

# It's Hard to be a Saint in The City

*By Jenny Butler*

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He sat on the edge of the bed and stared at his arms, darkened veins, raised welts and gashes. He didn't try to hide his track-marks or even his scars anymore. Years of long-sleeved shirts and layers, even in summer, and the unremitting fear of exposure at school: another cutter-freak. No longer did he feel shame in finding solace the only way he knew how. He even found pleasure in the ritualistic movements themselves: reaching under the bed to get the small Tupperware box, pulling open the lid, taking out the wad of cotton wool with the single-edged razorblade inside. The bliss of pressing it into his skin, piercing with the sharp steel corner, slicing in, drawing blood: relief.

He used to worry, as a teenager, about being caught in the act. He was afraid that someone would burst into his bedroom and interrupt him mid-cut, or see the blood-drenched comforter he used to catch the drips. He even derived joy from looking at the dark-red stains on white—such a contrast—but he was anxious about others discovering it. Now, he couldn't care less what people thought, what they found, or who saw him. But he still didn't welcome interruptions to his most secret activities. He liked the continuity and self-regulation that living alone allowed, even if it was in this dingy, noisy shithole.

He leaned on the side of the bed and stood up slowly. He filled the kettle, pressed the button down. He opened the cupboard and took out the tin of Folgers.

This brand was the one he always bought in remembrance of coffee heiress Abigail Folger, slain by the Manson family. Thinking of Charles Manson reminded him of The Haight with its street kids and dirty homeless old men, all begging from tourists, telling their “poor me” stories. He didn’t give a fuck what people thought of him, his appearance, but he had some dignity left. He never begged: he stole! They made it so easy for him, distracted by the Summer of Love commemorative bullshit in the windows; money was easy for the taking from handbags of those dumb bitches and the wallets of their map-reading, mouth-breathing husbands.

Once he got hold of some cash, he would immediately head downtown, to the Tenderloin, to score. He knew all the regulars, small-time dealers as well as the serious guys you don’t mess with unless you have *all* the money up front. Shuffling along until he reached an alleyway, he would hunker down by the piss-stained wall and strap the belt around his arm. This crouching was more a routine because in all honesty he didn’t give a shit if he was seen. There were normally about three other junkies doing the same thing in fairly close proximity. Public restrooms allowed more comfort because he could take his time. The blue lighting in there made it difficult to shoot up, though, as it took forever to find a vein. He didn’t want to miss and add another bump to his collection. The bumps now looked like mini-volcanoes, weeping pus, along a blue-black blotched landscape of skin. To avoid injecting the wrong place, he’d drawn along a couple of his veins beforehand with a black Magic Marker. The pattern made him giggle as it looked like the half-finished outline of a shitty tribal tattoo done by some scratcher.

He needed a spoon to make his coffee. He looked along the side of the bed by the wall and found one still on the aluminium foil from last night. He inevitably wanted more. Putting on his hoodie, he glanced in the mirror at his pallid, scab-

marked reflection. He put on one trainer, then the other, realising that the second had no lace; he'd used it as a tie off, in a rush to get loaded. Too antsy to find it, he set off to Union Square with one shoe flapping open.

The places to avoid for “decent people” had become his regular hangouts. He *was* the danger lurking, his tattooed fingers grasping the knife in his pocket. He would use it with no hesitation if they didn't hand over their money and jewelry (his favoured victim a wealthy-looking woman walking alone). It surprised him how many there were around. He wondered why they didn't get cabs, seeing as they could obviously afford to. Normally he went for the hood-up-grab-and-run method, but was not opposed to other approaches. If she resisted, he would slash at an arm. If she still stood firm, he'd go for the face. It had to be this way: He needed to get what sustained him, so she needed to give him the money to get it. Okay, he'd done more than cut a woman's face but it was her own fault—she should have just handed it over! In that case, it was a hooker and the bitch fought like a wildcat; he guessed whores felt they'd earned their money the hard way.

He no longer bothered to hide his addiction. He accepted the vicissitudes of life that had brought him here, made him this. He thought about the smackheads in the dirty corners of downtown alleyways and figured that's how other people saw him when they passed him by. He tried to see himself through their eyes. He imagined walking past himself, trying not to make eye contact with the young man in the tattered trainers and grey hoodie, soiled jeans, trying not to draw his gaze in case he asked for money or worse. Maybe he had a knife, a gun! Then he imagined the hoodie falling back, the young man's face, his face, yearning. The young man pulled a knife and lunged at him and they struggled, the man overcoming him, forcing him down to the ground. He could see his tattooed hands, dirty fingernails. The man grabbed his

wallet and ran off. All addicts fight with themselves this way, he reckoned. The addicted part of the self always wins out no matter how hard you struggle against him.

Maybe, if his life had taken a different course, he could've straightened out. He could have been on the other side, the rehabilitated, the *reformer* even! The idea made him feel strange. But he couldn't be held responsible for all that had happened, his fucked-up childhood, no! None of that was his fault. He couldn't be blamed for self-preservation, for staying alive, for getting his next fix. How could he stay on the straight and narrow? It was all he could do to keep himself level, like clinging on for dear life at the abyss-edge. How else could he get what he needed without money? And how could he get money without stealing? It's not like anyone would give him a job, not with a neck tattoo and three teeth missing. He'd been worn down from trying to do the "right thing"—Right for whom? Not him, that's for sure! It's too hard to be a saint in this city!