



Weightlifter

by Joe Schwartz

Phillip was six years old and had never spoken a word. He was capable, so the doctors had assured his mother, but still he did not talk. Over time, he and his mother had developed a bastardized sign language to communicate. Crude, yet effective, it was far from the standard. Teachers at the CID (Central Institute for the Deaf) refused Phillip's enrollment based on the fact he could hear quite well.

The St. Louis Public Schools would accept him, but insisted he join their 'special needs' class. Phillip's mother couldn't bear the thought. He wasn't mentally retarded. Phillip understood her when she spoke, obeyed her verbal commands to pick up his toys, wash his hands, or go to bed. Private school was out of the question. She had been a single mother for the last nine years. Her older son's father was dead, the victim of hit-and-run driver who was never found. Phillip was the result of a drunken one night stand three years later. The guilt she felt was perfected in her life as Phillip and his handicap were the constant reminder to her sin.

Leon was Phillip's significantly older brother. His mother's constant sorrow for his deceased father drove him to the streets where he found companionship and camaraderie with older boys. A seventeen-year-old, who went by the street name Prosperous Gangster, taught young Leon everything he knew about 'the life.' The life was simple: sell dope all day, all night, all week, all month, all year. People bought crack cocaine on Thanksgiving and weed on Christmas. There was never any shortage of customers or product. It didn't matter if a little fish got caught holding, they weren't going to be gone that long anyhow. A year in Juvi

max, then put right back where they started, doing the same things again as if time stood still.

Time, however, marched on. It could be measured by the fresh graves at the multiple nearby cemeteries. The new faces in the streets of boys who didn't know their times tables but could accurately figure grams into ounces. Neighborhood girls, still children themselves, who became prostitutes in what seemed more a right of passage than a disgrace. The babies they would have that would fill the void when the boys they loved were killed or grew to be men who lived life permanently behind prison walls.

It was Saturday, and Leon slept on the couch. His white t-shirt lay crumpled atop his red Converse. The dark, bare skin of his chest rose and fell methodically as his forearm shielded his eyes.

Phillip sat cross-legged on the floor next to the couch. He watched television, ate cold strawberry Pop-Tarts, and drank milk. Unable to reach the cups above the sink, he drank directly from the half-gallon carton's triangular mouth. Several times already he had spilled milk on his pajamas, but stubbornly refused to get a towel or change his clothes. Nothing could move him once the screen came to life with its vibrant images. His legs usually went numb by the time his shows gave way to afternoon infomercials, but he didn't mind. Five solid hours of cartoon binging was worth it. He wished they could afford cable. The idea of entire networks devoted to his favorite addiction was almost unbelievable.

The Galactic Rangers were about to confront their arch enemy Megadoom when Leon woke. Still lying on the couch he reached into his hip jean pocket. Like all the other boys, he wore the long shorts half down his ass to expose his boxer shorts. It would have went out of style long ago if it didn't piss off everyone over thirty. The cigarette pack was crushed and misshapen, the green and white Newport label impossible to read.

His eyes half-open, Leon used his long pointer fingernail to carefully pick open the silver foil top. In slow motion, he removed the last remaining crooked cigarette. It was part miracle - part skill it hadn't broken. Either way, he placed it between his lips and lit it. The cardboard match had a strong sulphur odor that he found pleasant. He held the snuffed charcoal end under his nose until the scent disappeared.

An aluminum ashtray, once bright yellow now mostly stained black, came to rest on his stomach. Leon wasn't surprised but laughed a little as the sudden coolness transferred to his bare stomach.

"Thanks, little brother," he said certain he would not be answered aloud. Leon pitied his younger brother. He was a gentle boy with eyes the color of melted milk chocolate. The boy physically was average in build, under-average in height, and meek as a puppy. It was a matter of time before his protection over him expired. When he was gone, he feared his sweet as sugar little brother would be in for a rude awakening. Boys young as Phillip were coming up everyday in the streets. Mean little bastards with no sense and less restraint. If Leon were locked up (or worse God forbid) they would mistake Phillip's quiet, humble demeanor as an insult. He would be easy prey for those looking to prove themselves to the others.

The last of the smokable cigarette vanished, and Leon crushed the butt into the ashtray. The cherry heat transferred through the metal, stinging his exposed flesh. Hot and intense like an insect bite, but he did not flinch. A mind game he played with himself, that should he give into the obvious pain, it was mark against his manhood. A black strike on a scoreboard only he could see. Should he overcome the pain, it proved his worthiness as a man and as a leader. This and many other assorted tests he sought willingly on a day-to-day basis. The more he passed, the stronger he became to face this world, and the harshness it doled out regardless race or religion.

He removed the ashtray and sat up. Phillip was, as usual, at his feet. He had but to snap his fingers and order him. The devotion made Leon wish he had such power on the street. Though he was now what his mentor PG once was, he knew his days were numbered as king. With the power came envy. It was a life or death chess game. One false move and he would serve a five-year minimum in the county slam for possession with intent to distribute. Get slack with his boys and they might find the nerve to make a move. The paranoia was hell. His plan was to cash-out soon. Take all the dope money he had been hiding under his mother's mattress and leave. The thing he couldn't figure yet, the whole reason that kept him here, was how he could avoid revenge by the gang on his family.

Their mother wasn't home. Saturday was when she worked her second job. Her primary job as an overnight security guard was barely enough to pay the rent and keep the utilities turned on. The twelve-hour shifts she put in as a part-time school custodian bought groceries and occasionally some McDonalds for her Phillip. She knew about how Leon made his kind of money and did not like it. He had held out fists full of cash and begged her to take it. Sternly, she refused. It was blood money. She believed it cursed.

A knock on the door made Leon nervous. He found his .22 pistol before he nodded his permission for his mute brother to open the door.

Phillip opened the door like Leon had taught him. After he unlocked the deadbolt, he turned the handle and walked backward. Should some serious business go down, the thick, solid core door would act as a shield. If things went terribly wrong, it might be able to hide Phillip and keep him alive, a forgotten player among the opponents.

It was Samurai Mike, Leon's best friend. His bald head was round and pudgy as the body it rested upon. He bent over the couch and bumped shoulders with the man he considered his superior.

"Time to go and do that thing, know what I'm sayin'," Samurai Mike said.

"Shit, man," Leon said, "I damn near forgot."

Phillip still stood by the door. He liked to watch them and how they interacted. The secret language they used with one another in words and gestures that they alone seemed to understand. It was Philip's secret wish to someday be exactly like Leon.

Leon reached down, grabbed his shirt, and pulled it over his head. The little gun was invisible under his oversized t-shirt. He put on his shoes, went to the bathroom, and came out wearing a shiny gold wristwatch and matching rope necklace.

"I'll be back soon," Leon said. He placed his hand on his little brother's head and looked him in the eye. "Don't be doing nothing stupid while I'm gone. Okay?"

Phillip nodded his head under his brother's hand. He reached out and squeezed Leon about the neck, then he was gone.

The television had given way to the first half-hour advertisement that promised firmer buns, leaner thighs, and washboard abs. Bored, he tried to concentrate on the blonde woman who made exercise seem so fun and not wonder if his brother might come home again.