

It Ain't Worth It

It was 7:45 p.m. In fifteen minutes the cells would be cracking for showers. I sat on the edge of the toilet seat and leaned forward on my elbows, using my hands to support my chin. I gotta be quick, I thought. I gotta go in and hurt 'em bad. I glanced around the tiny enclosure to see if I forgot anything. I thought about my mother. Women didn't understand the petty squabbles of men. I could hear her now, "You had a nice run selling those cigarettes. Now count your blessings and let it go. Nothing lasts forever." I was beginning to have second thoughts. What if he has a shank or can fight? If he gets the best of me, I'm sunk. It would open a can of worms for anybody who wanted to try me. BANG! BOOM! BANG!

The steel doors popped open, interrupting my thoughts. The sound was so loud and unexpected that I jumped off the toilet in a panic. I pulled myself together and stepped out of the cell onto the noisy block. A few people rushed past me trying to make it to the showers before it was too crowded. Junebug ran from his cell with a towel wrapped around his waist. Officer Ski dashed up the steps to release the doors on the top tier. Officer Tatum was busy signing people up for the phone. I made it to Junebug's cell without being noticed and slipped inside. My head pounded with fear. I could feel the adrenaline surging through my veins as I stood in the dark, musty, cluttered cell. I reached into my pocket, grabbed the batteries and laid them on his unkempt bunk. I pulled the gloves from my waistband and put them on. I dropped the the batteries inside the gloves and positioned them in the palms of my hands and then tightened the straps around my wrists. The leather creaked and crackled around my knuckles every time I made a fist. The anxiety I felt earlier seemed to melt away.

My eyes began to adjust to the Shadowy crypt. Junebug's sink was filled with dirty clothes soaking in oily water. With the exception of a cheap bottle of cocoa butter lotion, a tube of state issued toothpaste, a battered hairbrush, and a coffee mug, his shelf was bare. Dirty socks were piled in a corner and his crumpled, tattered browns sat in a heap on his bed. I stumbled over a sneaker, accidentally grabbing hold of a pair of damp sweatpants hanging from a hook. My skin began to crawl from the funk and smell of piss that hung in the air. How could anyone live like this? Junebug was a step away from being derelict. The only thing saving him from being classified as a bum was the penitentiary. No wonder he stole the cigarettes.

Maybe I had been a little rash in my thinking. I lowered the gavel and passed sentence on a man I knew nothing about. What was I trying to prove? Nobody thought I was soft. I'm getting ready to blow everything and for what? Five lousy cartons. I had that coming in this week with interest. Officer Tatum, who was making his rounds, peeked in the cell.

Without thinking, I dropped to the floor and slid halfway underneath the bed. My eyes and nose burned from the flying dust. Smelly socks sat inches from my face, but I was afraid to move. Tatum looked in and moved on. I felt like an idiot. Revenge at my age just wasn't worth it. I got up and brushed myself off. Just as I was about to step out of the cell, Junebugs took me by surprise. He quickly opened the door and stepped inside with his back facing me. That was probably the last thing he remembered.

"Go 'head nut!" He playfully shouted to someone, while stepping backwards into his fate. I froze, not knowing what to do. When he turned around, I pivoted off my right foot and threw a wicked left jab. When my fist smashed into his face it sounded like a wet towel slapping against a wall. I followed up with a devastating right hook to the jaw that sealed his fate. WHACK! WHACK! He didn't stagger backwards like I had imagined. He dropped straight to his knees. I grabbed hold of him and tried to lay him across the bed before he hit the floor, but the weight of his limp body made it difficult getting a good grip. By now, everybody was running around trying to get their last minute needs met before lockup. I managed to get his half naked body on the bed and placed a sheet over him. To get out of the cell unnoticed wasn't going to be easy. I'd have to be Houdini. What if I killed him, I thought, looking at his listless body lying in the shadows. I was getting ready to check his pulse when Officer Ski yelled, "If you're going to the barbershop tomorrow, you better sign up tonight." That was my cue!

While everyone rushed to the front of the block, I slid the door open and was just about to step out the cell when I realized the gloves were still on my hands. It was now or never. I tucked my hands underneath my shirt and walked, quickly towards my cell, afraid to look back. When I got to the cell, I removed the gloves and shoved them under my mattress. I felt sweaty and grimy. I was in such a hurry that I didn't notice the blood on the front of my shirt.

"Oh shit!" I mumbled, "Where did all this blood come from? I only hit him twice." I stripped down to my boxers and found blood on my body, and it was freaking me out. I balled the bloody clothes up and tossed them into the waste can. It was too late to take a shower, so I laid my big, blue fluffy towel on the floor and washed in the sink. After I dried off, I threw on a pair of sweats, grabbed my waste can, and went to the day room to empty it. Halfway down the block I remembered that my name and prison ID number was on the browns. Time was running out. In twenty minutes, the block would be locking down for the evening, and I didn't want to be stuck with the bloody clothes in my cell. I ran to the cell and cut the name tags off. I made it to the day room and dumped the waste can. I pretended to check the bulletin board for updated memos and call outs.

In reality, I was watching people dump their trash on top of my uniform. I didn't need nobody snooping around. On my way out of the day room I glanced at the trashcan, which was now full of rubbish. My pants and shirt were now buried from prying eyes. "Whadup, Tone?" Ricky walked toward me with a cup of hot water in his hands. "I haven't seen you all day, buddy. What's up?"

"I've been studying," I kept Ricky talking until we got to Junebug's cell, so I could peer over his shoulder and look inside. I didn't see movement, which worried me. Either Junebug was unconscious or dead. Officer Tatum looked in on Junebug, assumed he was sleeping, slammed the door, and moved on. With the amount of blood on my clothes, I was getting nervous. What if Junebug drowned in his own fluids? I shuddered at the thought. The last thing I needed was another body on my conscience.

"You seem preoccupied, Tone. You alright?"

"I'm straight, Ricky! I'm just trying to get over losin' my girl."

"I heard that big guy. I never met her, but from what you've told me, she was some kind of lady. Was she the one that used to babysit you?"

"Yep."

While Ricky rambled about nothing, I kept my eyes glued to Junebug's cell, looking for movement. A few of his cronies looked in on him but kept walking. One guy shook the bars and yelled inside, "Yo Junebug!" After a second or two, he moved on. I didn't mean to be rude to Ricky, but I stood there wondering whether I should come clean and tell Officer Tatum what happened. I would get a few months in the hole, but at least Junebug would be alive, if they got to him in time.

"You got that girl on your mind, Tone." Ricky looked disappointed because I was ignoring him, "so I'll catch you sometime tomorrow."

"Hold up, Kemosabe." I wanted to make him feel better. "Where you rushing off to? We're gonna be locking down in a minute anyway, so what's the hurry?"

Before he could answer, Officer Ski yelled, "Lock it up!" I gave Ricky a dap, and we went our separate ways. Tatum and Ski made their sweep down the block, slamming doors behind them. Ten minutes later, over the loudspeaker came. "Attention All Blocks! Attention All Blocks! 2100 stand and count, 2100 stand and count!" At this time, we had to stand in our cells, with lights on, in plain view of the officer when he came by.

If Junebug didn't stand for count the officer would bang the gate and rattle the bars until he stood or moved. If the officer didn't see movement, he would shine his flashlight on Junebug until he was assured he was in the cell and alive and kicking. Count would not clear until all inmates were present and accounted for. I paced the 9x12 cell, hoping, praying, wishing that Junebug was OK. As a distraction, I clicked on my TV and anxiously flicked through the channels. Nothing held my attention. Count clear was the only sound I wanted to hear. I turned off the TV and tried in vain to sit still, but I found myself pacing between the window and the cell door, sitting and then standing. I brushed my teeth, straightened my shelf, and changed my bedding. I checked my watch.

What the hell was taken so long for count to clear? I cranked my window as wide as it would go. The fresh, grassy, night air felt liberating. All was quiet! Too quiet! If I didn't hear something soon, I would go stir crazy. I stuck my mirror between the bars. The officer's were in the booth, talking and laughing, waiting for the count to clear, and finally to be relieved of their shift. My heart settled. If the count wasn't clear it meant something was wrong on another block. I clicked on my radio and went through old letters. Twenty minutes had passed and everything was still quiet. I was on pins and needles, ready to drop to my knees and pray. "Dear God, if you let Junebug live, I'll go to church every Sunday, pray every night, and read my Bible."

Over the loudspeaker came, "Attention All Blocks, 2100 is clear!" That was music to my ears. Junebug was alive, thank God. One bad decision can change your life forever, but if we do the right things we have nothing to worry about. I promised myself that night that I would never do anything like that again.