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The Narcotic Field Theory

by

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Chapter One

I am afraid of cities—Sartre

Midnight . . . noon, there was no way to tell. The studio apartment's only window, thickly covered by a shabby old Persian rug, let in no light. The day couldn't even be told for certain. The relatively small 1940's studio apartment, disconnected from time, existed in its own scruffy pocket of space. Groaning, Christian rolled out of bed and shuffled into the bathroom. He filled the sink, repeatedly dunked his head, then gulped mouthfuls of cold water straight from the spigot, leaned forward on the sink and studied his pupils in the mirror. Recent events proved that days might have passed while, in a drug-induced blackout, he continued to function, only to later hear details of what he'd done and to whom. Tiny pupils indicated a temporary well-being.

Collapsing back in bed, he glanced at the long dead clock. Memory fragments, chaotic, out of sequence, useless as touchstones, drifted through his mind. No last memory could be identified; liberating in an offbeat way. Eyes closed, he tried to will himself back to

sleep; it was impossible. With a moan he reached over to turn on the TV, to find static revealing another unpaid bill. The city outside made no noise but the constant lull of traffic crashing on the shore. He felt around the bed for his guitar, picked it up, cradled it, lay back to hum tunelessly and watch the static. Dim memories of a hectic car ride through the traffic choked streets ending at a rehearsal room full of oddly dressed people smoking drugs and drinking, came and went. This set off a catalogue of the previous days' happenings muttering around in his head.

Minutes later, restless, up off the Murphy bed, Christian tenderly placed his guitar on its stand in the corner. He'd built a shrine for the six string Les Paul with crosses, Jewish stars, a whole collection of obscure religious objects and Polaroids of Dolci, an interesting woman he'd met downtown. Often, after ritual self-medication, hours were spent having visions, genuflecting to the wild gods that endorsed his behavior.

Stretching out on the bed, he felt behind the headboard into the cubbyhole, and pulled out an ever-diminishing ball of Mexican black tar heroin bought only last week. "Perhaps a mouse creeps out at night to nibble on the dope," Christian thought, imagining the little addict, heroin stained whiskers twitching, getting thrown out of the mousehole by his girlfriend for being a fuck-up.

"Do the math," he thought desultorily, "however it disappears"

Rummaging through piles of newspapers scattered on the floor he found a piece of aluminum foil, rolled up his last 10 dollar bill, put a smear of the tar heroin on the foil, lit it from underneath with a lighter and inhaled the fumes through the bill deep into his lungs. He did it again and again. A scrap of sanity still resisted the dreary monotony of this tribulation. A short blissful period justified everything. The bottomless complicated warmth mercifully spread and eased his afflictions—physical, mental, some imaginary. One more

hit to completely detach, and he deemed himself courageous, ready to plunder the dealers who bore the blame for his diminished circumstances and steady fall from grace . . . the aromatic heroin left him hollowed out and tranquil.

Smoking heroin made him superior to the bloody-armed needle users. Not that it mattered at this late date. The rank of mad poet required a heedless madcap lifestyle of its practitioners, who often ended up living in dark areas of the city with its unbalanced citizens. The thieves believe themselves righteous and Darwinian, Hollywood whores trade their flesh for the blank rapture of intoxication, and all the junkies regard opiates as sacred stuff with impenetrable powers. Christian knew the life he aspired to demanded a certain degree of dangerous suffering, lunacy was mandatory. Heroin encouraged madness. Supplies were low.

He grabbed his phone book, stumbled out of the apartment, down the hall and through the front door, wincing into the afternoon sun. The glare was abruptly veiled by Old John, the aging landlord, as he rose from the lawn chair nailed to the building's front porch.

"Where's my rent?" Old John leaned into the question, demanding and vexed. Mostly honest, at 93 years old he had no time for civility.

"I think I paid," Christian said, making a show of going through his pockets.

"What?!" Senility plagued Old John. He plopped back into his chair and momentarily questioned his own senses.

"I paid the rent."

"Where's your receipt?" Old John grunted and fervently thrust out his hand.

"How tiresome to be you. No faith. I'll find your beloved receipt." Christian turned, heading back inside toward the imaginary document.

"Confound you, cancerous swine!" Old John sputtered, stood, then collapsed back to his flimsy folding chair. "You didn't pay no rent!"

"I've paid before. It's this month we're worried about."

Old John had forty-eight years dealing with scofflaws and rent dodgers, and he lived the entire time in the same apartment filled to choking with nearly fifty years worth of movie and celebrity magazines, furniture and utensils abandoned by tenants; and had come to believe he owned the whole building. He posted up on the front stoop from nine to nine daily, worked himself into minor rages and insulted tenants with an amateur linguist's collection of curses and blasphemy.

"Sweet Jesus Christ on a bicycle! You're a week late. We got a no guttersnipe policy here."

"First thing tomorrow morning," Christian put his hand out to shake, "I'll be at your door with the rent. You'll wonder why you couldn't trust me."

Old John waved the handshake off with a scowl. "What's going to happen between now and then, young criminal?"

"Things happen at night," Christian assured him, backing away.

"Get out of my life." Old John snapped his newspaper up dismissing the situation.

Christian made his way down Whitley Avenue to Hollywood Boulevard, avoided a couple of dirty bearded panhandlers, admired the late afternoon hookers, ducked behind a parked car when Robbie (of the 200 dollar dispute) cruised by, and then continued to stroll the boulevard looking for likely prospects. The smell of burning cow brought on a fit of hunger that felt like it hadn't eaten for days. Entering a shop so tiny that only one customer at a time could fit, Christian bought a falafel sliced from a huge hunk of rotating beef by an ironic Arab who gratefully received Christian's money then ordered him out of the shop. He

ate the falafel while studying posters and flyers in the next door window of a decrepit second-hand CD store. Nailed above the door was a single tiny speaker, battered and covered with masking tape, blaring sounds that might have been music or a recording of trains crashing. Tourists and street kids flowed around Christian down the sidewalk to nowhere in particular, and on the boulevard itself a steady stream of cars, taxis and buses were headed the same direction.

He stepped inside a phone booth and thumbed through his little black book searching for a suitable subject to grift upon. Vernon? Broke. Maxwell? In London. Darby? No, dead. Robbie? Obviously not. Janet! Generally obnoxious, she had given him lots of reasons: turned him onto crappy cocaine last week, complained about everything, and made disparaging remarks about James Brown. The silly, musically ignorant bitch fancied herself an international drug dealer. Once a month, with daddy's money, she bought an ounce of cocaine from minor league Columbian gangsters and sold grams to Japanese and European tourists. Janet's vulnerability was primed by a couple of real dope deals with Christian in the last few months where no one was robbed or violated. He loathed her Beverly Hills sensibilities, the naked craving for money and fashion, and loathed his dependence on her—even if that dependence only lasted the afternoon. Janet managed to scrape his last nerve raw, and Christian imagined he also annoyed her in some fundamental way. He dialed her number.

"Hey, Janet, it's me, Christian . . . Woke you up? Sorry . . . It's elevenish or one or so . . . You looking? . . . Remember those guys from Bolivia I was telling you about? . . . Very low price . . . Is your phone cool? . . . I'm on a pay phone, I don't trust mine . . . Okay, I can get you two ounces for a thousand, and it's far superior to that dreary Columbian . . . No, no

. . . That's not what I meant, your shit is great. Just in relation . . . Because they're broke, they owe me a favor, because, because . . . I don't want to put you out I know another guy . . . All right, there's only one problem. He doesn't want to meet anybody . . . No, I don't expect you to front out any money . . . I guess I'll tell him you're a cool drug dealer or something . . . I'll meet you on the corner of Whitley and Hollywood in an hour . . . Great! Bye."

Already exhausted by her, Christian hung up. He'd have to sit in Janet's car and act like he didn't hate her. She'd bring Butch, her ex-con boyfriend, who often livened up nightclubs and parties by slapping her for no sane reason. Christian had long ago vowed that if he ever got arrested and Butch was the kind of mook you met in jail, he'd kill himself in the back of the police car on the way down to the station.

To his credit, Butch had turned one of Christian's real drug deals with Janet into an utter fiasco. Several months back the three agreed to meet in the dark corner of a crowded trendy coffee house. While they traded cash for cocaine Butch took exception to Janet lightheartedly calling him a fag. He conked her on the head with the three-ounce sack of cocaine they'd just purchased from Christian. The industrial sized baggie burst open, a cloud of powdered cut and cocaine gushed across the room settling over counters, tabletops, cups of coffee and at least half of the patrons. Janet, aghast, mortified and infuriated, leapt up on her chair and shouted through gritted teeth, "THIS IS MY COCAINE! DO NOT TOUCH IT!" The coffee addicts, unaware 'til then that the cloud was coke, obliged by whipping out credit cards and driver's licenses to scrape up as much as possible. The one or two not inclined to touch it were nonetheless covered with the powder. An ex-addict cursed God, as he knew him. A dramatic beatnik looking fellow fell to the floor, clutched his face and screeched, "My eyes! My eyes!" His girlfriend watched dispassionately as if at the

theatre. Several people, including Butch and the beatnik's girl, casually snorted lines on their tables. An angry Janet darted about mindlessly, yelling at no one and everyone in particular, "You owe me MONEY, mister!" She cursed, cried, and stamped her feet in a complicated little dance with more rhythm than Christian would have given her credit for. The God cursing addict gave Janet a dollar.

Disorder inspired Christian. He climbed up on a counter, upset an exotic espresso machine, and loudly recited improvisational poetry to the coke-addled customers. Like many of his latest poems this one was about the physics of Chance, Chaos and Circumstance. Inspired by the blind whimsical course of the cocaine deal, Christian nearly shouted his poem. The cafe manager demanded that he cease and desist because the establishment didn't have a cabaret license—therefore shouting poetry was illegal. He didn't say a word about the presumably unlicensable act of hurling cocaine about the cafe.

Her pink and black late model BMW screeched to a halt in front of the falafel shop, scattering a gaggle of street kids. It had started to drizzle and Christian gratefully jumped into the front passenger seat. The BMW swung back onto Hollywood Boulevard's gridlocked midafternoon traffic. Today's Janet dressed like a wealthy model/hooker: black stiletto heels, a mustard miniskirt, black silk blouse and, perched jauntily atop her head, a leopardskin pillbox hat. If she didn't speak the result would have been striking. She cursed traffic and beat on the steering wheel. Her abusive lover Butch looked like he might be implicated in a string of liquor store robberies any minute. Brutally handsome, sullen, hard and stupid in a black leather motorcycle jacket, black T-shirt and black jeans, he often had a black eye. Butch may very well be blacking his own eye. He sat in the back seat fiddling with a crack pipe.

"What's Up?" Christian asked. He had no real conversation for the duo.

"Nothing much. How do you like the new car?" Janet said, spreading her hands like a spokesmodel.

"Let's quit with the fuckin' chitchat." Butch tapped his front teeth with the crack pipe and glared at Christian. "You got the dope?"

"I told Janet we had to go pick it up."

"God damn it. You silly bitch."

"Baby, come on. Get a grip. Come on baby. Baby?"

Butch grunted and snarled and feinted towards Janet who flinched and cursed him.

Christian, suddenly restless, listened to Butch's subhuman growls, stared at Janet's hat, and longed for the last of his dope. "I need to stop by my studio for a minute, to get dude's number."

With a stylish one-handed move Janet threw the steering wheel to the right, pulled out of the traffic, onto the sidewalk, nearly killing a street mime, turned up Whitley and skidded to a stop in front of Christian's building.

"Hurry the fuck up," Butch barked. He and Janet began to make-out.

Christian sprinted up the steps, past Old John trying to gather his wits to curse, bounced down the hall, let himself into his studio, and plopped down on the bed where the ball of tar and foil still lay.

Smoking and coughing and cursing himself, Christian inhaled the last of his dope, then sat musing on the spot he was in. Impulsively, he threw open the door and stepped into the dingily carpeted hall to tap on his neighbor's door. Ginna Kay Beal, a misplaced slender Texan halfheartedly nursing a romantic grudge against him, answered the door and came out into the hall. By day Ginna worked at a clinic where her fellow social workers

regarded her as dowdy; by night, with the help of vodka and friends like Christian, she turned into an attractive punk rocker. They'd come to be neighbors when Christian was evicted from his last domicile (a self-storage room) after falling two months behind on the rent. Ginna had only known him for two weeks, but compelled by infatuation, she cosigned the lease allowing him to get a studio apartment in her building.

"What could you possibly want?" Ginna asked, hoping she sounded subtly flirtatious; pleased and annoyed that he'd shown up on her doorstep, continually excited and exasperated by his antics. Their last few dates, or outings as Christian called them, had been marked by misadventure. There was an argument with street thugs about poetry; a bass guitar stolen right off the stage at a small club; and while Ginna used the restroom at a movie theatre, Christian stole the purse of a rich old woman in the seat in front of him. Before Ginna got back to her seat, Christian had changed his, they lost each other and she hadn't found him until the next morning. He later claimed to have lost his memory.

All of this paled next to his harrowing propensity for conning money from drug dealers. One day while Ginna and Christian were on the Hollywood Freeway, a recent victim caught sight of Christian in the passenger seat and chased Ginna's van from downtown L.A. all the way to the outskirts of Orange County. Usually his marks had no idea that the loss of their money had been planned. That Christian could make a plan probably never crossed their minds. Often so stoned that he fell out of chairs or cars or buildings, he still carried himself with a graceful aplomb that Ginna found mesmerizing. He'd also borrowed fifty dollars from her before their movie date.

"Can you give me a ride to the Quickie Mart?" Christian asked, trying to look sane.

"It's only two blocks away."

"I have some business . . . and I don't want to walk around this declining neighborhood with my pockets full of cash. Besides, I want to pay back that twenty-five dollars."

"Fifty dollars. Wait here, I'll get my keys." Ginna didn't want the fifty dollars so much as she was curious about who gave him money beside herself. Friends and acquaintances had told her rumors about him that bordered on urban legend. She didn't like to make up her mind based on other people's perceptions, and though she had enough personal experience to convict him—her infatuation wanted more adventure.

"I'll meet you out by your van. I have to tell these people parked on the street where to meet us." Christian said, and barged out the door.

"People?! What people? Wait!" Ginna yelled, but he ran down the hall and out the front door. "Christian! . . . oh, man."

He bounded down the stairs, slowed to a walk as he approached the BMW, wearily pushed his hair back with both hands, studiously rubbed his forehead, and leaned down to lie to Janet through the window, "Look, I don't think this is going to work out. Sorry I wasted your time. I'll call you later if something else comes up."

"What the fuck," she moaned. "What happened?" She took off her hat and prepared herself to throw a fit. "I already have it sold and the money spent!"

"It's too much of a hassle. My life is too complicated. It's all too much."

Butch peered through his crack pipe and growled, "Ohhh, motherfucker?"

Janet took a calming breath and changed gears. "Christian, honey, I got up before noon." She looked nervously in her rear view mirror at Butch whose metabolism was so out of whack that cocaine acted on him like a sedative. If he didn't get some soon there would be trouble, mostly for her.

"Oh Christ, all right. I talked to the Bolivians and they do need to get rid of the stuff. But I don't want any paranoid secret agent shit. I'm not making anything off the deal." This was a lie drug dealers routinely told each other. "Now, he doesn't want to meet anybody . . ."

"I do not front out my money," Janet said savagely, biting off each word.

"See how it is? I don't have time for this." He held his ground, kneeling on the curb, and had no intention of leaving. They stared at each other—Christian the well rehearsed picture of propriety, Janet grim and unyielding. He believed that setting her up was proper and nearly righteous. She'd been ripped off, burned and trained by past mishaps. Butch rummaged under the car seat looking for some little chocolate chip cookies he'd spilled last month in another car.

"I don't front my money out. You know that." Janet stuck out her lower lip, shrugged both shoulders and rolled her head emphatically. "I won't."

Christian carried on. "Okay, because you're my friend I'm going to work with you. We'll go to the Quickie Mart. You park directly in front. I'll call the connect. He lives right down the street. The deal will go down in plain view. He won't know you're there, so he'll be happy. Your money won't be out of your sight, you'll practically be in the middle of the transaction, you're ecstatic, serene and Zen. But you can't let him know you're there. Okay? Okay."

Janet pointed both fingers at Christian. "*You* don't understand."

"Are you trying to compromise my connection or what?"

"A plan where I front money doesn't work." She snapped her fingers in his face.

"Hello? Do you speak English?"

Butch growing increasingly furious as the negotiations progressed and yet no cocaine, decided to speak up and hasten the deal. "You! Punk ass bitch! Get in the car." He pointed at Christian, still kneeling on the curb.

Butch leaned into the front seat until his face was an inch from Christian's. "Get the dope. If you try any monkey business, I'll fuck you up." He leered, gritted his teeth, and sneered crookedly like he had a rare mental illness. Butch realized that Christian thought him foolish and tried to salvage his integrity by snatching a disc out of the CD player and throwing it out the window.

"Let's do this," Butch said, as Janet whimpered and got out of the car to retrieve her CD.

"The creature speaks," Christian thought, but he liked Butch, momentarily, for distracting Janet with his brutal love, not giving her a chance to think.

"Right, I'll meet you guys at the market in ten minutes. You can give me the money then. Everything will be right."

Christian leapt from the car and ran: arms and legs pumping, he flew up the sidewalk, around the side yard and dived in the open Volkswagen window. Ginna wasn't there. "Shit!" He clambered out of the van and ran back into the apartment building.

"Communist!" Old John cried; but Christian was already gone into the building, at Ginna's door, rattling the knob.

She opened the door, hand on hip, feigning mild surprise. "Can I help you?"

"What are you doing?" Christian said, grabbing her hand, pulling her into the hall and slamming the door all in one motion. "Come on!"

"Hold on." Ginna leaned against the door. "I want you." She put her hands together as if praying. "I want you."

"I'm sure this involves a deposit or guidelines that I'll have to follow. Come on! We can negotiate later." He pulled her by the hand down the hall. Ginna stopped short.

"No, you'll simply do as I please."

"That doesn't sound so bad," Christian mused.

"It won't be."

"Can we go? I beseech you and can you please stop stopping? Please!?" Christian peered out the front door window and noted that Old John had gone off on some landlordish business.

Ginna moved quickly to the front door of the apartment building and opened it. "I like you insanely polite and demanding."

Christian darted around her and down the stairs only to look back and see her sitting in Old John's lawn chair. "You're an odd woman."

"Odd? Don't you mean strange?"

"All right."

"People never notice," She said, a hint of mope in her voice.

"Well, I have. You're strange."

"Everybody at work thinks I'm normal. It's a bother."

"I understand, though I have the opposite problem."

Old John limped and cursed around the corner of the building and locked the gate that Christian had left open. John stopped to yell at a tenant in a window on the second floor about a troublesome and traitorish dog.

"Let's go! Please!" Christian said.

Ginna hesitated, certain that she was being drawn into something full of future regrets. She glanced at her watch, stood up from the chair, and took Christian's hand, hoping for not the worst—the kind of hope that kept men like Christian in girlfriends.

There was no point in letting Butch get a look at Ginna, so Christian had her park a block away from the rendezvous point. He jogged to the market and came upon Janet leaning provocatively on her BMW entertaining a couple of the local dealers who practically lived in the parking lot. Butch had directed her to wheedle a crack rock, while he tried to out brag a pimp sitting in a nearby Jaguar.

"Excuse me," Christian said coldly to Janet's admirers, "I have business with this woman." Butch scurried over, not wanting to miss any dope. The three of them got into the BMW.

"Give me the money. I'll call the connect right there at the pay phone and this will be over in five minutes."

Janet reluctantly handed over nine hundred eighty dollars, staring at Christian with all the intensity she could muster. "Here's a thousand. This better be good shit."

Christian snorted indignantly, climbed out of the car, and approached the phone booth attached to the front of the Quickie Mart. He turned and walked back to the car.

He smiled at Janet, "You have a quarter?"

She fished a dusty quarter out of the ashtray and dropped it in his hand with an icy stare as if he were a beggar. Christian sauntered back over to the phone and dialed the Los Angeles Police Department.

"Hi," he cupped the phone and urgently whispered, "I'm in front of the Quickie Mart on the corner of Highland and Hollywood. There's two guys with guns and I think they're

gonna rob . . . Oh My God! Gotta go.” He hung up the phone and casually walked back to the BMW.

“We’re good. He’s sending someone over with the coke immediately. Wants me to meet him inside by the beer cooler. Hang tight.”

Janet’s face tightened with characteristic petulance, but she bit her lip and said nothing. Christian had the money; too late to try and control anything.

Butch snarled, “Hurry fuckin’ up.”

Christian pushed into the store. Behind the counter was the clerk, a young Goth woman with black lipstick and fingernail polish. She glanced up from her magazine. “Can I help you?”

“No.”

“Good.”

Christian absently picked up a magazine and rifled through the pages. An older woman, who might have been a librarian from the look of her, entered the store. Casting her as “The Drug Dealer”, he asked if she could give him change for a dollar in order that Janet should see a transaction. The librarian counted out change and asked him a question. He stared at her, uncomprehending, couldn't hear a word, the whole world stopped as he focused on what he wanted to happen. He cursed the tardy cops.

As if cued, three police cars roared into the parking lot and slid squealing to a stop, perfectly in the offensive/defensive pattern taught them in an anti-terrorist seminar by out of work terrorists. The parking lot drug dealers, pimps and general layabouts scurried off to a more hospitable arena. From behind the magazine rack Christian watched the energetic cops pile out of their cars, crouch down and draw their guns.

A moment before the police arrived, Butch had left the BMW to peer in the store window, and now, like a full-fledged idiot, began running as if he'd recently murdered someone. Christian couldn't have hoped for more and decided to give Butch some money or dope later if the police didn't catch him. Officers Mitchell and Jones sprinted after Butch, who threw his crack pipe over his shoulder, nearly hitting Mitchell in the face.

Janet calmly started her car and slowly backed out of the parking lot. She spoke politely to one of the policemen, and then made her escape at the maximum legal speed thinking it every man, woman or idiot for themselves.

Christian cautiously walked out of the store. His longish hair and general fashion sense caused the police to peg him as one of the alleged robbers. Officer Browning pulled his megaphone from the trunk and blared at the suspect, only a few feet away, "HIT THE GROUND SCUMBAG! NOW!" Christian promptly complied.

The librarian came out of the store, arms raised, teeth clutching her purse.

"GET OUT OF HERE LADY! THIS IS A CRIME SCENE!" Browning bellowed. Purse in mouth, she crossed the street and kept going.

The clerk peered out the door. She glanced at Christian lying on the asphalt, then looked to the police.

"IS THAT THE GUY?" Browning demanded.

"What?" the Goth clerk asked, confused.

Realizing that the megaphone made his voice nearly incomprehensible, Browning set it aside. "Is that the guy?" he yelled, motioning with his gun towards Christian.

"What guy?" the clerk yelled back, staring at Christian to see if she recognized him, wondering why she should.

"The robber! Who tried to hold you up!" Browning shouted, angry at the uncooperative clerk.

"No . . . what?" Spooked, she jumped away from the entrance, spun on her heels and studied the store. "A robber?" The Gothic convenience store clerk looked in all directions, lastly at Officer Browning. "Huh?"

Browning jabbed his gun in Christian's direction in frustration. "That guy!"

"No, he's a customer."

"Buying orange juice, officer," Christian said.

The police rushed the store, Christian and the clerk forgotten.

"Orange juice?" the Goth girl said sternly.

"Whatever," Christian bowed to the clerk, and then took off trotting down the street towards Ginna's van with his \$980.