

J40 Fever

Written by Donovan Russo

“I want to work, Mr. Jefferson.”

“Call me Calvin. Do not call me, Mr. Jefferson. Now let me ask you a few things here.

You see this recession that we’re in? You see how badly it’s all perceived? Like there’s no hope and all of that? What if I told you people weren’t what you think they are? These fuckers you see on the streets, what if I told you that they were actually fucking rich? That they were playing the government and playing the system?”

“If that’s what you’re telling me, then I’d be very surprised.”

“It’s all a game. All a false perception. Just like the life you think you lived. Living in a fancy mansion, driving a round in your luxury vehicles, until one day, it’s all gone. The rich goes broke, and it is perceived that the poor goes even broker. But that’s where I come in. I take the poor fucks, and I put them to work. And guess what? The government don’t know a thing, so they don’t get taxed. It’s a fever. You hear me? A shadowed fever, where those who they think are losing, are actually quietly winning.”

“I need to win. For the sake of my children, I need to start winning again.”

“At what cost? We all have limits. Are you willing to move past these limits? To forget who you once were?”

Mario looked at Calvin in the eyes. They were brown, but fierce. Like those eyes have seen plenty. Mario’s heart was beating fast, faster than usual. He knew that what he was about to do was extreme. That he was about to do something, something that was out of his character. But in

Mario's eyes, it had to be done, there was too much at stake. There was an image, an identity that needed to be protected. So he looked at Calvin square in the face, he told him that he was willing to move past his limits and to forget who he once was.

It would start the end of time, the end of all times. The end of a family, the end of commitment, the end of faith. Well, maybe it was just the beginning, a beginning you would never think to think.

The Flashback Ends

The cocaine covered the table, several bags of it. Mario sat on his couch, trembling, glaring at the blood stains on the wood floor. He wondered, how it could have gotten this far? How did he become so dependent? He realized right then and there, that he lost sight of his purpose, that he lost sight of who he once was and he questioned if it was all worth it. There was a gun on the corner of the table. He glared at the gun, acknowledging what he had just done. Partially wishing, he would have just done it to himself.

He stood up from the couch, and he realized just how lonely our house had become. It was dark and empty. The leather couches were ripped up from his tantrums. The dining room was a mess from his late night binge eatings. And the walls were covered in holes, because he would enjoy putting his fist through them. But the pictures on the walls served as proof, that there was once love in this house. He walked over to the pictures, he removed one from the wall. It was a picture of our family at Disneyland, swimming in the pool. Our boys, John and David in the middle, while my husband Mario and I stood side by side them. As parents we are supposed to be guardians, protectors of our children. When I died, I failed my children for not being there for them anymore but I never expected this to happen. I believed Mario would survive without me.

That I wouldn't see him rolled up in a ball, in the corner of our now abandoned house. Yes times were rough, but Mario was supposed to be the brick, the man of the house, and he failed.

After a few minutes of reminiscent crying, he went over to take another snort of cocaine. His head twitched and his body shook, like there was new life in him. He started jumping around, allowing his adrenaline to kick in. Cocaine was now the only way Mario could get motivated. But it scared him to be motivated, because his mind would start to think again, he would think often about me, about my last few weeks. The last normal conversation we had.

The Sun Peaks, Then The Storm Hits

I met Mario when I was 19 years old. He was a young, confident man, who seemed as if he had the world rolled up in his sleeve. It was his determination, that attracted me so much to him. He had a desire to be successful, a desire to win at all costs. By the time he was 25, Mario had opened up five separate restaurants, all in primetime areas. Two were in Hoboken, two were in Jersey City and one was in Cape May. We lived a fortunate life, but it was all on him. I was never able to afford college, I only worked at a Shoprite in my local town. When Mario hit it big, he made me quit my job, he told me that he wanted to start a family, that the best days were ahead of us. In the mid 2000's, we had our boys, John and David. We moved to Mountain Lakes, New Jersey, to the very wealthy Jay Street; the mansion at the end of the neighborhood, house number 40. Mario loved that house because it symbolized everything he stood for and everything that he believed defined him. Like him, the house was wealthy, sexy, and plain out powerful. To Mario, J 40 was exactly what we stood for in society. From it's beautiful brick exterior, to the overly sized chandelier that hanged in the entrance hall. The floors, decorated in expensive dark wood. Walls painted with tan shades. The counters were shaped out of granite.

The house had a movie theater, a pool, an exercise room. Six bedrooms, three bathrooms, and a garage that could fit another family. This house told the world that we were wealthy and that we had money that everyone else didn't.

As perfect as our lives were, things slowly started to take a turn for the worst. Mario started spending money aggressively. It wasn't like he was being selfish, he would spend the money on fancy clothes, cars, and vacations, all for us. He loved spoiling us.

When the world struck 2008, life started to go south for our family. The economy collapsed and people stopped spending money. This meant that people stopped going to Mario's restaurants, which meant income stopped coming in for our family. Within a few months, all five of Mario's restaurants went under. He was completely out of business. I'll never forget the conversation we had, when Mario told me there was barely any money in our savings. It was the last normal conversation that we ever had.

"We're fucking screwed, Julia!"

"Why, why do you say that? You're scaring me!"

"I'm scaring you? There's no time for that! I don't have the money to keep up with all the bills, or to keep up with J 40!"

"The savings? What about in there?"

"No, I didn't put away much."

"What? Mario, you didn't save our money?"

"We had millions coming in each year! Nobody expected the economy to collapse!"

"Oh my gosh, I don't feel good."

I fell to the floor. I felt this tightness in my chest, this tingling in both my arms. The room started to go dark and this ringing blockaded my hearing. I never cared about the money or the fancy living. The house on Jay Street was nothing, compared to my family's well being. I tried so hard, to tell my husband with my eyes, not to care about the luxury. To be a father, a leader to our children. We looked at each other, it seems like forever. Things then started to get dark and quiet real quick, and then, I departed.

It was at my grave, that Mario made a promise to me. A promise that I didn't want him to make.

"I promise you baby, I promise I'll raise our boys the way you would want. They'll grow up, living happy lives, and they'll do it in honor of you. I'll work my ass off, to keep our home on Jay Street. I'll get my restaurants back. These boys, they won't grow up in poverty. I promise I won't fail you with that."

It haunts my grave, that Mario thought I was so fucking petty. I didn't care about the house or any of the luxury. As long as my boys were happy and healthy, as long as Mario was happy and healthy. I understand that he didn't want the boys to grow up in poverty, I didn't want that either. But they could have lived modestly, but Mario was fixated on the upper class.

The Flashback Ends

Mario took another snort of cocaine, he felt a warmth, resurgence, a shock in his skin. He grabbed the gun that was on the table, and he started pacing back and forth, talking to himself.

"You did this to yourself. Why did you have to do this?"

Mario looked back out the window, rain was pouring down. He then poured himself a drink. It was late at night, far too late to turn back. He had to see the children though. He wanted

to see the children. He decided that he would first finish his drink. He walked up stairs to the master bedroom, then to the bathroom. He looked in the mirror and he examined his face. His tan skin was now wrinkled and his brown eyes were bloodshot. It was when he saw that his jet black hair had a few grays poking out, that Mario started laughing hysterically. He was in disbelief over how bad he looked. He then looked at the blood that stained his hands. The blood made him think of Calvin. It made him think of what Calvin made him do 6 months ago. Mario ran down stairs and took another hit from the powder, that covered the table.

The Beach and The Powder

It started with small work, delivering packages, then it went to assisting drug dealers, then finally, becoming the drug dealer. Mario met up with Calvin's people at this beach down in Belmar. He thought it would be a regular day, but Calvin was there.

"There's something about the beach. There is a raw sense of diverse emotion to it. People are always getting married on beaches, making love on beaches, families spend time together on beaches. But at the same time, people drown when they go to the beach, they get attacked by the sharks", said Calvin.

"Am I in trouble, Calvin? Did I do something wrong?"

Calvin looked out at the water. It was as if he saw something out there. Something beautiful. Something that touched him. Mario saw it in his eyes. He saw the human side of Calvin. The boy in Calvin.

"Is something wrong Calvin?"

"My daughter was shot, killed. Her mother, my ex did it."

He refused to look at Mario, but Mario could still see the tears run down his face.

“I’m sorry, I don’t know what to say.”

“Then don’t say anything! Words can be sophisticated but silence, silence is what makes the man. What creates power. It’s our actions Mario, our actions that speak the loudest, you know that. It’s my actions, that define me. I told Melinda she couldn’t handle our daughter. She insisted that she could, but then she shot her, in her fucking face. Now we must do something about it! We must do something, to show how angry we are!”

Calvin waved to his men, they came out of their van and then pulled out a woman. As she tried to scream with a taped mouth, they dragged her to Calvin. They threw her hard against the sand. Calvin then pulled out a gun. It was nice looking gun too, a shiny but sharp, silver one.

“I gave you every opportunity, every opportunity. You lay here today, with the blood of my baby girl on your hands. How dare you!”

The woman looked as if she was screaming off the top of her lungs, begging for mercy, Mario noticed this.

“You’re going to face your death today, there’s no getting out of that. It’ll be simple though. A quick shot to the head. But I’m not going to do it, my friend, Mario is.”

“What? I never killed anyone before Calvin. This just isn’t me.”

“You need to do this Mario. Sooner or later, it needs to be done. You will do it. You will put a bullet in this bitch’s skull. She is a killer, she killed my baby girl. Are you saying that it is okay that she did this?”

“What? I would never say that! Of course not!”

“Then you will do this then. You will shoot her.”

Calvin handed him the gun, staring at him dead in the eyes. He wouldn't look away. Mario then saw all of Calvin's men looking at him. Mario then saw the girl looking at him, begging for mercy with her eyes. Mario pointed the gun at her head and shot her. The blood spattered on both of their faces. Mario vomited instantly. Calvin then spoke.

"Come on, let's go get high."

Calvin's men created a fire on the beach. Calvin then ordered for his men to leave him and Mario. From his pocket, Calvin pulled out a bag filled with white powder. He started to examine it.

"Amazing, is it not? Such a quiet substance, but filled with so much power, so much wealth. Are you familiar with cocaine?"

"No, I never was a big drug guy. Never have done anything intoxicating besides drinking if we're being honest."

"If we're being honest, then I'll be very blunt with you, Mario. You're smart, you have business characteristics. You're great with people. You see this cocaine here, with the rest of the other drugs, are what sell the most. I need my most valuable men in that department, you will sell my products. Do you understand?"

This request upset Mario. He was already forced to kill a woman tonight, and now he was being asked to be a leading drug dealer. It was too much criminal for him, too much to handle. But how could he refuse Calvin? The man had displayed his power time and time again. He was the king, the man who rescued not only Mario but hundreds of others from poverty. The power was far too intimidating to comprehend. If Mario were to refuse, who knows what Calvin would have done. His only choice, the only safe choice to make was to accept the offer.

As a form of celebration, Mario and Calvin got high off of their own supply. Mario watched as Calvin dribbled the powder on to his hand and he watched as Calvin violently snorted it. Calvin sat for a moment, embracing every grain of powder that had entered his body, it was as if he was completely recharged, blessed with the gift of a rebirth. He then looked at Mario, and he handed him the bag. Mario tried to mimic the procedure, exactly how Calvin had done it. When he awkwardly snorted it, a sonic boom went off in his head. Passion, love, adrenaline, it all exploded throughout his body.

Mario and Calvin would spend the night talking, snorting cocaine. They got to know each other better. Mario told him more about our family situation and about my passing. Calvin shared more of his philosophies on business, power and prosperity. At one point, they were so hopped up, they started to run on the beach. They ran for miles and miles. The only question that hindered that night for Mario, was why he had to kill Calvin's ex. Although they shared a bonding experience, Mario was still too intimidated to ask Calvin that one question.

This was the start of Mario's true downward spiral. He started selling drugs, and killing when he had too. More money was coming in, but this only empowered him to make costly decisions. He started to spend his income on cocaine, lots of cocaine. It got to the point where it was all he would think about. He was literally putting his life on the line, no longer for Calvin, but for cocaine. Calvin noticed this.

The Flashback Ends

After a few short drinks, Mario decided to go visit the kids. The car ride was tougher than he thought it would be. He was clearly drunk, but at this point in his life, he was an experienced, talented drunk. Time was running out, and he only had a few hours left. Mario pulled up to his

sister's house. It was small but cozy. He craved cozy, he would die for cozy. He thought how calm the outside of the house looked. It wasn't even anything special, just your traditional, one floor house. It was the traditional sense, that he missed so dearly. The images of blood, the images of suffering, it all violated his brain again, thinking back to the blood stains on the wall and floor. Mario opened the glove compartment of his car and found a little bag of cocaine. He snorted it all, but the flashbacks surged through his brain anyway.

He saw himself knifing one of Calvin's workers to death. The blood spewed everywhere, Mario could still taste the blood and its coppery spice, that invaded his mouth. When the worker was finally dead, Mario looked at his bloody hands and then he acknowledged just how good he became, at taking one's life. He then thought about the discussion he and this man, Tommy had shortly before the killing began.

Man of the Year

Tommy came over, to talk business. The night started out fine, a little recreational cocaine snorting, a few drinks and a few chats about the past and the present. It was when those chats turned to the present time, that things suddenly got weird. Very weird. Tommy started talking about Calvin and just how powerful he was getting. More and more people were being recruited. Tommy acknowledged that both he and Mario had been moving up fast. It was right then and there, where the fire hit its prime.

"I'd be lying to you though, if I told you Calvin wasn't concerned."

"Concerned about what?"

"The drugs. You do a lot of drugs, he doesn't know if you're capable anymore."

"What? It's fucking coke, we all do it."

“Yeah well you do it a lot more than us.”

“Yeah? Whatever Tommy. That’s ridiculous, Calvin has taken me under his wing, if he has a problem, he should say it to my face! You’d be surprised of what he has asked me to do!”

“He’s taken me under his wing too, Mario. Don’t act like you’re so special! You know what he asked me to do?”

“What? What has he asked of you?” Mario was confident that Tommy could not match what he had done for Calvin.

“He had me kill his bitch of an ex. She shot and killed their daughter. Can you believe that, Mario? The tragedy destroyed him. He took me to the beach, he tossed me the gun, he couldn’t do it himself. The man with all the power in the world, the man who is fucking fearless, asked me to kill the woman who killed his daughter! Do you understand how honored that makes me feel? Calvin was so gracious, that he made me get high with him. We spent the whole night, snorting and just bullshitting. So you tell me what you have done for him? You tell me, because I guarantee it won’t top that!”

Mario’s faced dropped. He was the one who killed that woman. He was the one who got high with Calvin. It didn’t make sense, was it an artificial scene? Was this, in a way, the answer to Mario’s original question, why Calvin had him kill this woman in the first place? Mario continued to watch Tommy’s face light up, glowing over his love for Calvin. That’s what it was, it was complete love for this man. Maybe it was all a test, to see who loved Calvin more? Who was willing to do more for him? No, it couldn’t be. Mario and Tommy did equal amounts for Calvin. What could it have been then? Mario thought hard, but then he started to pay close attention to Tommy.

His hair was a mess, his face filled with a scrappy beard. His clothes looked like they haven't been washed in weeks, and despite his denial, he was equally fucked up on cocaine. Mario realized that Calvin had transformed him and Tommy into the same person. Two men doing one job. And it wasn't to rescue anyone out of poverty. Calvin was simply corrupting the vulnerable, sweeping them by their feet when they were at their weakest. Giving them hope, giving them work, only to convert them into worthless pieces of shit. Like a tank of gas, he would burn them out, only to refill with new gas. It was the end, Mario had been burnt out, and Tommy was his refill.

Mario pulled out the gun, that he had in his pants, without an ounce of remorse, he shot Tommy right in the face. Then out of rage, he stabbed him twenty-nine times in the face. He couldn't stand looking at Tommy and he couldn't stand the thought of Calvin no longer. But Calvin was simply too powerful.

The FlashBack Ends

Mario got to his sisters late. She was surprised to see him and was hesitant to let him in the house.

“Mario? What the hell are you doing here so late? I'm trying to put your kids to bed.”

“I need to see them Marie.”

She saw that his eyes were bloodshot and she smelt the alcohol on him. She also noticed his messed up hair, dirty face and shoeless left foot.

“Mario, are you fucked up right now? Are you kidding me? You want to see your boys like this?”

“Marie, it’s over after tonight. I promise you that. Now I’m begging you, just let me say goodnight to John and David.”

She didn’t question him. How could she? She stepped aside and let him in the house. Right when he walked in, he saw his boys watching “The Departed” in the living room. Once his boys saw him, they ran with open arms to him but, Mario wasn’t happy with what they were watching on the TV.

“Marie, that movie is not appropriate for them. Why are you allowing them to watch it?”

“Don’t be a hypocrite, Mario! It teaches reality!”

Mario paid no more attention to his sister. He was instead focused on his boys. He would spend about twenty minutes with them, they would discuss school, their friends and how Aunt Marie’s cooking doesn’t even compare to what mine was. When Mario had to leave, he tucked his boys into the queen size bed they were sharing. Before Mario could leave, the boys had some serious questions that leaked out of them.

“Dad, did you make us come here, because you love cocaine more than us?” Asked John.

“I made you come here because I messed up. I let my habits get the best of me, and tonight I’m going to steer clear of them all. For the sake of both you, because I love you both so much.”

“Daddy, are you taking care of the house? Are you making sure it’s how Mommy would want it? Are you making sure it’s clean, and that it looks like we’re rich?” Asked David.

“David, never worry about looking rich. I don’t care about the house or the rest of Jay Street. I let it destroy our family. I’ll never forgive myself for that. Please don’t ever be like me. Be the exact opposite of me. Materials, they’re just materials. You two boys, you need to be there

for each other. You need to keep the family alive, and make sure to visit your Mommy. She, she's watching over you."

He was right about that, and tears started to fill his eyes because he knew he was right. The pain, the agony, it truly started to hit Mario. He realized just how upset I would be with him. He looked to escape from the room but before he could go, David asked one more question.

"Wait Daddy, can we get ice cream this weekend?"

Mario looked at his boys in the eyes. They were too young to understand. They didn't understand what had happened or what was going to happen. And how could they? They only knew part of the story. They will spend the rest of their lives wondering, what the fuck happened to daddy? Where did he go? How did Daddy get mixed up with drugs? And if they do ever find out, they will wonder, who was Calvin Jefferson? Why was he so important?

Mario kissed the boys one last time. He headed back to our palace on Jay Street. He drenched the house with gasoline. He drenched himself in gasoline. He took one final snort of cocaine, and then lit the house on fire.

I can feel the walls closing in now. The process starting to take place. It's like I'm in quicksand, and I'm drowning in it. Communication is running out, the thinking process is dying out. I can only observe but not think. I will watch my boys grow from a room, but that is all. Just like it would eventually die for my husband, the fever is gone. The fever is long gone.