

Smoke

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"Five thousand is a lot of money, but if you really need it, I know someone who'll give it to you."

Yeah, I really needed it. You see, I fucked up-big time. I got a tip, I made a bet. If I'd won, I'd be pretty well set at the happy age of eighteen. Instead, my tip fell through, I lost the bet, and now I owe five grand to a man who swears he'll kill me if I don't pay. When Marcus says he's gonna kill you, he's not exaggerating.

I tried getting a loan, but I have no credit. After talking to the loan agent at the bank, apparently no credit is worse than bad credit. He suggested I get a secured credit card. Well, "secured" means I put the money in an account, and the bank gives me a credit card. Now I don't know about you folks, but if I had the money, I wouldn't need the credit card. I wouldn't need a loan, and I wouldn't be looking behind my back every time I stepped out of my apartment. I left the bank empty-handed, with no hope of paying this debt off. I thought about asking my folks, but I knew the way that would go. My parents have been divorced since I was twelve. My pop would yell, then he would lecture, and then he would yell some more. After all that lecturing and yelling, he still wouldn't give me the money.

My mom, on the other hand, would definitely give me the money. Unfortunately, Mom's finances were in worse shape than mine. While my addictions run towards gambling, Mom's ran towards alcohol. If she had the money (and that is a very big if), she'd have it spent on booze before I could come get it. Don't get me wrong, I love both

my parents, I was just looking honestly at my options, which seemed fewer by the moment.

I'd been avoiding my ringing phone for a day, hoping that somehow I'd come up with the money. I'd also been chain-smoking like a madman. On a good day, with no tensions, I easily smoke two packs a day; but take a problem like I had now, and I was smoking them one after the other.

I picked up the phone, trying to come up with an excuse that wouldn't land me in the hospital. As it turned out, it was just my friend Mike. We talked for awhile, and then I asked him for some money. He was the only other person I knew well enough to borrow money from. He didn't have it, but he knew where I could get it. Some old guy Mike had borrowed money from before.

"Who is this guy? I already got one guy who's gonna break my legs, I don't need another."

"It's not like that", Mike said. "He doesn't work that way. You won't even have to pay him back the money."

I lit another cigarette, and inhaled deeply.

"What kind of shit is this? I'm serious, man, Marcus is gonna kill me. I don't need bullshit answers. I need your help."

"Look, you want my help? I'm telling you, this guy's on the level. He's some kind of weird collector. Sure, he'll want something back in return, but it'll be something you own. You probably won't even miss it. The main thing is, he'll give you the money. That's what you want, right?"

"Yeah. Okay, give me the guy's name and address, and I'll go see him."

After getting the information I needed, I hung up. I stubbed the cigarette out, and immediately lit another. My throat was starting to get sore from all the smoking I was doing, but I had bigger problems. I grabbed my coat, opened the door, and almost walked right into Marcus. Not good.

Marcus grabbed me by my shirt collar, lifted me off the ground, and shook me.

"What's it gonna be?" he asked. "You got my money? Or do you want to lend me one of your arms? Maybe I'll just take your fucking head off and call it a day."

"Man, I swear, I was just about to call you."

Even I knew I was grasping at straws. So did Marcus. I could tell by the way he grabbed me by the throat.

"I can live with the fact that you owe me money. I'd have to break something, but I can live with it. But I don't like being lied to. In fact, I hate it"

His hands squeezed my throat. My mouth worked uselessly, as my air was cut off. I tried to speak, tried to breathe, tried to scream, but all I could do was try to pry at the fingers around my throat. My vision began to blur, as I saw Marcus smile. I had started to pass out when Marcus suddenly let go. I fell to the ground and breathed in deeply, almost screaming for the air as I inhaled it. As soon as I could speak, The words flew from my mouth.

"MARCUSISWEARIMGOINGTOGETYOURMONEYNOWIMGOINGTOPAY
YOUNOWDONTKILLMEIMGOINGTOPAYYOU-" I shut up at the pain of Marcus hitting me in the chest with the flat of his palm. I fell back against the wall.

"Ok. So where are you going? How're you going to pay me?"

My mouth opened, but wouldn't work. I was still having problems breathing.
"Hey", he said. "Calm down. Breathe."

He picked me up, and made a show of brushing the dirt off me. "Relax. Calm down. Ok?"

I nodded quickly.

"Now talk", he said.

"I'm on my way to get your money now."

"Where you gonna get five thousand?"

"A loan. I got turned on to a guy who will give me the money today."

"Heh", he laughed. "Into the frying pan ... "

The smile ran off his face, and he looked into my eyes.

"Whatever. Let someone else inherit you. Just pay me. Let's go."

I started to walk.

"Oh. One other thing ...

" I turned around. "Yeah?"

He slammed his fist into my gut. I fell over.

"If you're fucking with me, I will kill you. No more time; no more deals."

He pulled me to my feet, as I wiped the blood off my lip. What could I say? I knew he was serious. I led him downstairs to my car, and we headed.

As I drove, I kept glancing over at Marcus. I pulled out a cigarette and put it between my lips.

My hand was shaking so much the flame from the lighter kept going out. Finally, I steadied myself, and got the tip of the cigarette lit. As I drew in smoke, Marcus reached

over and crushed the end of my smoke between his thumb and forefinger, stopping my cigarette cold, and not even flinching from what must have been a painful bum. He glared at me.

"No smoking. I hate that shit."

And that was that. We arrived at the old guy's building. I had been in this area before, but I hadn't noticed this building. The place was really spooky, with vines creeping up the sides, and weird gargoyles crouched on the rooftop. We stepped into the lobby, and I looked for the name I had scribbled on the back of an old receipt. I pushed the buzzer. An accented-voice answered me.

"Yes, what is it?"

"Urn, Mr. Dietrich, I got your name from Mike Schneider. I need your help, Sir."

For a moment, there was no answer, and I would have sworn that there wasn't going to be one. I just knew he was busy dialing the police, and that they would arrive just in time for Marcus to hand them my heart. Instead, the buzzer rang. Marcus opened the door, and pushed me through it.

Dietrich lived on the fifth floor; 5-D, to be exact, so I was surprised when I looked around, but couldn't find an elevator. I guess I shouldn't have, this building looked about a hundred years older than me. We found the stairs, and made our way up them. By the third floor, I was already starting to breathe heavy.

"You should quit smoking", Marcus sneered. "It's not good for your health."

Neither was hanging out with Marcus, but I wasn't about to mention that to him. We got to the fifth floor, and made our way to the apartment. I knocked softly. I heard Dietrich call for us to come in.

We made our way in. I saw Mr. Dietrich, sitting at a very elegant desk to my left.

He seemed ancient; if I had to guess, I'd say late eighties would not be far wrong.

He had a beard and was wearing thick glasses. He motioned us over to him. There was a single chair sitting in front of the desk. He looked at me.

"You, sit down."

He turned to Marcus. "You will wait outside, please. I have no business with you." Marcus shook his head.

"I own this piece of shit. I'm not letting him out of my sight."

The old man shrugged his shoulders.

"And where are you afraid he'll go? Do you think he'll jump five floors, get up and run off? I will only deal with this young man. You must leave."

This old man had balls. Asking, no, commanding Marcus to leave. Marcus took a step towards Dietrich, and then, I swear, he seemed to think better of it. He hesitated.

"All right, but if I'm not paid in fifteen minutes, there's going to be three very unhappy people in this room."

"Yes, I think we all understand the situation.", Dietrich replied with the kind of look usually reserved for cockroaches.

Marcus waited another moment, then walked to the door and left. Dietrich's demeanor became almost cheerful as he turned towards me.

"Now. How can I help you, my young friend? You need some money, yes?"

I was about to ask how he knew, but then realized Mike had said he'd lent him money, and Mike was my reference, after all.

"Yes, Sir."

"May I ask you your age?"

"I'm twenty-three, Sir. Almost twenty- four."

"That is good. Most young boys no longer had respect for the aged. It is nice to see one with manners."

"Thank you. Sir. Uh, do you mind if I smoke?"

He shook his head and pulled an ashtray out of the top drawer of his desk. He pushed it towards me. I lit up a cigarette. I offered the pack to him.

"No, thank you. I quit smoking a very long time ago. Your friend made it quite clear that we should finish our business quickly."

God, I had forgotten about Marcus! Truth be known, I had forgotten that I had come with a reason.

"Sir, I need to borrow five thousand dollars-"

"No, I do not loan."

I could feel my heart shatter. It had suddenly gotten very cold in my world. What the fuck was Mike thinking? If I left here empty-handed, Marcus would kill me. I was very sure of that.

"I will give you your money. But not a loan. We will make a trade. What do you have that I want?"

I couldn't think of a thing. If I did, I would have sold it and been out of this mess.

"You think you have nothing, no? I assure you that you do."

He pointed to the pack of cigarettes in front of me.

"You want my smokes? For five grand?"

" Of course not. I want your habit."

"I don't under-"

"You will sell me your cigarette habit. And once I pay for it, you may never have another cigarette again. Are we agreed?"

What was wrong with this guy? He wanted me to quit smoking, and would pay five thousand dollars for me to do it. What the hell ... ?

"Yeah, sure, we've got a deal."

"Good, sign this please."

He slid a sheet of paper towards me.

"What is this?"

"It's a simple contract. You agree to sell me your habit for the sum of five thousand dollars."

"What if I take your money, and smoke anyway?"

"Then it will be recorded. And for each cigarette you smoke, a different trade will commence. I assure you, it will be something small, something you can afford. Do we have a deal?"

"Yeah, whatever."

He had me sign two copies, gave me one, and opened a small metal box.

"I assume you will need cash, yes? Your friend will not accept a check?"

"You got that right."

He counted out the money, and then shook my hand. It felt leathery, but I shook it. This man had just saved my life. There was no way I would have refused that hand.

He had a very firm grip for an old man.

Dietrich looked to the front door. "You may come in now."

Marcus walked in, looked at the two of us, and then at the money sitting on the table.

"Is that mine?"

Dietrich nodded. "Yes it is. Please take it and go."

Marcus stared at Dietrich, seeming as if he was trying to work something out in his head. Then he took the money, not counting it, and slipped it into his pocket. He looked back at the old man, and then at me.

"You know, kid, I don't know why, but I think you were better off dealing with me."

With that, Marcus left. I turned to Dietrich.

"I want you to know I really appreciate you helping me out."

He was busy staring down at a very small book. I assumed it was a bible.

"Our business is done. You may leave."

"Uh, do you want me to leave these cigarettes for you?"

He looked up, and for the first time, smiled, just a bit.

"No. You may take those."

I snatched them up and headed for the door. Once there, I turned around and looked back at Dietrich. He was acting as if I'd already left. I opened the door, and headed downstairs.

Once I got outside, it was like I was in a different world, man. No more gambling-that was one thing. That was just too damned close for comfort, and I never want to be in that situation again. I felt good. Marcus was off my back. Hell, I might even quit smoking for real. I felt strong enough to take on the challenge. I threw the

cigarettes on the passenger seat of the car, and headed out to see if I could find some company to share my good feelings with.

I wound up cruising over to Johns Street. There was a pretty cool bar over there called Revved.

I could usually find someone to pick up there, and I really didn't feel like being alone tonight. I managed to find a good spot to park in about two blocks from the place. I started to get out of the car and automatically reached over to the passenger seat to grab my cigarettes. Once I had them, I remembered I was quitting, but put them in my shirt pocket anyway. What the hell? I'd just finish this pack and then that would be it. I got to the door and paid the cover charge.

"John; how's things in here tonight?"

John had been working the front door at Revved for at least the last four years. I mean, I liked the guy and all, but have some ambition!

"Hey, Dude. Things are hot in here tonight. Things are always hot in here, you know that."

Revved has two sections. Once you walk in the front door, you can either take a left turn or head upstairs. If you turn left, there's a dance floor, but it's not very big. Also, it's very near to being pitch dark in there. Occasionally, one of the lasers in the ceiling will shoot out and hit the crystal hanging over the dance floor, showering rays of light all over the room, but those are few and far between. Mainly it's just dark, and to be honest, it kind of creeps me out in there. It's just a mass of sweaty bodies writhing together. You can feel hands groping you, but it's damn near impossible to figure out who. It's not conducive to meeting people, and it certainly wasn't what I was looking for.

Instead, I headed up the stairs. There's a nice bar, the place is dimly lit, but there's more than enough light to see who's who. If you head to the back of the room, there's a pool table, but it's usually quite a wait to play. That wasn't what I was looking for, anyway. I looked around at the tables. Mainly couples, staring at each other. I checked the bar out. There were two ladies, one on either side of the bar. One was quite a looker, and she had two guys on either side, each waiting their turn to buy her a drink. On the other side was another lady, kind of heavy-set, not the best looking woman in the world, but cute enough for one night. She wasn't talking to anyone, just kind of staring down at her almost empty drink. I went up to her and motioned to the empty chair next to her.

"Hey. Is anyone sitting here?"

She shook her head. I sat down, and hollered over to Bob, who was bartending tonight.

"Bob! Let me get a Bud. Bottle."

"No problem, Man, hang on a sec."

I looked at the chick sitting next to me.

"Would you like another drink?"

She looked at her drink and then nodded. Bob brought the Budweiser, and I told him to bring another drink for the lady. I leaned in a bit closer to her.

"Hey, I'm Tommy."

"Hi. I'm Sheryl. Thank you for the drink."

"No problem. Are you new around here? I come in quite a bit, and I don't remember seeing you."

"Actually, I came down to visit someone, but he apparently had other plans. No show at the airport. "

This was sounding better all the time. I pulled out a cigarette, and lit it. It had been a little while since I'd had one, and it tasted really good. We began talking, as I bought a few more drinks. It turned out she'd been having a long-distance relationship with some guy. They'd been having problems, with him hinting that he'd been seeing other people. They had an argument and she told him she was coming down. He told her not to. She told him she was coming and if he still loved her, he should pick her up at the airport. She got her answer when he never showed. There wasn't another flight back home until tomorrow morning, so she rented a car, got a room near by, and decided to have a few drinks before she went to bed. This was all gold to my ears. I was sympathetic to her, gave her little compliments without over-doing it. Within two hours, she was inviting me back to her room. Of course, I accepted. I had finished the three cigarettes left in my pack, so I stopped off and got another pack on the way. We got to her room, and she was like an animal. I had hardly taken my jacket off before her skirt was off, and she pushed me down onto the bed. I was the grudge fuck of her life. Afterwards we lay down in bed smoking and talking. Finally, I fell asleep.

In the morning, Sheryl woke me up around ten. I thought this was a little strange, because I'm an early riser. I'm almost always up by seven at the latest. I stretched out. My back was a bit sore, so I figured I had probably over-done it. I kept hinting to Sheryl about screwing one more time before we left, but she obviously wasn't into it. I figured she was probably feeling guilty about her boyfriend. I wasn't going to mention that he was probably fucking someone else last night, too. She kept looking over at me.

"What's wrong? You keep staring."

"How old did you say you were last night?"

"Twenty-three", I said. "Why?"

"Nothing. You look older than that, that's all."

"Yeah, a lot of people say that."

Actually, people told me I looked young for my age. I was always getting carded for beer, and most of the times, I got carded for cigarettes. Her constant staring was starting to get on my nerves. I grabbed my pack of smokes. Damn, we had smoked about half of them already. I lit one up. Sheryl spoke up.

"Hey, listen, I probably need to get going."

"Yeah, let me finish this and use the bathroom, and then I'll be ready. Would you like me to keep you company until your flight gets here?"

"No, that's okay. I'm sure you have some things to do. I don't want to keep you."

"Well, yeah, I do have some stuff to get done."

Like most days, I had nothing planned. But I really didn't feel like hanging out with her, I was just trying to be nice. I finished the cigarette, and went to the bathroom to take a leak. Afterwards, while washing my hands, I looked up and stared at my reflection in the mirror. Sheryl was right, I did seem older. I guess I hadn't noticed before, but the bags under my eyes seemed more pronounced, and I could see little wrinkles forming at the corners of my mouth. Also, there seemed to be a few gray hairs, which I had never noticed before. No big deal, still a good looking guy, I just hadn't seen it before. I got out, said goodbye to Sheryl, and took off. I stopped off at a store, picked up some beer, and cigarettes, and then stopped and rented some movies. After what I had gone through

the day before, all I wanted to do was chill out at home, watch some movies and get a little drunk. That's exactly what I did. I finished all the beer, half the smokes and when I think of it now, that's the last good day of my life that I can remember.

I woke up to the phone ringing. I leaned over to get it and felt a really sharp pain in my back. I hesitated, felt it ease off and then picked up the phone.

"Hello ?"

There was silence for a moment. Then, "Is ... is Tommy there?"

"Yeah, this is T-- Mom?"

"Tommy? I'm sorry, I didn't recognize your voice. Aren't you feeling well?"

"Yeah, I feel fine. My back's a little sore."

"I'm sorry to hear that. I was wondering if you were going to stop by later."

Sure, she was wondering if I would bring some booze for her.

"Urn, yeah, I could; do you need me to pick up something for you?"

"Well, if it isn't too much trouble, could you pick up some wine coolers?"

"Sure, Mom, I'll be there a little later tonight."

"Ok, great, thanks, Hon. I love you."

"Yeah, Mom, I love you, too."

I hung up and grabbed a smoke. I realized my neck was kind of sore, too. And it was almost twelve! I never slept that late. I got up and headed to the shower.

After a long hot shower, I felt a lot better. I got out and toweled off. The mirror was all fogged up, so I used the towel to clear it away. I almost screamed. I was staring into the mirror, but it wasn't me staring back. That is to say, it was me, but not exactly. I looked older. Older, hell; I looked old.

My hair had big patches of gray in it, and it seemed thinner. Not quite as full as it usually is. I lowered my head, and could see that I had a bald spot forming. My cheeks were sallow, sunken in. My face was much more wrinkled than it had been yesterday morning. My legs had big blue veins running in them. My muscles didn't feel as full as they had been, and my ... my pubic hair was gray. What the fuck was going on? I went into the living room and grabbed my phone. I dialed my doctor's number.

"Dr. Arton's office, can I help you?"

"Yes. This is Tommy Kintner. I need to set up an appointment, please."

"Please hold."

I listened to the phone play a tinny version of Toto's Africa. Then the receptionist got back on the line.

"I can set you up for the 27th at 3:00 pm. How is that?"

"The 27th? No, you don't understand. Something strange is happening, and I need to see the doctor today. This is an emergency; I think I have some kind of cancer."

The receptionist sighed. "Hold please."

I heard the final strains of Africa, and then the music switched to some song I wasn't familiar with. After five minutes, the receptionist picked up.

"Dr. Arton said he'll see you after his last appointment today at 6:00." She sounded surprised.

"That would be great. Thanks."

I hung up, and then lit a cigarette. This is insane. How could I have aged ten years in two days?

I looked at the clock. It was 1:00. I felt like going back to bed. I was exhausted. Instead, I got dressed, and headed out to get a bite to eat.

I wound up going to a Waffle House that wasn't too far from my place. I grabbed a booth in the smoking section. I ordered a cheeseburger, and smoked while I waited for it. I hadn't noticed it before but these cigarettes tasted better with each one I had. That was kind of strange. Usually, the first cigarette in the morning tastes really good. But as the day progresses, the more cigarettes you smoke, the worse they begin to taste.

Sometimes by ten or eleven o'clock at night, I put my cigarette pack down for the night because they just taste like shit by then. But these just kept getting better. My food came and I began to eat. While eating, a piece of burger got lodged between one of my back teeth. I tried dislodging it using my tongue, but that wasn't working. I went to the counter and got a toothpick, and began to try to work it out. The piece of food came out, but the tooth itself didn't feel right. It seemed to be leaning at a strange angle. I felt for it with my finger, pushed just a little bit, and the tooth popped out. I spit it out in shock. There was no pain, no blood, even. Just a tooth sitting on my plate. I pushed the plate away and went to pay my bill.

Once I got outside, I looked at my watch. There was still about two and a half hours before my appointment, but I didn't care any longer. I couldn't think of what else to do. I drove to the doctor's office and checked in. I let the nurse know I'd be sitting outside on the bench, smoking a cigarette. She told me she'd send for me when the doctor was ready.

For two hours, I sat outside, smoking, wondering what was happening to me. I watched children playing. A plastic ball came rolling up and tapped against my foot. I

picked it up, and as I examined it, I noticed my hand. This aging process had begun to affect my hands. They had begun to wrinkle. As I lifted my hand to examine it, my watch slid down my wrist, as if it had loosened. I usually wear it pretty tight, because I hate feeling it slide back and forth up my wrist. Had I lost weight? Was this cancer? A ball rolled up to me and a little boy came running up after it.

"Hello", he said.

"Hello back. Is this your ball?"

"Yes it is. May I have it back?"

"You sure can. Here."

I held it out for him. He hesitated for a moment, but then he reached out and took it. He smiled, and kept staring at me. I stared back. Neither of us said anything. It was a very comfortable moment. I heard someone call out, and the boy turned around. I assumed it was his mother. She looked to be in her late thirties. She came over and took his hand.

"I'm so sorry if he was bothering you, Sir."

"No", I said. "He wasn't bothering me at all. He's a good little boy, aren't you?"

"Yes, Sir."

"Well, you go on with your mother now."

His mother thanked me, and walked off with him. I could hear her admonishing him for bothering the "nice old man". Old. I was at least five years younger than she was. I was gripped with a sudden urge to run over and knock her down, and then just for good measure, give that little kid a kick in the butt, just for being so young; just for

having his whole life ahead of him. I could feel my chin start to shake, as it did when I felt tears coming, but held them off. I was disturbed by the receptionist.

"Excuse me, Sir?"

I turned to her. "Yes?"

"I'm sorry", she said. "I called you three or four times. Didn't you hear me?"

"No. I sure didn't."

"To be honest, at first I wasn't even sure it was you. You look different."

"I'm sure I do."

"Well, the doctor is ready for you."

"Thank you", I said. I stood up, ignoring the pains that were in my knees, and followed her into the office. Dr. Arton was standing in the doorway to his examination room. The look on his face was shock, and it told me how bad off I was.

"Tom?"

"Yeah, it's me, Doc. I'm ... I'm not feeling too good."

"Come on in."

I followed the doctor into his examination room.

"Tom, when did this start happening?"

"I'm not sure. I think about two days ago."

"Two days? This all happened in two days? Let's run some tests; I'll get them Fed-Ex'd out. Normally, it would be a few weeks before we got any results, but I've got a friend who can check them out for us, and call the results to me. I can know within a day or two, although I won't have results back in my hand for at least a week. But at least it should let us know what we're up against, okay?"

"Okay. Thanks."

Dr. Arton made me feel a lbetter. The doctor had said we'd know what we were up against. We. I felt like he was part of a team, and no matter how dumb it was, it made me feel a little better.

Dr. Arton had wanted to have me admitted, but it was really important to me to go see my parents. Despite how crazy they made me, I really loved them and I knew they loved me. And I thought something else. I thought that maybe I should see them just in case. I had aged almost 30 years in two days, and I didn't know how many more days I might have. I was placing all his hope on Dr. Judith, but the truth was, I didn't have a whole lot of time to find a cure. I told the doctor to give me a call when he found out something, and then I would allow him to admit me wherever he wanted.

I pulled up to Mom's house around eight. I'd stopped off and picked her up a case of wine coolers, as well as some cigarettes. I walked in without knocking.

"Ma?",

"I'm in the living room, Tommy. How are you feeling? You sound-"

Mom's voice dropped off as she entered the room. Her mouth tried to work, but no sound came out. Her eyes welled up with tears.

"Mom ... Ma, I know", I said as I put my arms around her.

"What's happened to you?"

"I don't know. Come on; let's go inside. I brought some coolers."

After going in to the living room, we had both started drinking. I had a beer, and Mom had a cooler. She drank the first one down as soon as she opened it.

"Tommy, what's going to happen?"

"I honestly don't know, Ma. The doctor's doing everything he can. He should call me in two days. Tonight, I'm hanging out with my favorite mom. Tomorrow, I'm going to see Dad."

"Tommy, you sound like you're going around saying goodbye to everyone."

"No, Ma, I'm not, I just want to act normal. This thing may be changing the way I look, but I don't want it to change the way I act. I want to do the same things I always do."

We talked for a while, and then we tried to play some Scrabble, but neither of our hearts was really in it. So instead we got drunk, and I fell asleep in Mom's arms, and it felt like home. In the morning, avoiding both my mother and a mirror, I snuck out and headed back to my apartment. I checked my messages. There was one from Mom. She had woken up shortly after I left and wanted me to call her. She was crying. I didn't call.

There was another one from Mike asking if the old guy had fixed everything for me. Finally, there was one from Marcus wanting to know if I wanted to bet on the Tyson-Holyfield fight. Seems we were friends again. Well, I wasn't calling either of them back.

Instead, I walked in to the bathroom, braced myself, and then looked up in the mirror. I saw a sixty-year old man staring back at me. I began to weep, a long soft, sobbing sound.

Once I had regained my composure, I grabbed a shower, and then headed over to my father's house. On the way there, I stopped off at a drug store, and headed over to the reading glass section. My vision was starting to get blurry. I tried on reading glasses until I found a pair that made my eyes as good as possible.

My father is not your usual redneck. He brought being white trash to new lows. As I pulled into the yard, I noticed there were a few new lawn ornaments. I walked up to the door and rang the bell. My father answered the door, and looked me up and down.

"Can I help you?"

"Dad? Dad, it's me. It's Tommy."

And then my dad, my big strong dad did something that scared me more than anything else had. He fainted. I caught him, and tried to bring him to the couch, but I didn't have the strength to do it on my own. I called to my stepmother.

"Mona? Mona, get in here!"

She came running in, and stopped when she saw me. Then she saw her husband in my arms, and raced over to help me. I could hear her whimpering.

"It's okay", I said. "He's just fainted."

We got him to the couch, and he started to come to.

"Get him a glass of water."

She left to go get it. My dad opened his eyes and looked me.

"Tommy, what. .. "

I heard a shriek and then glass breaking. I looked up. Mona was standing there, pointing at me.

She had dropped the glass of water.

"Oh my God! Tommy, it's-- you're Tommy! Oh, God."

My dad gripped my shoulder.

"Mona, go to the kitchen! Leave us alone."

Mona left, but continued to rant under her breath while walking back to the kitchen. Once in there, I could still hear her bitching. My dad spoke.

"Son, what have you gotten yourself into this time?"

"Pop, this has nothing to do with me. It might be some kind of cancer, or some new disease; I don't know what it is, but I've been to see a doctor, and he's working on it."

"That same Jew doctor?"

"Yes, Dad, that same Jew doctor. Dr. Arton is a good man. Despite your feelings about anyone who isn't a white Catholic male, I trust him."

"All right, all right, let's not get into this."

I could hear Mona in the kitchen, alternating from weeping to praying. I like Mona, I really do; I know she means well, but she doesn't seem happy unless she's bitching at me. I drink too much, I smoke too much, why don't I find a better job, why don't I go to church, blah, blah, blah. After a while, she grates on me. And right now I definitely didn't need her shit.

"Tommy", my father said. "What do you think is going on? How did this suddenly happen out of nowhere?"

"Dad, I just don't-"

Mona cut me off as she entered the room.

"It's all those cigarettes! You got cancer from smoking too much! I told you this would happen. Why didn't you listen?"

"Mona!", I exploded. "It's not the Goddamned cig-"

And it hit me. I thought about things squarely for the first time since this started. The old man; this had all started after I saw the old man. The old man wanted my

cigarette habit . And I hadn't stopped smoking. It was crazy to even think about it, but so was the fact that I had aged almost 40 years in three days. I stood up and grabbed my keys.

"I've got to go."

"Tommy", my dad said. "What are you talking about? Where are you going?"

"I've got to go . I'll call you guys."

I ran out of the house, with my father and Mona running after me, yelling at me, but I wasn't listening. I had to get to the old man.

I raced to his building as fast as I could without getting stopped, praying that he would still be there. What if he was gone? I entered the lobby, but before I could press Dietrich's bell, the door sounded, buzzing me in. I took the stairs to the fifth floor, and walked to his apartment. I was out of breath. Leaning against the wall, I could hear a voice from inside.

"Come in, please."

I walked in, and saw Dietrich sitting at his desk, smoking a cigarette. At the side of his desk was a small suitcase. But he was different. He was younger. He looked to be about forty.

"What have you done to me", I asked.

"Please", he said, softly. "Sit down."

I sat, not so much because he asked, but because my knees felt weak, and I knew if I didn't sit, I might collapse. I was so very tired.

"I did nothing to you. I made a deal. You were supposed to quit smoking. You didn't keep your part. I didn't think you would. I've waited a long time for this."

"I don't understand."

"No, I did not think you would. Did you know I was a morphine addict? Of course not, how could you? But it is true. I got into quite a lot of debt supporting my habit. One day, a friend introduced me to someone who offered to give me the money I needed to pay off my connection. I foolishly accepted. After all, it was a sweet deal. All he asked for was my morphine habit. What a stupid man he was, yes? But, as it turns out, I was the stupid one. I must say, I caught on much faster than you did. I stopped taking morphine. And I sat here, waiting for the next junkie to come in. I've had several gentlemen who have taken me up on my offer. But wouldn't you know, each one actually managed to quit their addiction. Even your friend, Mr. Schneider, was able to quit. Did you know he indulged in cocaine? Quite badly, as a matter of fact. He took much more money than you did. But he also quit using. And then I met you."

"How can you do this?" Dietrich stood up.

"I did it because I must. It was my only hope. Now, it is your only hope. But of course, it is completely up to you. You can stop this now, if you want; if you don't mind being an old man. I can see it in your eyes, you know. Even now, you are thinking, whom can I deal with? Your mother? Father? Perhaps a friend will send a stranger your way. I will give you the head start that I didn't get.

In this desk drawer is a book you should read. It took me six months to find it stashed away in the ceiling. "

He stood up and grabbed his suitcase.

"Well, my old friend", he said as he headed to the door. "Let me leave you with one last piece of advice."

"What?", I said as I tried to hold back tears.

"Quit smoking."

And then he left. That was two days ago. I looked around the apartment, but there was nothing else except for an old cot in one of the bedrooms. Searching the desk drawer, I found an old book entitled *Transference*. I've begun reading it, although I don't think it will matter. See, he left something else, too. In one of the desk drawers is a carton of cigarettes. They're even my brand. So far, I've only smoked two. One for each day I've been here. What is that, two years of my life? I'm not sure. But I am sure that if someone doesn't visit me soon; if I can't make a deal with someone, well, who knows? I may just sit down and smoke every one of those fucking cigarettes until I'm nothing but dust. Nothing at all but dust.