

After Victor finished speaking, the car remained dark and silent.

Everyone's eyes darted, searching for a fresh speaker.

Feeling brave, Noah spoke up.

"I guess I'll go now."

Everyone stared at him as if searching for some hint as to what he would speak of. Victor spoke next.

"Well, go on, kid. Don't be shy."

Silently, Noah thought to himself.

"I haven't relived the past in a long time. Do I feel comfortable enough to speak about it in front of all these strangers?"

Noah took a deep breath, slightly rubbed his left arm and began.

My family fell apart when I was an infant. I remember almost nothing about them. I haven't seen my father since he walked out on us. I always felt like I could never forgive him for what he took from my mother. I was always a bitter person up until a certain point in my life when I met this guy. His name was Julian and he was maybe five or six years older than I was at the time. He really seemed to know what he was talking about.

When I met this guy, I was near the edge. There were times when I thought about why I was even still alive. I was slowly destroying myself from the inside out, not knowing how much I could lose. I was always silent, very

antisocial, and I never wanted anyone near me. In school I had a few select friends who eventually drifted from me. They started to get really afraid of me. I got worse as I approached high school.

I think it was the middle of my sophomore year in high school when I really lost it, so bad that I left school and sat on the city bridge for hours debating whether or not to jump into the black, icy water below me. Finally, I decided against it realizing my mom still needed me around for at least two or three more years.

When I got home that night I started to drink. And I'm not talking water or orange juice, I mean drinking. That night I think I pounded at least a twelve pack, a bottle of Jack, and God knows what else. I just remember not being able to see straight for a long time, taking a shower, and getting into my bed. The rest of that night is blank in my mind.

This went on for at least two weeks or more, I'm not sure. The blackouts, the dizziness, I got accustomed to it. Everyone around me started to get really worried. My teachers started to ask a lot of questions, so many that it got to the point where I got detention from one for telling him to leave me alone, only it was a little meaner at the time. The nurse even called me down a couple days in a row and asked if I wanted to go home. I didn't want to go home. I could do worse to myself at home.

My mom started to get worried too. Although she never said anything, I could tell by the look on her face that she thought she was going to lose me. That look always made me feel so guilty. When I felt guilty I'd go have another shot.

After that night when I realized even my mother knew I was losing it, I started to skip school. I didn't want to deal with what everyone else had to dish out. I didn't rightly care what they thought about me or about what I did. I wanted to get away from all of them. Either that or I wanted all of them to leave. When that dream couldn't be fulfilled I fed the monster of addiction in me yet again.

After that, I didn't even bother showing up at school. I'd get home at night and there would be a message form the main office stating that I was absent again. I always thought they were stupid for that. Kids who got home before their parents could just erase the message. I erased the messages almost everyday.

I had even lost my spot on the wrestling team because of my problems. During one of my late night binges I fell on our porch steps and really screwed up my shoulder. After that I couldn't wrestle. They would've kicked me off eventually anyway.

I think it was about March -yeah, March- when the weather started to get warmer. I would walk around town with a bottle of whiskey hidden in a plain

paper bag. I would just walk the streets of my small town swaggering and taking sips, ending up wherever I ended up. One day I landed at the local diner.

I had been to this diner before, it was small and they had good food and was popular around the town. Well, when I walked in that day, it was definitely apparent that I lived in a small town. Every head in the place turned to greet me with a look of “Oh, God, it’s that drunk kid.” I passed it off like it was nothing and took a seat at the counter next to this guy. He was nursing a cup of coffee and had a half eaten sandwich in front of him. He had a pair of ratty jeans on with a red shirt. He had black hair that was neatly styled and he wore sunglasses, and like I said before, he looked about five or six years older than me. He had a sleeve of tattoos on his right arm but I couldn’t focus on them. I was too buzzed to know what was going on around me.

Some waitress came up to take my order. By the looks of it, she had worked here for years, come to think of it she did. If I can recall, I think she lived about four blocks over from the diner itself. In a small town you know everybody, everybody except for the stranger that was sitting next to me.

I ordered a cup of coffee and a plate of eggs and bacon when the man turned to face me. The neon lights that covered the wall glared off of his sunglasses and made him look like a demon trying to convince me to sell my soul. This was the first time he spoke to me.

“Kid, you damn well stink of alcohol. Aren’t you underage?”

“What’s it to ya?” I answered.

“Nothing, I just think you have to be pretty screwed up to be that drunk.

What happened to you? Did someone die or something?”

“Nah, dude no one died. It’s a long story that I’m not sober enough to tell.”

He smiled and let out a laugh. “I like you kid, what’s your name?”

“Noah.”

“Well, my name is Julian. Meet me here tomorrow kid, same time. If you think you’ve got it bad, wait till you hear about what I’ve been through.”

“Could you write it down? I have no memory. Months of blacking out do it to you.”

He grabbed a napkin off the counter and wrote down the name of the diner, his name, and the time he wanted me to be there. Then he gave me a nod, tapped me on the shoulder, and walked out.

I met him again there the next day. We did the same for weeks. I would meet him somewhat sober and he would tell me about the hell that he called his life. He told me how he grew up with his dad because his mom died when he was six, at least that was what his dad’s excuse was for not having her around. I told him how lucky he was to have a dad, since mine walked out. Then he told me how he started drinking at a young age just like me. He told me how his father abused him and how he felt he never measured up to anything in the old

man's eyes. He ran away from home when he was seventeen and ended up getting arrested for stealing a car. After his run in with the law, he moved to a big city where he ran into even bigger problems. He got addicted to all kinds of things. Crack, heroin, and he was still a heavy alcoholic. He even tried to kill himself twice and never finished high school or went to college.

I sat there for those weeks and listened in awe. I honestly thought my life was bad. Julian had it much worse. I didn't want to be like him.

He told me about the tattoos on his arms and how he hung out with this group of guys that got him to do it. They would all go out together and do drugs and drink. He told me the one night they were so hammered that they just waltzed into a tattoo shop and sleeved their entire right arm. All six of them, so drunk they couldn't even feel the needles and when they woke up the next morning didn't even remember getting inked. He told me the only tattoo he'd gotten done voluntarily was the tribal on his left upper arm. The insane mix of colors and pictures on his right was a constant reminder of how he was young, stupid, and lost. It was a constant reminder of the life he'd led. Up until a stint in rehab.

One day when he was hung over he found himself in a small coffee shop. He told me that on the opposite side of the shop was the most beautiful girl he'd seen in his entire life. And still having some false courage fabricated of alcohol, he went up and talked to her.

He told me they hit it off then and there. The only issue was his addiction. She completely disagreed with it. All she had wanted him to do was change. All he wanted to do was be in love with her, and he was. The way it sounded, she really cared about him too and, she was the only person he ever really cared about. He saw her for a few months until she finally told him she couldn't put up with what he did anymore. She explained how she couldn't be with him, especially if his addictions were more important than she was. She asked him to quit and he told her it wasn't that easy, you can't just cold turkey it. It's a habit just like brushing your teeth every morning. He told her he'd try and she told him trying wasn't good enough. He had to stop. She told him that if he didn't stop for her, he had to stop for his own life. Julian didn't know at the time he damaged his body so much that he was dying inside.

Furious by what she had to say, he went home and did everything. He took every drug he could and drank every bottle in his run down apartment. All he could see were her blue eyes, her amazing Caribbean blue eyes. And after that, darkness.

He told me the next morning he woke up to bright lights in a white room. Everything was white, he thought he had died. When he finally came to a nurse told him he had a letter. She handed him a blue envelope and walked out of the room. He rubbed his eyes hard and tried his best to focus on that familiar handwriting.

“Julian, I was hoping we could work things out. But when I came to check on you, you were passed out cold in your apartment. I thought you were dead. It was then I realized, I’m never going to be able to change you. And I can forgive myself for that. But, I’ll never forgive myself for not trying to help you. I don’t want to find out that you’re dead knowing that I never tried to help. You’re in good hands. This is the best rehab center in the country. Please get better. I love you so much.”

As he read he became both sad and furious at the same time. How could she do this to him? Why did she leave? This will never work.

It took Julian six months to realize maybe these people could help him. Maybe it wasn’t so bad. But why in six months hasn’t he heard from her?

It was a long hard time for him. And the way he told his story to me, I could tell it wasn’t easy for him to recount it. Especially when it came to her, the girl with the Caribbean blue eyes. I don’t think he ever told me her name.

Julian eventually recovered. He told me how hard of an experience it was and how sick and scared and alone he was. He seemed so strong to me. I couldn’t believe he had ever felt scared in his life. He walked out of rehab with his head held high a year after his admission. He told me he was proud of himself and confident. After that he never relapsed.

When our diner meetings became more frequent, Julian told me his story in about three weeks time. Except unexpectedly, the tables turned when I had to tell him mine. I felt like an idiot. My problems were nothing compared to his.

My experiences looked like dust next to his. He had seen and done horrifying things. I would have never survived that.

Julian made me feel strong. He made me want to be just like him. Someone who could get into a huge mess and pull themselves out of it in the long run. I became determined to stop drinking and to get back into school. He helped me get my act together. I began seeing him only on Friday nights and over the weekend. He helped me with my homework and helped me bring my grades to where they used to be.

But I had one last promise to fulfill. My mother would ask where I was all day for weeks on end. I told her about Julian and how he made me feel and how he made me determined to fix myself. I hadn't seen her that happy in months, she asked to meet him and I agreed that on my last meeting with Julian she could come with me.

On the last Friday night I would truly need Julian's help I took my mother to the diner. She asked all kinds of questions about him, I think it was mostly because she wanted to deem the guy a saint.

When we got to the diner, Julian rose to meet me and my mom. He took off my sunglasses and I noticed a look of surprise on his face. Puzzled I turned to face my mom and realized she was crying. I had no idea why.

"Mom, this is Julian."

She stammered and said "I know, Noah. He's your brother."

My what? I was never told I had a brother. I turned to face Julian and I saw him crying too.

“Your father took him with him when he walked out. I thought I’d never see you again. I only knew it was you because you look just like your father.”

They looked at each other for a long while and Julian slowly pulled his wallet out of his back pocket. He flipped through a few plastic picture sheets until he came to a picture of my mother holding an infant, who was Julian. The look on his face was one of someone who finally learned the truth, his mother had never died. They leaned in and hugged each other.

I was still absolutely speechless. I never knew I had an older brother and little did I know the guy who saved me from going over the edge was someone who was meant to be in my life from the start. Part of me wanted to yell at my mom for not telling me and the rest of me was still in shock, in awe by the way everything works out.

Julian and I kept in touch during my last two years of high school. He finally found his girl with the blue eyes. Apparently she was looking for him too, she never found out where he had gone after rehab. All she knew was that she had saved him. I ended up graduating, with honors and going on to college. I ended up meeting a wonderful girl, who I was on my way to see until I got stuck on this subway. And on my eighteenth birthday I went out and got my

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tattoo. A tribal on my left arm. It became the constant reminder of the brother I
gained and the life he helped me leave behind.