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# Heroin in Her Tears

A Story by Sydney Knox

## Heroin in Her Tears

It was raining and cold the night Angela Hicks found her messiah in the most unlikely of places. ‘Ang’ as her family and frenemies called her, was at the end of her rope and out of ideas. Ang had no money and no place to go. The only thing she did have was a car on its last legs, but unlike people in her life, Nadine, an old blue Honda, with a smashed bumper and 150,000 miles on her, never let her down. Right now, Nadine was parked outside of a housing project on Nebraska Avenue, the nastiest hoe stroll in the city and the fact that Ang was here, contemplating the unthinkable, was proof positive of just how desperate her circumstances had become.

She was still enrolled as a sophomore at the University of Tampa, though at the rate she was going, not for long. Ang had dreams of fame others around her only pretended to have, and the drug she craved had yet to extinguish them. If anything, it made them vibrant, more beautiful to her mind's eye when she was feeling down. They felt like hope in a hopeless place, and the stories her dreams spun for her were worth telling, but no one had asked to hear them. So she kept them to herself along with the lie that her addictions would make her a better actress one day. Nobody without real pain in their life was good at acting or storytelling anyway. It was something you just couldn't fake. You have to be able to conjure your despair from a dark well inside you, and good luck doing that if there wasn't one. It was like threatening someone with a

dreaded ghost of Christmas Future and getting a ghost of Christmas Past instead. All smiles and cheer, it just didn't have the same zing.

Sitting with the engine running and her eye on the gas light which had just come on, she couldn't see any other ready choice to fix things. At least for a while, until she could figure out something else, she needed 500 dollars and had five of them to her name. The rent was overdue, and the landlord was threatening to throw her out. Her cocaine habit plus a wild weekend had taken up the money her parents sent to pay it. She couldn't make herself fumble together yet another lie for why she was short, and anyway, this time she was short the whole way. There was no explaining that one since she'd already told them last month the car needed repairs and how many times could she get robbed? If they didn't already know something was wrong, they would soon enough if she couldn't make this right.

"How the hell did I get here?" she muttered to herself, afraid to say it louder. Even alone she was ashamed to speak of the utter degradation that rotted her soul. What was left of her spirit and her sanity asked the question and tried to provide an answer. She gave herself a half-hearted pep talk. "Pull it together, Ang. You're going to be dead and never make it to Broadway if you don't stop. Is this finally enough?"

She wanted to say yes, to convince herself that after she got out of this jam, she was done. This was her rock bottom, but she knew that for a lie too. Rock bottom was the mask falling away and her sins exposed to the world. Ang was a beautiful girl, with exotic coloring, big hazel-green eyes with flecks of gold and light brown hair. She could sing, dance, was talented and smart in so many ways. She looked too unusual to be where she was; pretty, well-brought-up girls always look out of place when they try to slum it, and ending up on Nebraska Avenue at 11 o'clock at night was definitely slumming it.

*Honestly*, she wondered, *how had she come to be on this street, surrounded by people acting on their worst impulses?* She barely remembered driving to Nebraska, but like everyone in Tampa, she knew exactly where it was and what happened there. Admittedly, she was high when she first pulled into the parking lot of the projects on the corner of hell and nowhere good, but that was some two hours ago. No one noticed or bothered her. The cops usually ignored the malignant activities on Nebraska, unless there was a dead body involved, or they wanted to harass a few derelicts, but not tonight. Even the homeless were tucked away under bridges or vacant buildings. Only the most desperate women were on the rainy streets, with just the most pathetic of the johns to troll them.

Ang sat in Nadine on that cold-for-Florida night and wondered how one went about hooking. *Like, exactly how did this work?* Having to ask the question showed that she had no business being there in the first place, but like everything else in her life, when she had to figure something out, she did it and never asked anybody for anything she could get on her own. And the ugly truth was, she'd done worst things for free when she was drunk or high, getting paid for it couldn't be that much worse, or so she thought.

Being in school helped, she knew how to research, and she'd done a little before she got to this point, just in case she ever needed to know. Ang had read a few books on the subject, mostly old pimp tomes by the likes of Iceberg Slim and others of his ilk. Little good it did, sitting in the rain in high heel boots and a short pleather skirt. She didn't know how to approach a regular boy, much less a john looking to sex her quickly and for a fee. She wasn't even sure how much to charge. Decisions, it was almost funny, but the joke was on her. Just as she was about to pull away and go home to cry, there was a sharp tap on her window.

Ang looked up to see a guy not much older than her. "You working?" he asked.

For a minute, Ang couldn't find her tongue. She didn't even know how to answer such a question or that he would ask it that way. *I guess that's how this goes* Ang thought. She squeaked out a frightened "yes, I am" with as much confidence as she could muster, but her eyes must have told the real tale.

The guy looked unimpressed by her answer. "You're no working girl, or least you shouldn't be. What are you doing out here? Don't you know you can get killed looking like a lost rabbit on this street?" The man shook his head. His jet-black hair was long, shaggy; he'd missed more than a few cuts and shaves. There were bags under his eyes and butter on his teeth. He looked too down on his own luck to have an opinion about her.

Ang found her voice easily then, righteous anger always worked in a pinch. She searched her memory for the kind of hardcore language she picked up reading her streetwalker stories. Fear was not an option, and attitude was everything.

"Who the hell are you to say anything to me, asshole? You came over here to me, not the other way around. So, you interested in me or what? And I'm not as cheap as some of these hookers out here, so I hope you ain't wasting my time!"

The stranger was taken aback, his eyes widened and he looked genuinely confused for a minute while he tried to figure out if she was a good actress or a not-so-bright whore. Finally, he laughed a bit, telling her, "That was pretty good. You almost made me believe you. Little girl, you don't know a thing that's going on out here, but you'll find out the hard way if you're not careful. Maybe if you had a cigarette hanging out of your mouth, you'd be more believable."

"I don't smoke," Ang said, still trying to play the hardened prostitute, weary of games.

"Well, I do." He pulled a pack of Camels from his pocket. "Here, take one and pretend. I'm trying to help you out because I see you need it. I'm not wasting your time, but you might be wasting mine." He turned to look toward the alley behind him. Throwing a thumb over his shoulder, he told her. "I'm looking to score, and my man behind me is busy. I thought I might as well be busy too until he's finished."

Behind them, a sketchy figure was just stepping from the alley. This new stranger was short, fat and zipping his pants as he neared the main road. Not that it mattered, he was dressed in the typical dope man uniform of glitzy sneakers and designer jeans that hung low enough to see his checkerboard boxers. Trailing at his side was a half-dressed woman who held out her hand for her pay, a little plastic bag she greedily palmed like it was the cure for what ailed her, which Ang guessed from personal experience, probably was. Her cheeks were hollow and her eyes sunken into her head. She had dirty, greasy hair and her fishnet pantyhose were more holes than net. As she walked away from him, he gave her backside a playful slap and she blew him a kiss. They could have been lovers parting instead of desperate people transacting dirty business in an alley.

Ang snapped at him. "Well, what's keeping you? You getting in or you're going with him? A score is a score I guess, smack or me? You can take your pick. The smack is cheaper, but the high won't last as long."

While the man had been watching the dealer and whore emerge from the alley, Ang had been watching him. She looked at his hands which were unexpectedly clean and manicured. His clothes fit him well and looked like they had been very expensive at some point. Remembering the rules she set for herself, she scanned him for the tale-tell bump of a gun or hidden knife and slid her hand down the side of her door to make sure the .38 her father gave her when she left for

college was still there. Same place it always was, as soon as she gripped the cold steel she knew she wasn't afraid to use it if this guy wanted trouble. If she were lucky, the rest of him would be as clean as his hands, and she could get things over with as quickly as possible.

“Still playing tough? Okay, I call your bluff. I’ll take you and it.” While Ang sat there unsure of what to do, he walked over to the dealer who was ready for him. It took seconds for him to get what he wanted and turn back to her. He walked around to the other side of the car and pulled on the door handle.

Ang just looked at him for a minute. He stared back but didn’t move away. Slowly, she reached beside her to pop the lock for him and the next thing she knew she was in the car with a stranger who expected her to sleep with him and pretend to enjoy it.

Ang took a deep breath. “Where should we go?”

He laughed. “You really are green aren’t you? Pull behind this complex to the trash cans. Nobody goes back there but people doing the same thing we are, and nobody cares. My name is Melvin. What’s yours?”

“An—Nadine.” Ang was glad it was dark so he couldn’t see the deep blush spreading across her face. She almost gave him her real name, and he probably guessed she was lying.

More laughter, “Okay, An—Nadine. Let’s go.”

Ang headed to the back of the complex where it was so dark she could barely see in front of her face. “So, it’s 500 dollars if you want to have sex with me,” She told him. Melvin stared at her, incredulous.

He shook his head. “Baby girl, we’re in the front seat of your car. This ain’t where you pay that kind of money.”

“Well, what will you pay then?”

“I’ll give you 100 bucks and some advice. This life ain’t for you. You remind me of my little sister. I would hate to see you on this road because I know exactly where it leads.”

“What do you know about my life? Why don’t you just pay me, fuck me and get the hell out of my car?”

Melvin paused. “I could do that. But I’d rather save your life. I watched you for 30 minutes. You must have started and stopped yourself a dozen times. I thought to myself, nobody struggling that hard to hook should be doing it. You looked so scared and so lost. I don’t have much humanity left in me, but I remember when I was like you. And if it weren’t for my parents, I’d be homeless or worse right now. I don’t belong out here, but here I am. A user with my best days behind me and nothing but a life of self-hate in front of me. ‘Something about you... I have to do something. It’s my one good deed, and I’m going to do it for you and me. So I know my soul ain’t lost. I’ll give you the 100 bucks, and you don’t have to sell yourself to me to get it. All you have to do is listen to me. Deal?”

Ang looked at him with suspicion. “Okay, it’s a deal, but I want the money first.” She held out her hand and slid the other down to grip her father’s .38 special. Melvin saw her do it. She meant for him to see it but he said nothing, just dug into his pockets and pulled out a hundred dollar bill from a small roll of them and handed it to her.

“Do I have your attention now?” he asked with a small smile. “I told you, I’m not supposed to be here. I’m from Atlanta. My dad owns a bunch of shoe stores, and he’s trying his hand at local politics. My mom is a so-called classy lady, and my sister is in law school at Harvard. I’m here being the black sheep they’re ashamed of, even though they made me this way. They keep me in money, so I don’t embarrass them getting arrested for dumb shit. As long as I keep to my usual vices and stay out of trouble otherwise, they don’t give a damn what happens to



me. They probably wish I'd go ahead and overdose. Maybe I will soon. I've always been addicted to something or someone since I was a kid, and I'm always looking for the next high."

Ang didn't know what to think or say. She looked into his eyes, which she was just noticing were the kindest she'd ever seen. For some reason, they made her want to talk to him, to tell him her story that nobody else wanted to hear. And so she did. Ang spoke with Melvin for hours, sitting behind those projects. At some point, she started up the car, and they drove to the gas station where Melvin filled up the tank. He peeled off another four bills and handed them to her too. Ang wanted to refuse them, to give him back the first one too, but he insisted, and she stopped arguing.

When they left the gas station, Ang headed toward St. Pete Beach and as they drove across the causeway, telling stories to each other and sharing both their pleasures and pains, a strange thing happened. Ang started to cry, and once she started, she couldn't stop. Melvin stopped talking. They drove in silence while the tears ran down her face. When Melvin reached over to touch her tear-stained cheek, she didn't stop him.

Slowly, savoring it, Melvin tasted the wetness of her tears on his fingers. He closed his eyes, sat back in the seat and just let her drive.