consider desperate took hold. I looked up at the mirror and slowly opened the palms of my hands. Goddammit. No stigmata. Murderer it was, then.

Mosquitoes flitted around my empty stomach and my feet were frozen on the cold linoleum floor. Errant drops of pee flecked my toes as I stood there hoping for a generous meteor to fall from the sky and end this miserable course once and for all. I couldn't remember anything about last night or this woman — not her name nor her occupation, where she lived or what kinds of bands she hated (which was, of course, always so much more important than which ones she liked). I briefly wondered how many other men right this second were standing half-naked in front of a mirror considering the survival of their evening's companion. I wondered if they, like me, put their hands behind their backs and crossed them at the wrists to see what they would look like being escorted to a squad car in handcuffs.

Desperately, I scanned the bathroom for that small window through which the good guy always escapes. No dice. My mind fast-forwarded through the arrest, the headlines, her bereaved parents on a local TV news show and straight to the dank 6 x 8 foot cell in which I would spend the rest of my days, praying for a visitor with a nail file baked into a cake to set me free.

Perhaps they'd give me a corny nickname like "The Capitol Hill Cannibal," and I would appear next to "The Campus Killer," Ted Bundy, and Richard Ramirez, "The Night Stalker," in criminology textbooks. Maybe the chief of police would seize the opportunity to blame a few unsolved murders on me. Maybe I would request sushi and a couple of Dick's Deluxe burgers for my last meal, guaranteeing a nightmare situation for whoever had to clean up the gurney they would strap me to.

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I paced the five feet from the tub to the opposing wall and realized that being in a stranger's bathroom meant being near a stranger's medicine cabinet. Goddammit. On the one hand, her being dead made this a horrible time to rummage for prescription meds. On the other hand, her being dead made her not one to stand on ceremony. I licked my lips in anticipation. Cracking open a stranger's medicine cabinet had been a thrill I hadn't passed up since I was a youngster.

As a teenager in Phoenix, Arizona, I had organized a troop of Mexican ne'er-do-well kids from the block to break into neighborhood homes during summer break. Miguel was 12 years old; as the elder of the crew, he was the Artful Dodger to my Fagin. He followed my directions precisely: Do not destroy the place, do not disturb the "valuables," and get in and out quickly. I wasn't interested in their TVs and jewelry; it was their pharmaceuticals I coveted. Miguel would return to my place alone and empty his pockets, and with my handy 1978 Physician's Desk Reference I would sort out the good pills from the bad ones, pay him a fraction of what they were worth and send him on his merry way. In retrospect it seemed like a recipe for disaster, but after a couple of summers Miguel and company just stopped coming around. I imagine that they found someone who paid better or began to partake in their ill-gotten gains themselves.

The shelves were in disarray, a massive collection of her half-empty lipstick tubes, powders and potions. I found an empty prescription bottle. I squinted at the label: Percodan. Why would she keep an empty prescription bottle? And why was this giving me such a feeling of déjà vu? Had I already slept with this girl before? Had she already been robbed before I got there? I stuck my thumb in the coin pocket of my jeans. That explained it. Five yellow pills told me I had done my due diligence the night before. I popped the pills in my mouth and swallowed them with a handful of water from the sink.

Then, from the corner of my eye, I saw my salvation. A reprieve as if called in by the governor himself: a fresh, bloody tampon next to a couple of used, bloody condoms in the trashcan.

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I wiped the sweat off my forehead with the pink, germ-infested towel hanging from the shower curtain rod and used it to muffle my mirthless laughter.

Clicking off the light, I tiptoed out of the bathroom and dressed quietly, never taking my eyes off my new young lady friend. The wailing siren of an ambulance startled me as it roared past the apartment building. I leaned down to gather my wallet and rigs from the impromptu nightstand, cleaned the burn marks from the spoon and made a clumsy attempt to wipe the fingerprints from the whiskey bottle with my t-shirt. I picked up a matchbook that had my name and phone number written on it and stuck it in my pocket.

Standing up to leave, I heard a mysterious gurgling sound from the far corner of the room behind me. The gurgle segued into tiny laughter. I moved slowly toward the sound and lit a match to get a better look.

First I saw the mobile with circus animals and clowns, then the crib below. I hovered in a place where the scent of baby oil overpowered the stale cigarette smoke from the rest of the room. The child lay on its back, opening and closing its tiny hands as if they were new discoveries. I couldn't tell you how old the kid was, for I had never even held a baby in my arms. I assumed it was a boy from the blue blanket and just stared at this sinless, otherworldly being.

For a minute I couldn't even imagine how he got there. I wanted to lean in closer, but I was sure I would appear a monstrous gargoyle to the infant, and a screaming baby was right at the top of my list of the last things in the world I needed right then. I remained in the shadows. Was I staring at history doomed to repeat itself, or just an unfortunate client of the worst babysitter in the world? I wasn't about to stick around and find out.

3. YOU AREN'T YOUR ONLY SIN

I stepped out the front door of her building onto the corner of Denny and Summit, the raindrops punching holes in my head. I lit a cigarette, yawned deeply and raised a middle finger to the sky, the way I started every waking morning.

My feet began to move, against my wishes. For the last two mornings I had made the trek to the King County Detox knowing damn well I would never get in. In order to be accepted to the facility you need to arrive as early in the morning as possible, first-come, first-served. Since most of the clients are homeless alcoholics and drug addicts, they set up camp on the front steps the night before, leaving us employed junkies and drunks with busy social schedules little or no chance to make the cut. Imagine my heartbreak.

There were — believe it or not — a good-sized throng of people interested in my well-being. Oh, not my family, they were thousands of miles away and oblivious to everything. And no, not my co-workers, they were just glad I showed up so they didn't have to deal with the cavalcade of scum that came though the shop while they were comfortably tucked away in their beds. No, it was my friends, my misguided and often fucked-up

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themselves friends. They worried about me. They loved me. I guess there's no accounting for taste.

My current situation could have been worse I suppose. I could easily have regained consciousness in Kent or Bellevue or some other hellish suburb that would require a humiliating trek back on public transportation, but instead I was afforded a leisurely escape on foot, having had the luck, dumb or otherwise, to have come back to life in my own neighborhood. In a few minutes I would be sitting in the waiting room of the detox center. After a couple of hours they would read off the names of the newly accepted patients, I would feign disappointment and be on my merry way.

We were in the middle of a month-long run of overcast days, the kind of days that made everyone else shudder but made me feel alive. This is the time of the year I walked out of the shop after an eight-hour shift of selling raunchy periodicals and masturbation accessories not to the sunny beginnings of a brand new day, but to a city still cloaked in darkness. The sun, if it decided to come out at all, was barely peeking over the horizon by the time I crawled into bed, and by the time my alarm went off at 4:30 in the afternoon it was all but gone. It was beautiful. I preferred the gloom. I suppose I could blame my lifelong obsession with horror movies or my fair skin or the fact that my pupils were pinned most of the time, but the truth is I'm from Arizona and I don't care if I ever see the sun again.

There's something about this weather that compels men to use Drop D tuning on their guitars, the ladies to wear overalls and the whole damn city to throw themselves off the tallest landmarks they can find. Apparently the same clouds that I adored for shielding me from god's prying eyes and the drizzle that rinsed my filth away had the opposite effect on other folks. The city personally greeted me with two hours of gridlocked traffic the day I arrived in my beat-up Chevy van with nothing but two trash bags full of clothes as some poor soul considered To Be or Not To Be from high atop the Aurora Bridge. Nowadays, the corporate home of a major software company

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is located underneath this same bridge, and while most jumpers hit the water, about a half dozen times a year the employees arrive in the morning to witness a truly gruesome display of human desperation in their parking lot.

As I walked my mind raced. I tried to piece together the night before. Pussy Galore played at the Vogue and the place was packed. I remembered avoiding the hateful gaze of an old girlfriend. I remembered standing next to my friend Chris Pugh as the band played. He was strategically standing where he could see the stage and peer into the ladies' room; he was a first-rate deviant. I remembered being clever and charming as I sweet-talked the girl I woke up with that morning. I remembered her cleavage and her lips as she spoke to me, but I would have had a hard time picking her out of a police line-up. I remembered stumbling into a convenience store with her to purchase condoms. With her draped over my shoulder, we stood in front of the tiny section of toiletries.

"Where's the goddamned rubbers!?" she called to the annoyed cashier.

In his thick East Indian accent he pointed to the shelf, "Can't you see? Straight in front of you."

Reaching for the box she fired back, "If I could see straight do ya think I'd be fuckin' him?"

My very cells protested as I neared my destination. They reminded me that in a couple of hours we'd be sick as fuckin' dogs. They called me weak and worthless. Let's go, man. We've got 30 or 40 bucks from that chick; wouldn't we rather go home and get loaded? We deserve it. They told me to face facts: I was a liar and fraud. Who did we think we were fooling? We weren't the slightest bit interested in getting clean. We were just tired of the abscesses on our arms and the judgmental looks from old ladies and our negative bank balance. We just didn't want to hear another exhausted sigh from our landlord because he had had it up to here with our erratic behavior. We just wanted our friends to stop accusing us of stealing their records, which of course we

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had done but would never admit to. We just wanted our girlfriend to stop threatening to move out even though she's no fuckin' angel herself. We just didn't like the monster we were becoming. We just wanted to get high.

I grabbed a place in line and exchanged good-morning nods with the new line-up of degenerate hopefuls. I squatted down and leaned against the brick wall to blend in with my fellow dirt, broken glass and grimy brethren.

I was about a dozen people deep in a line of thirty-five or so. The building was painted that awful beige color that all publicly financed buildings that don't need to be inviting or picturesque are painted. I imagined there was a government warehouse with cans of it stacked to the ceiling just waiting for the next time the DMV or some low-income childcare facility needed another coat. I watched a couple of crows peck away at the smashed corpse of an unlucky squirrel that didn't quite make it across the street. I thought about how this sight should've made me ill but only reminded me of the frozen macaroni and cheese I had waiting for me at home.

As we were corralled into the waiting room, we were each handed a clipboard with a tiny, eraserless pencil attached by string.

"Have a seat and fill out the questionnaire," the attractive black woman with the blue lab coat instructed us.

I had spent the last couple of mornings ogling her over the pages of the same 3-year-old *People* magazine I stashed under what I considered to be *my* seat, the one in the farthest corner from the desk. She recognized me and we exchanged pleasant good mornings.

As culturally diverse as my neighborhood was, you couldn't exactly call it ethnically so. Unless, of course, you were sitting in the waiting room of the King County Detox Center; only here was I a minority. As a group we were Native American, African American and Latino with a sprinkling of Whitey. We were all ages and both sexes but mostly male, with several of questionable orientation. We had two things in common: We were poor and we were fucked up.

YOU AREN'T YOUR ONLY SIN

Patient name: *CHARLES M. HYATT*
Date: *OCT. 21, 1990*
Age: *28*
Address: *906 E. JOHN ST., APT. 311, SEATTLE*
Occupation: *BOOKSTORE MANAGER*
Marital status: *SINGLE*
Ethnicity: *WHITE*
Substance: *HEROIN*
Level of recent use: *HEAVY*
Treatment history: *NONE*
Main motivating force at time of admit: *NONE*

I filled out the rest just as I had in the days before, phone number, Social Security, then signed at the bottom underneath the ominous statement, “The below signed agrees to stay under the care of the King County Detox Center for a minimum of 72 hours.”

As I approached the young lady’s desk to drop off my paperwork I noticed a tattooed name peeking out from under her sleeve. There was something naughty and subversive that I could work with. All I needed to do now was strike up a conversation.

“So, why do you work here?” I asked.

“Oh, I dunno,” her mind calculating, “about 7 months or so.”

“No, no...*why* do you work here?”

“I suppose I started working in the field because I lost my sister to this disease.” I paused for a moment to give her a chance to clarify. I must’ve looked puzzled because she went on to explain.

“You know, alcoholism.”

“Oh, I’m sorry...I’m here for drugs.”

IN CASE WE DIE

“I see that,” she said, eyeballing my clipboard.

“But the truth is I was just raised wrong,” I said, trying to be cute.

“You better have a seat, Sugar, or the other patients will think I’m playing favorites.”