

*Paying Some Respect To Love*  
*from Manchild on the Streets*  
by Brit

Throughout my life, I've learned a bunch a lessons. Some were fairly easy. Some nearly tore me to pieces, inside or out.

When my pop was killed so many things changed. I changed. Everything in my life seemed raw and razor sharp. And I cried. God, how I cried. Ma said it was good for a man to cry. See, I guess somewhere along the lines I had gone from just barely being a teenager to becoming a man. Ma said that it was okay to show how I felt, that it didn't make me any less of a man. But on the streets of New York some people take that kind of . . . I don't know—sensitivity, I guess—and turn it into something hurtful or use it like a weapon against you. That was a lesson I learned the hard way.

So, I stopped showing those outward signs. Not the easy stuff, like being loyal to the guys you ran with or being gentle with a girl. But when it came to really getting deep with the “feelings stuff,” it just became one more soapy scene like on those bad soap operas with the cheap actors that were all fluff and great hair. Telling your buddies how much they meant to you was just another way to get your butt kicked in a royal way. They either shied away from you because you were a sissy and couldn't be counted on in a fight, or worse—they thought you were queer.

After I grew up, that was a hard lesson to unlearn, even after I met Hutch. I've learned a lot from ole Blondie, though I'd probably never admit it to him. He could of been a professor, he's so smart. Not just the book stuff, but about life. And people.

You see, when I first met him, there was something different about him. Not just his obvious refinement. Here was a guy that had some class. But there was an easy way about him—the way he laughed, the way he smiled. How comfortable he was around people. Squeezing a friend's shoulder or slapping them on the back came as easy to him as breathing. It was just part of who he was. Natural, you know? So after we started hanging around together it was no big deal for him to reach out for me when things were going good or when the pressure was on.

I have to admit, at first it made me uneasy. I mean, not that what he was doing was anything more than a gesture between friends, but the contact—I don't know—got in my “space” like. It's kind of like in the comics when the superhero has a protective energy shield around them, you know? So here I am, Captain Marvel Supercop and this blond stranger just *whammo!* Easy as punch, reaches right through my shield and gives my shoulder a grip. Crap, how did that happen? I think I even flinched the first couple of times he did that. But what was really weird was the fact that after a bit, I never even blinked. Even found myself reaching out to him without even realizing I was doing it. At some point, I guess my brain decided I didn't need an energy shield to keep him out. Didn't want to either. It just seemed right, like it was supposed be that way between friends. I realize now that it's the incredible amount of love this guy has just kind of made up for what I had missed for so long.

You ever been out in the desert? It gets so dry out there that the ground actually cracks. But when it rains, the earth can't get enough of it. The rain pours down and it makes everything come alive and turns it into something spectacular. I think I know how that feels.

One of our first cases together was a hard one. A little kid was murdered involving a porno ring. That was the first time I cried in front of anybody since...well, since awhile after my pop died. I cried like I'd been storing it all up for fifteen years or so. Maybe I had. But instead of turning away from me like I was half afraid he would, like all the friends I had growing up did, Hutch just gathered me up in his arms and cried along side of me. I think that was when I knew—really knew—that my life was different. That I was different.

A test of this lesson came when Jackson was killed. He was a good man, Jackson Walters. What happened to him and his family shouldn't have happened to a dog. You see, Jackson had a buddy that he carpooled with. This dude's car had been snatched and used in an attempted 2-11, then abandoned. So when Jackson's friend finds his car again and picks him up for work, some patrolmen spot them after IDing the car. Jackson's buddy's not too bright and splits and...well, what happens is that a trigger-happy bigot rookie named Andrews shoots Jackson cold.

Me and Hutch had just been playing a little two-on-two with Jackson and Junior an hour or so earlier. Things were fine until Jackson discovered some drugs Junior had been given by some of the guys he'd been hanging with on the streets. I tried to connect with Junior before he went tearing off. We've got a lot more in common than I think he realizes. The streets of Brooklyn and alleys of Bay City aren't a whole lot different from where Junior was at.

So now I'm holding Jackson's hand while his life bleeds out onto the pavement. We get him into the ambulance and track down the lizard that shot him. When he said the witness was lying, called her a "nigger," that was it. I only slapped the little bastard, but if Hutch hadn't grabbed hold of me, I swear I woulda taken him out right then and there.

Later that night, we're at the hospital waiting for word before we tell Jackson's momma and Junior what happened. Hutch went down the hall to make some calls to the station and track down some coffee. I didn't mean to, but I fell asleep on the sofa. That shouldn't surprise me. Hutch says I can sleep anywhere if I'm tired enough. What's weird is that I started dreaming about my Pop. Probably because Jackson got shot. But in my dream, Pop and Nicky and me are shooting hoop in the schoolyard. The ball gets hit out of bounds, and so I go legging after it, catching it just before it rolls through a hole in the fence. I turn around to throw it to my dad, but he's lying on the pavement bleeding like he'd been...when he'd...and Nicky...Nicky just sits there next to him crying his eyes out, sobbing like there's no tomorrow. Which there wasn't.

It's the sobs that wake me up. Only it's not Nicky, it's Sammi. She doesn't have to say anything, I know. I know that Jackson's dead. Hutch comes back with the coffee, his eyes wide when he sees us sitting there. For some reason I still have to say the words "Jackson's dead." My eyes fill up with tears because I loved my friend.

If you had told me five years ago that I'd be sitting in a hospital hallway crying, I probably would have busted you one. But I've learned from my partner that it's okay to cry. I don't have to think about it, worry about it. Hutch's eyes are filling up, too. No thoughts about being any less of a man—just have to worry about how we're going to tell Mrs. W and Junior that Jackson's gone. I can hardly talk "I...I think we'd better go home." There is no shame in my reaching out to Hutch, a gentle hold on the back of his neck, reminding him of our shared grief, our shared bond. He'll start the leg work and I'll take Sammi home. I know we'll hook up later and really grieve for what's been lost.

As we sit at Mrs. Walter's kitchen table, I can't find the words. Something feels really, really weird—*deja vu* almost—like I've sat here before. Done this before. But I can't figure it out, and don't have time or energy to waste on it. Right now I have to tell this kind and gentle lady that her son's dead. My friend is dead. Shot by one of my brothers in blue. I'm not at all proud of being associated with such company right now.

She's getting frantic with her unanswered questions. I know I've got to spit it out, however badly I mangle it.

"Jackson.—" The realization hits me in that moment. "Oh, my God...."

It's like months of my life were all crammed into what could have only lasted an instant at that kitchen table. Another cop, years ago, sat at my family's table talking to my mother, who only moments before had been wondering why Pop had been so late in coming home from his shift. It was early morning and I was just coming out of my bedroom. The other cop was there to tell her that my father had been shot and killed. Murdered. My heart imploded at that moment and something within me was destroyed too.

Junior was just coming back from his paper route and overheard me tell his grandmother that his father was dead. Just as I had overheard. I knew, I knew *exactly* what he was feeling—*exactly*. I wish to God I didn't, but I did. Still felt it as if it were yesterday. *I knew*. I ran after Junior as he tore through his neighborhood trying to escape his grief, trying to escape the horror of it all, trying to escape the loss of what was left of childhood innocence. *Deja vu* hung on as I remembered my own flight into the streets being chased by the same demons.

Somewhere along the way I twisted my ankle, no idea how or when, but the pain in my leg was nothing compared to the pain screaming through my chest, my head, my heart. When he finally stopped, Junior needed answers but I didn't have any. None that would take away his pain, anyway. But there was one thing I could say that might make a difference.

"I think you can be the man your daddy wanted you to be." I hoped that it would mean to him what it had meant to me back then. You see, I finally figured that if I could become the man that my father was raising me to be, somehow I could stay close to him even though he was gone forever. I missed him so much those first few years I didn't think I couldn't stand it. But by hanging on to who he was, holding on to his love for me, respecting what he wanted for my life and trying to be that man—that kept me from going down the wrong road time and time again. Yeah, I made some stupid choices during those first few years. When your daddy dies, it's awful hard to see straight. But I loved my Pop. Respected him. So I held on to the things he taught me and that kept me from self-destructing. And later in my life

it was a certain blond partner that not only kept me from going off the deep end a time or two, but re-taught me one of the most important lessons of my life: that love is something to be cherished, that love holds no room for shame, and that love is to be respected.

Later that night I found Hutch crashed out at my place, waiting for me. Without a word I claimed a portion of the couch next to him and we simply sat there, neither one of us saying anything for awhile. We didn't need to. Tears came later and so did a brotherly arm across my shoulders when the grief turned to weeping.

The next day I found myself back with Jackson's momma, sitting around the kitchen table picking at what was left of the blueberry pie. I listened while she told me stories of a younger Jackson, stories that made both of us smile and cry a little. I listened while she told me about her fears for Junior, how this might be the final push that sends him over the edge. He hadn't been home since the day before, and she was afraid that he'd miss his daddy's funeral and worse. As she walked me to my car I promised that I do what I could, but *would she be all right?* She assured me that "God don't give us more than we can handle." I wonder sometimes if God thinks we're stronger than we really are. I didn't want the opportunity to find out.

Later, a little simple detective work made us realize what Junior and Maurice were up to. Like I said, it was pretty simple: when your daddy dies, it's awful hard to see straight. We only had one hairy moment in the hospital when Maurice decides to grandstand by threatening Sammi. I can't tell you what went through my head when Junior picked up the bag of stolen drugs at Maurice's goading. Or how relieved I was when Junior nailed him up side the head with it.

There were only loose ends to tie up. Thankfully, the hospital wasn't pressing charges. Andrews was on unpaid leave for 90 days, then his case would be reviewed. Like the Cap'n said, it's an imperfect system. Junior said it was jive. I think it's a load of crap myself, but I'm still gonna be one of the jackasses pulling the cart because I know the system does work most of the time. Besides, there's still time to even the score with a certain bigoted little SOB. I ain't through with him yet.

But there was still the jumble going on inside Junior's head. Probably nothing I could say or do at that moment would amount to a hill of beans against what he was feeling and thinking. But sometimes you have to push that aside and do what's right for the one who loved you. I can read the emotions that run across his face. It's like changing the channels on your TV real fast—rage, hurt, resentment, desperation, regret.

The hardest of those feelings to deal with is the anger: anger he had for his father. That's right, for his father. Even though Jackson was the victim—he certainly didn't ask to be gunned down—Junior was still mad at him for dying, feeling betrayed because he's not there when he was needed the most. In some irrational part of your mind, you think if he had just loved you a bit more, he wouldn't have died. It sounds stupid, but I've been there, and that's where I think Junior was, too.

I remember the battle I fought with myself as my own father's funeral approached. I didn't want to go. Couldn't bear to see the honor guard hand my mother the flag from his casket. Couldn't bear to see him slowly lowered into the grave. Couldn't bear to say Kaddish. Of all the raw emotion I was

experiencing, shame was the worst. I couldn't remember the last time I had told my father that I had loved him and that ate away at me like a cancer. Surely he had known, but he left without a clear memory of the words having been said. That loss, that shame, was too much to bear. But love was stronger and I respected the bond between us too much to not say goodbye. Even if goodbye started my life on a lonely journey...lonely until a man closer than a brother rekindled what I thought was gone forever.

“Junior, Hutch and I are going to your father's funeral, because we loved him. He loved you, too. That's what funerals are about: *paying some respect to love*. Now, are you coming, or aren't you?” My heart swelled as Junior stood, answering the call of a father's bond to his son. Paying respect to love.

And later today, after the funeral and we spend time with the Walters, I'm gonna set my blond teacher down and say out loud what's in my heart. Tell him how I was reminded again how short life is. Tell him how grateful I am to have him as my partner, my friend, my brother. Tell him that *I love him*. Even after all the lessons I've learned from him about showing love—a touch, a grip, an embrace—saying these things out loud won't be easy for me. But love is something precious, something to be treasured, something to be respected. It deserves to be said out loud so that it leaves no room for doubt.

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