

Debts

ZEKE CALIGIURI

Guys ran around frantic, the economy bustled on canteen day, and it started in this shrunken, miserable little room in the basement with exposed pipes, where we all gathered and waited for our names to be called to get our weekly commissary.

“How do they run out of summer sausages? They should never run out of summer sausages, or envelopes, or rice, or noodles. It doesn’t make sense.” Big Jeff was telling me this, his size so very apparently large in the small, crowded place; giant arms with obligatory spiderwebs splayed over the elbows.

“Doesn’t make sense, I know,” I answered.

“That would be too much like right, then,” said a kid who wasn’t even in the conversation. I’d heard that one at least a billion times in the few years I had been here. I nodded. Jeff wouldn’t even look at the kid. Probably because just a few weeks back Jeff had tattooed an entire sleeve on the kid’s left arm in goblins and demons, and dicks. He’d incorporated at least a dozen penises into the pattern without the kid realizing. For what? Jeff never told me why—spite probably.

At least seventy-five of us were crowded into the small area waiting to get the things we needed to get through the next week or two: instant coffee to stave off the headaches, snacks to supplement bad meals. Some guys just needed soap or

toothpaste. It was a mob of activity, rife with tension and boredom and an acute awareness among all the people involved of what they had or didn't have. And of all the things everyone around them had.

Big Jeff was surveying bags for all the guys that owed him something. He was psyching himself up to confront the same few guys that never seemed to have what it was they owed. Big Jeff was almost forty and was one of those guys who'd made a life out of his stints in the joint. He was supposed to be somebody important, somebody good to know.

Right then, Damien sashayed through the incongruent mass of bodies, ponytail bouncing, in state jeans cut down to look like capris, and swinging his empty mesh canteen bag. At the sight, Jeff let out a one-syllable laugh. It was still uncomfortable for me to see Damien running around like that, swishing his hips.

"Don't you know that punk from the world?" Big Jeff asked me with a wrinkled lip and raised nostril.

"He wasn't like that when we were kids," I said, hoping to change the expression on Jeff's face. It wasn't necessary to tell him that Damien had been one of my oldest friends, or to try to explain the box-cutter incident in the liquor store parking lot, or the lighter burns on his arms, or that my sick mom still asked about him. I was much too worn down from the embarrassment. "He was much more violent then."

"Yeah, well, now he's getting his spokes busted out," Jeff laughed, proud of his remark. It was not the place to teach tolerance to a guy with a hundred pounds on me and a tattoo of a strung-out devil on his sleeves. Jeff already knew how he felt about things like that.

Jeff was always comparing this place to California. "This kind of shit could never happen in Cali. You can't get away with not paying your debts. Here, if you can't pay, guys write a kite and they disappear for a month, or never." Guys would sit around and listen to his stories; I did too. I thought it might offer me some safety. He was going to start doing some work on me and I didn't want him tatting dicks on *me*. When I'd heard all of his stories, I'd only pretend to listen. He and I got along, I think, because there were so many stupid motherfuckers and so many dick riders and it was hard to find guys that didn't fit into either category. I was learning that he was one of those guys who constantly talked about the invisible lines: "once crossed, there's no going back." He was part of a breed that lives here whose entire view of a person's human nature comes down to if they paid their debts or were willing to fight or not. If you did, you were

“solid.” If you didn’t pay back the \$2 salami you owed, or stick up for yourself just once, or if you ever “kicked in,” then you were a bitch and your reputation was sealed. If someone said you sucked a dick, then you were a punk for the rest of your life—there wasn’t any coming back from that. The word “solid” got thrown around so casually, but once it got taken from someone it was nearly impossible to get it back.

I’m not sure what made me notice it. It wasn’t a noise; the room was too full of conversation and personal entertainments to hear anything other than chatter. There must have been an abnormal movement: a jerk, a subtle disruption in the consciousness of the place. A few bodies moved, seemingly in unison. I looked past them and saw Damien in a corner struggling with a much bigger white guy. The white guy, just a fat-nasty mongrel of a man, had a hand wrapped around Damien’s throat and was trying to control him with a grip around his wrist. Damien squirmed enough to get his hand away but couldn’t get out of the corner. My first thought was something freaky and a layer of disgust oozed over me, or fear. Then for a sec I hoped they were playing. Guys always played. There were wrestling matches in cells all the time, with all kinds of strange, sexual undertones to them. But neither Damien nor his aggressor was laughing. The man was using his free hand to throw short little punches to the side of Damien’s face.

As the room noticed, men formed a blockade with their bodies to obstruct the view from the cameras and the half of the room where the officer stood. Big Jeff was quiet, but I could feel his eyes on me, watching for a reaction, as though Damien’s, or even my own, social distinction was being sorted out in front of our eyes.

Punch back! I thought. It didn’t matter what I thought, though—I wasn’t in this. He knew he had to handle his own business, had to negotiate his own actions. I wasn’t jumping into any issues where I didn’t understand the terms. Even though you never really understand the terms until after you make your choice. This was different: I wasn’t getting anywhere near any kind of lovers’ quarrel. It was just the kind of bullshit I told him I wouldn’t take any part in. *Why wouldn’t he fight back?* We all knew the rules: if you didn’t fight, you were a coward, right? What could be worse than that? Not fighting alongside one of your friends maybe? Although people knew that we had known each other as kids, I had never claimed him as my friend and I had hoped that would mean I wasn’t expected to help him.

With his back trapped between the wall and the girth of this man, Damien tried with one hand to loosen the grip on his throat and dissuade the blows

with his other. In the chaos, he scanned the room and I caught the slightest eye contact from him. His eyes were panicked and desperate. I stayed in my place.

Damien's last name was announced on the garbled P.A. to go to the window for his canteen, and the room went silent. But the mongrel, into heavy, labored breaths by then, didn't stop. Instead, the man committed the energy he still had to reinforce his choke hold on Damien, even as someone alerted him to a second announcement on the P.A. He released Damien's throat and tossed him to the ground by his shirt. Damien stayed right there for several seconds, a human pile on all fours at this man's feet like a wounded animal.

Get up! I wanted to yell. *Get up!* But I was too conscious of Jeff and the other guys around me, and the C.O. on the other side of the room. From his knees, Damien began crawling away from the man, who made a weak kicking motion at Damien as he moved away. Damien's face was pink and raw but not swollen yet, and he had a large handprint on his neck when he got to the window. He filled his bag— just a single honey bun—and walked off looking at no one in particular and with a little smirk on his face.

I saw Damien later in the day, moving through the marketplace that was the flag on canteen days. At one table, a guy sold homemade greeting cards, another sold portraits of 2Pac and Beyoncé. We passed by each other silently, moving past a table on the flag with every square inch covered in ass shots for sale. A small crowd stood around shopping. He stopped. I tried to keep going.

"I didn't expect you to help," he said, standing in the middle of the hall. "I take care of myself, always." I didn't respond. "Hey," Damien called, "how's your mom doing?"

I kept going, doing my best to hide my flushing face from him and all of the men standing around.

