

Ditch Lilies chronicles street youth in late 1980's Pittsburgh, when Downtown's major avenues hopped with vice and depravity.

DITCH LILIES

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CHAPTER ONE:

THE AVENUE

The year is 1987, and the streets he walks are not yet gentrified as they will be a decade from now. This night he peers up at the cornices on the building across the way and wonders how many years of built-up pigeon shit lay there, and how many more it's going to take before it rises up like mighty stalagmites to cover the cloudy windows. Litter would swirl around the misused garbage cans if ever a cleansing breeze made its way down the avenue. Instead it's kicked from the path of every passing shoe and collects in the gutters. They haven't put too many bus stops along this length of Liberty yet, and in the stretch between Sixth and Ninth Streets the characters wander like aimless children.

Freak show, Daimey thinks with glee. The strippers and whores, drunks and junkies, your garden variety skid row souls. They walk and they talk and they indulge their vices, ladies and gentlemen. Step right up and pick your very own *teenage male prostitute!* See the lactating *peep show girl!* Examine our array of white powered substances from China White to White Horse to baking powder for you rubes out there. Daimey hissed through his teeth at some respectable looking tourists who should

have gotten off a block earlier. *Stick to Wood Street. Beware, all ye who enter here...*

There were seven more dime bags burning a hole in his pocket. He tried to adhere to the quota he set for himself every night, even if he'd done better the previous night and definitely if he'd done worse. No room for slackitude. Never knew when you'd be laid up in jail and losing that precious revenue opportunity. Blowing out his cheeks and pacing the curb, he perused the activity on the avenue. It had been a shitty day, dreary and sleepy, and now the comers-and-goers lacked the usual energy. The vibe was much better when it rained most of the day. Then it was like all the bad schoolkids that had been cooped up tore hell for the main drag once it dried out, intent on making up for lost time. Daimey rolled the tension out of his shoulders and decided he would have to take a walk or lose his gumption.

Strolling past the video arcade, the raucous blast of noise that jumped at his head made him move on without looking in. He'd been in there too many times tonight and the guy behind the window was a hard-ass. There was no business to be had there or Daimey would have found it anyway. He checked the succession of adult stores and dive bars across the street hoping for a glimpse of Kat. She hadn't come by in a while. Maybe she was having a good night.

Daimey came upon the usual gaggle of male hustlers on their corner in front of the bank., carrying on and bitching at each other. Much to his amusement he was occasionally mistaken for one, which he assumed was a compliment. Perhaps it meant he looked young and pretty. He was so obviously on the make that some pervs took him for a hustler. The regulars knew better though—they knew which boys were in the game.

It still half fascinated Daimey to watch the pickups go down. Some of the young guys were denim jacketed, baseball cap wearing straight dudes trying to look tough as they entered a car, trying not to give away this was a necessity and not a choice. Daimey sensed they were ashamed. Not like the sleek, coy gay boys though. They would come out in the finest their means allowed and work the corner like it was their star turn, smug when the john pointed in their direction. They departed with the air of being bestowed an honor.

What Daimey didn't fully grasp was the shared resignation between the two types of hustlers. Only the outward bravado was different. Even if he were able to see that side of the coin, he could not have been any more thankful that that life didn't involve him.

He stopped to talk to the boys. Daimey held no hetero-man prejudice about gays and there was no antagonism

on their part either. They joked with him and shot the shit and were good customers of his. There wasn't one among them that hadn't offered their services running weed, but Daimey's answer was always the same. "Got all the help I need, man. Got it covered." Business was business.

Tonight, action was slow. He lifted his chin in greeting. "S'up."

"Not a damn, honey," Little Jeff drawled. "Even in this get-up I can't land one." He gestured to his skintight attire and skewed his lower lip.

Robin concurred. "It sucks, and not in the way that's gonna make me any cash." His slender brown arms were tucked around his waist, eyes never still. "What the fuck is up with this?"

Daimey noticed Sammy sitting on the stoop of the darkened bank. "S'up, man."

Sammy was a brawny kid, blond curly hair and a post-puberty mustache dusting his lip. He looked like a high school Everykid which added to his value on the street. "Not much." He stretched out an arm to knock fists with Daimey. "Take one of your bags if you got 'em."

"They ain't goin' nowhere tonight." Daimey took one from his pocket.

“Word. I hear that.” Sammy gave up a ten-spot and palmed the weed. Surreptitiously he cracked open the bag and sniffed deep. “Yeah. That’s something worth havin’. How’s your kitty- Kat?”

“Doin’ good, I suppose. She’s either unloading it slow or making the effort tryin’.” Daimey spit on the pavement, a stupid habit he tried to break himself of. Once the phlegm left his mouth he wished he’d thought enough to stop. It grossed Kat out.

“She is so pretty, man,” Sammy said, shaking his head and looking at Daimey with grave eyes. “I tell you...”

“Yeah, she’s a keeper.” Daimey was brisk. He avoided talking about her. Not that he wouldn’t wax on about a fine lady, but he so respected Kat that he didn’t tolerate others saying their shit about her. It bothered him, and even though she had no awareness of the conversation he knew the attention bothered her too. Sauntering to the mailbox, he flipped the maw of it open a couple times to occupy himself. The echo of it slamming shut bounced off the buildings.

“Your mojo must be drummin’ up some business,” Little Jeff purred, gaze locked on a burgundy Cutlass that slowed to the corner. Daimey caught the driver looking him over and walked away from the curb.

“You don’t want him, baby,” Little Jeff chided the man. “He’s straight. Lookee here...”

“No, Jeffy, that’s the man that likes tickling.” Robin called out. At that, Sammy sprung up and was upon the car by reflex. The driver unlocked the door. Robin threw a sympathetic chuckle aside to his friend. “You know he likes those big strong quarterback types. Sammy gets him twice a week.”

The thought of Sammy tickling or being tickled by that old guy was something Daimey preferred not to ponder. He threw a wave to the corner boys and turned down towards Penn for a quick loop around the block.

Here’s where the females hooked thick as crabgrass, on Penn Avenue. It was half a block to the Alexander Hotel which still gave hourly rates, very good for the trade. Most of the stretch was dismal at night but the score of closed storefronts showcased the girls like some red-light honeycomb. The guys trolled this stretch and scrutinized to their heart’s content. Daimey figured he would take a shot at the bars close by and see if anyone was needing.

There was a pronounced rougher element to the few holes in the wall on Penn—bikers, ruffians waiting for their dancer/whore girlfriends to come back with money, the heroin crowd. Pool hustlers with their Wildroot and a-

lines strutting amongst the tables, cocky and loaded with Jim Beam. They were sometimes good for a few bags. Most of them wanted coke though, to keep the buzz going. Daimey had toyed with the idea of branching out a number of times but hadn't gotten around to executing a plan. It was coming. For financial purposes, for his future, it was on the horizon.

He located the most familiar face in the bunch and plastered on a smile. The shark offered a nod and laid an intense gaze on the one-pocket game. In position he landed an excellent kick shot and Daimey led the applause.

Crowing, the guy ordered another drink, "...and one for my good luck charm here..." Taking Daimey in an affectionate headlock, the guy tossed him around a bit and slapped him on the back. "That game just paid my rent for three months, buddy." He haw-hawed and made a gross sound clearing his throat.

Daimey bobbed his head. He accepted the nasty highball from the bartender and turned back to...Al? Steve? What the hell was his name? Stan. *Stan*. "Thanks Stan. Cheers, guy. So hey, you want..."

"Let me tell you, I had that in the bag from minute one. This cockroach thinks he can cheat me, it doesn't happen, man. He's not on his turf in Beltzhoover, right?"

Even if he won, he'd have left with empty pockets." Stan paused to yank up his shirt sleeve and display the Aryan tattoo on his bicep. "We'd have made sure." His lips were wet in a way that turned Daimey's lunch all around. Trying to feign appreciation for some suck-ass drink and standing around with this turkey was more effort than he wanted to put out. He was almost hopping up and down with the effort to restrain himself. All he wanted to know was if the guy was interested in buying, for chrissakes.

As a rule Daimey didn't drink. He had a fake ID but getting served wasn't the issue. He didn't like how sloppy it made people, from his dad on up. Smoke was his recreation. He broke the golden rule not to do what you dealt but he'd been getting high long before having to earn a living and that took precedence in his credo. Looking at the barflies for too long reinforced Daimey's disdain. This was where they chose to be, *preferred* to be. It seemed a tremendous waste of time.

Stan jabbered on and on, laughing like a pig at Daimey's elbow. Daimey rued venturing into the bar but was at a loss of how to extricate himself. How he wanted to throw a bottle at the wall and just scream in Stan's face to shut up for a fucking minute! *I can go back home and get this* was the thought that came to mind, and he shook his head as he chewed on his ice cubes.

It took a few minutes but Fate was kind. He was saved from Stan's braying by a lovely blond cocktail waitress.

"Honey!" Stan turned up his volume. "Honey, when you gonna let me make an honest woman out of you and agree to bear my children?" He followed this up by cupping the poor blonde's ass cheek and wedging his fingers way too close to the holy land. Daimey nearly swallowed his tongue. *That's one way to get 'em, chief. Why not try pulling your dick out right here and have her make a go of it?*

The waitress had known him since times of yore and could lay into him better than anyone. The barflies refrained from breathing just to hear her comeback.

"Stan Polk, I knew you since you was *Stan-Polk-Can't-Poke* in high school and if you couldn't do it then *why in the HELL* should I believe you can do it *now*?" This seemed a ritual to the vast amusement of the regulars. Over the approving howls and whistles she took his drink away from him and threw glass and all into the trashcan. "And let me tell you something else, Mister, you got enough of a belly on you, put on a wig and pretend yuz carryin' ya own damn kids."

The stormy blonde drive Stan to distraction and Daimey sailed on in her wake. Ditching his drink, he clapped Stan on the shoulder on his way to the door. "You

got your hands full there, buddy. Quite a lady. No man, can't stay. Gotta go, gotta run, I'll see you around."

Screw this nonsense, Daimey thought as he burst like a free man into the night air. Couldn't burn bridges, that was never wise, but enough was enough sometimes. *Kill me before I end up like those numb-nut wonders, please. Just nail me to the wall and leave me.* He shuddered as if their crudeness was contagious. Were these guys once halfway redeemable people who ended up in slums with tired, dried out girlfriends by some sort of accident? To have a broad that matched you drink for drink and drooled all over you until you couldn't even love her properly, were she worth that kind of love...

Daimey shuddered again. Not that outsiders would think he were much better, he and Kat. But Kat was special, she was golden, so golden Daimey couldn't bear to bring her down by being more than whatever-the-hell he was to her. Kat was decent and deserved some kind of life. The best Daimey had to offer wasn't a hell of a lot. Yet she ran for him, shared her apartment with him and was the other half of him.

And what was he? A loser, some juvey hall reject that wasn't even old enough to be a bike courier, *no wait, that isn't all there is to my life, it's not true! I am a good person I saved a kid from drowning once and I never*

swear around old people and I am so much more, I am, I ammmmm Daimey began to hum out loud. Hum or lose his mind. Years of negativity, man. No matter how much time passed it seemed all the shit was right there again sometimes. Waiting to blow your legs out from under you. That was it, no more pitstops in bar tonight. It depressed Daimey to hell and back.

He was able to unload an eighth to a cab driver and another dime to the guy who manned the parking garage next to the city's-best-pastrami sign. Security guards were reliable buyers. It got boring playing babysitter to nearly empty buildings. You had your radio and some nudie magazines and what else? Usually the classified section to look for another job, joining the ranks of pizza deliverymen who were many of Daimey's best customers too.

Rounding the defunct opera house on the corner, Daimey headed back towards Liberty Avenue. The fact that a thriving local fish joint occupied space next to Spade's made Daimey chuckle every time. Spade's was an all night porno theatre with peep show booths on the second floor and it was said if it wasn't the smell of spunk making you sick, it would be the odor of fish. Not emanating from the girls of course, wink wink. A sandwich shop stood proud amidst the storefronts next to an incongruous lighting fixture supplier and a specialty

luggage shop equally out of place. Daimey never saw either in operation since they closed down well before he hit the avenue for the night. In the end it would only be the lighting and luggage stores that endured once the city council wielded their bureaucratic broom in their “Sweep the Avenue Clean” campaign, still years from inception. All these rag-tag places would be forced out. The renovations would begin for the sake of cultural attractiveness. Daimey checked his beeper in front of the variety store that would one day be an eye care chain next to a coffeehouse with a French name. He was getting a page.

Good people. Chris Anne was from the West End and had been a friend of Daimey’s since last summer when he’d needed a job. Her husband Derek ran a flower business that sent joes to various posts around the city—intersections, strip malls—selling bouquets from buckets. Derek was a fair boss who paid cash. Daimey worked the off ramp of an expressway for months, working up capital to start selling weed.

“What can I do for you tonight, Chris Anne?” Daimey grinned into the mouthpiece of the corner pay phone. He needed whatever they were spending tonight.

“You know, D, I hate to make you run out here for a quarter. I just wanted to make sure you were out tonight,

I'll come down myself." Her smoked braised voice disappeared in the roar of a passing truck. Daimey plugged his other ear.

"As you can hear, I'm out on my usual beat awaiting your arrival. How long?"

"About twenty minutes."

"See ya then." He was relieved she didn't want delivery because that would have meant rounding up that looby Cargo to get his ass to drive it. There had been no sign of him tonight and that suited Daimey just fine. If there was no business, Cargo whined. If there was, he complained. Right now Daimey didn't have it in him to deal with that. After Chris Anne showed up, he was ready to call it a night.

It was never a good idea to have lots of goodies on you and Daimey had a dozen safe cubbyholes Downtown in which to hide them. When someone wanted quantity or the runners needed refueling he'd slip off to get what was needed. Chris Anne's eighth was taped to the underside of a pipe cover in a nearby alley, and he made quick time recovering it. Within two minutes he was back on the avenue, fists in his pockets keeping the stash close. *I'm Olympic material.*

He noticed Kat emerging from the newsstand across the street where she'd been buying cigarettes and stopped just short of calling to her. For a moment he watched her and let their breaths keep time. Kat. She had long ropy hair that always looked like she'd just unbraided it. Daimey looked forward to the approaching summer because it would frame her shoulders when they peeked out from sleeveless tops. She lit a careless cigarette and he saw the definition in her cheek bone. Until Kat, Daimey didn't understand how hearts could skip a beat.

He whistled. Kat recognized the sharp sound and her eyes found him right away. Hitching up her purse, she crossed the street and stood hip shot to Daimey, who continued his scan of her face. "How goes it?" she asked.

"Pretty quiet. You?"

She shrugged and took a drag off her cigarette. "All but one."

"No shit? Not bad at all." Daimey believed Kat could sell firewood to lumberjacks. "Chris Anne's picking up a quarter and then we can split, ok?"

"Roger. I'm drained." She shifted from foot to foot, wrapping an arm around her midsection. "And hungry, Christ, I could eat a horse."

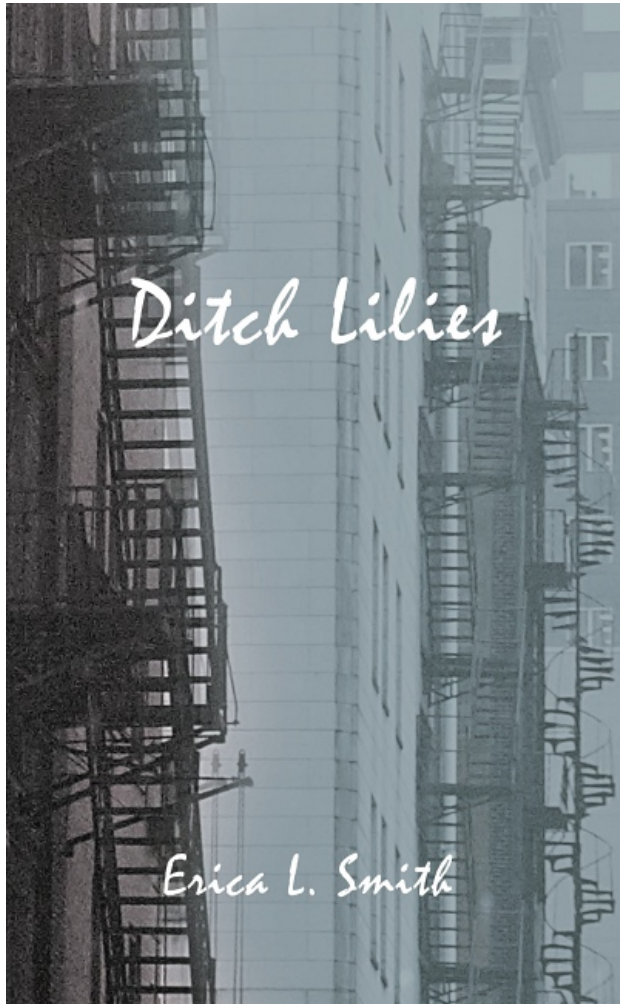
“We’ll grab a hoagie or something,” Daimey said, willing Chris Anne’s car into sight. “Maybe tomorrow we’ll go see a movie. Or walk around the Arts Festival, that starts this week. Get our faces painted if it doesn’t rain. Would you like that?”

Kat smiled. “I would.”

“Good.”

They sat on a bench for a bit until Chris Anne’s horn sounded, and once Daimey did his business he was fifty dollars richer. The money let Daimey finish the night at a profit, let him circle the shoulders of the only woman in his seventeen-year-old world, and head to bed with a full stomach. Not remarkable to some, but damn satisfactory to him.

He knew it wasn’t always going to be this way. At some point he would never have to approach another car or waste another night outside of some massage parlor pushing treats in small baggies. This was a means to something else and all the means he had for now. Kat didn’t seem to mind. She gathered up her toffee colored hair in a ponytail and related stories of her evening. Daimey sighed with relief as they walked towards the sandwich shop, discussing plans for tomorrow. Quitting time. The avenue could do without him for another night.



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