

(a short story - 3274 Words / 11 pages)

The Damn Need

My name is Andrew, and when I light a candle, it's to cook my life in a dirty spoon. I'm a journeyman electrician, and when I feel good, I am the best, but today I am far from the top of my game.

Ten days ago, I started a new job rewiring an old office building half a block from my rooming house where my girlfriend and I share a small room for forty a week. With no driver's license, two DUI's, and a blown transmission in my car, walking to a steady job is a lucky break. I have a chance to make enough money and maybe clean up my life.

Payday is Friday. Just have to hold everything together for two more days, but after four hours on the job, I drop my tool belt and bolt for the alley. My body erupts from a tremor in center of my gut as I slap my knees. A gush of vomit splatters the pavement. I feel clumps of blood push through my brain like a sewer full of shit, as my beard twitches like feelers on a cockroach. A deep craving in me, more demanding than the need for sweet mother's milk has become my Satan.

Picking up a butt, I pull out my Zippo, "Damn't, I need medicine." Exhaling, I look around to see if anyone saw me puking, and go back inside to pull more red, black, white, and green-coated copper veins to pump electricity throughout the building, its lifeblood of comfort and light.

Desperate for a hit, I head to the tool room. Maybe it's unlocked. I can check out a power tool, hock it, and buy it back on payday. I rush to the tool vault as my pain intensifies

to only to find a locked tool door. Angry, frustrated and cursing, I kick the damn door. I need money now!

From my tool bucket, I pull out my drill and battery charger thinking, *I've gotta be nuts. Without this drill, I can't work. It's the only thing I have worth any money.*

Cramps and more cramps. I step out the front entrance into blinding sunlight. Walk toward the pawnshop with a heavy thirst, a searing desert thirst.

There she is again! My older sister riding up the street on back of a Harley. A scene I can't shake. The biker's name is Thunder. He would shove my sister around, help himself to any damn thing he wanted. Anything worth anything. I hit him with my baseball bat as hard as I could hit. He jerked it from my hands, knocked me across the room. As I struggled to get up, my sister scrambles to my side me yelling, "Don't hit him, he's my son."

Son? Not brother? She said son. My mother isn't grandma? In a moment of fear, she let the truth slip, and the next moment she was gone. Gone with that animal. Choosing him over me.

My love for her turned to a dust devil sucking an empty tit, leaving me in pain and despair. Her deception grabbed me like a jumping cactus tar baby with barbed wire thorns prayers could never shed. It is a hurt never lost, as big as a dark winter storm cloud.

Booze first. I'd steal whatever I could find. There was always something if I looked hard enough. Grandma's jewelry in her dresser under bras and panties. Tools in the garage. Antiques in the attic. When they ran out I stole from other houses. Bicycles not chained down. Then shoplifting: Tools from Western Auto. Booze from Sammy's Liquors. Especially booze. My first real drunk was a pint of vodka with orange soda pop. Fell down basement stairs. Spent the night hugging a filthy toilet. Couldn't eat for three days. At the age of

twelve, I graduated to pot. Began dealing. Everybody wanted it. Before the age of seventeen, I owned a 57 Chevy, and was pretty much stoned from morning to night.

After high school, at Arizona College, I land in boomtown. The students have real money, and after a semester of Mary Jane, wanted harder drugs. Wanted a better high.

Hello heroin. Nothing like it. The big H eliminates pain. While it last, peace. A floating velvet glove peace that strokes every cell in your body creating goose bump clouds defying gravity as you float to a hidden place with God. A place where you are loved and love. So beautiful, you never want to leave.

It quickly becomes my drug of choice. At the end of the year, drug stings were everywhere on campus. I leave the college and enroll in a technical school to become an electrician. Pay was good, and I'm a fast learner. I spend a couple years in journeyman apprentice training and become a certified journeyman electrician.

Two years later, I'm a job super, earning a thousand a week. For the first time in my life, I was doing something worthwhile which paid well.

But after five years, *The Need*, and its dark cloud, takes a toll. I become careless, out of control, tell too many lies, and steal from everyone including friends, work mates, employers, and family. Any favors I might have coming, disappear. I know my only salvation is working as a journeyman electrician, where I can make good money. But even this becomes harder and harder. Steady jobs disappear. Some days is hard to even show up for work. Other times I leave because I am sick, need a hit. After burning one job after another, temping is my only source for work. On and off jobs. Becomes harder to keep *The Need* at bay.

I enter the pawnshop half blind from sun. A skylight hides behind piles of pawned TV's, stereos, and tools. Lots of stuff. There is a trodden path worn into a wooden floor leading to Jude's money cage. He sits on a stool working a crossword. A cigarette hangs out of far corner of swollen lips. Sullen eyes rest on his blue beard. A green visor shades his bald head.

I slipped my drill under the exchange bars. "Jude, I need thirty till Friday." The chain link cage casts a web shadow on my arm from the only light in the store hanging over Jude's head. He plugs in the charger and tests the drill, looks up from under his visor. "Ten dollars".

"Ten dollars! How stupid do you think I am? That's a hundred and fifty dollar drill."

Jude turns his back on me, "You got a better deal down the street, take it. Don't need no damn drill. Got a hundred of them." He turns again, and disappears into a back room. I grab the bars on the window of the pawn cage.

"Okay, okay, I need the money... I'm sorry... I'll do it for twenty dollars and a quarter, okay? A deal, okay?" Now I'm really in hurt begging a quarter for a call to Hawk, my supplier.

Jude comes back to the window. "You guys are all the same. Fifteen dollars and a quarter, and that's it." This is Jude's game, and he always wins.

Breathing deep, I drop my head in resignation, and lay the drill on the counter. With both eyes and index finger on the drill, I reluctantly push it through the cage window. "Give me the money."

Jude fills out the pawn slip; I sign it, grab the fifteen dollars with the quarter and head for the door yelling, "Don't sell it! I'll be back Friday."

“It will cost you thirty plus five for handling,” Jude replies.

I rush out the door mumbling “Asshole!”

Outside, I pick up the pay phone receiver from the pawnshop wall, and dial Hawk’s pager. Now, it’s my turn. I enter the world where I’m a player. I bring Hawk a lot of business. The carved numbers and graffiti on the phone booth jump out at me as the phone rings.

I grab the receiver; take a deep breath. “What’s happenin bro?”

“Cut the shit, Andrew. Where’s my fucking money?”

My gut takes another towel wringing attack. The sweat rolls off my body, and I begin to feel crawling maggots again.

“Man, I’m really sick, and need to work. I need medicine. I’m outside the Chicago Pawn, got no wheels. Can you meet me at McDonalds on Tenth? If you bring three right-away, I can finish my work, and pay you on Friday.”

“You got my money?” Hawk asks again. He isn’t talking about the thirty for hits. I’m into him for a thousand. He advanced me forty hits for an old schoolmate earning good money. I arrange to make the score for a thousand dollars, but my friend didn’t show. Afterward, I turn a few on the street, spend some of the money, and take a hit. Later, a gang mugs me, and steals all my money and the drugs.

That’s why this job is so important. Important to stay alive. I have to payoff Hawk, and my pain is special heavy. Can’t function. Can’t work. Too damn sick.

“Sure, I can pay you Hawk. You’ll have everything on Friday. How soon can you meet me, man? I’m really sick and need to get back to work. I don’t want to lose this job. The paycheck on Friday is yours. I promise.”

Hawk's silence amplifies *The Need* knocking on my door. "Alright, I'll be there in a half," Hawk replies. "You had better have the money for this order." Hawk is a man you don't want to cross. His shoulders pack his black knit shirt so tight, gold chains bounce between his pecs as he saunders toward you. Can't tell if you should stay put to get an autograph, or clear a path. Mirrored sunglasses muzzle his psycho eyes as he stalks his prey, and you may be it, no matter who you are.

I hang up knowing both help and trouble is coming at the same time, but as before, pain and desperation makes me cross the line. I hit up five more people on the street, collect a dollar fifty, make my way back to work.

Back in the building, I hunt down Armando for a loan. I had trained him to pull wire.

"Man, I need medicine bad. You've got to spot me twenty until Friday."

"I can't. All I've got is five dollars."

"I'm really hurting, man. Loan me the five, and I promise to get it back tomorrow. Cindy's working tonight, and I 'll have the money."

Cindy, my girlfriend, hadn't been around for two days. Probably partying. She is my insurance policy. Her long red hair and dark eyes, nice figure with bounce in her step announces her presence a block away. When cash is thin, she can turn a trick or two, and pick up extra. Construction workers could tell with one look she is a party girl. Cindy, my ace in the hole. We're great together.

Armando grimaces but gives me the five. I race to the construction yard in a desperate hunt for more money.

"Going to McDonalds. You guys need anything?" No one acknowledges me.

"You guys need anything?" I ask again.

One of the older workers lifts his arm with index finger pointed like a loaded gun and says, "Get the hell outta here, Andrew. Nobody is going give you a dime." The workers hold a steady glare pushing me away.

There's no money here. I leave the yard.

At McDonalds, I hustle two more dollars waiting for Hawk. I know there will be trouble if I don't have the thirty.

Another cramp attack sends me racing into the restroom. Down on my knees, I heave in the stall. *The Need* grows stronger by the minute. I put my head under the faucet to wash the crawling varmints from my hair. Can't remember being this sick before.

The manager barges in the restroom. "What the hell are you doing here? I told you not to come back here, you damn addict. Get out of here before I call the police."

I pushed my wet hair back, take a handful of paper towels, and can hardly walk. I have enough problems, not the time to get involved with the law.

Checking the pay phones to see if any coins are left behind, I spot Blackmon, Hawk's bodyguard, drive into the parking lot. Hawk is in the back seat. The tinted windows barely reveal his shadow. Blackmon drives to the back of the lot. I hustle to the passenger back door. Doors were locked. Hawk lowers the rear window a crack, and tells me to go to the front door.

"You got the money?" He asks.

"Man, at the pawnshop, somebody lifted my wallet. This is all I got." I push my twenty-three dollars through the window.

"You fucking liar." In fear, I jerk from the car. "When are you going to learn not to lie to me? Andrew, you're disgusting."

“I’m not lying, Hawk. I had the money. Somebody ripped me off while I was calling you. Didn’t have a cent to call you back. While you were on your way I hustled for what I have. I’ll pay double on Friday. Friday’s payday, and I’ll have all the money. You gotta give me the hits I need to get through the next two days.” While holding on to the car window to keep Hawk from pulling out of the parking lot, I apologize and beg at the same time.

Hawk leans forward, grabs the front seat. “Andrew, if this shit wasn’t fucked up, I wouldn’t even be here. It’s washed out, but it’s all I’ve got. You caught me at a bad time. You can always double up. Take it, or leave it. It’s all you’re going to get with a lousy twenty-three dollars.” Hawk smiles at me out of the side of his mouth. “You’ll get the hit you’re used to, if you double up.”

I stared at my dual warped reflections on Hawk’s mirrored glasses. “Hawk, you won’t be sorry. I’ll pay you Friday for sure.”

Hawk takes the money, orders Blackmon to get out the two balloons, each the size of a baby’s eyeball wrapped in tin foil. Blackmon places them into my begging hand.

Hawk settles back into his seat, orders Blockmon, “Drive!”

I run with a stumbling gait up the street to the rooming house, an old apartment building with each apartment divided into rental rooms. It’s a two bedroom unit with a third bedroom wha use to be the living room and my room, a six by ten-foot walled off section of the kitchen. Cindy and I share this space on a soiled mattress, with a pine wood dresser decorated by a collage of cigarette burns on top. Rent is forty dollars a week, and I am behind a week. It has been three weeks since my last paycheck; no one will loan me a dime, but none of this matters now. The only thing that matters is getting high putting *The Need* in its’ closet.

Reaching my apartment, I burst into the kitchen, yelling for Cindy. I stop at the sink, rinse out a dirty glass, and fill it with tap water. Drinking half of it in a gulp, I unlock the door to my room entering like a guy desperate to shit. I am alone. Cindy is probably out hustling, but I have mine, and that's all I care about.

I lock the door. Pull the dresser from the wall and reach for a small cardboard box taped on the back pane. I rip it off sending syringes, spoons, cotton, lighters, candles, and rubber tubes across the dirty tile floor.

I pull out the lower dresser drawer, throw its contents on the bed. Turning it upside down and sit on the floor legs folded Indian style. I light a candle, drip wax on the bottom of the drawer to mount it, and then tie a rubber tube around my left arm. In my panic, I start slapping the floor yelling, "Where's the damn spoon?"

Finding it, my clammy hand trembles as I heat the spoon over the candle as my other hand picks up the closest syringe. I pull its orange cap off with my teeth, and spit it on the floor. Dipping the needle into a glass of water, I draw 20 cc's, and eject the contents into the spoon.

Rolling each heroin ball out of my mouth, I bite the foil off the little yellow balloons, and squeeze the black tar heroin into the spoon. It is almost a quarter of a gram. I know this could be risky, but hell, Hawk had told me this shit was half cut, and the way I am feeling, I need it all.

I try not to shiver any of the golden juice out of the spoon. "Keep the ship taut." Uncle Walter used to tell me each time he'd go to sea. A full chief in the Navy, he was always traveling around the world. Uncle Walter. Wonder where he is now. I think of him while cooking the juice.

“Doesn’t look like the bad shit it is. Maybe I’ll lick the spoon after I’m done for an added kick.”

I put some cotton in the spoon, and draw the elixir up into the syringe shaft. The rich heroin liquid settles against the plunger as I point the nettle toward the ceiling. My stomach takes another twist as *The Need* makes my jaw tremble. It is beating on my last door. It takes all my strength to push the air out of the syringe until, a foaming cap of bubbles emerge from the needle.

Maggots are crawling on my face. I lick my upper lip as I pump up my tied arm. With a deep breath, I slip the needle into one of my older spots just below the elbow. I know every do-able vein in my body, including the ones between my toes and under my tongue. *The Need* was about to go back into its little dark cave. “Oh mannn”, I moan as I start injecting the hot liquid.

I release the tie, start pumping home the load. “Godd Damn!

I feel thunder in my head signaling a blast off. Every neuron in my brain is firing as the pleasure center of my nervous system takes flight. *The Need* quickly fades in the dark distance as I drift into an orbit of orgasmic pleasure. Then suddenly, I feel my body escape the gravity of earth. Hawk had told me this shit was only half strength, but he lied. This is stuff is goddamn strong.

“Mother Fuckerrrrrrrrrr!” I cry out, hoping Hawk can hear me.

I howl louder at him, “You son of a bitch!”

The adrenaline surges through my heart like water in a fire hose knocking down every toy soldier in my body. I spring to my feet, bouncing off the wall, bawling obscenities at Hawk.

“Mother Fuckerrrrrr! You asshole son of a bitch!”

“Motherrrrr,” My throat erupts with blood foaming out of my mouth, drowning “Fucker” with a deep chest gurgle. I go into convulsions as waves of blood flood my eyeballs. I hit the bed and fall forward, slamming my face on the bottom dresser drawer. My world and internal organs explode in a finale. My soul hits the black wall of empty space at warp speed. My mind, in a plastic bubble floating through dark silent space, sees life disintegrate until all light fades.

The Damn End