

YOUNG
JUNKIES

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YOUNG JUNIUS

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For my families —
Harwood and Palms

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“You have to figure it out, is what it comes down to.”

Junius fingered one of the long tassels of the curtain ties. In one of the funeral parlor’s front rooms, his older brother lay in a coffin, not yet twenty and done with all the living he’d ever do.

Here in a side room, it was just him, Willie Stash, and a small, ugly nine.

“I try this, you put me on?”

“Shit,” Willie smiled his signature smile, the one that showed the big gaps in his top *and* bottom rows of teeth. “You do this one, I put you in charge of Teale Square. How that sound?”

Junius smiled. He had no crew, just the cheap nine on the table—if he took it—and his boy Little Elf. But the gun gave him so much more than he’d had yesterday, even *with* a living brother.

He picked it up. *Beretta*, it read along the side.

“All right.”

Outside, Elf came up to Junius before he made the corner. He’d been waiting on the steps of the funeral parlor for Junius to finish with Willie. They walked a block before either of them spoke.

Then Junius stopped, turned toward his man. “This,” he said, pulling up his shirt to show the Beretta tucked into the front of his jeans.

Elf nodded. “Then we find who killed Temp?”

Junius looked up the block. At the corner, two of Willie’s boys stood talking to one another, trying to look as though they owned the real estate they stood on. For all purposes, they did.

A BMW stopped in front of them, and a white face stuck out the window—a college kid looking to score. Willie’s boy shook his head and sent him around the corner. In the liquor store lot next to Food Master, someone else would hand him a bag and take his money.

Junius shook his head. He turned away and started walking, the hard metal pressing into his abdomen, cold against his skin. He knew the safety was on, but still it felt strange. “He wants us to make it right.”

Elf looked away, toward the projects on the other side of the street. In the middle of a courtyard, five boys played twenty-one on a netless hoop with a soccer ball.

“Fuck it then. Where we start?”

“The towers.”

Along Alewife Brook, they made their way toward the T station, walking opposite the big cemetery for the first few blocks, until the sidewalk ended and they had to cross four lanes to avoid the mud. Elf had on his new Forums, so he was real particular.

Junius looked below the sidewalk into the dirty brook that separated the street from the cemetery. It didn’t so much flow as creep, an old bicycle and a rusted shopping cart sticking up out of the muck.

The headstones along the grass were old but in good condition. No room inside for Temple, only long-dead white people. Temple would get cremated, and then Junius didn’t know what. But it was better they had the body; his mom didn’t have to suffer more uncertainty or a missing persons investigation that would yield nothing after months.

The walk to the towers took them into Arlington, just a block into the dry, white Switzerland of the surrounding neighborhoods.

They went up Mass Ave. and down a back street that let out on a path behind the T. In the mornings and afternoons, commuters lined this route, but in the mid-afternoon of a Sunday, the two had it all to themselves. They passed through marshland, with twin banks of reeds by their sides.

“Yo,” Elf said. “Show me the gat.”

Junius stopped. He was eager to look himself, to get a feel for the grip and the touch of the steel. Temple had always kept him away from guns, made him swear off their violence. Now, he pulled it out from his belt and showed Elf, holding the barrel parallel to the ground, aimed back toward where they’d come.

“Damn, yo. Let me hold it.”

“No.” The handle felt small in his grip, as if it were made for a boy’s hand. Even at fourteen, Junius stood six foot three, the equal of many grown men he saw, and not skinny like the rest of the kids he’d come up with. His bones held man muscles; whether he’d earned them or not, he had the gait of one who had. His legs bowed and his arms rarely fell straight.

When he looked around them through the reeds, his head dipped below his shoulders and his back hunched. He was like a spring—ready to pop.

Elf backed away a step as Junius pulled the slide and chambered a round. Willie had shown him the safety, and now Junius clicked it off. He touched the trigger, testing its shape not its tension, and turned the gun over. He held it sideways, like on TV.

“Yeah.”

Then in one motion, he swung the gun over his head like the arm of a clock going from nine to land at three. He straightened his elbow, aiming toward the station. As he did, he squared his shoulders. With his arm level and the gun straight, it felt real; he held it up and down, ready.

“That’s how you do,” Elf said. “Now let me hear you clap.”

Up ahead, Junius saw nothing but reeds. He squinted, aimed, and pulled back the trigger until he felt it tense, took it just to the point where he thought it might fire. He had never shot a gun.

His breath hung in front of him in the dry, cold air.

He didn’t know how it would kick, only that it did. It would be *loud*. He tensed his face—partly from fear and partly to aim. Then he lowered the weapon.

“Shit,” he said. “We kill some commuter, we be fucked.”

He took his finger off the trigger and slipped the safety on. He wanted to eject the live round but didn’t know how, only that the safety was supposed to keep it from shooting.

He slipped the gun back into his pants and walked up the path. Behind him, Elf sucked his teeth in disappointment.

As they came to the big, gray parking structure of the station, Elf pointed out two of Rock’s boys hanging where the commuters came out to get their rides or catch a bus. Rock did steady money from the business set like this. So if Marlene controlled two of the three towers, Rock still did well running the station and 412.

Willie ran pieces of Somerville, not much compared to the towers, but enough. If Junius found out who did Temple and took that man down, he’d have Teale Square, some of the best territory in his hood. At fourteen, that was more than even Temple had amounted to.

The two crossed toward the station and headed for Rock’s boys.

Junius recognized Derek and Ness as they got closer. Ness used to be Eliot when he was young, but then when he started to roll, people called him Ness because of his long neck.

Elf called out, giving them the nod.

Derek shook his head. “Fuck you niggahs want?”

“We looking to find Rock. Want to see what’s been going down.”

“Down?” Derek stepped back and looked at the ground. He checked Ness and then stared at the others. “I don’t see nothing here but rent, motherfucker. Rolling product. You want to try and take this?”

Junius stayed quiet. He watched Derek talk his shit, point his finger at Elf and tell them they should go back to their side of the border.

“We just want talk,” Junius said finally. “It’s about my brother.”

Then Derek stopped. He wiped his mouth and shut it all down.

“Yeah,” Junius said. “That’s what we here on. That’s why we going through to the towers.”

Derek looked around. Junius could see a white guy in a suit waiting to talk to Ness, looking to buy, but Derek waved him off. “Come back later.”

“Who I talk to?” Junius said it slow, definite. The voice was one he didn’t recognize, one he didn’t hear as his own.

Derek said, “You go to the top, son. Tower two. Take your ass up in there and all the way up. You ask the Oracle.”

“Marlene?”

“Shit. Oracle to you, motherfucker. Whatever she say be your fate.”

Elf took two steps back. Neither of them had thought of going all the way to the top.

Junius nodded slowly at Derek and Ness. They’d been fair: no threats, no need to show the gun. “That all?” he asked.

“Ha?” Derek’s mouth almost popped with the sound. “Is that all?” He shook his head and started laughing, turned to Ness and pointed at Junius. “This motherfucker,” he said.

Ness laughed and they slapped palms.

“Yeah, niggah,” Derek said when they finally calmed down. “That all. Just take your ass to the Oracle.”

Junius turned to the towers, his hand at his belt, and listened for any fast movements behind him as he started up the sidewalk. About four steps later, Elf called peace to the others and started to follow.

The Rindge Towers stood three tall buildings, each one a city: twenty-two stories of apartments, hoods, crews and trouble; a corner on every staircase. Whoever pushed and ran these controlled much more than Teale Square, more even than the bulk of the Davis-Teale-Tufts triangle that Willie called his land. Much more than weed to the white boys and whatever they needed for parties on the weekends.

Whoever held the Rindge Towers supplied to the serious Cambridge junkies and suburban drive-thru addicts—the ones who snorted, smoked and shot up, who would bring you every dollar they *could*.

“Shit,” Elf said when he caught up. “The top? Fuck you think be up there?”

Junius heard Ness call to the suit. He took a quick look back and, though Ness slapped a dime into Mr. Suit Man’s hand, Derek still

watched them. He gave Junius the nod, pointing his chin toward the towers.

“Top,” Junius said, “means we go all the way.”

They crossed in front of the Polynesian tiki bar and approached the highway.

“You ever been up there?”

“I been inside a couple times,” Elf said. He showed the palms of his hands. “But not like this.”

Across the street, the three brick towers stood tall, each one covered with hundreds of windows on a side: windows that betrayed nothing, just endless rows of lives and capped-over air-conditioners that didn't work.

The light changed and traffic stopped. Junius began to cross. Elf hesitated, then hurried to catch up. On the other side, he stopped.

“Yo, J,” he said.

Junius turned.

“Yeah?”

“I think I'm a head back.”

Elf was sixteen, two years older than Junius, but they'd been together almost all their lives, like brothers, even with Temple around. Junius nodded. “I hear you.”

He walked ahead on his own.

Junius saw Lamar in front of 412. Lamar who lied about his age to play in the Rindge Ave. league games. Where Junius was the man-child lying to say he was old enough to play, Lamar was the eighteen-year-old who cheated not to leave. Junius was good enough that everyone looked the other way. With Lamar, they left it alone because he carried a Glock.

As soon as he saw Junius, Lamar headed toward him across the parking lot. He called his name out, asked what Junius was doing on the wrong side of the world.

“What you want?” Lamar asked, when they were face to face.

“I’m looking for Marlene. Come to find who shot Temp.”

“Yeah?” Lamar laughed. “You going to see the Oracle?”

Junius started to pass, but the bigger man cut him off with a forearm to the chest. He pulled up Junius’s shirt and looked at the nine.

“That for real? You crazy?” He pushed Junius back, and then Lamar had his hand on the gun’s grip, but Junius caught his wrists and kept Lamar’s fingers away from the trigger guard. Lamar pulled on the gun and pushed Junius. They both stepped closer to the highway. Junius did not let go.

“Now, motherfucker. You let this shit go, and you walk. You leave, I take your gun and *don't* cap your ass. You fight, I drop you like the bullshit you is.”

Cars whizzed by. Junius pulled on the gun, but it didn't move. Lamar was strong. He tried to twist it. Same result.

“Go home.”

“What up, niggah?” Elf stood next to Junius, shoulder to shoulder with him in front of Lamar. “My man and I going in today.”

Lamar let go of the gun and stepped to Elf. He laughed. “Fuckin' munchkin-land. Ain't I showed you not to come up here before?”

He threw a fast elbow at Elf's head and Elf flinched back, but Junius didn't hesitate: as soon as Lamar's hands were off the gun, he pushed him back toward the towers. He'd been boxing for two years and knew the right moves, but none of them came; he reverted straight back into the streetfighter he'd always been.

Lamar stepped back shaking his head. That was when Elf caught him under his chin with an uppercut and then followed with a quick left hook to the body that came in as soon as Lamar's hands went up.

The hook was enough to double Lamar over.

Elf stood before him, his fists ready and one foot forward. “Go on,” he said to Junius. “I got this.”

“No you ain't.” Lamar touched his chin and spit on the ground. He stretched his neck and stepped to Elf.

Junius looked at the two of them. Lamar had two years on Elf and at least fifteen pounds.

“Go!” Elf waved off Junius. “This me, niggah. That—” he angled his chin at the towers, “is you.”

Junius stepped into the drive, still watching as Lamar stood tall over Elf and threw his first punch. Elf caught it on his arm and didn't hesitate; he came with a left jab to Lamar's chin that rocked his head back and then stung his cheek with a fast right. Lamar stumbled.

Elf ran at Lamar and crossed him with a left hook to the head. Lamar folded and spit blood.

It was then, while Lamar was bent, that he drew his gun.

“No—” Junius called, but it was too late.

Elf froze at the sight of the weapon, and Lamar stepped forward. He whipped Elf across the head with the barrel, then slashed the gun’s butt up into Elf’s mouth.

Junius saw blood.

Lamar doubled Elf with a hard left to the stomach and tried to knee him in the face.

As Elf struggled to catch his breath, Lamar raised the Glock. They were far enough from anything that wasn’t towers for him to drop a body and not fear.

Junius stepped toward Lamar and drew his nine.

“Stop,” he called. “Hold up!” He tried to sound hard.

Lamar howled and backed off, shaking his head. “Now you fucked up *two times*.”

As Junius stepped to the walk, he had the nine leveled at Lamar’s chest.

“You pull a gun on me? Oh, now fucked yourself, young one.” Lamar’s lips curled into a snarl. He spit. “Think you really use that?”

“Step off.”

“Yo, fuck you!” Lamar started to turn his gun on Junius. “Shoot me now, or I carve you up like my boy did your brother.”

“What?”

“Think you have any choice about this now?”

“Who? Who killed Temp?” Junius jumped forward.

Lamar saying “his boy” could mean anyone in Rock’s crew: Black Jesus, Roughneck, Milk, Hammer, anybody. Junius waved the gun.

“Who?”

Elf fell from a bent-over position onto his ass. He spit a stream of blood onto the ground. A thin trail hung from his chin. His eyes blank, he said, “No, J.”

“Listen to your man. He speaking truth. Like this you walk out.” Lamar smiled. “Maybe. This shit go further, they gone carry you out on a board.”

Junius traced the arc of the cold trigger with his thumb. He flicked off the safety.

“*Or*, maybe I be fucking with you. What you think?”

“This for real,” Junius said, trying to sound steady. He knew what he had to do. Behind him, someone in the towers would have Lamar’s back, and someone that person’s back after that. But right now just the three of them made this scene. The February cold offered that small piece of justice.

“Yeah, niggah,” Lamar said. “Shit be real now.” Junius could see the black O of the Glock’s barrel as Lamar raised it up. He knew Lamar’s next move.

Junius fired.

The crack of the report cut the day, and Junius jumped from the sound. Lamar spun fast, his right hand shooting up to his left shoulder.

Elf’s eyes went all disbelief and fear. He knew how much that shot had just changed.

“Yeah,” Lamar said. He started to turn back around with his Glock when Junius fired again: three fast shots. Now that it had started, there was only one way for it to end.

Only one shot hit. Junius knew he’d fired wild, but let off two more shots as he saw Lamar’s chest. The second hit him hard, knocking him back off his feet.

Derek and Ness would be coming fast now, and others too.

“Get up,” Junius yelled at Elf.

He walked up on Lamar, kicked the Glock out of his hand. With labor, Lamar wheezed and spit blood on his lips. “You dumb, dead niggah.”

“Who killed Temple?” Junius asked, holding the gun in Lamar’s face. His voice sounded distant, not his own.

“Fuck you.” Lamar reached for his gun.

Junius kicked him in the side. He pressed the gun to Lamar’s cheek and asked again, “Who killed Temple?”

“Fuck him *and* fuck you.”

Junius knew the next shot would kick. There was going to be blood—enough of it to bring a war.

“Get ready to run.”

Elf scrambled to his feet. “Don’t—”

Without looking down, Junius pulled the trigger one last time.

The sound was louder, and something wet hit his neck.

Junius saw it all in Elf’s eyes: more than he needed. Whether he didn’t look down that last time because he didn’t want to—because seeing death on his brother’s face was enough for one day—or because he couldn’t, Junius didn’t know.

And it didn’t matter now.

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