

Alone and Broken

by Angie DePuy

This story was written during a workshop in the Riverhead Jail in 2015.



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I meandered to the side of the decrepit-looking 7-11, picking up a cigarette clip off the ground and lighting it. I sat behind the dumpster to count my haul. I emptied all the change and crumpled bills out of my pocket and began to count, \$27.03. Today was a slow day. Three hours of standing in the parking lot of the Montauk highway 7-11 and that was all I made? But it was a brisk October evening, long past dark and I didn't dare stay there any longer. If I stayed, more attention would be attracted than I was willing to risk. Plus I needed to do what I had to do and get to sleep on time to wake up for school in the morning.

I was slightly inconspicuous, thanks to my height. At 5'10 1/2" I could pass for older, but if anyone dared look past the sadness in my eyes they'd be able to see the 11-year-old features that still haunted my face. I went into the store to pick up the necessities, a hot cocoa and buttered roll, for dinner of course, and a vanilla dutch-master. I then made my way up the back block, only pausing to pick the remaining clips out of the dusty astray.

It was freezing out and getting colder by the minute. I wrapped the old hoodies tighter around my goose bump filled body, breath crystallizing in the air in front of me, and walked the four remaining blocks to my boy's house. Upon

arrival, I went through the gate and knocked on his back door.

"Hey Ang, whatcha need?" he said with a smile. Warm air smacked me in the face and started to thaw out my freezing body as I stepped in and followed him down the long hallway that led to his room.

"Just a dub" I replied, placing the twenty on the dresser while he grabbed stash and scale from his closet. He stared at me with his big brown eyes, fighting to keep a pained expression from his face.

"Ang are you back home yet? Your mom was here looking for you the other day."

He paused, fixing a questioning stare on me. "You're not staying outside again, right? We all know how bad your mom is, but it's getting really cold out there."

"Yea the bitch found me," I lied, eyes on the floor. I hated pity. I was independent and didn't want, or have the time for anyone to feel bad for me. The look on his face said he could tell I was lying, but he left it alone, placing the eighth in my hand.

"I only gave you twenty dollars" I said curiously as we made our way back down the hall.

"Don't worry about it" he replied "you're like a sister to me."

I responded with a genuine smile, pity I hated, but I would be stupid to turn down the extra chronic. He opened the door and gave me a hug. "Be safe," he cautioned as we parted on the doorstep.

I made my way back onto the dimly lit street and crouched down pretending to tie my shoe. I glanced over my shoulder to make sure he wasn't watching which way I walked down the street. The abandoned house I slept in was only one block over, and it was too risky to have anyone else know about it. The cops couldn't drag me home if they couldn't find me. And no one would think to look for an 11-year-old in a mostly burnt down abandoned building.

My eyes darted nervously up and down the block to make sure no one was peeking out a window or taking out the garbage while I slipped through the hole in the chain link fence. I walked the same barely-there pathway I had always walked in the last two years, ducking around and under the vines and thorns, now barren from the approaching winter, in the overgrown year. I walked up the incline of the rust metal basement doors and hopped through the broken window, the only non-boarded up entryway to the house. I nicked my finger on the broken glass, peeking out of the bottom of the sill like razor sharp teeth. *But I barely notice because I'm numb. Numb not just from the cold, but too numb from the inside out to care.*

My feet expertly land on the mere six inches of the non-caved-in part of the floor that lines the perimeter of the

room. Back to the wall, I swiftly make my way to the doorway that leads into the next room. The piles of debris and the smell of char and mildew, not to mention the gigantic black holes in the floor and ceiling, would be enough to make any normal person turn heel out of there before they cleared the window. But I wasn't exactly a "normal" kid. Plus after two years of this place being my sanctuary I could make it to "my room" blindfolded.

I slipped through the doorway into what used to be the living room of the old house. This room had no holes in the floor, but was heavily littered with debris from where the roof had caved in during the fire. All the windows were boarded so the only light was from the pale silver moonbeams that shone through the missing parts of ceiling above. There was something beautifully serene about looking at the stars through all the wreckage. Call me crazy, but this place made me feel safe. This place was mine, modest as it was. I felt untouchable here, unlike at home where horrors awaited one just a few short blocks away. I yawned deeply.

Before that moment I was too preoccupied to realize how tired I really was. I pulled back the sheet that hung in the doorway to "my room," happy to finally be somewhere a bit warmer. The sheet worked wonders to hold a little bit of heat in the would-be-chilly room. I stripped my hoodies off and looked around; I was relieved to find all my stuff still in order. It wasn't much, just some old blankets, extra sets of clothes, a couple of candles, and an old sheetrock bucket I

used as a garbage pail, but it was mine. In only two years of retreating there I had never seen another soul near the place. Yet I always got nervous that I'd come home to find some homeless person sleeping there, or that some rowdy teenager had come in and destroyed the few tangible possessions I had left.

I lit a candle and watched the flame dance as it bounced its light off the walls. It was a small room, 12 x 8 at most, but it was the only place in the house with a sound roof and floor, plus the plywood board over the used-to-be window was secure, so I was completely protected from the elements. I settled down, cross legged, on my makeshift bed of blankets. With a satisfied sigh I let my mind wander as I started to loll.

I inhaled deeply and lay back, my senses relishing the sweet smell and taste of the sticky buds. As used to sleeping here as I was, I usually needed to be extremely stoned to pass out. I just wanted to fall asleep but the pain to my neck was really bad. I would have to wear every choker I owned to hide the bruises on my neck, because tomorrow was Monday and I'd have to go to school. I lay back puffing lightly on my blunt as my mind flashed back to my mother's latest episode.

It was a normal day in my crappy little family home. My two-year-old brother was in his high chair in front of the T.V., as usual, me and Johnny were jamming out to Motley Crue in the front room. My mother was in the kitchen cleaning up

after my little brother's lunch. She seemed to be in a good mood but I wasn't fooled. Years of experience told me she could go from happy to scary in the blink of an eye. I was hoping today would be a good day. She was usually happier when Johnny was there.

Johnny was 27 and a family friend who frequently stayed with us when he had nowhere to go. Our house had an open door policy. We knew what it was like to have nothing, so even though we couldn't offer more than a warm couch, we always helped those in need. Johnny was one of my mom's favorite guests because he paid for his stay in sex. Out of all the guys in and out of her bed, he was my favorite to have around. Me and him were really good friends. We shared a love of classic rock, he was also the one that introduced me to my first doobie and taste of hard liquor.

So there we were air guitaring to "Shout at the devil" when my mom started screaming. I heard a loud "smack," followed by my little brother's cry. Now, I knew better than to talk back to her and what the consequences would be, but I'd be damned if I let Logan go through that at two.

"Stop fucking crying!" she screamed, reeling her hand back to hit him again.

"NO!" Leave him alone ma." I yelled, running over to my little brother and covering him, her hit connecting with the back of my neck rather than his face.

"He's too young! He doesn't know better!" I cried to her.

She grabbed me by my hair and ripped me to the ground, aiming a kick to my side.

“Who the fuck do you think you are? He has to learn sooner or later!” She marched to the kitchen. I leaned up against the leg of the kitchen table, sitting up I tried to regain my breath. I locked eyes with Johnny who looked stony faced and mouthed, “I’m sorry” at me.

“It’s okay” I mouthed back. I didn’t want him getting involved. Me and him both knew getting in my mom’s way would just make it worse. I slowly started to get up, trying not to cry. Crying always made her madder. But I was losing that internal battle as silent tears slid down my face.

Just as I got back to my feet she walked back in from the kitchen. “Who told you to get up? Did I fucking say you could get up!?” she screamed.

“No momma,” I managed to choke out as she dragged me back to the floor by my hair. This time she sat on me, her 200 something pounds immobilized me, making it hard to breathe. “You won’t get up until I fucking say so.”

I tried to lie there obediently, knowing that was the quickest way to get it over with, but breathing was becoming harder by the second.

“Ma, I can’t breathe,” I wheezed out, trying to sit up but failing under her weight.

“Lying bitch,” she hissed, “I’ll show you what it’s like not to breathe,” she said as she wrapped her hands around my throat. Now my mother had choked me before but usually only for a couple of seconds, this time she didn’t let up.

“Help,” I choked out, even though it came out more as a gargle with the pressure she was placing on my windpipe.

“Yvonne, that’s enough!” I heard Johnny yell and felt the weight of her tossed off of me. Air rushed back into my lungs, making me lightheaded. I heard them yelling at each other. But the words were all a blur as I tried to breathe and get oxygen back to my brain.

As they screamed I managed to get to my feet. I bee-lined out the front door, while they were distracted by their fight and ran down the street as quick as I could. I got two blocks away and sank to my knees sobbing uncontrollably and trying to catch my breath. I felt bad leaving Johnny to deal with my mess. He had just saved my life. I was sure she was going to kill me this time.

As my memory faded I lay on my makeshift bed, overwhelmed with guilt. I was hoping Johnny found somewhere to go. I know she kicked him out for helping me. I rolled over to blow out my candle and tried to get some sleep. I was going to pray he was somewhere warmer than I was, but I knew there was no God to hear me.