

The Hustle

By John Grind

It was another day, another grind. Michael slipped out of bed and into the same pair of black jeans he'd been wearing for months. They were stiff and crusted with dirt. He looked down at the gorgeous girl beside him, so elegant and radiant even when asleep. Her name was Kayla and she was his world.

Staring down at her peacefully dreaming, Michael knew she would wake up sick. He was already feeling it now himself, the sore joints, sweaty skin like gooseflesh, waves of debilitating nausea, and all the other fun symptoms. It was dope sickness and dope sick hurts the whole body. The pain can't even be explained to those who have never been through it, and good for them. Michael wouldn't wish such misery on his worst enemy.

So here they were again, the same as the day before and the so many before that. This life was one of repetition, repetition of the most agonizing magnitude, a black hole that swallows you up and spits you back out a shell of who you once were. It had been around sixteen hours since they last used. They were pushing it.

Michael hated to see Kayla sick. He hated to see her in pain. He reached into his torn back pocket and pulled out thirty-six dollars, all the money he had in the world. He stared down at the crumpled bills in his hand. Welcome to hell, he thought. Enjoy your fucking ride. It'd taken him all day to hustle up a measly hundred bucks. He'd rode the six train up and down; pick pocketing a wallet here, and panhandling for a few stray dollars there.

He didn't tell Kayla about the remaining money last night, as he knew she would have just blown it all on coke in five seconds flat, leaving them completely screwed for the morning. So Michael lied and said he'd run out of cash. After some yelling and a few charming expletives, Kayla relented. They did their last bags of dope and called it a night. But now it was morning and it was back to the races. Time to hit the cold street. If Michael was fast, maybe he could even go and come back before Kayla woke up, have a nice wake-up shot ready for her. That was the only thing that made her smile anymore.

Careful not to wake her, Michael shrugged on his tee shirt and boots, and left the run down apartment they were squatting in, the thirty-six whole dollars clutched in hand. It was a cool morning in Manhattan. The condensation stuck to the sea of cars lining the streets and storefront

window panes. The place they were staying in was on the corner of Eleventh and Avenue C, a recently abandoned apartment building between Tompkins Square Park and the East River. It'd been a nice place once before it became a haven for dilapidated junkies and transients.

The minutes on Michael's cheap cell phone had run out days ago, so his preferred connect was going to be a no go. That meant he'd have to cold cop in the park, something he hated doing but was not a stranger to. He just prayed a decent dealer was out this early because he didn't have the time or the money to go searching all over the East Village for dope.

He picked up the pace, his legs feeling like they were shackled to concrete blocks, boots dragging on the pavement as he walked. He went around to the south side of the park entering just in front of the benches and basketball court where all the dope fiend's congregated day in and day out. Despite his distaste for the park, Michael was a known face. People nodded to him as he passed, some on a heavy lean, others curled up in a ball dope sick. The look in their eyes was all too familiar to him. It was a look of desperation and loss.

Michael passed the public bathrooms, the stench of stale piss and dried blood wafting in the air. He scanned the park for a connect.

"Yo Mike," Spider yelled from behind him.

Michael cursed under his breath. Spider was a younger dope fiend, only nineteen or twenty. He came to the park when he was only fifteen and had been there ever since. Everyone used to call him "baby junky". Michael had no clue how he ended up as Spider, but it sounded like an improvement. Michael sighed and turned to face him.

"Mike. My man." Spider said, shifting his weight from foot to foot. "You holding?"

"Nah I'm dry. Sorry, man." Michael went on his tiptoes, ignoring his unwanted guest, trying to see further across the park. "Playboy around?"

Spider wiped a layer of snot from under his nose. "Yeah, I just seen him like...five minutes ago. I asked him to spot me a few bags, ya' know? But—" He paused, looking deflated.

"He said no."

Michael saw the top of Playboys head pop out from behind a tree across the park. "Gotta go." He said quickly. He took off before Spider had a chance to speak again and more than likely ask Michael to buy him some dope.

Michael called out. "Yo P."

Playboy turned his head, thick dreads bouncing in front of his face. "What's good?" His voice was deep and rough.

"Can you do five for thirty-six?" Michael said.

Playboy's face twisted. "What the fuck? Come on, fool. Thirty-six dollars? Da fuck is that?"

Michael bit his lip. "Four then."

P reached into his bulky jacket pocket, grunting. He pulled out four loose wax bags and slid them into Michael's waiting hand.

"Thanks, man." He handed over the money.

"Uh-huh." Playboy said, shaking his head as he began walking away, "Thirty-six fuckin' dollars." He scoffed under his breath.

Michael headed back to his place in a rush, hoping to blow through to his building before any more random junkies came out of the woodwork to ask for something. Michael took the three flights to his apartment two stairs at a time, his legs burning from the strain. Kayla was awake when he got back, hunched over the toilet violently puking.

"I'm here, baby." He said, shutting the door behind him.

Kayla looked up; spit hanging from her nose and mouth, eyes watering. "I'm sick." She croaked out.

"I know baby. We're okay."

Her hazel eyes lit up. "You have something?"

Michael walked into the bathroom and extracted the bags from his pocket. "It's not much, but it's enough for now."

Kayla tore under the sink, pawing for the gear. She came out with a zip lock bag filled with a handful of syringes, two spoons, and some q-tips. They didn't say another word to each other until their shots were prepped and arms were tied off.

"I love you, baby." She said, eyes down at the crevice of her elbow. She slid the needle into the thick scar that ran down her vein.

"I love you too." Michael hit the same spot on the top of his hand he'd been using for a few weeks, his new old faithful, at least until it disappeared like all his other veins. It was almost gone now, but the universe was smiling upon him today and he registered on the first try. The rush hit them both at the same time, a ball of light exploding under their skin. They sunk back against the wall, tangled in each other's arms.

Shooting dope when you're sick is an amazing thing. You go from throwing up and wanting to rip out of your skin, to absolute bliss and wellness in seconds. The world melts away and a freight train of warmth, stronger than the sun itself, envelops you.

Michael and Kayla woke up still intertwined in the same position three hours later. The syringes littered the floor, matched by random blood drops on the grime stained tile. Michael lit and a cigarette. He took a few drags and passed it to Kayla.

She took a deep pull. "What are we going to do for later?"

Michael didn't answer right away. He just started up at the ceiling. "I'll figure it out, baby." He said eventually. "I'll think of something."

Kayla's face sunk. As if in a wisp of air, her ever increasingly rare smile disappeared again, like it had never existed at all. Michael got to his feet, kissed her on the head, and walked back to the front door.

That was it. It was back to the ripping and running all over again.

No rest for the wicked.

This was his life.

He put one weak hand on the doorknob and turned back to face Kayla. She simply nodded to him and started scraping the empty bags for every last morsel of dope. Michael stared at her for another moment, eyes transfixed, remembering the funny and happy girl she once was. He dropped his eyes.

"I'll think of something." He said again quietly to himself. "I have to."

Michael opened the door and stepped back out into the relentless streets of filth, back to the grind that never ended.