

My Man Clarence

By L. B. Davis

WWLI: We like the way the author employs parallel monologues that never quite intersect in this 'dirty realism' story that nods to Bukowski. It's a literary device that effectively mirrors the breakdown of communication and trust between the junkie and his PO. This is a well-written example of its genre where good guys finish last and some don't finish at all. The knuckly prose gives it heartbeat but in the end the story works because of voice. Lyrical phrasing in street rags abounds: ...And the last line, to our minds, is like, you know, the very definition of what used to be called 'Soul'. Dig?

Clarence rotates the pipe in his fingers slowly while he's hitting it—like you would with a cigar. It makes him look like a sophisticated junkie. You would think he's getting ready to drop some serious life knowledge on you, but when he finally exhales, he can barely finish a full thought. He'll need about two minutes to get his shit together. When he finally does, he'll break into song.

He can sing like a bird. You would think after so many years of free-basing, his voice would be shot, but if you close your eyes and listen to him, you'd think he's Al Green in the flesh—the young Al Green.

After a note-for-note rendition of "Let's Stay Together," he'll once again launch into the story of how he got locked up.

I was making a run. I was supposed to be delivering a package, but when I got there, they was getting raided. When I headed back to the spot to tell them, they was getting raided too. I stashed the rocks in some bushes and waited for everything to clear up. When it was all done, I had more rock than I could smoke in a month. I didn't tell anyone I had it, obviously. I didn't want to give it back, and I didn't want to get caught with it. I also wasn't feeling very generous. You know how crackheads is—they find out I got all that shit, it's gone in an hour. So, I took it home, made a fire in the fireplace, closed the flue...

He spent two months in the jail infirmary; crack-overdose and smoke-inhalation.

I was all fucked-up. I couldn't breathe. They had me hooked up to all this shit. Meanwhile, I'm sick with withdrawals, can't eat or drink anything...

When he was well enough to leave, he spent five years in Federal Prison.

They hit me with a reckless endangerment charge on top of the possession—said the pigs and paramedics were put at risk due to 'exposure.' They said I would've gotten more time, but they couldn't confirm the actual amount of rock. Most of it was burnt up, you see?

Today was my last day as his Parole Officer. I was fired for Gross Misconduct. Clarence doesn't know yet, but it's his fault, and right now I'm fighting the urge to snatch him by the collar and scream "Shut the fuck up! Do you ever shut the fuck up?" It doesn't matter now, though. I always knew it would come to this. All it would take is some fool, not honoring our arrangement for the walls to cave in.

First time he came by here, I was high as fuck, man. I had just got out, had some friends over, and we was celebrating, right? This dude shows up out the blue—talking bout he called like five or six times over the past 24 hours, so he had to come by. He wasn't even mad though.

I realize when a junkie gets released, their typical first line of business is getting back to the business of being a junkie. I understand this, and I told him so. I told him if he asked his friends to leave so we could speak in private, I didn't see any reason for this to be a violation.

I couldn't kick them out fast enough, but I was nervous. He's a P.O., but he got some street in him, you know—intimidation techniques. I thought maybe he asked everyone to leave to spare me some embarrassment or something, but he was all about that square biz.

I've been a Parole Officer for eight years. In most ways, I'm a typical P.O. I help parolees find housing, employment, education and training. I help them get welfare benefits and so on. My main objective is to prevent recidivism. I realized early on, though, drug-offenders re-offend all the fucking time, and the recidivism rates for black, male offenders is sky high. I started taking it personal.

Addicts are the worst about it. I got so tired of locking up addicts—people who probably shouldn't have been locked up in the first place. My conscience started fucking with me, not just because of the re-offending either. Newly released addicts are something like 40% more likely to overdose than the general population. It was exhausting.

I'm not the first P.O. with a heart. Even the most jaded among us get frustrated when parolees go back in for stupid shit. The difference between them and me is when they get fed up, they tend to quit. I decided to do more.

A couple years ago, I read an article about a guy in Indonesia—I can't recall his name, but he opened a drug rehabilitation facility there. He had been through AA himself some years back, but he found the fight for sustained sobriety wasn't necessarily the right approach for every addict. He developed a strategy built on what he called "harm-reduction."

The idea is that 100% sobriety is not what everyone needs. He believed if a person's affairs are in order, if they're not causing any harm to society, if their relationships are intact, then perhaps it's okay to indulge in their vices, responsibly. You wouldn't necessarily ask a sex-addict to abstain from sex forever. You certainly wouldn't insist a food-addict stop eating. They need to learn self-control and discipline. He applied that logic to drug-addicts.

He helps the addicts supply their habit, based on agreements they make when they enter the program. They negotiate what an acceptable amount of indulgence looks like for each individual. He wasn't without his doubters, but apparently, the program had found some success, and addicts were getting their lives back on track.

I was fascinated. I decided to enact my own version of that program for my parolees. Drugs are allowed. We agree on a responsible amount of use, and I supply that. As long as they're taking care of their business, doing well at school or work, and they shut up about it, I won't allow them to go back for drug-offences. I even take their drug tests for them.

I make a similar arrangement with parolees who return to the drug trade. I protect them as best I can, and that's how I supply rations to the addicted parolees. Sometimes they give me shit for having to supply me for free, but protection and freedom to operate without fear of prosecution trumps that conflict. I had a crisis of conscience early, but the results patched that up, no problem.

In the past two years. I've put a record-low, seven total parolees back in prison. Unfortunately, the ones I do send back are for major violations, and most of them are in for life, with no chance of future parole, but none of them went back for drug offences.

All the collateral damage which tends to accompany addiction was also eliminated. Free access to dope keeps the addicts from engaging in other illegal activity—theft, prostitution etc.—to supply their

habit. Rationing the drugs keeps them from losing control, employment, family and any remaining community respect. Most importantly, not one of my parolees has overdosed in two years.

The happiness quotient improved too. The joy ran deep in post-prohibition-parole-land, and Clarence was probably my most satisfied parolee yet. It had been years since he experienced the kind of stability he presently enjoys. It was a strange, beautiful, successful arrangement.

The first thing he asked me was how I was enjoying my freedom—sounding like Morpheus and shit. How are you enjoying your freedom, Clarence? HA! If he wasn't a P.O., and I wasn't a junkie, I would've thought he was gonna offer me a pair of pills, feel me? But he just offered me some help; the kind of help I could tolerate.

Clarence hasn't been honoring the arrangement. I've never heard him tell this story, but I've heard about him telling it. I could have been charged with a plethora of crimes, but the Parole Commission couldn't prove anything, so they just fired me. They said they understood my motivation, and they were impressed with the results, but they obviously couldn't look the other way.

Maybe I'll inspire a colleague to follow suit, and all won't be lost. I suppose it depends on if they see me as a cautionary tale or a tragic hero, but for now, the arrangement is over.

I'll tell Clarence later. He'll be disappointed and apologetic. A lot of people stand to suffer because of this. He's a sweet man. He just talks too damn much. He sure can sing, though.

I'm so tiiiiired of being alone...

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *I feel like all story telling stems from 'what if?' This story is my version of 'what if' drugs were legal? I read an article about a rehab program in Indonesia, and the idea*

came together. When I write, I try as best I can to sound like myself. Bukowski was great at that. He really projected his voice well, and he inspires me to project my own.

BIO: My name is L. B. Davis. I'm a call center employee who likes to write. I've been published by *Brilliant Flash Fiction Magazine* and *The Raven's Perch*. I live in Chandler, AZ.