

## False Reality

Everyone stood around the body as if they had never seen a dead person before. A pool of blood spread around like red carpet welcoming this lost soul into its new existence. Of course I had other things on my mind...things that I could never speak about...things that I could never tell. *Rest in peace my friend. We'll meet again. Probably sooner than I would like.* I uttered while slipping away from the spectators.

The night felt weird and I couldn't help but feel uneasy as I made my way back to a place I called home for the past three months. It's not the best place, but it certainly beat the cold hard streets. After about twenty minutes or so, I stepped into my hell or haven which ever you choose to call it. I don't know what to call it myself. It can go both ways depending on the circumstances at the time.

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"Yo Bull, where have you been? I've been looking all over for you." Vic said as I took a seat in the living room. His eyes bulged as he waited for a response. *Is he serious? I thought. He obviously didn't get the word that his boy is dead. I'm not going to be the one to tell him.*

"I've just been out taking a walk. Why you tripping?" I answered.

He moved closer looking at me suspiciously. Victor loomed over me with his intimidating structure. He was close; I could smell the crackling leather suit he was wearing. I don't know why he wore leather because he made so much noise when he moved. It was worse than the creaking floors.

"I'm tripping because I just lost one of my boys! You know something 'bout that?"  
"Nah man. I haven't heard anything about that. Like I said, I was just out walking. Carter was on his own. What happened to him?"

Vic backed up a bit turning on his heels. For a brief moment, I was watching his back then he turned to face me again...

"They tell me that someone stove his skull in and that you were seen with him earlier. You sure you don't know nothing 'bout that?"

"That's a shame man, but like I said, I don't know nothing 'bout that. We left together, but he said he was going to shoot over to some broad's house." I didn't look up at him because I was afraid he would see right through me. He loved that kid like his own son. Carter had it coming and Vic knew it. The kid was a walking disaster. He must have sensed it, because he continued to question me.

"So all you did was walk around? Where did you go? Who did you see?"

“No where in particular. I stopped at the corner spot and grabbed a soda; some chips then breezed over to Alberta’s house. She wasn’t there so, I headed back this way.” But this was far from the truth. There was no way I was going to spill what I knew. I might as well put a gun to my own head and pull the trigger. If I told, I was good as dead.

He must have felt satisfied because he shifted and made way toward the kitchen. I could hear the refrigerator opening and him pulling out a beer. Vic had the tendency of drinking too much which explains his excessively large belly. I took in a deep breath and exhaled. My body fell backward into the cushions. My mind was going crazy and I couldn’t help but remember how Carter was laying in his own blood. I closed my eyes and recounted the events that took his life...

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“Hey man,” Carter bellowed jovially “What you wanna do today?”  
“I don’t know. I hadn’t given it a thought. You know we should just lay low and chill.”  
“Man you’re like butter...Soft!” he said with his face twisting into a disgusted frown.  
“Why don’t we shoot over to Junie’s place and get high?”  
“Nah, I’m not feeling that scene. Besides, you know he can’t stand your sorry ass.”  
“That’s dead man. We settled that long time ago.”  
“Yeah. You think his run in with Big Vic settles your score? I think it only pissed him off.”  
“We’re straight man. I’m telling you. I talked to him just the other day.”

There was no convincing this idiot. He was not going to take no for an answer, but I didn’t want to get caught up in this mess. Carter didn’t take much serious and he always had Vic to handle things for him, but I was not a part of that click. Vic would turn on me like a Pitbull the moment Carter wasn’t looking. Not only that, Vic had problems of his own. Helping Carter brought debt to himself. He wasn’t generating like that.

“You can do what you want man, I’m not going. I’m just going to chill.” Deep down, I knew that the bottom line was that I would give in, but I had to at least make my protest known. “All right man, count me in, but if things get strange in there, I’m out. You hear me. I’m telling you that we ain’t got love in there.”  
“Whatever man. You just roll with me and I’ll take care of you. You know I’ve got your back.”

As Carter wanted, we moved on up to Junie’s place. Junie had a soul food restaurant. He was one of those country bastards that appear to be legitimate but had a front for a drug spot. He and Vic had a run-in once before because he had turned his boy Carter into a crackhead. Vic promised Carter’s mom when she died that he would take care of him, but Vic had his own dirt. Although he didn’t turn him out, he had him selling, which was just as bad. Carter detoxed under Vic’s two-step program...broken legs. Needless to say, he straightened up right away with a permanent limp as a constant reminder.

We stood at the door observing the customers and noticed Trish, one of Carter’s squeezes, who was seated with Junie himself. This angered him right away.

“Come on man,” I told him trying to defuse a fight waiting to happen. Junie definitely didn’t want to have any dealing with Vic, but he was no punk either. He shot a look at Carter letting him know that his presence didn’t go unnoticed, then just as quickly returned his attention to Trish. He grabbed her hands and gently kissed both of them then excused himself as he moved toward us.

“Y’all here to eat or what?” He said challenging Carter’s stare.

“Yeah man. We just want something to eat. What you got cooking today?” I offered trying to maintain cool.

“Grab a seat and check out the menu.” He said in his best effort to behave himself.

There weren’t many people in the place, but enough that could spread word if word needed spreading. The two of us started toward a table near the back of the restaurant. Junie followed us closely behind. When we were at the table, he handed us a menu. Carter reached out for it and Junie held on to it.

“You boys gonna behave right? Don’t start no shit.” He told us directing his statement to Carter more than anything else.

“Hey, you got a problem with me.” He shot back not wanting to play into this keep it cool fiasco.

“I don’t like you coming up in here like you got it like that. You still owe me. I’ve extended you some time, but I still want my money. Understand me?” He said before releasing the menu.

Carter had taken just about all he could from this guy. He wanted to ice him the first chance he got. He spread his lips in a mimicking smile and took a seat. He quickly glanced at the menu although he knew exactly what he wanted. Just get me a steak man. Rare.” He emphasized without regard to the man’s note of sarcasm. He looked at the woman behind the bar in the kitchen and nodded his head. She quickly made way to the table.

“Get this guy the bloody special.” He told her. “You having the same?” He asked me.

“No. I’m not hungry,” realizing exactly what he meant. This smuck Carter was totally clueless, relishing in his own presumed power. “Just get me a glass of bottled water please.” I replied while clearing my throat. The tension was too thick and I felt as though I couldn’t breathe. It’s funny how crap gets started without anyone saying a word. The truth is a lot was being said. I for one wasn’t going to eat anything in this place that wasn’t pre-sealed and providing adequate security from poisoning.

“Rare huh. Well that’s on me.” He told him and nodded to the waitress to get the order.

By this time, Trish had taken notice of Carter being there. She dismounted her seat and sauntered over to where we were sitting.

“What’s up Carter? It’s been a long time.”

His eyes glared at her and before anyone knew it, he had rested a cuff on her cheek. “What you doing here girl? I called your house earlier and you weren’t at home. Something told me to come in here. So this is your new thing now?”

Luckily for me, Junie had followed the waitress to the kitchen, probably to add something special to the dish. Carter snatched the woman by the arm and told her to go home and he would deal with her later. Trish hurried out holding her cheek. God was I praying that she didn’t make a scene. Carter was really pushing his luck at this point.

After a few minutes, Junie returned with my water. Sealed just like I wanted it. I gave him a quick nod and opened my bottle. He offered me a glass, but I didn’t need a glass. That’s just like accepting an opened bottle from your enemy.

“This is fine. I’ll drink it straight from the bottle.”

“Once a nigger, always a nigger.” He remarked and walked away.

For the first time, he noticed that Trish was gone and instantly, he turned to look at Carter. Carter shot his taunting smile at him again which really added fuel to the fire. This was definitely time for me to make my exit. The scene was getting too thick for my blood.

“Hey man, I’ve got to be going. You gonna be all right?”

“Yeah. Things are under control. Don’t worry about a thing,” he assured.

With that, I stood from my seat, paid for my water and made tracks. I felt like a sucker leaving him like that, but at the rate Carter was going, he would end up on the menu.

I didn’t go far. My girl lived only six blocks from Junie’s place. I figured Carter would pass by and I would join him when he reached this point. After mounting Alberta’s steps, and knocking on the door, she answered the door. She stood rugged style in her jeans and timberlands.

“Hey baby. I didn’t expect to see you today.”

“I know, I was just in the area and wanted to check you out.”

*It was a typical line, but what was I supposed to say, that I was here for a booty-call?*

Anyway, she let me in and to my surprise, she had a house full of guests. *There goes the booty-call.* I stayed for about twenty minutes before I got tired of this scene. I was never the one for crowds. I said my good-byes and side-stepped out of there.

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Junie remained at the table with Carter, looming over him.

“Hey man, where’s my food?” He questioned.

“Don’t worry, it’s coming.” Junie remarked with a cynical grin. Carter pulled closer to the table resting his hands palm down on the table.

“Can I at least get something to drink while I wait?”

Just that time, the waitress was returning with his steak. There were no more than six other people in the restaurant. Everyone seemed to end their meal at the same time and

made quick strides out the door. Carter looked around and wondered why everyone was leaving.

“You know, you should pay more attention to your other customers. I don’t require this much attention.”

Just that instant, the door opened...

“What’s up...?”

Suddenly, he couldn’t breathe. Someone had grabbed him from behind and held a plastic bag over his head. He fought to gain control, but was overpowered. He was drug from the table and into a room in the back. Once in the back, the bag was removed. Carter sat on the floor gasping. Slowly the dark cloud that hung before his eyes began to clear and at first he could see little lights flickering before him but soon disappeared and clarity returned. He recognized his attackers.

“What’s going on man? Why you tripping?”

“You talk too much.”

“Talk too much!” he exclaimed. “Who have I been talking to?”

“I’m sick of your mouth. It’s time you paid your own tab?”

“Whoa. Wait a minute. What are you talking about? Listen I’m straight. I haven’t said nothing.”

“Give me the bat!”

“Hey. What are you doing? I haven’t done nothing. It was Justin. That slick bastard who rolled out on me.”

“He’s gonna get his soon, but now it’s your turn.”

The metal bat connected with Carter’s head in a homerun swing. It made a crunch and chime when it hit. Carter’s body fell over and slid across the floor.

“Grab that fool and bring him outside.”

Two men grabbed him by the arms and legs and carried him out to a van. They pulled him in and drove him a few blocks away and dumped him on the street and continued on their way. The screeching tires caused nearby people to investigate. They found Carter’s body. Alberta was one of the people amongst the crowd. She recognized Carter right away as one of Justin’s friends.

“Oh my God. I better let Terri know. He might be in danger.”

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Considering I was tired as hell, I decided to take the short-cut home when I saw a crowd forming two blocks up. There was so much commotion, that I had to check it out. When I got there to my surprise, well maybe not a surprise, Carter was laying on the ground with a dent the size of a baseball in his head. Someone had caved his head in. The sight of it made every nerve in my body tense up. Seemed like minutes passed before I could move. Things started spinning and I knew that I had to get out of there because if Vic found out, he was going to kill someone...and that someone was me. It was my responsibility to watch over him and I skipped out on him. I was tired of being his babysitter. That kid had far too much mouth for me. I knew that Junie had had just about enough of him, not to

mention running his girl off like that. Of course, that was the only thing they seemed to have in common... Trish.

No one noticed me so I quietly eased away from the crowd. I was thinking what to say to Vic when I got back. I was hoping he wasn't there. I eased into the house. To my surprise, Vic was there. Vic was upset, but he didn't press me about what happened to Carter. I was glad, 'cause Vic had a temper and no one wanted to get on his bad side.

I moved upstairs to my room. Tired, sexually frustrated and scared as hell, three evils I didn't need right now. I could hear Vic downstairs shuffling around. He probably was thinking what to do about his boy. It's not like he was free from sin himself. He had some bad blood out there too. Debt is one of those things that doesn't go away without bullet in the back of your head. Carter and I took care of things on the outside and Vic collected the money. Not enough though. Time was running out quickly and Vic had two more days to get it. He was going to pay with cash or his life.

Someone was at the door. Probably one of Vic's thugs bringing his the news again or his juvenile gladiators who would sacrifice their lives to defend the coward they represented. I wasn't going down there. I didn't want to take part in that crap. I was far too young to die in some alley or have my skull caved in on the street. But I listened at the door instead just to see who was down there and what Vic was sending them to do. It was strange. As loud as Vic usually talk, I couldn't make out what he was saying. Why would he be telling secrets in his own home? I wondered. I opened the door and neared the stairs but stayed out of sight.

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"Here take this and cave that coward bastard's head in."

"Now."

"Right now. He think he's going to walk away from this shit, but I can't let that happen."

"You know where we can find him?"

"I'm going to take you right to him."

Vic shifted his head indicating for the three to follow him upstairs.

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Justin silently returned to his room. His heart was racing because he knew that Vic wanted him to go with them to Junie's place. He was not about to get into a squabble with Junie. Of course, he couldn't say no either. He would have to leave with them and find a way to ditch them too. Junie would probably end of bashing their heads instead.

Vic pushed the door open to find me sitting on the bed. I looked surprised. I let my eyes absorb their expressions. Something was wrong. I got this eerie feeling and knew that I would not make it back from this trip alive. Vic was definitely not going to let me scurry out of this one.

"What's up man? Where y'all going?" I asked playing stupid.

“I wan’t you to go with them to Junie’s, find out about Carter. I want you to deliver the message.” He paused pulling a switchblade from his pocket. “Personally.” He said pushing the closed knife to my reluctant hand.

Vic was definitely out of his mind. I mean what did he think this was ‘West Side Story’; The time of gangs and street fights. Junie would blow my head off before I could even open this knife. Maybe he’ll even take the time to shove it up my ass. I took the knife and gave him a ‘you’ve got to be kidding look.’ He didn’t mind my look. He turned his back and escorted us to the door. The three stoogers followed silently behind me as I led them like a small army down to Junie’s place.

I could feel cold bats fluttering in my belly. I was walking straight up to death and handing him this little bitch knife and ask him to please put it into my chest because that is exactly what he is going to do. Not just me, but the three assholes behind me. All this would be done without any effort.

Junie was open still as expected. It was quite evident that he didn’t have any customers. This was definitely not the time to start this bullshit. We neared his restaurant and my gate got shorter. I was thinking hard about what to say and what to do. My gut told me to take cover, but it was obvious that they were not going to let me back out of this so I continue up to the door and pushed it open.

Junie was sitting at a table along with some other guys. He didn’t look surprised at all to see us. A cocky smile cut into his face as though someone had sliced it. It was more like an exaggerated smile.

“I see you’ve come back.” Junie shot to me as I took a firm stance two tables away from him.” Something cold as ice ran up my spine and for the first time, I felt like something was wrong. It wasn’t so much that Junie was smiling at me or that Carter was murdered earlier and it was probably Junie who did it, but the way he looked at me. His eyes told an even greater story. He never paid attention to the guys just behind me. They didn’t seem to bother with formalities either. What the hell were they waiting for? Junie was seated, unarmed and begging for a bullet. His eyes went from me to the two with me. He stood from his seat, started toward me and suddenly I felt something...something wrong and unexpected.

I drifted with the two guys to a room out back. My legs felt wobbly and stiff. Nothing was making sense. It was like dejavu. This whole scene seemed as though it had happened before. Everyone was standing and somehow, I found myself seated. I don’t know what everyone was talking about. Why didn’t they just go ahead and kill him so I can be on my way. I didn’t have any real beef with Junie, but Vic said waste him, that meant waste him.

I was getting a real headache by now. Tired of sitting around, getting nothing done, and wasting time. Suddenly, everyone stood back and looked toward the door. Vic walked in. The low chatter I heard earlier had gone silent. Not the ringing though, it continued to

sound off in my head. I was sweating profusely. It must have gotten really hot all of a sudden. I reached up and wiped the sweat with hand. And it stung when I touched it.

“Y’all can’t do shit right.” Vic said as his menacing stature continued through the room. I knew that Vic wouldn’t be hesitant about getting shit done. He must have known that they would not take Junie out. As he neared us, his eyes moved from one to the other, calculating. Junie didn’t seem bothered by his presence. He watched as Vic continued toward them. Didn’t he understand that he was about to die, or did he have something up his sleeve? That’s got to be it. His eyes met Vic’s and their stares locked on to each other. He now stood in front of me. I realized for the first time that his eyes were actually fixed on me. I became apprehensive.

“What’s going on man?”

“You talk too much.”

“Talk too much!” he exclaimed. “Who have I been talking to?”

“I’m sick of your mouth. It’s time you paid your own tab?”

“Whoa. Wait a minute. What are you talking about? Listen I’m straight. I haven’t said nothing.”

“Give me the bat!” he said as Junie passed him the bat.

“Hey. What are you doing? I haven’t done nothing.”

His body twisted and he angled the bat far behind him and brought it back around in a quick, smooth turn. The bat connected, making a sickening crunch. I could feel myself floating into darkness. I don’t know where this cloud was taking me, not that it mattered anyway. I couldn’t move. Hell, I couldn’t feel a thing. Moments later, there was a lot of light again. Probably Heaven. Dang, what are all these people doing here? I wondered. What are they staring at?

Their muffled voices could barely be heard. I strained my ear to get a keener earshot of their gibber. Carter was staring down at me with his mouth agape.

“Take it easy man.” Carter told me. His expression told me that something was terribly wrong. “I’ll get some help.” He turned to leave, but I managed to call out to him.

“What happened? Why is everyone staring at me?”

“Vic found out about you. He found out that you short changed him. He...”

A menacing drumming started in my head. I started to remember. It was coming clear. The words Carter said echoed in my mind and I started to remember...

“Justin you’re dying man.” Carter leaned down and got really close so that I could hear him. “Vic and Junie did a real number on you. your head’s been caved in.”

“Not me. You!” I wailed. This hadn’t happened to me. I wasn’t the bad guy, Carter was the bad guy.

“You got high again. Vic told you that he would kill you if you got on that shit again. I told you to leave it alone. You owed too much money man. I couldn't talk them out of it. There was nothing I could do.”

“You set me up? Didn't you. That's why you took me there. Isn't it.” I now remembered. It was all too clear. Time had caught up to me and like the good book says... You reap what you sow. It was only seconds after that everything went dark. I was gone.