HERBERT

When Lucifer was cast out from Heaven by Jehovah and his white-hat gang, and sent to the flamey place, he arrived to find the joint already inhabited. Something much older was in residence. Not a smart, stylish, rebellious intellectual like himself, but something much more elemental, basic, and unselfconscious….Old Nick, the Devil himself.

That's the way it was back at the dawn of the Beats, the now-eulogized and suitable-for-widescreen epoch when the disaffected, round-peg-in-a square-hole, out of the Forces, out of school, and out of their heads, literary crowd hit Times Square in the immediate post-war years. Ginsberg, Kerouac, Ferlingetti, Corso, et al, poured in to the human whirlpool at the center of the world, heads afire with rebellion, Pinko ideas, new appetites, old hang-ups.

I think they expected a Damon Runyon world of war-time characters, perhaps the cast of Busby Berkeley's '42 Street', but instead they found a fully fleshed-out world of hookers, drugs, pavement philosophers, sexual deviants and plain old criminals.

Like Lucifer, they discovered that an older, unlettered, but endlessly more experienced devil had already staked out the territory, and the name of the beast was Herbert Huncke, known to the landmark's denizens as 'The Mayor of Times Square'.

It was Herbert, a homosexual (this is well before 'gay') junkie, petty thief, and all-round gutter saint, who coined the word 'Beats' to describe this new crowd of college-educated malcontents and counter-culture pioneers. But when he talked to me he just called them, 'The college kids'.

"But not Burroughs - he was different. A bad guy who knew the score. But the others – babies," he would tell me with those mischievous eyes in a ruined face, provocative and incendiary, always seeking approval, love, an angle.

I was introduced to him by Jerry at the desk.

"Listen, Norman, Herbert's a sweetheart, you should hear his shit, but I wouldn't let him up to your apartment, old habits die hard, yaknowwaddimean?"

And that's the way it was. I was mostly single when we first met, and I'd be coming home from this or that club at 4 in the morning, still buzzing, and Herbert would be haunting the lobby. An insomniac, no longer an active user, but always a junkie. His huge, sad gaze, straight from a Keene painting, would slide towards me, and his spidery body would unfold a little.

"Hi man, how's it going, you're early, wanna smoke a little?"

He knew, from habit, and that innate cold-reading ability that all true street people rely on, that I was too revved up to sleep, and we had formed a routine of sorts. We'd go to his room and he'd smoke these needle thin joints he'd roll, while I worked my hand-pipe. My weed, of course.

His room was one of the Chelsea's 'suicide' rooms, former closets and maid's quarters, some with no windows, that Stanley would let, or sometimes donate, to those who needed the cheapest option, window or not.

When I first arrived at the Hotel, there was a now-gone cadre of old people, definitely not hipsters, who inhabited many of the back-waters of the building, salted away in tiny, bare-light bulb garrets, spluttering black & white TVs always on, take-away food containers piled around soiled beds.

They were that dying breed of New York characters, people don't even look that way now - big noses, goiters, Bowery Boys Brooklyn accents, night jobs on the subway, janitors at now defunct department stores, all with stories, hard-knock histories from another age. Some were

remains from the old, down-on-its-luck Chelsea of the 40's, others whom Stanley had offered sanctuary.

There was a hugely fat guy who lived in one of the #22 rooms (there was one on every floor), tiny ex-closets with no room to allow the cat in, let alone swing it. The tiny air hole/window opened onto an airshaft, the only illumination the single 100watt bulb hanging naked, room centre. His room contained only a single bed, a large, ancient fridge, and carrier bags with his possessions. His name was Gus, I think he was originally Portuguese, and he was a copywriter for a slew of magazines that went belly up in the early 80's, hangovers from times and reading habits past.

He was discovered cold in his room, two days dead, and during the clear-out, they discovered he was a prolific generator of exquisite lesbian porn, with monthly articles in appropriate magazines. The disconnect between this deteriorating walrus of a man, his squalid life, and the delicate Sapphic poetry he produced was stunning. Pearls from a particularly stinky oyster.

I mention this guy 'cause he so well represents the kind of marginal, never-see-them-in-daylight inhabitants of the tiny-room demi-mondes that used to be, the hotel before the neighbourhood gentrified and became rich/gay ground zero. Herbert fit in there real well.

I've read that Herbert's later years in the hotel we're paid for by Jerry Garcia of the Grateful Dead, who he never met, but hotel lore had it that Stanley understood his outlaw status and allowed him free passage. It was from here he published his memoirs, 'Guilty of Everything'. The title says it all.

So we would go to his room on the 3rd floor, a #22, and after he had smoked a little and made his customary comments on how strong pot was, "Not like the old stuff", I'd settle into the lone chair and the stories would start.

I met so many famous, notorious, noteworthy characters in my Chelsea life, but I rank Herbert right up there in the legendary department. The things he would come out with in those late night ramblings were pure hipster gold.

I take note that each generation fascinates with what they missed…the 60's and 70's are now the basis of most marketing to kids today, the movies constantly reheating and reworking the period.

As a solid, first generation hippy, I was there, I saw the shit happen in real-time, so my fantasies and imaginings are for the period prior to the 60's, the time of the Beats, proto–hipsters, Blue Note jazz, a period when being cool and aware was not the norm, and when I fantasize you could get away with so much more, the squares having little idea what you were up to.

Herbert had the dope on this period, in every sense of the word. He would relate in that singsong, druggie-velvet voice, the real shit, the way it really went down, who was who, and who wasn't. He had first-hand knowledge and a cynical opinion on every transgressive scene from the end of the war till that night. He knew where the bodies were buried, who was real and who was a tosser.

Here's a favorite example: One enduring jazz legend is the theft of Gerry Mulligan's spanking new bass saxophone. The story goes, he and a group where struggling to get themselves, their instruments, and his large sax case into a cab outside Birdland. While the club was named after Charlie Parker, Charlie himself had been banned on account of this towering, and by then problematic, smack habit.

Charlie was hanging around outside and offered to hold the cumbersome instrument while the guys squeezed in the cab. Somehow, the cab left with Charlie still in possession of the sax which, legend has it, he then proceeded to hock and blow the money on the bad thing.

This story, in one shape or another, is a classic, much repeated Bird legend, but Herbert added a brilliant touch to the tale.

"Course, back in those days, no nigger could walk into a pawn shop, Midtown, and hock a new sax, so it was me, the pretty white guy, that took it in to the place on 9th Avenue that gave the good price for horns. Me and Charlie had a good time, one, two, three days, no problems."

When he told stories like this, his face lit up, not just because it was Bird and all contact with him is now hallowed territory, but ‘cause it was his guys - the users, the hustlers - getting one over on the newcomers, John Law, the real world. Gerry Mulligan was in fact no ‘college kid’, but correctly or not, Herbert labeled any non-street character as such. Except Burroughs.

On their first meeting, Burroughs was trying to sell a shotgun and some syrettes of morphine, and because of the way he looked, Herbert thought he was a cop. When he decided he was not, he bought the morphine and insisted Burroughs shoot him up immediately. Burroughs immortalized this scene in *Junkie*, and they became friends, if that is the word.

As much as anyone I can think of, Herbert led the life. He was one of Kinsey’s main research subjects, opening him up to the whole world of homosexuals, rent boys, the works. He is Elmer Hassel in Kerouac’s *On the Road*.

He got busted trying to steal a car on 42nd Street with Dexter Gordon, slept on Billie Holiday’s floor. And as a testament to his anti-social, never-rat-on-a-brother street ethos, he served a 3-year sentence in Sing Sing in the late 40’s for a car accident in upstate New York. Ginsberg, at the time his roommate, had been the driver, tried to run down a motorcycle cop, but it was Herbert who took the rap.

Here’s how Kerouac describes him in *Desolation Angels*:

'Huck, whom you'll see on Times Square, somnolent and alert, sad, sweet, dark, holy. Just out of jail. Martyred. Tortured by sidewalks, starved for sex and companionship, open to anything, ready to introduce a new world with a shrug.'

‘Martyred’… Such a telling word. That’s how he put it across - martyred for a cause with no name, taking blows that cleared the way for a flamboyant future, a martyr for drugs, deviant sex, crazy poetry and anything new.

Herbert died in 1996, 81 years old. To hang with this old soul, smoking pot and talking loose – wow. What a privilege. What a uniquely Chelsea Hotel privilege. There’s so much bullshit surrounding the place, artistic haven, community of-like-minded blah blah blah…. He was the real deal, an uncompromising and unremorseful rebel. A true bohemian who had seen it all and rejected most of it.

Like I said, I’m lucky, my timing was good. A coupla years later and I would have missed him.