

Tuesdays for Julius meant nine hours on the truck, thirty minutes punching the heavy bag, six rounds of sparring, and no time for a shower. The best he could do for his sweaty body was a locker room towel. He dabbed his chest, his pits, and opened his locker for a fresh shirt; it stuck to his skin as he pulled it over his head. A gold necklace swung from a hook, and Julius clasped it around his neck. He scrubbed his bald head one last time and tossed the towel into a hamper. Next up: an hour at Narcotic Anonymous, where he sat every Tuesday as support for his younger brother Mel, a recovering addict, who was in a day-by-day struggle to piece his life together. Julius slammed shut the dented locker, which like much of the battered gym looked as if it had once been punched by a colossal fist.

Every day after work, he traded the box truck for a pickup. Its wheels crunched over the gravel parking lot. The dilapidated building looked more suited to finding drugs than drug reform, all cracked stucco with a flat stone awning over the entrance. For landscaping, bur clover grew out of the rock. Layers of dust from a season of dust storms collected in the windows, leaving only the murkiest light to be seen from inside.

Most Tuesdays, Mel was already seated in the circle, wearing an unwashed shirt and dirt-covered shoes, with a sack of clothes beside him. The post-meeting, the final Tuesday to-do, would be spent at Julius's apartment, where he'd force his little brother to start last week's laundry.

A number of heads with sunken cheeks and tired eyes acknowledged Julius as he entered. A quick glance revealed no Mel. The circle was missing the starkest part of its color wheel; typically, the two brothers were the only black Arizonans in the circle.

Julius, muscled arms tired from boxing, raised a half-wave. Silently, he mouthed to chairperson Herman, "Mel here?"

Herman shook his head.

Julius left to wait outside in the dry, nighttime air. Sometimes Mel was late. He arrived to the meetings by bus. Sometimes he missed one bus and waited for the next.

Soon a bus hissed to a stop across the street. Julius couldn't see who was exiting on the other side. As the bus drove off, its absence revealed an old lady with a grocery cart, two latino teens lighting cigarettes, and no Mel.

Julius called his little brother.

No answer.

He called Mel again.

No answer.

He sent Mel a text.

Yo, where you at? It's Tuesday. I'm waiting outside.

He put his phone in his pocket, hoping for a buzz.

The sky was clear, the moon full.

His pocket vibrated. An Unknown number.

Check the inscription, read the message.

Who is this?

Your necklace. The inscription.

A natural stubbornness caused Julius to hesitate before taking this order from an unknown number. But in touching the necklace, he suddenly realized what he hadn't when putting it on after the workout: it was lighter. His hands, his arms, were no longer so heavy and it felt cheaper. He unhooked it. A small pendant, merely a short bar connected to the clasp, carried the engraving.

For the past seven years it had read, *For my baby, my baby, please protect my baby, I love you both.*

This Tuesday, it read, 9— *Solano Street*

And it no longer glowed in the silver moonlight.

This wasn't his; it was a fake; fake gold, a fake gift, a false legacy. He walked, then ran, for his truck.

His pocket buzzed again.

Get it off yet?

Who is this?

Know where your brother is?

What do you want?

Finally.

Then his phone rang. The unknown number.

“Come to the address. Bring three-thousand in cash.”

“What have you done to Mel?”

“I know you’ve got it. They pay you in cash for those fights, right? Those local rec rooms where you either beat up a bum or get beat up like a bum? And what is it you do? Deliver canned goods to all those crap restaurants across town? What a life.”

“I’m tired of repeating the same questions to you. Hear my voice: it’s not a question this time. What have you done to Mel.”

“Mel has debts. Either you pay them, or he will. And brother, Mel is broke. There’s only one way he can pay. It’ll be the last lesson he ever learns . . .”

“Do not hurt him.”

“Then come to the address with the cash. You’ll get more directions when you get there. And don’t bother with cops. Cops won’t care a thing about your black junkie brother. They don’t rescue people like him, they just toss them in jail.”

The line went silent.

Julius gripped the steering wheel hard enough to leave an impression of a closed boxing fist. The truck spit gravel as it skidded out of the parking lot.

With a brown sack of cash hidden beneath his seat, Julius called the gym owner, Alonzo.

“Do you have cameras in the building?”

Someone must have switched the necklaces while he was working out. Someone who knew his routine, his locker—although that same someone could have beat such information out of Mel. Julius had brought his little brother to the gym before, hoping the adrenaline of punching and being punched might awaken a newfound work ethic, a motivating force for his restarted life. But each session ended with Mel whining. He struck the pads with less and less effort until Julius did, once again, what he’d promise their mother he wouldn’t do: give up on the kid. But he’d only thrown in the towel on Mel as a boxer. He hadn’t given up overall. Which was better than most could ask of him.

“Cameras?” responded Alonzo, amusement in his voice. “You think I can afford cameras? You’re hitting a heavy bag in here that I tell people Miguel Vasquez popped around back in 1988 before a lightweight title fight. I don’t tell people that cause it’s true, Julius. I say it because the bag is over forty years old. Patched by duct-tape. I do it to distract them from the water damage. And because there’s a nicer gym five blocks down the road.”

“Did anyone come in tonight who wasn’t supposed to be there?”

“No, it was just you, me, Russell. Davis is here now. Been quiet. Why? What’s up?”

“I’ll talk to you later.”

He tossed the phone in the passenger seat. Back in his worst days, who had Mel been hanging around with? There was a Corey, or a Courtney, though Julius had never met him. A name like Marvin, or Martin, sounded familiar, but he’d never met him either. He’d hardly known Mel during those days. He tried to visualize suspects as if they were a circle of narcotics anonymous but came up with a ring of empty chairs. In those days, Julius had still been wearing the gold necklace but hadn’t kept the promise written on the pendant. Worn it, but hadn’t lived it, until Mel was in jail, and Julius felt their mother watching from above.

The destination laid ahead. One in a row of rundown houses on the left, surrounded by chain link fences with broken tube slats, stitched by spiky plants.

Solano Street

Julius rolled to a stop. He looked through the windows of the addressed house. Into a yellow kitchen, where a middle-aged woman appeared to be washing dishes. The front door opened. Julius readied himself. But only a small boy walked out, carrying a trash bag to the curb. He threw it on the sidewalk and Julius’s phone buzzed from the passenger seat.

“You made it.”

“What am I doing next?”

“You got the cash?”

“I got the cash and I’m here—what am I doing next?”

“Get out of the truck.”

From there, Julius followed the unknown number’s directions.

Walk two blocks south. Hop the fence at the abandoned green house. Walk to the backyard. Climb up the cement wall. Jump down into the alley behind it. Keep walking south, in the dark, until you find us. No lights. Put your hand on the cement wall, and walk, and walk, and keep walking.

Lights from the nearest homes hardly shined over the wall and left the alley in deep blue. A midnight blue, though it wasn't nearly midnight yet.

Suddenly a white light flashed in Julius's eyes. He shielded his face with a hand. Once his eyes adjusted, he lowered his hand, and saw three figures almost hidden behind the light.

"Big brother made it."

Julius didn't recognize the voice.

"Where's Mel?"

"I'm here," came a whimper.

Julius recognized that one. The flashlight turned to shine on little brother, who'd been driven to his knees, hands roped behind his back. His unwashed shirt was torn at the neckline.

"Where's the money?"

Julius reached behind his back. He heard the cock of a gun.

"Easy."

He turned around, showed the small brown bag tucked into his jeans.

"Grab it if you want it," said Julius.

There were three of them surrounding Mel. One approached Julius and reached forward as if expecting to touch an electric fence. Quickly he swiped the paper bag from Julius's jeans, and hurried back to their side of the standoff. Nighttime details were beginning to form, and all three men wore masks. The bold man who'd grabbed the bag opened it for another to peer inside

with a flashlight, while the third held the gun steady on Julius. All three were small, scrawny, probably addicts like Mel.

“Looks good.”

The man with the gun grabbed Mel by the neck and shoved him forward.

“I don’t want to see you ever again. Now both of you get out of here.”

The flashlight shined again in Julius’s eyes, making it more difficult to undo the ropes binding Mel’s wrists.

“The transaction’s not done yet,” he said.

“What’s that, tough guy?”

“I am so tired of repeating myself to you. His debt with you is settled. But your debt with me isn’t. One of you snuck into my gym. You opened my locker. You stole my necklace. I’m not leaving until I get it back.”

“Alright, who has the guy’s necklace?”

In the blue darkness, man one shook his head no.

So did man two.

Julius raised his voice to a thunder, “Who has my necklace?”

No one answered.

“You all are wearing me down, I swear,” said Julius. “This is the last time I’m asking,” and he paused between each thunderous word, “Who—has—my—necklace?”

The masked men exchanged quick glances with one another.

Each look seemed to say, I don’t have it, do you have it? I don’t have it, do you have it? They expected an answer and found none and then, whether it was intentional or not, all three looked at Mel.

Julius caught the exchange. He patted Mel's thigh; a hard lump rested in little brother's slightly torn pocket. Julius reached his big hand inside, increasing the rip along the seam. Deep in the pocket, he touched a cool metal chain. He stopped, didn't reach or grasp any further, and removed his hand from Mel's pocket with nothing in his grip.

"Stupid," he said.

And then, with a warmed-up quickness, as if his body had never cooled down from the workout, he threw Mel headfirst like a torpedo into the gunman's stomach. Mel bowled the man over, who did not fire his gun, knocking the air from him, and the two fell in a heap.

Man two never saw the right cross coming.

Man three never saw the left hook.

Julius picked up the bag of cash, grabbed Mel by the hole in his shirt, and marched him down the alley. He looped his finger through the tear in the collar to lead Mel like a man on a leash.

"Julius, I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry." He repeated a variation of the phrase over and over to silence until they reached the truck.

Then Julius said, "Give me my necklace."

Shaking, Mel fumbled in his pocket. He held up the rattling chain. Julius snatched it and rounded the front of the car to the driver's seat.

"Three thousand dollars," he said in exasperated disbelief.

For my baby, my baby, please protect my baby, I love you both.

He hooked it around his neck.

"Get in."

The steering wheel, already fitted to such a grip, took the bulk of his anger.

“You must’ve thought you were so damn smart, getting a fake etching on a fake necklace. And then you left the real one in your own pocket. Real damn smart. What’d that set you back? Forty bucks? Well, you aren’t getting any of that back from me. You using again? Those your new friends?”

“Julius, please don’t call the police on them.” His voice shook. “Where are you taking me?”

Julius checked the time but didn’t answer.

“I think you knocked them both out. Julius, are you turning me in?”

“You know, Mom gave me this necklace as a promise to you. It was a gift but it came with a promise that I had to make—to you. It took me a minute to keep it. But even then, maybe I’ve just been going through the motions of that promise.”

“Julius, are you turning me in?”

“Be quiet. They’re only halfway done with tonight’s last meeting.”

Soon they pulled into the gravel parking lot of the rundown building, with cracked stucco, and thin weeds for landscaping. A stone awning covered the entrance. Julius moved Mel toward the door with a hand on Mel’s neck. They were late to the circle, but the other members stopped to greet them. It wasn’t unusual to see someone in torn clothes, and they paid no judgement to the tatters on Mel. Julius and little brother took their seats in two hard plastic chairs.

At the next break, they introduced themselves.

“Hi, I’m Mel, I’m an addict.”

“Hi, Julius, his brother, and supporter.” After a few moments, Julius added, “You had something to share tonight, right?”

“Yeah, yeah. I once—tried to rob my own brother. I acted like I was in trouble to try and get some money out of him.” He curled his knees to his chest in his chair. “I lied, and made him worry. I thought it would be easy.”

“And I still came and got you, didn’t I?”

Julius put his arm around the back of little brother’s chair.

“Yeah.”

“I think tonight,” said Julius, “he and me need to talk about forgiveness. There’s a lot we still need to sort out.”

The group embraced such a discussion; they’d stay over if needed.

It started before their mother passed . . .

Oh, what a Tuesday.