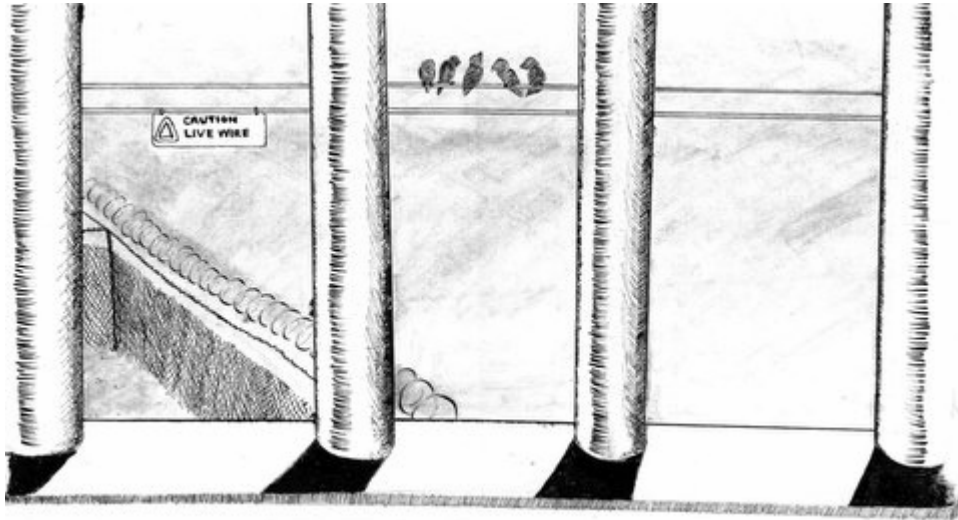


Tacenda Literary Magazine

Prison Stories Studies in Crime and Punishment



Drawing by Eleanor Potter

Spring 2007

Editor-in-Chief

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Tacenda Literary Magazine

Special Topics Issue

Prison Stories: Studies in Crime and Punishment

Tacenda Literary Magazine
Published by



www.willotrees.com

Tacenda: n., pronounced ta'KEN'da – *things better left unsaid.*

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Note from the Editor-in-Chief

Prisons are a world apart. They are larger than life and different from life as most of us have known it. The contributors to this special issue of *Tacenda Literary Magazine* entered the alien world of prisons by immersing themselves in the writings of prisoners. Drawing insights from the poetry and prose of confined men and women, the authors explore a world shaped by crime and punishment, degradation and loss. They take us on a journey behind the stone walls and razor wire fences of our prisons, examining life (or something like it) as it unfolds in prison yards, where old scores can be settled in the flash of a homemade shank, and in the dreary and sometimes deadly neighborhoods formed by cell blocks and tiers. They give us glimpses of life inside the cramped cages convicts call home. Some even take us to the death house. The tales these writers tell take many forms, from poems to stories to plays. Many touch on the subtle but painful truth that haunting memories of lives past can be evoked by something as ordinary as a passing comment or the feel or smell of a blanket; suddenly and without warning, prisoners are shaken from their routines and forcefully reminded of where they are and what they have lost. All of these writings, moreover, have an underlying message to convey—we can scale the walls of our prisons if only we have the imagination and courage to try.

Prisoners are relegated to the modern equivalent of a jungle. It should come as no surprise that they at times act like savages, lost in the moment, captive to raw emotion. The first law of this jungle is simple but sometimes deadly: “Do unto others before they do unto you.” Yet most prisoners tell us, in word and in deed, that they secretly yearn for order, security, and simple decency. They are up on their toes, alert but wary, hungry for deep sleep—the kind of sleep you can only find when you are secure, when your world is ordered, when you know you are safe. The rest of us, captives of convention, are bruised daily by the firm walls of civility, and in our hidden hearts yearn for the liberation of our senses, for appetites sated, for moments red and redolent of life lived raw. Bored and restless, we yearn to live on the edge, to flirt with danger—at least in the safe confines of our minds. What prisoners live, however uneasily, citizens dream; what citizens live, however reluctantly, prisoners dream. Prisons thus take root at the intersection of civilization and chaos. We are advised to cross that intersection with care. The writers in this collection made that crossing, and now their readers can follow.

Each of the contributors to this volume has, in my view, produced one or more original works that say something remarkable and often moving about crime and criminals, prison and prison life. The bulk of the writing in this special issue of *Tacenda* is the work of students in an undergraduate honors course on prison life taught at American University during the fall 2006 semester. I am proud to showcase the work of these talented young scholars, my students, who are a credit to American University. I extend my thanks to Kirsten Hubschmann, who served as my assistant and reliable guide on matters of grammar and form; and to Christina Hammond, who did a fine job hunting down and fixing typographical and other errors. I am grateful to Eleanor Potter, who graciously allowed us to use her artwork for the front and back covers, and to Penny Lynn Dunn, founder of *Tacenda*, who has kindly allowed us to devote this special issue of the magazine to our collection of prison stories.

**Robert Johnson,
January 2007**

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<p>The Big Day <i>Katlyn Miller</i></p> <p>Pace yourself... One foot, step Two foot, step Hear the rhythm as one foot falls two foot falls, repeat.</p> <p>I feel my heart, bursting, pulsating with anticipation, no longer a steady metronome gently guiding me down the aisle.</p> <p>My knees buckle, one by one locking, unlocking threatening to give out.</p> <p>My legs tremble, unsure of the floor below me the earth shifting, a constant shaking that jars me inside out.</p> <p>One foot, step Two foot, step Hear the rhythm as one foot falls two foot falls. God I hope I don't fall.</p> <p>My body wobbles sure of nothing anxious about everything every... little... thing...</p> <p>Many have walked before me, I think, and surely some have fallen, but that brings me no solace.</p> <p>My body drips sweat. A constant stream down my face, pooling like tears <i>Does he think I'm crying?</i> <i>Wouldn't that spoil everything?</i> as I wear my nerves frayed</p>	<p>for him to see, for all to see.</p> <p>I look down the aisle and see him standing in front of me clothes neatly pressed, shoes shined, tie perfect, everything in place looking at me encouraging me, counting on me.</p> <p>"You can do this," he told me, "I'll be right there."</p> <p>And so I walk on to him.</p> <p>The music plays in my head A mournful tune, welcoming me into my next life.</p> <p>His eyes hold me captive, guide me through the final steps. I shiver at the cool touch of fresh, crisp, clean, pure white sheets, nestled amid leather straps, holding me close.</p> <p>I look up at my executioner and see in his eyes the question that has haunted my life: "Do you accept this fate... "To have and to hold... until...</p> <p><i>"I do."</i> I think to myself, then whisper "I'm ready."</p> <p>I see his face relax. It's going off without a hitch.</p>
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Heat
Kathryn Nimick

Trapped water in the air
A stiff new uniform
Cemented to my body
Everything too close
Sweat slides down my
Forehead, stings my eyes
A quick, sharp pulse
steals my breath
A cold hard shiver
pricks my fingers,
slices my wrists
freezes my
legs
A cold heavy weight
Consumes me.

PANIC
Kathryn Nimick

Now:
No air
Someone is choking me
My lungs won't fill
I can't breathe
Pitch Black Everywhere
Blinded.
No space to move
The walls-
The walls collapse inward
Toward me, on me
I shut my eyes to stop it
It's still black
And I can still feel them
Fingers closing around my neck
Suffocating me—
I need help- Help me
HELP! STOP! NOW!

Later:
Alone and crumpled in a heap
Fresh cuts and bruises decorate my
flesh
Cell block souvenirs
Left by my neighbors

Portrait
Kathryn Nimick

Greasy dark hair, pulled back
Tired worn face, sagging
Sunken eyes: dead to light
Tight pursed lips: raw, unpainted
Ashy skin: painfully thin
Sheer enough to see within
A broken woman.

She sits
Still
Silent
Nothing left
Only time.

Not a Typical Blankie
Taylor Rose Ellsworth

The cool, soft fabric folds over me
 Envelops me, and swallows me whole
 I sit hunched over,
 My sun streaked hair held back loosely in
 my favorite balloon clip
 Only my bangs fall, ruler straight
 Across my forehead
 Mom always did cut them too short
 Everything looks different
 Under my queen-sized pink sheet
 Softer
 Not a typical blankie for a six year old
 But my life is anything but typical
 I hold my brother close, he's only four
 And right now
 I mean the world to him.
 He trusts me, and knows we are safe
 When I pull him under and tell him to be
 quiet
 I can still hear them shouting
 Words I don't understand
 Hoping
 I am invisible
 Hoping
 We are invisible
 Waiting
 For a chance when I can catch my breath,
 and
 Breathe out loud.
 Every time he yells, his voice gets louder
 And I squeeze my brother a little bit
 tighter.
 Finally, it stops.
 Slowly, cautiously
 I lift off the blanket and take my first deep
 breath
 In what seems like hours.
 My brother is gone,
 My hair is dark brown and hasn't seen the
 sun in years,
 No bright balloon clips to hold it back,
 My bangs have long since grown out.

I am no longer holding a soft, pink sheet
 But a coarse, woolen blanket
 That scratches my skin and creates a
 darkness like no other
 And yet, when the noise from the tiers,
 Or the cells on either side of me,
 Or the noise in my head gets too loud for
 me to handle
 I still find peace and comfort
 When I pull the gray fabric over my head
 and
 Disappear
 Within the dirty folds.
 Not a typical blankie for a woman my age
 But my life is anything but typical.

Hope
Katlyn Miller

Dragging
 through the pain,
 the boredom.
 Every day
 monotony.

Stretching out.
 Reaching; straining
 toward hope
 of anything.

Loneliness wears
 on my heart—
 withers my soul,
 embodies my life.

Or is it my death?

My death. A death of feeling.
 A death of love
 of warmth;
 a useless heart.

Drained of hope.

<p>Sunsets <i>Taylor Rose Ellsworth</i></p> <p>Five minutes in the corner My tiny face smushed between the walls Arms dangling at my side Nothing to look at, white stucco walls too close to my eyes All I see is darkness. All I feel are paint-stained jeans against my hands Paint That I used to decorate the walls, they were so white before. But Mommy didn't like my painting. She made me stretch out my arms, Turn my hands over, palms facing up So she could see the Red, orange, and yellow Paint Smearred together like a sunset. She told me to go stand in the corner where my color hadn't reached the white. And think about what I had done. Now I am in the hole of darkness again, White walls, no color No emotion Only me and my thoughts, just like before Only five minutes will never be up. Now When I close my eyes, I dream about my Mommy Paint The tears Streaming down my face when I turn around, and sink into her forgiving arms.</p>	<p>The Package <i>Kathryn Nimick</i></p> <p>The mail came today I saw it A small brown box A shiny golden treasure chest.</p> <p>She thinks I'm asleep But I watch her open it slowly, Delicately, pulling the tape cleanly, In one piece.</p> <p>I squint to see Inside Pictures, photographs She lifts them gingerly A little child, a puppy, all smiles.</p> <p>Next Something small In a clear plastic wrapper, familiar A Chinese fortune cookie! She has so much good fortune She puts it back, unopened.</p> <p>Carelessly She picks up a tiny plastic globe, Filled with water and glitter Holds it up, turns it over Snowflakes swirl around the miniature world inside I watch her watch the sparkles I see the faint smile, See her eyes relax a little Holding this perfect dream inside Her perfect little hands.</p> <p>I look down at my own hands: Cuts. Small red half-moons down the center of my palms I've seen enough Turn away Shut my eyes A tear escapes me.</p>
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<p>Freedom <i>Taylor Rose Ellsworth</i></p> <p>I sit, relaxed Around the table Leanin' back in a blue plastic chair Adidas, bright white with metallic silver stripes Restin' on the table surface Feelin' the rhythmic beats through my shoes Up through my jeans Comin' from the hands poundin' Free style beats Noddin' my head n'sync Waiting for Kiki to drop a line so smooth That everyone covers their mouths And says, "Oooooo." 'Nata eats her wings. It's Thursday. Blockin' out the rap battles Enjoying her last ten minutes Of freedom Before the bell rings Her Styrofoam tray shakes Every time a fist hits the table But she keeps lickin' the hot sauce off her fingers Bouncin' her head along Cops stand in the corners of the large, noisy room But they can't touch us Unless, someone decides to throw down We are Free, free to carry on The bell sounds, The battles end And the trays are tossed, one by one Into the black, billowy trash bags Untouched coleslaw dripping down the side Half drunk milk splattering back up Everyone filin' up the stairs. Only, There's no hurry to make it back To Spanish class on time To rejoin my classmates</p>	<p>In another race against the clock. Three-thirty A time which holds more significance than most. A time that's etched into our minds From the moment we wake up in the morning A time where we are free to walk Through the heavy doors Into the sunlight of the parking lot And out to the pay phones to call our rides. No, I'm on my way back to cell block three To sit and ponder The pointless, endless Concept of time. Keeping time with the beats In a place where I will never be Free, free to leave.</p> <p>The First Time I Saw That Place <i>Thais H. Miller</i></p> <p>"Up at the right there," "There above my right?" "Right car mirror, there— There's Juvie" My driving instructor points out to me.</p> <p>"Oh," I say, watching the cinder blocks rise Rise up above the deserted hill, over Over ramps of the freeway. Freeway. Way to freedom, I know now, instinctively. "In this world," he says, "there are only criminals and victims"</p> <p>"The criminals go right." Right to jail. Right people turn left "Left turn to merge onto the 101, The freeway, towards home" Home away from where we put... Store, exile, hide away Children who went wrong and now turn right, Away from what "we want our children to see"</p> <p>Seem like children to me, Children we don't want to see.</p>
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<p>The Underworld <i>Taylor Rose Ellsworth</i></p> <p>I watch the waters rise Higher and higher Steam clouds the room Covers the mirror I push my hands down And watch them slowly float Back to the surface I cannot sink I have already drowned. Lying in the bottom of A porcelain ocean My skin, like gills Accepts the water And I breathe, Effortlessly Engulfed in warm, red waters I lose my senses I am Free But the police, Found me feeble When they pulled my cold Naked body From the crimson waters Now, I am in murky waters again The underworld Full of fish Trapped behind Bars and bars Of reef and coral Eyes darting back and forth Glazed over And all I want Is to float back to the surface And be Human again.</p> <p>My Light <i>Katlyn Miller</i></p> <p>Such a beautiful woman, the prettiest I have ever seen. My mother sits beside me. And I know... it won't be long,</p>	<p>it's never long, before she exits gallantly, just as she entered and will re-enter.</p> <p>A whirlwind! My wonderful chaos. Together we laugh so hard, I want to hold her and never let go. My love never lets go. I want so badly to keep her, to call her mine, to know she's mine.</p> <p>But she can't be tamed. Such a brilliant creature can't be held won't be held.</p> <p>Instead she flickers in my life like the joyous flames on my birthday cake that light my life once a year.</p> <p>I reach to touch the flame to run my fingers through but Grandma yells "Don't hold on too long, darling!" "Don't want to get burned, darling..."</p> <p>Too late, the tips of my fingers blacken. I'm burned, but as much as I try and persist I can never hold on; Mom won't let me hold on.</p> <p>I can never hold her, I will never hold her. Her flame shines too bright, Lighting up her prison night and mine.</p>
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<p>Imagination <i>Taylor Rose Ellsworth</i></p> <p>I can build a Lego tower six feet tall I can climb up the doorway, legs stretched out Grasping the sides Until I reach the very top. I can draw elaborate pictures No lines can suppress my imagination A masterpiece hangs proudly on the fridge. And best of all, I can break dance. I can do spins and handstands And go for hours on end. The kitchen floor works best, The tile keeps me from slipping. I dance my little heart out all morning Until it's time to stop Put on my book bag, that's almost bigger than I am Grab my arctic blue lunch bag Swallow my medicine Mommy calls them my calming pills Everyday before school I take one with apple juice And every night before bed I take one with bathroom sink water Mommy says they help me sit still during math Pay attention during reading And do an entire vocabulary worksheet Without getting distracted School is like a jungle gym for me Only the bars are too close together And I can't squeeze free I'm always getting in trouble I like to roam around During lessons, especially I'd rather build, play, run Instead of sit at a desk With my legs wrapped tightly around silver poles To keep me in my chair, to keep me, Theirs.</p>	<p>I try to listen, I try to sit still But every time I'm in a classroom Or at the dinner table Or at a restaurant for lunch I just want to move The little beats inside my body take control Well, all that movin', jumpin', dancin' never really went away Only now the impulses are buried so deep underneath these Nameless, Tasteless Calming pills. That they rarely break loose Or at least, that's what mommy used to call them. Nobody here tells me what they are But I have to take them, twice a day Everyday Now, I don't have the big kitchen to dance around in Or the coloring books to let my spirit flow All my energy has been sucked out By these little pills Given to me in a little paper cup By a woman who makes me stick out my tongue After every dose. And then watches me drag my lifeless body Back to my cell And sit, colorless On my steel cold bed As my steel cold eyes Stare blankly</p>
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Nobel House: A Play
Jeremy Knobel

Act I Scene I – The March

Blacked out stage. Noise of pans crashing and people hooting. Lights fade up. A long corridor of prison cells lined with rowdy prisoners, only their hands visible through the bars. Prisoner Number 3752 walks in with a line of other convicts.

Offstage Voice: Prisoner Number 3752!

PN3752: *(Spotlight on his face)* I cannot see. I cannot think. Not because I am blind or dead, but because I miss the world. I am frightened.

Prisoner 1: *(Calls from behind the bars)* Hey sweet cheeks! Check out the new fish!

PN3752: I hate these grimy clothes. Amazing, how long will it take for me to forget a tuxedo? A bicycle? Mom's food? The sound of cold chains makes me shiver.

Guard 1: Keep up in line, piss ass. Do you want to call your Mama? Pussy.

PN3752: All the movies show me to be a goner...or at least some guy named Bubba's bitch.

Inmate in line behind falls into PN3752.

Guard 1: No pissing around! God, I love this job...

Prisoner 2: Alright, who takes the scrawny black walkin' upfront?

Prisoner 3: I got three cigs on fat wop upfront.

PN3752: The noise is deafening; it's hard to hear your heart anymore. I just...

Prisoner 1: Hey Sarg! Tell your bitch thanks for last night!

PN3752: *(Noise building as he tries to talk over it)* I just...

Guard 1: *(Moves to cell and swings club at Prisoner 1)* Shut your yap and get in your hole!

PN3752: ...don't deserve this.

Silence. The hands slowly move back from the bars. Suddenly an inmate crashes up to the bars and peeks out

Prisoner 4: None of us do.

Prisoner 4 sneers, blows a kiss, and backs away into the dark cell. The new inmates continue down the hall, silently. Slowly, the hooting and banging start again. Slow blackout.

Act I Scene II – His Story

Offstage Voice: Prisoner Number 510!

Lights up on a white-washed cell with two beds, a sink, a toilet, and two small boxes; one empty, one full. PN3752 is pushed into the cell where he sees nobody. Unbeknownst to 3752, the one bed has his sleeping cellmate under the blanket.

PN3752 sits down on his bed, looks into his empty box, goes to take a piss but stops in disgust. He begins to sit on the other bed when his cellmate wakes up and screams. PN3752 screams too and huddles on his bed.

PN510: What the hell are ya trying to do! Have enough trouble sleeping as it is. *(He notices PN3752 is not speaking, only shaking and staring directly at him.)* Look, calm down. I didn't mean to make ya shit yourself. *(Pause)* *(Jokingly)* Well, looks like I got a new bitch to play with. *(He moves to the other bed. PN3752 doesn't get the joke)* Jesus, calm down! Not much of a joker, are ya? If you're gonna make it here, ya better start growing a spine. *(A cockroach crawls across the floor. PN510 kills it with a pound of his fist)* Only a couple times a day. Alright, well try to get some sleep...I know ya won't, but try. It's not me ya gotta worry about. *(He rolls back into bed)*

PN3752: *(After long pause)* How'd you get here?

PN510: Hmm? Same way you did. Got caught for something I didn't do.

PN3752: But I did do it...

PN510: *(Laughing)* So did I! It doesn't matter once you're in here though. None of those memories matter.

PN3752: Can I ask you...did you start forgetting everything on your first day? I can't remember what I had for breakfast. I don't want to forget my family. I'm just worried...

PN510: *(Cuts him off)* Whoa, calm down. Ya just haven't learned how to think about "then" and "now" at the same time. You'll figure it out. Sure I forget what my license plate looked like or the name of my school. But some things are so real, you'd be foolish to forget.

PN3752: Your Mom? Dad?

PN510: I liked my dog. Always there for me. Never betrayed me...or beat me...or raped me. Not saying I didn't deserve any of it. Just hated the taste of blood.

PN3752: (*Speechless*) Oh, sorry. I forgot. My name is...

PN510: Shh! Don't know. Don't wanna know. It's better that way. Let's keep this a, uh, business relationship.

PN3752: But we're gonna be here for a while.

PN510: Maybe. Just don't worry about it. You have enough to remember. (*Pause*) If you gotta know something, just call me Buddy. I'll find you when I need you.

PN3752: So why no calendars in this place? Aren't you counting the days? I'm trying to figure out the seconds already.

PN510: Nah. A man would go crazy trying to do it. Although sometimes being crazy makes this easier. No f---ing pigs watching you, no wall, just your mind and the grass and the sky.

Offstage voice: Hey, you porking the new bird yet? Send him over here to suck on a real...

PN510: Shut your f---ing mouth or I'll have to stop f---ing your momma to come beat the shit outa ya! She'd be pretty pissed too. Actually, the bird here's taking her from the other end! (*To PN3752*) Gotta have "shit whit," be able to stand your ground jokin' and cussin' at everyone. Anyway, what was it you were asking me?

PN3752: Time.

PN510: I forgot. Sorry. Really no need to keep track since the dicks outside do. Us, only the weather matters. Snow means Christmas. Brown leaves mean school must be starting for my kid. Hot sun makes the f---ing around here out of control. Remembering all those skimpy bitches in bikinis. Now I always respected women – I have a daughter – but if one of those Playgirls walked in here, I'd be right in line to tap her ass, any ass. (*PN3752 looks worried*) Not your ass, calm the f--- down. Never do cell mates cause they know too much about ya. Don't want to get emotional and shit. Just need to blow every now and then. Or get blowed. Been since at least last snow since I f---ed a guy.

PN3752: Were you...um. I mean did you prefer...before you got here, had you...

PN510: Was I a faggot? Before here? Nah, still not. But a hole, is a hole, is a hole, is a

hole. *You* gonna be a faggot? Prolly not. Not unless you let them turn ya. It's every ass for hisself here. Good luck and good night.

Act I Scene III – Badger

Offstage Voice: Prisoner Number 0072!

Prison mess hall, which is a mess. 3752 nervously stands in line to get his meal. Quickly he falls into step. He hurries to squeeze in next to 510 at a table.

3752: Can't wait to taste this.

510: You'll be tasting it long after you're outa this hole. Grows on ya, or in ya. I think yours is still moving.

3752: I don't' think it was ever alive.

0072: *(A hulking man)* I know I wasn't.

510: This is Badger. Got caught raping and killing a couple girls from a Wisconsin law school. Works in the library here, so he can help ya with any law shit ya need to know, or at least can point ya in the right direction.

0072: Ol' Buddy here showin' ya the ropes? He's not a bad lil' f---er. Just don't trust him as far as you can throw his fat-ass heffer of a momma.

510: At least mine can fit through the damn prison door to visit.

0072: *(to 3752)* Just f---ing wit-cha. Buddy'll help ya survive, one way or another. Me? I just f--- everyone smaller than me. Most of 'em get the fag tag and end up in Block E, so nobody tries to come f--- me. Nobody. *(Pause)* Nice meeting ya. See ya 'round. *(Stares down 3752, then leaves)*

510: Pays off the doctor to swap his splooge for clean shit. Amazing how money gets you out of f---ing anything, even if the jerkoff gets a salary.

3752: Um...fag tag?

510: AIDS. Gotta pick up fast. And don't go f---ing Badger. And don't let him f--- you. Some rules to stay alive by.

3752: *(nervous)* Um...thanks.

510: And eat faster. That's another. *(Seeing 3752 obviously uneasy after Badger's comment)* Screw him. You can trust me. Don't and you'll die here. No skin off my teeth.

3752: Why help me?

510: Rather not go through another damn roommate croaking on me. Smells bad enough at home.

Act I Scene IV – Nails

Offstage Voice: Prisoner Number 1001!

In the prison yard. Weights, basketball net, wall laced with graffiti.

3752 stares for a bit, decides to start on the weights.

Latino prisoner 1: *(A small man enters)* Drop those damn weights, f---er. You're steppin' in on my time.

3752: *(Stunned for a second. Nervously tries to stand his ground)* Back off. You wuzn't here. It's my f---ing turn. Calm the f--- down. Don't make me...

Latino prisoner 2: *(A much larger man enters)* Do what, whitey? *(Goes nose to nose with 3752. Visibly nervous, 3752 still steps forward into the larger prisoner)*

510: Hey! *(Comes bolting over)* Leave the fish be, man. *(To 3752)* Come on, you're up for some hoops. And besides, looks like Brown-eyes over here could use some time pumping his *dick* anyway! Haha!

Grabs 3752 by the arm and leads him away. The two Latino prisoners stare as 510 and 3752 walk away; they then start on the weights.

510: Jesus, f--- man! Gonna get yourself killed out here. I told ya, I'm not gonna let ya murder yourself with some dumbass mistake, but I'm not gonna clean up after ya.

3752: Figured I'm not gonna let these...shit-heads...boss me around.

510: You'll let 'em if they're in packs. Just met Pee Wee and Nails, two of the nastiest mother-f---ers you'll meet from C Block, the Gauchos.

3752: I coulda taken Pee Wee.

510: Pee Wee is the big ass guy. *(3752 looks puzzled)* Made his first cell buddy stand still while he pissed on him before he raped him.

3752: Shit...Nails?

510: Even nastier shit. Look you gotta start realizing, this shit is for real. Your number, cuts, the dark, the food, death, the nightmares, the screams, the time. Learn it. Live it. Try not to love it.

3752: Or?

510: Or you *are* it. It eats you up (*Pause*) Now try to make a f---ing shot, will ya? (*Shove basketball into his hands*)

3752: (*Follows 510*) Buddy...thanks.

510: Shit, you ain't seen nothing yet.

Act I Scene V – Picture Show

Offstage Voice: Prisoner Number 9330!

In common room where the prisoners are all sitting in chairs, watching a movie projected on the wall. Some "3 Stooges" movie is playing on back wall. Lights are dim. With backs to the audience, 3752 and 510 move in and sit down. On 3752's left is a stranger.

3752: Damn, I haven't seen a movie projector in years. Thought they went out with the dinosaurs.

510: Nah, they throw all that old shit in here. (*Shouts*) Got some f---ing dinosaurs here, too!

Elderly prisoner: (*Shouts back*) Eh, f--- you! Your mom was sucking my dick before you were born. (*Prisoners laugh. Start swearing and bantering*)

Guard: Shut the f--- up! All of ya!! Or I'm throwing your asses in the hole! (*Slowly they quiet down*) Watch the Goddamn movie, Goddamn bitches.

Everyone is watching the movie and laughing. Suddenly 3752 is startled by the stranger's hand on his leg. 3752 is visibly startled.

3752: What the f--- do you...

Trix: (*In a feminine voice*) Shhh! Just watch the movie. And try to be quiet. *Winks. Trix's head disappears into 3752's lap.*

3752: What? (*Nervous*) Oh, shit...oh...shit!...just stop it!...oh, don't stop...don't...UGH!

3752's climax coincides with a 3 Stooges water gag. Trix sits back up and wipes her mouth. Holds out her palm. 3752, confused, shakes it.

Trix: No! You don't get Trix for free. (510 hands her a box of cigarettes) Thanks for the ciggies, hun. Anytime you want. My pleasure. (Blows 3752 a kiss)

3752: (Still stunned) I...she...he!...what the...

510: (interrupts) You're welcome. You owe me. Now f---ing switch seats already! (They trade seats)

3752: You can keep it. Jesus. (Stares at the movie. Everyone laughs except 3752.

Trix's head drops

Act II Scene I – The Wall

Offstage Voice: Prisoner Number 3752!

The stage is split in three. To SR is the prison; CS is a hallway, and SL is a visitation room. The prisoner's side of the visiting room is the only side visible.

The guards and prisoners swear loudly at one another. 3752 is shoved by a guard onto SR where the noise is thundering. He crosses the threshold into the hallway, the door is slammed, and the noise is now muffled.

Guard 1: Spread 'em, sweetie. (3752 is searched. Guard 1 grabs his crotch.)

3752: Hey!

Guard 1: (clubs 3752 on the back.) Keep your mouth shut, or I'm throwing you back in with those ape shit friends of yours. (Guard 1 leads him into the visiting room and slams the door behind him.)

The noise is gone and the room is silent. Another Guard leads 3752 to a steel chair with no padding.

3752: (picks up the phone. Only his voice can be heard) God I've missed that sound... Your voice!...Nah, I'm OK. Well, I'll be fine. I mean... Yeah it's bad. But I'm good. Fine. They say I might get a little off my time for good behavior. (Guard lightly chuckles, picks his nose, and adjusts his sunglasses.) We'll see. I just miss you. Thanks for coming... Third grade? God, had it been that long?... Oh, well seems like forever. Sorry, you forget things like dates here... No, really. I'm doing fine... Yeah I miss your mom's food. Probably other than you, that's what I miss the most... Haha, yeah. Yeah... I

know this is tough for you baby. Just, just keep with me. (*Guard hits his club on the glass to get his attention. Points to a watch.*) F---! I mean, sorry baby. I know you don't like hearing that. I hate saying it. But, you know, you gotta...I'll be fine. Send my best to your mom...I know, you'll be fine. I miss you. Of course I couldn't forget (*He is cut off by another smash on the glass. The Guard grabs his arm and stands him up.*)

He opens the door, shoves 3752 out, and slams the door, which hits 3752 squarely on the back. The Guard in the hallway laughs and throws 3752 against the wall for another search. Swearing can be faintly heard again. As the Guard grabs 3752's ass, louder profanities, screams and thuds are heard.

Guard 1: What the f---? Aw damn it, just when we were about to have some fun. (*He cuffs 3752 and goes to open the door when...*)

Guard 2: (*comes crashing in through the door, breathless. He screams over the incredible noise.*) Lock up! Lock up!! Three shits are f---ing loose in C Block! (*Points to 3752*) Get this shit back to his f---ing cell *now*.. Shit! Lock up!! (*Runs back through the door*) LOCK THE F--- UP!

Guard 1: Maybe next time, if you're lucky. (*Clubs 3752 in the balls. 3752 groans and starts to collapse. The Guard pushes him against the wall before he can fall.*)

Sirens begin wailing in the distance

Guard 1: Stand on your f---ing feet! F---ing maggot. Now get moving! F---ing crazy enough with your dumb shit friends out. Too bad we'll have to beat 'em til there brains f---ing spill out. Haha! (*He pulls out his keys, pushes 3752 through the door back into the prison. The noise and sirens are deafening. Guard 1 locks the iron-barred door and pushes 3752 and they exit SR.*)

The noise thunders still as the lights blackout.

Act II Scene II – The Trick

Offstage Voice: (*Different voice*) Prisoner Numbah F--- You!

Lights up on the same opening set in Act I, Scene I with a corridor of cells. 3752 and Guard 1 enter SR and begin walking upstage. The noise is still deafening. Guard 1 spots a cell door on SR is open

Guard 1: (*to 3752*) Don't move!

He wields his club and goes to inspect the cell. The cell door across the hall slams open. Four prisoners with night sticks run across stage and begin beating Guard 1. Overwhelmed, Guard 1 collapses in the cell where he is kicked and beaten more. 3752 looks around and sprints upstage. Nervously looking around, a hand grabs him and pulls him off SL, and he screams. The two of the prisoners, when finished their beating, laugh and calmly stroll down upstage, waving Guard 1's keys as they exit SR. The two remaining prisoners begin raping the bloody, semi-unconscious Guard. NOTE: This should be done with the back of the actors to the audience so what is seen are the bare behind of the prisoner and the legs of the fallen Guard. Offstage screams of "Holy Shit! They have keys! Kill the guards! Lock up! F--- the prison!" and gang calls can be heard amongst the sirens, locking and unlocking of cells, and cracks of breaking bones. The two prisoners finish raping the Guard, spit on him, and slam the cell door shut.

Black out.

Act II Scene III – The Beginning

Lights up on an alcove in the hallway to SR in which 3752 and 510 are crammed and huddled together. SL remains dark. Noises of sirens, bars clanging, bodies falling, and yelling are heard from all sides of the auditorium. 3752 is still handcuffed.

510: Give me your hands.

3752: Where the hell am I?

510: Shh! You're in the middle of a f---ing riot, that's where ya are! Now give me your hands already. *(He picks the lock on 3752's cuffs and they unlatch)*

3752: Who started all this shit!

510: Doesn't matter now. Just better hope they don't know ya, don't hate ya, or don't find ya. That's why we're here.

3752: But I'm not a f---ing guard!

510: Goddamn, you don't get it. It's not about the f---ing badge, it's about the...*(A gun is fired. The noise and yelling increase)*

Lights up on SL where five prisoners walk in, wearing ski masks, and carrying clubs and knives. One has a gun: PN 9835.

9835 fires his gun again straight up in the air. The yelling stops. He motions to another

masked prisoner to go off SL. The prisoner does so, the alarms stop, and he reenters.

9835: Alright ya f---ing maggots! Now it's our f---ing turn. (*Looks into a cell on SR*) Come here. (*Nothing happens*) Come here! (*Still nothing. He motions to another masked prisoner who pulls out the keys, opens the cell, and goes inside. Suddenly a Guard comes crashing up to the bars, his face being pressed in by the prisoner.*) You're my bitch now, huh? You f---ing come when I call you. Eat when I give you shit to eat, and believe me you gonna eat some shit! Sleep when I'm done beating ya, and talk when I tells ya. And that goes for all you f---ers!

3752: See, it's about the Guards. F--- you, Buddy. I'm getting the hell outa this hole. (*Goes to stand up*)

510: (*Grabs 3752 and pulls him back down*) Sit down! You're gonna f---ing kill both of us! And keep f---ing quiet.

9835: This is our house now and ain't nobody gonna f---ing stop us before I pop 'em. This is for all of us! All of us!

3752: I wanna get outa this hole already.

510: *This* hole? Where do ya think you've been this whole time? It's all a huge f---ing hole. You get lost in it and die and nobody will know.

9835: F--- the guards!

510: Nobody will care.

9835: We all need to stand together!

510: Me, I'm gonna crawl out one day.

9835: (*starts a chant*) F--- the Guards!

510: But you gotta stay alive or you can't get anywhere.

The chant grows louder. Slow blackout. The chant slowly turns into general shouting. A gun shot. The noise remains. Another gun shot. The noise dies down to a low but constant sound of people grumbling and bars banging. Two more slow gun shots. Silence.

Act II Scene IV – The Drop

Lights up on the same scene. All is as it was last seen a few hours before, but now two dead prisoners and one dead guard lay near the feet of 9835. Everyone is visibly sweaty

and tired. Some prisoners have removed their masks.

9835: *(as he gives his speech, a masked prisoner is searching up and down stage for anyone hiding)* F--- the Guards! And f--- all you f---ers who are friends with these f---ing pricks! If we're gonna get a little respect, we gotta protect ourselves and f--- all those snitches who always f--- us! I'm doing my f---ing time the way I oughta, f---ing staying alive and f---ing keeping my shit to myself. All you's who think otherwise ain't gonna be thinking much longer. All them f---ing cameras outside are in for a real good show. This is real f---ing TV, not that bull shit garbage my bitch watches every night. Now she gonna see me as a star, a f---ing Hollywood pimp.

Masked prisoner spots 3752 and 510 in the alcove.

Masked prisoner: Hey! *(Flashing a knife)* Get the f--- out here! Yo, we got ourselves a coupla f---ing stowaways here. Move it! *(He grabs 3752 by the shirt and throws him at the feet of 9835)*

9835: Haha, it's the f---ing fish! What you hiding in there for? Aw, scared? Better f---ing right you bettah be f---ing scared! F---ing shitting yourself, that's what ya do. Never trust the new ones. Always gonna f---ing stab you in the back to survive. Not like me. I'll f---ing stab ya in the heart and watch ya drop. Teach you to be a f---ing rat, not that ya ain't gonna have that chance again. *(Aims the gun at 3752's head)* Well, I hate to be all fake and shit with the whole "last words" bullshit...so I won't. Fish snitch, fish sink. Shoulda been a shark, kid.

510: Hey, f---er!! You such a f---ing dumb ass. Kid don't know shit. He ain't even know how to f--- a bitch if you put his dick in for 'em. Not that you'd know either, ya shithead.

9835: You little motha...pull his ass our here!! *(The masked prisoner throws 510 at his feet. 9835 now points the gun at 510's head)* For being around so f---ing long, you didn't ever learn when to keep your f---ing mouth shut.

510: It's f---ing hard not too when you got a bunch of f---ing shit for brains around ya thinking they run this place. But ya don't. You don't f---ing own anything. Wanna talk about scared? You're the one who should be f---ing scared. Cause the cops are gonna f---ing bust in here before you know it, and they gonna serve your ass on a f---ing platter. And this little piece of shit you wanna pop ain't know nothing, ain't been nothing, and ain't gonna be nothing. Just you like. Me? I been something. You want a f---ing snitch? You're looking right at 'em. *(9835 is getting visibly angry)* You gonna be a f---ing star? You want some f---ing respect? F--- no! Man, in two years, two months, two weeks ain't nobody gonna remember this, you, or any of us. You wanna f---ing drop something, put that goddamn gun your own f---ing mouth and do us all a favor. Or better yet, f---ing drop me so I don't have to listen to all your bullshit no more.

9835: FINE! (*Quickly, 9835 shoots 510 square in the chest. He drops. 3752 watches but is still huddled on the ground*)

(*Seconds after 9835 hits the ground, from the back of the audience doors are heard slam open*)

Police (offstage): FREEZE! PUT THE GUN DOWN!

Everyone on stage drops to the ground, except for 9835 who starts firing towards the back of the theatre while shouting "F--- the guards!" After he gets a couple shots off, a bullet hits him in his arm and then another in his chest. He drops.

As soon as 9835 drops, instant blackout. Silence for about 10 seconds.

Act II Scene V

Offstage Voice: (*Back to traditional voice*) Prisoner Number 4992! All's well that ends well!

Lights slow up on same cell as in Act I Scene II. 3752 is taking a piss, zips himself, flushes the toilet, and sits on the edge of his bed. The other box that was at the foot of the other bed is now gone; the bed is bare.

3752: The days are long, the nights are longer. Some nights you can't dream. Some nights you don't want to. (*Pause*) All the blood spilt in that bed alone. F---ing ridiculous. How many people have pissed on that mattress, how many scratches made in the wall, how many tears on the pillows...Actually, probably none. Or few. Cause you can't. I stopped, real quick. Didn't really have a choice. Didn't really notice the change. Can't wait to get out of here so I can forget all the people I met. Just like everyone has prolyy forgotten me. But...that's how it works. (*Takes a large sniff*) Humid, must be summer. Gotta get some sleep. Maybe dream about some skirts. God help me, I hope I do. (*He rolls over under the sheets.*)

A few seconds later, footsteps can be heard approaching. The lights begin to dim when an inmate is shoved into the room, box in hand. As he begins to look around the room, the lights fade to black.

A Love to Kill For
Kerri Carlson

A smell. A faint scent of something, something that I am not sure I have ever before experienced. It's not sweet, but is it really sour? Sour. Sour like decay. The scent of death, perhaps.

"Next!" I am quickly brought back to my reality. But my reality now is no longer what it had always been. I shuffle toward a man standing behind a desk. He asks me a few questions, and I answer, all the while not really conscious of what I am saying. *That scent still hovers, enveloping me.* He then instructs me to go through door 2 and I enter a room, unsure of what lies ahead. A new man calls to me from across the room. I shuffle to him. He tells me to turn around and stand still. I do as I am told, but I am still focused on that smell. Can't anyone else smell it? Could it be coming from this man, standing two feet from me? Or is it seeping from my pores?

"Open your mouth!" I do as I am told. Is it my breath that smells?
"Spread your legs!" My legs separate from one another, and I feel like a statue.

"Bend over!" I am suddenly aware of where I now stand.

It has been thirty-seven days since I first came through that heavy steel door. As I watched the sunlight disappear behind concrete and barbed-wire, I remember feeling at peace with myself. Yes, I was no longer free to do as I please. But I had lived a full life. I was seventy-four years old, and surely showing the effects of time. My hair had turned a stark white and was much thinner than in my youth. There were now bulges and curves where muscle had once been.

But most importantly, I had loved another person with all of my heart.

I was seventeen that summer when she came into my life. I remember the way her hair blew in the breeze. It was golden in the midday sun. She was the most beautiful person I had ever laid eyes upon. And that summer, I experienced, savored, true love. I had never believed in soul mates, but I knew she was mine.

We spent the next fifty years together, very much in love. Fifty years. A life sentence, captives of our love. We shared birthdays, anniversaries, and dreams. Aside from our wedding day, she gave me two of the best days of my life – the birth days of our children.

We were as happy as ever, until one visit to the doctor changed everything. My wife, my lover, the mother of my children, had cancer. She would live another year, at most.

Not a moment goes by that I don't think about her. She was my everything, my reason

for living. I remember the car ride home from the doctor's office. We both sat in silence as we made our way through town – past the school, fire station, post office. Everyday things I took for granted – life had become a routine. But now everything was different – it had to be. I looked over at my wife and saw tears glistening on her cheek. She was trying to hold them back, to be strong for me, for us, for our children. I reached over and put my hand on her leg. As she grasped it, I could hear her quiet sobs.

Sometimes I find myself sitting in my cell, counting the minutes until I can sleep again. Sleep is my solace here. I find her in my dreams. And when I am awake, I am caught between thoughts of her – longing to be with her again, and the realization that I will die here. I imagine what it was like for her to go the way she did.

We had endured four months of treatments – chemotherapy, radiation, even surgery. Every day, I saw the look of fear in her eyes – fear that she would soon leave me; fear that she would die in animal agony, bereft of dignity; fear that she would never see our grandchildren graduate from college or get married. But mostly, I saw her suffering. The cancer was killing me, too; I could not bear to watch her in such misery, powerless to ease her pain.

The days here go by, one gray day follows another, but everything is different. Yes, I pass my time with the other people here, writing or remembering all the good times in my life. But the nights are the best times. At night, I can lose myself in the past and forget the life I have now, if you can call it a life. It's funny, now that I think about it – when I was younger, I used to dream about the future, all of my hopes and desires for my life. Now, I don't have a future, at least not one worth dreaming about. For me, my dreams are all in the past.

Some things I can't bear to think about. Those last few months, especially, when her pain was more than I could endure. I focus on the good things, and that keeps my heart alive. I never thought we had the power to control our dreams, but now I know it is possible. I do it every night. I sit there on my bed, everything dark except for the low, dim light coming from the guard's station. The quiet breathing of my cellmate, interrupted every few minutes by a cough or moan from one of the other cells. It feels almost peaceful. I can hear my own heart beat. It is this time every night that I cherish the most, because it is now that I am back at home, listening to the quiet breathing of my wife.

I look over at her. She seems so peaceful, yet I know she is being ravaged by disease, eaten alive. The latest report confirms that things are hopeless. The cancer has spread to her liver, colon, lungs, and bone marrow. There is nothing they can do now but try to make her comfortable. It is only a matter of weeks before my love is gone forever.

I move a little closer and reach my arm around her body. She moans quietly and I just barely hear her saying, over and over, "Help me! Help me! Help..." No, I can't do it. I

won't do it. I get up out of bed and walk into the bathroom. I notice the vast assortment of pill bottles on the edge of the vanity. Maybe, just maybe, a few extra would make the pain go away.

I sit on the edge of our bed for a moment and look at her. She is there before me, the woman I love, old, racked by pain but still beautiful to me. Deep dark circles unfold under her eyes, the laugh lines are now permanently etched in flesh, an ashen tint colors her wrinkled skin. But her eyes have it, they still sparkle; when the pain subsides, her eyes dance across my face, taking me in, telling me she loves me. And I love her. She is the woman I fell in love with so long ago, the woman I love now, and the woman I will love always. I made a vow to love her, through thick and thin, good times and bad. Would I break that vow if I made all the bad go away? Would it be a sin to end her suffering and bring her peace once again?

Would it be a sin not to bring her peace? Can I sit here and watch her suffer and still say I really love her?

My eyes open just a crack to the bright morning sun peering through the curtains. I feel disoriented, groggy – unsure of what is happening. Am I really alive?

I move my arms – yes, they seem to be moving; my legs, too. I roll onto my back and feel my wife beside me. I touch her gently but she doesn't move. She must still be tired. I slowly get up out of bed and stand still for a moment, getting my bearings. Why do I feel so strange – like I'm in a dream, drifting, not completely in control of my body? I steady myself and make my way over to the pill bottles sitting on the dresser. I begin to prepare her medication for the morning. I reach for the morphine but as I pick up the bottle, I cannot hear any pills inside. I know there were quite a few left after yesterday's midday round. How can it be empty now? I try to remember how many she took yesterday, but the evening's events seem to be missing. I can't remember what happened.

I try to wake her up but she doesn't move. Not a single flinch. I go to her, I touch her, I shake her – nothing. I place my hand on her chest but feel nothing. I put my ear to her mouth. Nothing. I place two fingers on her neck. Nothing. Not even the hint of a pulse.

She is gone. I know it, but I can't admit it. I don't want to admit it. I knew this day would come but not now – not today. Why does it have to be today? Today – the day of our wedding? That magical day we shared so many years ago. It was the beginning of our life together, the vows we took to love one another through it all - now only a moment in time and lost amongst our memories. It was our beginning and now it is our ending.

It wasn't until several days later, long after the paramedics had pronounced her dead, that I began to realize what had happened, what I had done. The police investigation and the coroner's report, they told the story, the one I'm trying to tell now. I couldn't let her suffer anymore. I had to protect her. I wanted, needed to be with her. And in my mind, I could take her life if only I took my own, and take us both to a new place. I tried – I took those pills. And I gave her the rest. But they weren't powerful enough for me. They were too powerful for her, but not enough for me...

The morning sun wakes me. It is precisely 5:30 in the morning – the same time every day. I wonder if that is the time I killed her, or freed her from her suffering. The coroner's report was a bit unclear about that. I get out of bed, think about her, about us, then walk to the stainless steel sink. I wash my face and look into the cloudy handheld mirror propped against the wall. The face staring back at me is alive, but the soul inside is dead. That part of me left with her. May we both rest in peace.

I have nothing to live for, other than the belief that I will be with her again. I don't know how long it will be – weeks, months, years? I wish I knew. Sometimes I wonder why they put me here. Was it to make me suffer a pointless end? Was it because they couldn't understand why I did it, because they had never experienced true love?

But I do know one thing – I had to do it. There was no other choice.

The French Fantasy
Jonathan Abbasi

“Hey park my Benz, and don't scratch it.” I toss my keys to the valet. I'm meeting my boss for dinner in the most expensive French restaurant in town. “I hope he's paying for this,” I say to myself as I step off the red carpet and through the door. I walk in and am immediately repulsed by the delicious smells that attack my senses.

Walking home from elementary school, I would salivate as I walked by these kinds of places. Let the aroma of food I could only dream about roll around in my senses as I did just that, dream about those exquisite blends of flavors and spices as I imagined I was eating them. My friends would catch me, “You alright dog? Quit trippin, this ain't the place to be day dreamin, do that when you're home, if you ever get there.” Gunshots rang loud, two maybe three blocks away. We looked at each other, “Glock- 9mm,” we say together as if it were a game.

“I'm here to meet someone,” I yell over the noise before I even get to the counter and I see the maitre d recoil a bit. “Excuse me, I'm talking to you,” as my New York accent hits extra hard. “Yes sir,” he replies in a near silent but obviously snide voice, “this way.” I see Mr. White waiting for me, but he is too busy puffing a cigar and sipping on his cognac to see me come in. He doesn't even notice I'm there until I am practically in his

lap. "Enjoying that cigar a little too much Robby?" My words catch him a little off guard, but he knows who it is. "Only you would announce yourself in such an insolent manner, and honestly, that's why I love you. Now sit down and order, I'm almost full from all this liquor."

"Try it man, just try it, its awesome. You'll never feel better." They kept pushing it into my face. "Just try it, try a little smoke, try a little drink, everyone does it."

"But I don't want to, I'm fourteen. I'm too young for this, maybe in a few...."

"Awwww the little baby is too young, you wanna be the punk your whole life, or do you wanna be a man?" I was fourteen and highly impressionable, and they were challenging my manhood, something that has to be defended here.

"Give me that, I'll show you how a real man does it." Next thing I remember was blood, and cop cars.

As always, Mr. Robert White, or Robby as only I call him, engage in the usual hilarity that ensues only when we are together. We take in the cigar coated aroma of some food that I will never know how to pronounce. "What the hell do they call this anyways?" I say in my usual snide manner. "Escargot", he replies in his best uptight impression. "Epcot-who?" I lash back. "It means snail in French." He grins. I don't. In fact my smile has vanished completely and the color drained from my face.

There were months when I would eat cereal with water, bread with no peanut butter or jelly. I was just a kid, I didn't understand. "Mommy, I want a hamburger." I would cry out as I rubbed my stomach. "We can't, not yet," she would reply in the same soft voice she used every time. It was the kind of voice that was a blend of hope, determination, and sadness. She was upset we couldn't have those things, but she knew one day we could pick ourselves up, as long as we never gave up.

"Can I get a hamburger in this place, damn, White?"

"Hamburger? Here?" He starts to chuckle. "What, they don't have cows in France?" I say as his chuckle becomes roaring laughter while his face turns bright red. I wasn't laughing, which made him laugh more. "How about I order you a steak?" He barely manages to get the words out, as he gasps for air.

My food arrives and the waiter gently places it in front of me. He lifts the silver lid off the top and the steam rises like a giant cloud, smacking me in the face. As the fog clears, I can see the cop cars. As I cut into the meat I could feel the knife in my hand. When the meat cuts apart, I can remember the blood on my hands.

There were three of us, after our fun with drugs and alcohol; we had wandered up the wrong street. Where I was from, that was enough to get you killed, or get them killed. I woke up alongside breathing bodies and corpses. My face was swollen, and as I reached up to hold the side of my face, I could see the crimson stains on my hands. I looked around. A young man swims in a pool of blood, another lays gasping for air. Two others

lay unconscious, and one more was up against the wall crying. Between his sobs, I could hear the sirens approaching. The cops let me go. It was self-defense, or maybe they just didn't care. They knew I wasn't going anywhere, they would have their chance to get me sooner or later.

I couldn't eat my steak anymore. "Lets get down to business, Shall we?" White announced as he sat back in his chair and put out his cigar. "I didn't bring you all the way out here just to bankrupt the company account. I finally realized that I'm starting to get old...". "Starting to?" I cut him off. "Yeah, Yeah, I had that one coming to me. But seriously...."

My teacher called me into her office after class one day. "But seriously, you are a student at this middle school, why don't you do your homework? You are a bright kid, you have your whole future ahead of you, and you could do very well," she questioned me. "What would that do for me, besides get me made fun of? Good grades around here are a

bull's eye for people to give you a hard time. I don't need that. We all know I am not gonna be driving a Benz and eating at any expensive French restaurants. Do you know where I'm from?" I replied. She obviously did know, but she must have seen something more then some kid off the streets.

"No, but I know what you are capable of. I thought you were tough."

"I'm the toughest." I sat up straight and lifted my head when I said it.

"Then why are you scared?" She hit my best weakness, my pride.

"I'm not. Listen teach, nobody does their work around here. Nobody"

"Why don't you be the first?" At this point I knew I wasn't going to win. There was no way to beat Ms. Cadenazzi.

"Ya know what? You stop hassling me and we'll see what happens."

"I know you came from a rough neighborhood, and a rough life, but I think that's what makes you the best we have. Nothing is too much for you to handle and you never take anything for granted. You worked your way up, not like me, I just walked into this money, but you fought for it all. Didn't you?"

"Every last nickel White, you know that."

"Then I'm going to give you your chance to show everyone what you are made of, to show that hard work and determination will always pay off in the end."

"What do you want me to do?" I said, once again fading into my memories.

"I wanna do my homework," I said, surrounded, "Why won't you just leave me alone?"

"Don't you get it? We own you, you do what we say when we say it. If you don't do it, well you know what happens. That's how the street works kid."

"Street? That's how prison works, too."

"It's our way, or no way. That's it. We've been covering for you for a long time, and you owe us time. It's with us, or against us, come on kid, you know what this means." They pushed in closer to me.

“Yeah, this means I get my life back. I can get out of here, off the streets. I can’t live like this no more. You guys keep me all caged up, and only let me out when you need me. I’m like a prisoner, and I’m not in jail... yet. But if I stick with you, I know I will be. I’m out. I don’t wanna be a part of this anymore”

“You’re out? What do you think this is, the boy scouts? Listen, you do what we say, and you do it now. You think you’re in jail? Well get ready for your prison beat down.”

“I’m ready.” I closed my eyes....

“Hey, pay attention, this is for real. I’m going to get straight to the point. I want you to take over the company. I’m ready to retire, I’m old and I need a vacation. I’m going to announce it in two days at the company meeting. You be ready to accept, and say something, inspiring, if you know how to do that.”

“I can do it.”

“I know you can Superman, you can do anything right?”

“Right.” I sat up straight and lifted my head when I said it.

I was there, beside the stage. My heart was pounding. I had prepared for this, but could anyone ever really be prepared for something this great? My body followed my feet, but I felt like I had left my mind behind. I walk up, center stage, all eyes on me. I had worked so hard for this. My mind, body, and soul were waiting for this moment. I had no breaths left to waste; it was time to let them know. I was going to be in charge of this company, and these people. I had worked my whole life, and now, there was no where left to go. I actually did reach the very top.

“In every man and woman’s life, there comes a point where you have to make a choice. No matter what the consequences are, you have to make the right one. I promise you that most of the time, the right choice will be harder, but no matter what, you have to do it. For example, I had the choice to commit a serious crime, or go home and do my homework. All I wanted to do was study; I thought I had a chance to escape. Seems very simple, but sometimes its not. Sometimes there are people who are willing to do whatever it takes to drag you down. People, who are not willing to let you go; people who need you, to control you and hold you down. I finally got away. I fought, but not for them, I fought against them. I yelled, I screamed, and in the end, I ended up in the hospital for months. Recovering from various stabs, broken bones, and internal injuries, I finally had the chance to study in peace. Between surgeries, I studied. Between medications, I studied. I ended up here. I got away. If I could get away, anyone could get away. You all have the power to rage against the darkness, as I have. I fought, I won, and now I am surrounded by the best, the brightest, and the accomplished. You are all my family, and we made it together, and we will continue to make it together.”

I looked up from my paper, amidst a raucous of applause. For a second I thought I was standing in front of my high school, again. The last time I used this speech was when I was Valedictorian of my high school. I graduated, and I graduated with the best grades. It was the happiest moment of my life. I was able to tell them no, I was able to escape a

harsh reality of crime and violence. I was able to do everything I had ever dreamed of. I was able to....

“Hey 368, lets go.”

Reality phased back in, I was in front of my mirror in my cell. Life in prison is a long time to think up elaborate day dreams.

“I’m not going to ask you again, you get one hour of rec time. Hurry up or stay locked down. Your choice.

“All right, I’m comin CO, give me a sec, damn.”

I stared back into the dirty mirror; I couldn’t look myself in the eyes. I turned away in regret. I wished I was still dreaming.

Sitting in the Hole

Becky Thoman

It’s funny, on the outside I was always content to live in my head. If I was working, or in school, or anywhere, it didn’t matter, I’d be lost in a daydream meeting great people in exotic locations, being great people far from where I was. It didn’t matter how pathetic my actual life was, in my head I had lived the greatest life of all time.

That’s why it’s so strange that now, sitting in the hole, my imagination fails me. It abandons me to filth and solitude, to slowly lose my mind from lack of distraction.

For the first few hours I would close my eyes and try to sweep myself off to the Alps, where I loved to climb to the top of the mountains and sing like I saw in a movie when I was five. I don’t know about the whole nun thing, but the dashing captain I could come up with a few ideas for.

But it wouldn’t work. The smell of the thousands of bodies that had been stuffed in here before brought me back to reality, the worse place there is, worse than any nightmares I’ve ever had, because at least in my nightmares something exciting is happening. At least I’m not me, alone, forgotten...

I don’t know how long I’ve been in here. I tried to keep track at first, counting off in seconds, minutes, hours, but I lost count and that was probably a long time ago anyway. By now, I’ve memorized every scratch mark on the wall, every tear stain on the floor, but when I try to imagine why they’re there; nothing. It’s just salt water that escaped from someone’s eye in a vain attempt at relief, there’s no meaning in it. I thought about leaving my own mark, but I have no tears. Without my imagination I have nothing to cry over, no anger to claw at the walls with, no joy to fill the room with laughter.

I lean back and sigh, “I’m bored.” The sound startles me...

I wonder if I'll run out of air, I muse as the far wall makes his daily move towards me. They've all been really sneaky about it, moving only a millimeter or so at a time. They think I won't notice, but I'm too clever for them. I hear the creaks as they shrug off their foundations, arguing in whispers about who gets to move first. The far wall always wins. He says he has the farthest to go and the others agree with his logic and wait. So he slides closer to me with each breath I take, chuckling as he thinks of the day when he and his friends will crush me.

For a while I tried to fight back. I would take a running jump at each of them in turn, but I only managed to undo one hour of their work, buying myself that little bit of time. So I stopped, it's not just that I realized I won't win, it's more than that. I have to laugh as I think about the impact the end of my life will have on the world outside these walls. I've already been forgotten, that is if I was ever remembered. The guards put me here, as they've put so many others, to slowly disappear. I wonder which will happen first, if I will fade away or the walls will have their fun and squeeze me out of this world. It's a waiting game for now, but I can't tell you how long, you wouldn't understand my system of time anyway. Instead of measuring my life in minutes, seconds, sunsets, birthdays, the rest of my life will be measured by the movements of the walls, intervals that are too insignificant to be of notice in the outside world, only in here do they register...

I've made myself as small as possible, curled up in the fetal position, prepared to go out the way I came in. As I find myself in an impossibly small space, I see light, just a small crack at first but then gradually more and more and I gasp as my head makes its way into the world, the clean air stinging my lungs that have to learn to breathe all over again. A hand reaches for the rest of my body as I am reborn. The light, the air, and the human contact are all too much for me and I feel the pressure of tears swelling in my eyes. I can't be out here; I'm exposed; naked as the day I was born. My legs are shaky but I hear some distant memory telling me right, then left, now right again as I take my first steps down the corridor...

My head hits the pillow, and I sink into the unfamiliar softness. I lay still, the mattress cradling me like a mother's arms. I stare blankly at the ceiling as I thaw from my experience and sink further into the mattress. Then with a spark it comes back to me, my imagination comes back in full force and with it the tears and relief I had been denied in that place. I start to remember my previous life, cycles of pain and escape from pain, the more pain, the more I tried to escape. The more I tried to escape, the more drugs I used, various kinds for various alternatives to my reality...

They told me why they put me here, but they don't know that wasn't me. I'm not important. I don't have connections to get a gun. I don't instill fear in others. I'm afraid. It was the heroin that shoved the gun in her face and said those threatening words, that lied to loved ones and betrayed trust, that poisoned my body, mind and soul and left me alone here to think about my true life, and not the one I started creating as a child, the first time he hit me.

Then the voices come. 'Rise above it.' The strong think it's so easy. 'Everyone has problems.' My mother was weak and I think I inherited it from her. I don't know what hurt more, my father hitting me or my mother standing by and watching; not doing anything about it.

When I got here they gave me an anal search and a mission to figure out why I don't belong out there. And I don't. But apparently I don't belong here either. I've been put in a cell, far away from the child killers and daughter rapists; for my own safety. I imagine myself as a fierce creature that they need protection from and then I see how gentle my hands look, how slender and smooth the fingers are. If my father had hands like these, how different my life might have been....I might have been you.

**Love Always,
Mommy
Melissa Tanguay**

2/1/1990 – First week in prison

Mothers are supposed to lead their daughters into life – to teach them how to spread their wings and fly. God knows my mother didn't do that for me, and I guess I'd always planned on making life different for my own girls. But then I went and got myself locked up and I've left my girls behind. I've betrayed my babies in the worst way: I've deprived them of a parent.

Thank God my Nana, the same Nana who took me and my sisters in when our mother hit rock bottom, is still around to pick up my pieces. The girls will stay with her while I'm gone. Maybe, just maybe, one of their fathers will help out sometimes. They are still so young – Kara is 10, Julie is 8 and Samantha is only 6.

But I may as well have died in the girls' eyes. I'll miss everything in the next 10 years – Christmas mornings, school plays, sleepovers, birthday parties, proms, the Tooth Fairy, everything. No one will be there to tell them what to do and what not to do, what to wear and what not to wear, how to think and how to blossom into a good person – if I could even show them how. I hate myself for how I've ruined their lives.

Even though Nana doesn't want the girls to speak to me, I must do what I can. It's not much, but I will write letters. When I get out, they will be grown up and I will be a distant memory. They won't know me and I won't know them. Maybe they'll read my letters carefully – or maybe they'll rip them up in rage.

All I can offer is a piece of me on paper, a story, a word of advice, a memory. It's not a hug, a nice house with a big backyard in the suburbs, me handing them a lunchbox on the way to the school bus or sitting down for a family dinner on a Sunday night. But it's all I've got: my words.

Dear Kara, Julie and Sam,

3/10/1990

How are you doing? Are you being good girls? How is your new school? I hope you like your teachers and you're making lots of new friends! I miss you all so much and I think about you every day. I feel so bad that this happened. Someday I will make it up to you, I promise. You're my girls and I love you more than anything.

I am doing well. No need to worry about me! I always have enough to eat and a place to sleep. I work in the cafeteria here and sometimes play cards to pass time. I show everyone pictures of you and they all say how cute you are, especially in that picture where we are all wearing blue sweatshirts at the playground. That was a good day.

I promise to write you letters often. Please write back when you get a chance. I miss you all so much. I'm sorry you are too far away to visit, but you need to focus on school right now, and keeping Nana company.

Kara, make sure you're helping Nana with the other girls. I'm so proud of my big girl! Julie, I want to see straight A's this report card. I know you can do it! Maybe Kara can help you with your math homework. Sam, happy early birthday to you! I hope you have fun. I'll tell Nana to give you a hug for each of your seven years, like we always do. Remember, all of you, to be nice and kind to everyone (even the mean kids) and take care of each other and Nana.

Someday I hope we can be together again. You are all beautiful and strong. I pray each day that you will become the nice and successful girls that I've always dreamed of becoming. You shouldn't have to grow up like this, but Nana will be good to you. She was always so great at taking care of me when I was little.

Stay strong, be good and write back soon.

Love always,
Mommy

8/20/1990 – Six months down

I was never one of those girls who played "babies" and "house" for endless hours in the backyard. In fact, I always said I'd never be a mother because I was so angry with my own for never paying attention, for not being a mom. But then life changed when Kara was born 10 years ago. She was a surprise, of course, but a "happy accident." The minute I found out I was going to be a mom, something just clicked. This was my chance to do it right!

And I tried to do it right. Julie and Sam followed in intervals after Kara. In a way, they are like signposts for my love life in the past decade – two years between each, three different seemingly "perfect" relationships gone wrong. But despite my bad luck in love, the best part of my life has been being a mom to Kara, Julie and Sam. We were a family.

But apparently I couldn't get it all right. I vowed to clean up my act after each of the girls was born, but it was always too easy to go back to the drugs, the drinks, the streets. Nana would watch the girls when I disappeared for days at a time. Thank God, they never had to see me at my worst. All I ever wanted was a good life for my girls.

Maybe they are better off with Nana. I'm not sure if she's giving the girls my letters, but it makes me feel better knowing that at least I'm doing something to stay in touch. Life is rough here. You have to mind your own business, watch your back, do your time. The minutes, hours, days and months run together. You lose track, though I'll always try to keep track of what my family is doing, what they look like, who they are becoming without me. What I wouldn't give for a night in my warm bed with a home cooked meal and some quality time with my kids.

I do talk to Nana once a month on the phone. She realized after the first few months that it was eating away at me to have no contact at all with my family. I know she means well to keep the girls' lives as "normal" as possible without dealing with their mother behind bars, but it hurts. Nana said the girls are okay – coping, loving each other, growing big and strong. She says they miss me and they know that I miss them too. Nana said she wants to stop this cycle; she wants to teach my girls to lead a good life so that they can be successful people and good mothers one day.

God, I hope she succeeds!

Dear Kara, Julie and Samantha,

1/1/1991

It's been almost a year now. I can't believe it's been 335 days since I've seen your smiling faces, given you hugs or heard your voices. I miss you more than I can express. Nana tells me you are doing well – adjusting and settling into your new routine. You make me so proud.

Happy New Year! I really wanted to write today to celebrate the holiday. I couldn't stop thinking about you on Christmas and New Year's Eve, and Thanksgiving too. Holidays are just days here; maybe an extra cookie at dinner or an hour more in the yard, but nothing special. I wanted to be home with you – watching you open your presents from Santa, preparing turkey and mashed potatoes with Nana and playing with your new toys and games under the Christmas tree.

I hope you got everything you wanted this Christmas. My only wish is to be with you, but, of course, that won't happen for many Christmases. I wish you a New Year full of happiness, surprises and love. I am so proud of you for carrying on and adjusting so well to your new life, new house, new school and new friends.

I have a new cellmate here named Dana. We rang in the New Year by watching the ball drop and drinking apple juice in the rec room. I am the leader in the gin rummy *Tacenda*

tournament we have around here. And I've been jogging and reading novels everyday – and thinking of you. My life must seem so small and distant to you.

I would love for you to write back. I want to be a part of your life too. But I know Nana thinks it's best for me to let you be – let you move on and grow up. I'm sure you each grow taller and prettier every day. Do me a favor and make the most of each day, take care of each other and stay out of trouble!

Love always,
Mommy

10/31/1994 – Almost halfway

I'm nearly halfway through my sentence now. Nearly five years of my life have been wasted away. I have my routine here: get up, eat, work, eat, work, try to stay out of trouble, sleep. Life here is rough, much rougher than any of my hardest days on the streets. While I'm numb on the inside – as a method of survival – I've changed on the outside too. I'm older, harsher, grayer, broken. Would my girls even recognize me if they saw me now? I don't think I would recognize myself with my unruly hair, gray skin, dull eyes and baggy clothes.

But would I even recognize my girls after nearly five years? Some days that question burns inside of me and I can hardly breathe, or prevent myself from crying out their names in my cell. Nana has kept me up-to-date – as much as she can, anyway. I fear I've become the distant uncle or second cousin who you send an obligatory Christmas card to and never get to know. Am I still the girls' mother?

I've learned to carry on the best I can. I rely on myself; I do my time. I try to become a better person and a better mother so I can lead a good life when I get out. I've taken a few classes here, even parenting seminars, and I read the Bible when I can find one. But I don't know if that will be enough to get my life back when I'm out.

I received a letter from the warden the other day. The only mail I ever receive around here is from the authorities! He told me I'd be transferred soon to another facility. They won't tell me where I'm going until I'm already gone, but I'm praying that I'll be closer to my girls and Nana when I move. Maybe they'll visit? Nana still makes her monthly phone call, but it hits me hard every time my cellmate's brother visits her on Sundays or when Mary down the hall gets a care package with shampoo and pictures of her dog. I have nothing.

Life in here stands still for me, while life outside goes flying by.

Dear Kara, Julie and Samantha,

6/1/1995

Even though I'm not sure you still think of me, you're always on my mind. You're 11, 13 and 15 this year – no longer my little girls! I wonder what type of people you have become. Do you still like to make up songs, Kara? How's your pet lizard, Julie? And, Sam, do you still sleep with that little bunny toy at night? Probably not. You're teenagers now! Who am I kidding?

Not sure if Nana told you, but I have good news! I've been transferred to another women's prison in Ohio. It's only about a four hour drive from home; much closer than upstate New York where I was for the first five years. I've been here for about six months now. I told Nana where I was at the beginning of the year and she said she'd think about taking you girls to visit soon. It's already June. I hope you visit.

This is a nice place. It's good to be around new people and a new place after all those years at the other one. But it's hard too – new rules, new job, new routine, new people to figure out. I work in the library at this prison and I read a lot. It's a rougher crowd here, but I've really settled down after five years of prison life. I stay out of trouble. My cellmate is nice. She has kids too, so we pass the time by exchanging stories of the good old days.

I have a little window in my cell. At night I watch the moon and think that you might be watching it too – from not too far away. Remember that rhyme we used to say when you were little? “My name is Zoom and I live on the moon. And I came down to Earth just to sing you this tune.” You probably don't remember anymore. But I do.

I'm ready to get out and turn my life around. I want a second chance to be a better mom. I miss you. I'm here for you. Don't forget about me. I will never forget about you.

Love always,
Mommy

1/5/2000 – Countdown

Less than one month left. The end is so near that I can taste it, smell it and touch it. My fellow inmates have started to look at me differently – less like one of them I guess. It's still going to take a long time for me to feel like a regular person again. The world is going to be so different – 10 years is a long time.

My family is going to be different too. The counselor here, Nancy, keeps telling me this, although I don't want to listen. She said I shouldn't expect the girls to accept me right away or to forgive me for leaving. Nancy said that even Nana might have issues with my return. I'm not sure I believe her, or want to believe her.

I still dream of my grand return – where I can pick up where I left off 10 years ago, with a cleaned up act of course. I want to take a real shower, buy a cute outfit, get a haircut, color all these grays and have a real night's sleep with lots of pillows and blankets. Most of all, I want to love and be loved. I hope this isn't just a dream....

Nana said I need to start thinking about what kind of job I want, where I can live and how I can support myself when I get out. She didn't mention the girls. I know she wants me to get my act together before I can be their mom again. I've done a lot of reading here, taken writing and computer courses and even done a little accounting. I was thinking about trying to work as a secretary in a real office.

Prison has showed me that I better stay on the straight and narrow so I don't end up back here, like many do. I'll get an apartment with an extra bedroom for the girls, a car, a job and a life. I'm determined to become the person I've always wanted to become. I'm 39 now – too late for mistakes and no time for a third, fourth or fifth chance... This is it. I'm going home.

Dear Kara, Julie and Samantha,

1/31/2000

Tonight is my last night in prison! Finally, the light at the end of the tunnel; I'm ready to return to the real world. I want you to know that I will always regret the things I did to end up here. I'm sorry, and I understand if you aren't able to forgive me right away. I've thought about you constantly over these past 10 years. I want to be a better person and a better mom to you. This is my second and last chance. You all deserve a good mom.

I can't wait to see you. I've dreamed of our reunion so many times, even though I haven't seen or heard from you in 10 whole years. I still love you. I hope that we can have a relationship when I'm out. You are so grown up now – 16, 18, 20 – but I want to lead you into adulthood and make up for all the other milestones I've missed. I hope you let me into your lives.

I'm going to get a job, a car and a place to live in the same town where you are. Nana has agreed to help me get back on my feet. My old life is in the past—no drugs, no drinking. I won't even date anyone until I'm on the right track. I am so lucky to have a fresh start at my life and I promise you that I will try my best to make it work.

I'll be in touch with you as soon as I can. I can't take back my mistakes from the past, but I can work on creating a better future for myself and for you. You have my word.

Love always,
Mommy

2/1/2000 – First Day Out

After my 10-year sentence, I walked out of the prison today as a free woman. A decade of my life is gone and I'm desperate to pick up where I left off. Always the caretaker,

Nana arranged for me to be picked up and to go anywhere I wanted to. She knows well enough to leave my options open after all these years. But there's only one place I want to go – home to my girls. It's so hard to tell how the girls will react to my return.

A friend of Nana's from church drove me home in his roomy tan car, no questions asked. It was amazing to be moving away from the prison, moving forward after 10 years of standing still. The man handed me a bag from Nana as we drove through the cold afternoon. I opened the worn canvas bag and read a note addressed to me: "Welcome back! Here are a few things to get you started. We'll see you when you're ready."

My heart raced. "We'll see you" meant the girls might want me back in their lives. I would do anything for a second chance at my former life. Inside the canvas bag was a bank card and a note that \$200 had been deposited in my name. Nana also included a knitted scarf to guard me from the winter weather. She's still so good at taking care of me. Throughout the four hour drive, I dreamt of the life I would build for myself and my girls – and Nana too. I owe her so much.

After the man dropped me off in my old hometown, I carefully withdrew the money from the bank and checked into the hotel. I took my first hot shower in years, taking time to carefully wash my hair and shave. I couldn't remember ever feeling that clean. Next stop was an overwhelming new store called Target, where I bought a great new outfit to look my best for the girls. And, of course, I ordered a big cheeseburger, French fries and a chocolate milkshake at the diner across the street. Food never tasted so good!

When I returned to my hotel room a few hours ago, I felt nearly complete again – clean, full and comfortable. I have shed the outer layer of my prison self, like that hermit crab that Sam used to have. Still, I'll never be the same person I used to be and I won't be complete until I see my girls again. So here I am – getting a good night's sleep in this comfy bed before I face my old life tomorrow. I pray that it will all be okay.

Dear Kara, Julie and Samantha,

2/2/2000

Do you even know who I am anymore? I am your mom – and I've come back for you. I've been out of prison for two days now and tonight I went by Nana's house to see you. What I expected was the great reunion I've dreamed about for the past 10 years. But I didn't get what I expected.

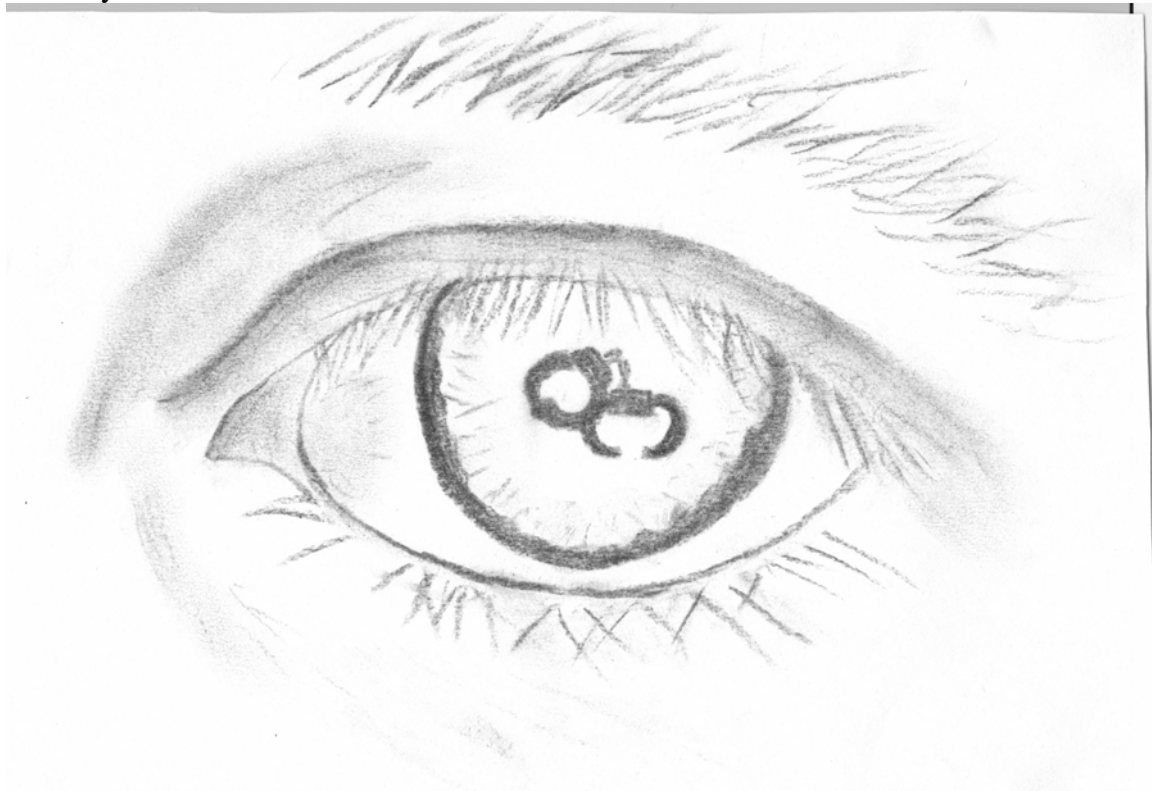
In the early evening I started the familiar walk down the snowy, cold street to Nana's house. It felt great to see the big backyard I used to play in as a child. On many sunny days I have imagined you playing on the swings and running through the sprinkler. As I approached Nana's house, my heart jumped. Looking through the big picture window, I saw a crowd of people inside, sitting at the dining room table. I started to walk up the drive, but I stopped when I saw you.

My feet were like glue on the driveway as I watched all of you sitting down for a family dinner. You are so beautiful, so glowing and so happy – looking every bit 16, 18 and 20. I saw Nana sitting at the head of the table, much older than I remembered, but laughing just the same. I saw Julie, with her long brown hair, talking excitedly with a friend sitting on the other side of the table. I saw Kara leaning on a handsome boyfriend in the doorway, looking confident and smart. And I saw cute, little Sam bringing a roasted chicken out from the kitchen.

As I watched you enjoy each other's company, I realized that I have lost my place at the family table – and in your lives. I was wrong to believe that I could just pick up where I left off after 10 years. I didn't want to interrupt your happiness, so I turned around and walked away from Nana's house. It wasn't the right time. I'm not sure if there will ever be a right time.

Please know that I am proud of you – and grateful to Nana – for carrying on in my absence. I could tell just by looking at you that you all turned out great. You have very promising futures ahead of you. I'm going to work on building a life for myself so you can carry on with yours. Maybe someday I can become your friend. Maybe someday I can sit down for a nice dinner with all of you again. Until then....never forget that I will always love you.

Love always,
Mommy



Eye of the Beholden

Drawing by Debora Pfaff

Merciful Killing
Katherine Chang

As I sat on my steel bed, I recalled what got me here. On a bright Sunday morning, I woke up and was ready to begin the beautiful day. As I turned my head to check on my husband, he began to cough. Finally, it got more and more intense and he covered his mouth with his hand. As he uncovered his mouth, he discovered blood on his hands. I turned my head around and silently cried as I lay next to him. As his loving wife, my heart ached every time I saw him suffer. I kept asking myself, "Why does God have to torture us this way? We are virtually inseparable. Why can't people who are in love live happily ever after?" It pains me to see my husband's body being tormented this way. Later at night as he lies next to me, I turned around and cried silently until I finally couldn't stand it. That's when I took my pillow and covered his face. He made a few noises and tried to grab me with his hands, but that just made me press the pillow harder to end the misery. Minutes later, the noises died down and his hands fell on the bed. I leaned next to him, wrapping my arms around him holding him close. Overwhelmed by the silence, I reached for the phone on the night stand and dialed 911.

The next thing I knew I was handcuffed and placed in the back of a police car. My trial is a blur, but I do remember clearly driving up to the prison gate, and taking a hard look at the place I was going to spend the rest of my life, the place that might consume me, eat me alive, kill the person I'd been all these years.

I wondered what my life at prison would be like. At the gate, the guards walked me down the hall. As I walked in, I saw the administrative section of prison. The guards sat in there working behind a screen that blocked them from the rest of the population. On the left hand side, I saw a yard surrounded by barbed wire. The yard was big and overrun with weeds. Some inmates were staring at me coldly; their looks frightened me. They reminded me of animals locked up behind cages at the zoo. Why do I get caged like an animal when all I did was try to help the person I love most, my dear husband. He was a prisoner of a debilitating disease; I set him free. Now it's me who's locked up.

As the guard walked me to the cell, I was surprised to see other guards delivering food through a small opening in the cell door. My cramped cell consisted of a steel bed, sink, and toilet upset me. The thought of me having my lunch after my cell buddy just used the toilet disgusted me. I could not picture myself spending the next twenty years of my life living like this. I thought about tearing apart the bed sheet, tying a knot, and hanging myself when the guards were off on their rounds. I sat myself on my steel bed and buried my face in my hands.

Standing in my cell, I thought of the beautiful moments I spent with my husband, as well as our last moment together. Inwardly, I told myself that continuing to feel sorry would not change anything. Instead, I need to make the most of my time here. I want to know if I had the right to end his pain. Because I don't know whether it was right to end his life, I asked the guards if I would be allowed to keep religious books in my cell.

The book on Buddhism brought me no comfort. I learned how wrong I was in taking the life of my husband even for humane purposes. According to Buddha, one cannot end one's life or that of another no matter what; otherwise, they would be tortured when they die and not allowed to reincarnate. I felt awful about the mistake I made and realized that the court was right. Here I am paying with my life for the big mistake I made. I am guilty. I belong here.

Today, I am happy because the guards finally allowed me to adopt one of the stray cats that roam the prison. I named him Tom Junior, after my husband and was given as a gift. Since we never had a child, we treated him like our son and loved him very much. When my cell buddy first saw Tom, she screamed at him and said "Don't you dare get that cat anywhere near me." The guards told me that as long as I kept the cat on my side of the cell, it was alright. I placed little Tom on my steel bed and patted him gently telling him how regretful I was of the incident. With Tom by my side, I no longer feel scared, or lonely, and I could almost feel my husband by my side again. Tom reminded me of the happy moments we shared during our anniversary. A little warmth goes a long way in here.

As I was picturing the happy moments I shared with my husband, my heart filled with intense pain. To calm myself down, I held Tom in my arms and crawled under the blanket to get warm. I could feel the darkness sinking in. I tried to build a wall around me and shut myself off from the rest of the world by covering my head with a pillow. My mind drifted. I tried to fall asleep, but I couldn't. Suddenly, I heard the horrifying voice of my husband penetrating through the walls calling my name and begging me to let go. Terrified, I buried my head deeper into the pillow almost to the point of suffocation. I could feel my cold sweat coming down my spine. Every time he called my name, I fought harder and pressed the pillow down trying to keep out his voice. I cried so hard that I couldn't breathe.

Prison—My Home
Eve Polak

I was terrified. I was numb. I could not feel, smell, or hear anything. It was like having a really vivid dream when your mind tricks you into having feelings and reactions in your head but your body doesn't experience them. This is how I remember entering my new home.

After a while, I could smell the odor of the prison, I started hearing the noise – my senses were working again. I was alone now; my head was spinning as the constant noise echoing between the cells bounced around mercilessly. I entered a cell, sat down on the cold steel bed, and began reassessing my new surroundings: the dirty walls, the tiny window, the sink, and the floor that had so many different colored stains on it – stains that represented stories of those to whom this cell had been a home.

I knew I had entered a different world, I sensed that the rules of the world that I came from did not apply here. Everything in my life was about to change. I stood up as if I believed that I could simply walk out, leave this parallel universe forever... but I couldn't... This is where I am now. This is where I belong now.

I would soon learn that disassociating oneself from this environment leads only to the two following outcomes: going insane or being abused. I would learn it soon enough, but my first night in prison, I decided to forget where I was and why I was here. I woke up in the middle of the night after dreaming about the prison stories drawn from the noises coming from the cells. This was the last time I slept and had a dream. After that I slept very little, not even enough to have dreams.

Forgetting and Remembering

As I spent more days behind bars I learned how to forget what was out there in the world that I used to belong to...I learned to stop imagining what could be if I was out there. Instead, I held on to the old memories which, for an unknown reason, were more clear and vivid to me than ever before. The present was a blur; the past, crystal clear. I remembered everything in great detail: my childhood and my parents who had great plans for me. At some point I even had great plans for myself! I opened my eyes - the lights were out, I was sitting in complete darkness. This was the time when I started thinking about the opportunities that I gave up to try to fit in, the things that I did, not to please myself, but to please my sense of belonging somewhere, anywhere really...

Undercover

When I was in school I was always the teachers' favorite. I wasn't an angel during recess. But during classes, I listened carefully and I paid very close attention to what the more knowledgeable had to say. I tried this approach here, it doesn't work. Here, I am no one's favorite. Here there is no knowledge, just power.

In prison you have to keep all your feelings and habits under a steel cover that serves two purposes: it protects you from showing weakness and vulnerability and it protects you from the harm that can be done to you by others. My cover used to work perfectly until one day when I felt comfortable enough to peek out.

My cover has holes now and they are getting bigger and more visible every day. Now, I am considered the weak one, as I still have feelings, dreams, and hopes.

Empirical evidence

To know is to experience and because you can't experience what prison is like, try to imagine and remember... Remember that time when you were away from the ones you know and love? Imagine realizing that you will never be able to see them again. Remember the time you hated the place where you were staying for a night or two? Imagine that this will be your home until you die.

Remember that time when you were excited about what will happen tomorrow? Forget about it, your life is routine from now on.

Remember being able to run away from what was unpleasant for you? You won't be able to do it again.

Remember the feeling of hope? You might as well give it up now.

Remember what I said in the beginning? You do not know until you experience. So forget all I said because no one's imagination is capable of picturing what it is like in here. I know, it sounds scary, it sounds like your worst nightmare come true. And it is. Trust me, it is.

Fear

I have never been the one to fear loneliness or seclusion. I felt like solitude would give me more time to reflect, take care of my mind and thoughts. The isolation block - I wanted to see if I can handle my own self there. So far the isolation gave me time to think and get away from having to pretend I was someone else all the time. It scared me at the same time – I think about those who spent months alone in here and went insane. I wondered... if I went insane, would I even notice it?

Useless

Getting used to the everyday prison routine was easy. The hard part was realizing that this routine would be my life from now on, that hope was a thing of the past, left outside the prison walls. Even if I fooled myself into thinking that there was still hope, I would soon know that it was long gone. So was everything that I was used to or I took for granted.

In prison, days capture you and carry you along. There is no sense of freedom or choice, even when it comes to basic human needs. You realize that you won't be able to explore anything new, anything beyond the prison bars. You now know what it truly means to be helpless. Absolutely helpless. There really is no escape. Some choose death to escape the helplessness. At least death is their OWN choice, it's their right to choose expressed in a drastic, yet the only possible, manner. It's an act of conscious choice and liberation. Who would have ever thought that suicide can only be explained in such terms in prison?

In the warehouses of those who do not fit in society, you live without will and you function without purpose. You exist...but you are considered a useless person. And you feel useless too.

Locked up

"I've seen the most f---ed up shit; I'd kill myself before I had to go back."

"In prisons, the guards are locked up with you. They are locked up just like

prisoners, except they have the power to go home. They follow someone else's orders too. They have no life because they take the prisons home with them."

Confused

Guards beating up inmates as if punishing them for what they did to their victims.
Guards trying to agitate the felons to make them snap.
Guards disrespecting the few rights the prisoners have.
Guards having no regard or compassion for who they are dealing with.

Guards... Why do they become like that? How can we expect any prison to serve its purpose if the institution evokes such behaviors and feelings in those who work there? Being in prison is not easy. It's not easy for anyone. You enter with a little bit of hope and realize that it would have been smarter to leave it behind. You may enter with a vision, some sort of a plan to change things, to make prisons work better. Better for you, better for others. But as you will soon discover... it doesn't work that way.

What keeps the guards at their jobs? Most people can't wait to get out of prison, but the guards go back there day after day. Is it the will and wish to change things that keeps them coming back? Is it the fact that they do not realize what they are getting themselves into? Is it their sadistic nature because of which they feel good knowing that they are superior to the felons? It's all of those three things and more. Sometimes combined, sometimes mutually exclusive. Just as there are many prisoners who go behind bars for different reasons and serve time in different ways, there are many guards who go behind bars for different reasons and with different plans or motives.

My life – a play on words

I am in prison, but I am not a prisoner.
I am behind bars, but I am not an inmate.
Prison is my home, prison is where I live.
I chose to be here, it is where I wanted to be.
Who am I?

Why am I in prison? Why am I serving time here?
I'll never tell, I can't remember the reasons.
It was my choice. It was my decision.
Who am I?

I became like all the others. Cold, distant, and angry.
I was trained to live in a different reality.
I can leave the prison, but the prison will always be a part of me.
I leave daily, but I always come back.
Who am I?

I lived through too much, I've seen enough.
I wish never to see the twisted reality of my life anymore.
I wish never to remember any part of it.
I can never escape from what I have become.
I can never be human again.
I choose to leave prison forever.
The job has killed me.*

**United States Penitentiary – Lee.*

Correctional Officer John Freeman was found dead in the isolation block D3 on July 4, 2005. He shot himself in the heart. His writings were found at his desk along with a hand-written note expressing the hope of his writings being publicized. USP Lee in Jonesville is a high security facility housing male offenders. USP Lee is located in southwest Virginia in Lee County.

Hardening of Hearts **Margaret Heald**

It was nearly a year before I was able to work at the prison. It was a great relief because it lessened the dreadful monotony of prison life. There weren't many options, especially for us new guys, but I was lucky enough to get placed in the shop printing license plates. One of the great things about the plate shop is that we actually get to leave the prison grounds, even if it is just down the road. The feeling of being on the road for those few short minutes is a little taste of freedom.

The guys in the shop aren't too bad and the CO's actually lay off a bit. The only time it gets real bad is in the middle of the summer when everyone is all hot and bothered. Those are the days you never know who will fly off the handle and never return to the shop again.

"Live free or die, what a joke!" laughs one of the new guys as the first New Hampshire license plate of the day rolls off the line. I shrug and turn my attention back to the conveyor belt. These new guys think it's funny. "How ironic," they remark without fail. It is an unusually hot summer day and the work room is unbearable. The giant machines keep humming, adding to the heat and stench of the room. The CO's let us take our shirts off and wrap them around our heads to keep the sweat from dripping down our foreheads. Fourteen guys working and no AC; only the constant clamoring of the industrial fans strategically placed in each corner of the room.

We laugh as the latest vanity plate rolls off the line, AQT4U. A leggy blonde perhaps? More likely it belongs on the back of a silver Volkswagen Jetta driven by a sweet sixteen. We've seen some good ones in our day, most of arguable taste and wit. My favorite, a classic, rolled off a few months back. PB4UGO. I laughed for hours it seemed. I mean, you don't see things like that everyday. It was a soccer mom no doubt, behind the wheel of a futuristic minivan.

I like to imagine who the vanity plates belong to, what they are like and what kind of car they drive. After all, who drives around with TRASH on their license plate? We can spend hours debating. Joe always thinks they must belong to a CO or his wife. It's unlikely, but it gives us a little material for when we get back to the block.

The days with no vanity plates are the worst. AFG 473, doesn't exactly draw up images of a girl with long sexy hair blowing in the wind as she drives up the coast. LEGS2SE, now that's a different story.

Back in my cell, the bars close in on me as I lay staring at the ceiling. Loud creaks escape from beneath me as I shift my body. After only one night on this thin mattress my back began to ache. Will this constant pain haunt me through the next few years, or will my muscles harden and adjust? Or soften to fit in with the program. I wonder, even as I long for the comfort of my own bed, the luxury of two pillows and a soft down comforter. For twenty-three years I slept soundly in the safety of my own home.

I can't help but wonder how I've become trapped behind these walls of cement and steel. I think about my dad, strong and proud, working countless hours to ensure that we had everything we needed. I never saw him in the mornings; he had left for work hours before I woke up, and many nights he didn't make it home until well after dinner. He is the most honorable person I've ever known. I cringe as I picture the look in his eyes when he saw them close the handcuffs. It wasn't the first time he had seen my wrists wrapped in cold metal, but this time it hit harder. This time the handcuffs came with a five year sentence. For the first time I looked at my father and instead of honor and dignity I saw disappointment. It cut through me and for a moment I could not even gather a breath.

I cannot blame myself entirely. There is, after all, another part of me, another blood running through my veins. Sometimes I imagine that my mother is the bad blood. Every time I feel the cold rush into tips of my fingers and down through my shoulder blades I think of her. I remember watching her in the kitchen when I was eight. She smiled down at me as she scrubbed the dishes. Her foamy, wet hands reached down and rustled my hair. I wiggled out of her arms and wiped away the water that dripped down my cheek. When I looked up she was gone, and a second later I heard the front door slam. In walked Nat, my mom's latest boyfriend. In an instant she changed. I became invisible, no more important to her than a rodent. Looking back, it wasn't the sense of abandonment that hurt so bad, it was the days that she stayed quiet or conveniently disappeared. These were the days that she failed to stop Nat, or Tom, or Phil, or whoever the latest man in her life was as he tried to come after my brother or me.

Some of the guys in here stayed on the straight and narrow their whole life then just lost it one day and fucked up big time. Imagine doing the right thing for years and years and then losing it all in one moment of rage or stupidity. That's not me though. I've had plenty of stupid moments. I spent my entire teenage life making stupid mistakes, each one building upon the last like the bricks that make up the walls that now

contain me. It started out small, a couple of joints with my friend in his garage. Then there was that time I stole the jeans from JC Penney. I wasn't hurting anybody; it wasn't really hurting me either. Sure, I got a slap on the wrist, a couple months on probation. What did it matter? All of my friends were on probation, or had been at some point.

I guess this last time I might have taken it too far, but really, anyone could have made the same mistake. I was walking home from a party. I don't remember much, I was way too fucked up, but I do remember it was damn cold outside. If there had been anyone on the streets I would have tried to bum a ride, but there were no cars to be seen. They wouldn't have picked me up anyway; it'd been two days since I'd showered.

Suddenly, to my good, unbelievable fortune, I saw a car. It wasn't just any car, but an unlocked car idling in the driveway of a local business. The headlights streamed into the darkness. From ten feet away I was sure I could feel the heat escaping through the seams of the car. I looked down at my thin jacket and tried to wiggle the toes I could no longer feel, and then I ran to the car. Glancing around quickly to make certain I wasn't seen, I reached for the door handle. My fingers, stiff and cold, fumbled with the latch. I tried to be quiet, but I was certain the pounding of my heart would wake the neighbors. When I finally got the door open, I slid into the driver's seat. The seat embraced me with warmth and for a moment I was lost in the comfort of the car. I quickly remembered where I was and sped out of the driveway and toward my home.

The short drive seemed to take hours, as I glanced from one mirror to another. Each passing car bore a striking resemblance to a patrol car, and I found myself sweating each time I saw a new set of headlights. As I approached my house, I considered what to do with the car. I made the decision to park it in the parking lot of the hotel across the street. Surely the police would focus all efforts on the hotel and never think to look across the road. I crawled into bed and fell asleep quickly, aided by the slight buzz and my foolproof plan.

Early the next morning I was rudely awakened by an aggressive knocking on my door. I tried to roll over and ignore the noise, but it continued. Still hazy from the night before, I rose from my bed and walked toward the door. When I opened it, I was greeted by the not so friendly faces of two Concord police officers. I stood up straight, confident in the fact that I was not in any trouble. Before I could say a word I glanced down. There, on the floor just inside my apartment sat the radar detector from the stolen car.

On the day I arrived at the prison I was taken aback by the rigid feeling. Immersed in a sea of steel and cement, I felt lifeless. This sensation was even reflected back at me through the eyes of my fellow inmates. Each set of eyes peered back at me, but there was nothing but emptiness behind them. I became discouraged, wondering how I would get through the next few years in this desolate environment. Then I found my one salvation. Above my bunk there was a small window, no more than a square foot. Through that window I could see a tiny sapling emerging from the hardened earth. It was

no more than two feet in height and an inch or so around. It nearly disappeared in the shadow of the penitentiary. Not so different from myself, I thought. Both young, fragile and thin skinned, trying to survive in a world we aren't equipped to deal with. Both trying to become something larger, our growth is stunted by the ever present cloud of the justice system.

With nothing better to do with my time, I watched that sapling each day. I was disappointed when day after day I looked out my window and saw the same scrawny tree. What I could not see was that the small plant had changed. Though it had not changed in size, it had changed in substance. Burned by the hot sun in the afternoons, whipped by the wind from the hills, and beaten by the pounding snow of the winter, the little tree had changed. The bark had grown thick and tough. It no longer bent with the wind. The tree was now firmly stationed in this place, its roots reaching deep into the earth. Not so different than me, I found myself thinking once again as I lay in my bunk.

I thought that friends and family would be my saving grace during my sentence. They would keep me grounded and positive, but my connections to the outside world faded quickly. It had taken two whole weeks before I was able to have visitors. My visitor list got shorter and shorter as I realized many of my friends couldn't or wouldn't visit me. Finally the list boiled down to three people; my father, stepmother and girlfriend.

I kept a picture of my girl with me in my cell. Her smile was one of extreme kindness and innocence. When I showed the other guys her picture they were stunned.

"How did you get a girl like that," some of them asked. I had no reply. I sat back and wondered to myself, how did I get a girl like that? I was not the best looking guy around. At 6'2" with gangly arms and pale skin, I was awkward at best. I couldn't say I was the nicest guy either. I had said and done some unforgivable things in my past, but she had stuck with me through it all. Now she was on the list of prison visitors, taking time out of her life to visit her convict boyfriend.

I was selfish though. I needed to see her, and when she walked into the visiting room I was grateful she had come. Her hair hung softly on her shoulders. I wanted to reach out and run my fingers through it. She smiled, obviously uncomfortable but trying to put on a strong face. She sat down hesitantly across from me. As she crossed her legs I noticed the way her foot swung slowly back and forth. It was as if I was seeing her for the first time, noticing all the small perfections I had missed before. She wore a modest burgundy top with long sleeves, careful not to push the limits of the visitor dress code. A small hint of her collarbone peaked out from the neckline, tempting me immensely. Seeing her was almost as painful as it was rewarding.

We talked for an hour, as long as they would let us. She told me about school and her friends. Everything was going so well for her. I found myself getting jealous of her as I thought about the next five years of my life in this orange jumpsuit. I wanted to tell her to stop, tell her how unfair it was that I was on this side of the wall, but I stopped myself. It wasn't her fault, but I couldn't help this feeling of undeniable anger.

Each week I counted down the minutes until Sunday when visiting hours began. I waited anxiously on Saturday nights knowing that I would see my girl soon. I tried to imagine what she would wear. At times I even let my imagination wander to thoughts of what we would do if the guards weren't around, but those thoughts were too painful. I daydreamed of the days when we would stay in bed all day, forgetting entirely about the world outside. I wondered if she remembered those times with as much nostalgia as I did. I wrote myself a note to remember to ask her at our next visit. I would ask if she remembered the time we went to Maine and spent the entire day walking along the rocky shore.

The next Saturday I got a letter from my girl. She said she had a college visit over the weekend and wouldn't be able to visit that week. She would try to make it the next week, but with finals coming up it might be hard. My stomach dropped as I read the letter. Two whole weeks would be torture.

I only wished that our last visit had ended on better terms. She had told me about a movie she had seen with her friends. They weren't just any friends, but her guy friends. How was I supposed to react? My girl was going out with a bunch of guys while I was locked up behind bars. For all I knew she was cheating. Okay, so maybe I should have kept that thought to myself, but it slipped. She was so angry she left the visit ten minutes early. I went back to my cell and punched the wall.

The thought of that visit clouded my head for two weeks. Finally, on Sunday morning I decided that I would apologize. I had overreacted and from now on I would try to be more trusting. She was a great girl, and if I wasn't more careful I would lose her. I laid back on my bunk and waited for visitation to begin.

To: Tim Rogers
Mark Stern

For that one instant, I felt my actions were perfectly alright. I had an urge, a desire that needed to be fulfilled. But did I ever consider the consequences that could happen, the amount of people that I would hurt, or even the amount of guilt that will forever be tattooed on my soul?

I realize now that I have a problem - I need help. And if you could just give me the chance to explain my reasoning to you, regardless if it makes anything better, I need to have closure by confessing exactly what I did, why I did it, and how I felt.

For the past seven weeks, I watched as your mother came to the local grocery store. I often times rang her up at the register, and she always smiled at me in a way that made me feel important. I remember the purity of her skin and the beauty of her eyes. I never will forget the way she ever so gracefully carried herself down each aisle, or what she wore. Man, she has some of the nicest legs and ass that I've ever seen.

Granted she was your mother, but she evoked feelings inside of me that could never go away. I knew that I needed to get closer to her, and I wanted her to be a part of my life.

So, as the weeks went on, I waited for your mother to arrive at the store. I soon learned her routine: Every Monday at 2:30 PM she would walk into the grocery store, still dressed in her workout clothes after her one o'clock session at the local fitness facility. She worked out everyday at one; I often times took my lunch break around then just to see the object of my dreams get out of her car. And of course, she never saw me watching.

I quickly learned from swiping her credit card that her name was Sarah Rogers. In a matter of minutes from when she left the store, the yellow pages hanging from the grocery's pay phone filled a missing piece from the identity puzzle I ever so wanted: 1437 Mulberry Street.

1437 Mulberry Street. Less than two blocks away from where I worked. Everything seemed so perfect, so easy, a simple 5 minute walk down the street could bring us together anytime.

Soon, after a few weeks passed by, I would begin to fantasize about your mother – she knew how to move me in ways no other woman could before. The object of my affection, my Mona Lisa, the woman I would take to be my own. When I slept, I dreamed of a world with just the two of us. We were the Adam and Eve, stricken by the lustful emotions that drove men wild. She wanted me. I needed her.

So occasionally, I'd go to visit her. I found a great climbing tree that gave me a perfect view into her bedroom window. I'm sure you played in it as a child, imagining that you were some type of knight or king, saving your princess in the tower. My imagination took me off to far and distant places, too, while sitting in it. It was vast in size, and as long as I was a top its branches, she'd never be able to see me. Sometimes I'd throw sticks and rocks at the window just to have her come over and look out – I loved creating the suspicion that someone was watching, and to see her face in fear sometimes would bring such thrill and satisfaction that if she only knew it was me, everything would be alright. I'd protect her.

But do you remember the first time we met? Yes, I happened to crawl down to the base of the tree one night and fall asleep in a world I created with your mother. You came over and woke me up – scaring me right out of the front yard and down the street. You

probably told your mom that some homeless man fell asleep in her yard; I knew that she'd never suspect it was her favorite register worker at the local grocery store.

And, of course, she never suspected anything at all. Her normal routine continued on, and every Monday she came in her workout clothes straight from the gym. But everything was alright at that point. I just watched her, wishing I could be with her, wanting to see her everyday.

You ask what triggered my anger. Why did I commit such a heinous act? It was an act of love, and it was beautiful. To have her be so much a part of my world is one thing, but to discover that I had absolutely no presence in her world kills the soul. My soul. I wanted to be a part of her life, a huge influence that she would never forget. And when finished, I would forever be the man she thinks about each night.

Then she did it - she broke my heart. She tried to run away from me. Our relationship began going downhill when our paths crossed at the local post office. Damn – it was all because of the post office. When she started to head out of the office, in her pretty yellow sun dress, I called out her name and began following her. She quickly walked towards her car, getting in without saying hello. I thought that was rather rude, so I came up to her car. She rolled down the window ever so slightly, and I said, “Hey Ms. Rogers. You look mighty fine today in your tight yellow dress. How about you and I go get some lunch sometime soon. It'll be fun.” She acted as if she had never seen me before, playing games as if I should know better. She looked scared, but I knew I'd protect her. I told her that I'll see her on Monday at the grocery store, right after her workout. She drove away - telling me to never speak to her again. I had done nothing wrong. I needed to convince her.

That's when everything began changing. She no longer came to the grocery on Mondays at 2:30 P.M. She no longer worked out at the same local fitness center. She even kept the curtains closed at night. She was hiding from me.

I never meant for her to change her routine. But since I knew that she loved me, she'd come back. So I waited one final Monday for her to show up at 2:30 PM in the grocery store.

She never came.

Not having her in my life for a few weeks punishes the soul. I wanted her badly, and she couldn't afford losing me. She needed to see how perfect life would be. She was incomplete, and I knew the solution to make it all better.

I dreamt of her every waking moment. When I slept, my fantasies would feel almost real. We'd make love... hold each other for hours. I'd shower her with kisses. She'd laugh. We were happy.

But I had enough. After an hour slowly crept by, I decided to go to her... 1437 Mulberry Street.

Remember that my decision to come to her house is what brought us together. I welcomed myself as a member of your family, and even after today, I will forever be a part of your past, present, and future. Never had I remembered, all the times I visited, how inviting your house was that day. It was time for me to confess my love, to sweep Sarah off of her feet and into my arms forever.

Sarah left the front door open for me, so I walked into the kitchen where she was already preparing our dinner. She knew I was coming, and never had I seen her so beautiful. Surprised by my early arrival, she yelled in excitement. I came closer to her, and when we looked into each others eyes, we sailed into a new horizon that brought us to our own special place.

I followed her up the stairs and into her bedroom. She reached for the phone, but I told her there was no need to talk. Words were not necessary to help explain the feelings buried deep inside both of us. These feelings would explain themselves. I was here, and everything was how we wanted it to be. So, I swept her off her feet and carried her to bed. Then the tears came, tears of love and passion. Neither of us could hold back, and the pieces that kept us apart were slowly coming together.

While on the bed, I felt her heart beating faster. It was a sign of true emotions - she was beginning to see. And while making love, I showed her the world. Together, we went to the top of the Eiffel Tower, glancing into the distance as fireworks danced around us. In Venice, I sat with my arms around her as we floated in a gondola down a never ending river. We held hands while walking through the endless layers of the Amazon Rain Forest. And we cuddled for hours in a small hut on the beautiful Barbados beaches. I had never been so satisfied.

However, as we went from place to place, she would slowly bring me back to reality. While at the Eiffel Tower, she was frightened by the heights, so I would surround her, sheltering her in my arms. While in Venice, she would try to jump - off the gondola - so I would grab her tighter, harder. In the rain forest, she would try to hide behind the trees - I would find her, and force her back to the ground. But it all ended in beautiful Barbados. It was the best part of our trip together. We sat holding each other in the little hut for hours and hours. And when I woke up with her by my side, her spirit had already left me, and she lay there, lifeless. So I left her there in Barbados and told her that I'd be back one day.

Before I left my new home, I went back into the kitchen, sitting... enjoying the dinner she made me. And the events thereafter, well, let's just say that they eventually drove me to where I am today - just waiting. My fondest memory after the world venture with your mother was being questioned by a special detective at the state prison facility. He kept on

asking me, “Do you understand the severity of your actions? Did you know she was a mother of two and a grandmother of four?” My response was just the same; that of course I knew – I knew better than anyone else how important she was, for I showed her a world hidden from her very existence. I never regretted the vacation, and everyday I am thankful for the time we spent together.

But now I continue to wait for my ultimate ending. My actions have hurt you, and only time can heal these wounds. The death penalty is quite a punishment for such a small act. Although you might be looking at what happened as a detriment, you’re not seeing anything. You see, she’s not dead, Tim. She’s waiting too. Since I’ve been on death row, I’ve felt her by my side every night. She thanks me for taking her around the world. She understands why I’d come visit her. And some nights, she’d sit with me atop that special tree... her head on my shoulder... my arm around her tight waist. She’s happy now – happier than I’ve ever seen her before. I’m glad she finally sees, but you don’t, Tim. Why aren’t you happy, too... or at least happy for her?

Look at the bright side, though. If you still don’t understand what I did, why I did it, and how I felt, then I’ll give you the rest of your life to think about it. For in a few moments, I’ll be out of your world and in hers again. So yes, I will have no more home cooked meals, and never again will I experience a family vacation or walk in the park. But thanks to you, I’ll experience something else.

You see, I’ve been keeping her waiting for some time now. She loves me, and we’ll be getting married soon. I will forever join the ranks as a family member, with the woman of my dreams by my side. We’ll continue to travel the world together, hand in hand, and everything will be even more perfect than before.

But don’t fret, Tim. Although it will some time before you see us again, we’ll still come and visit you. We’ll watch over your kids as they sleep; I’ll teach them how to follow their dreams, and when the time is right, they’ll know when to reach out and grab them. We’ll be at all the birthdays, holidays, and family functions. Always know, too, that if you ever get that strong sensation deep down inside, just know it’s because we’re right by you, watching.

And, yes. It is totally fine with me – quite appropriate even. Of course, Tim, I don’t mind if you call me father.

Well, it looks like they’re coming for me. I hope this letter finds you well, and I hope you realize how excited I am. I’ve been dreaming about this moment for some time now.

So here’s my final toast to you:

To all the good times and happy occasions we’ll have in the future, I look forward to being reunited with our new family... my wife... your mother. Here’s hoping that you will get to experience a life as fulfilling and complete as the one I have.

With Everlasting Happiness and the Purest Love,

-Frank E. Bowers

The Radio
Marc Cowans

On the radio, the low end of the dial
The forgotten stations
In prison, the lowest of society
The forgotten men
Signals interfere and clash
Each with a purpose and hoping to be heard
Passed over for classic rock or R&B
Inside the prison the noise increases
As programs are cut and sentences are lengthened
Turning the dial away makes it easier to ignore
The static that remains.

Animal Instincts

When I was in the library one afternoon, I noticed an article in *National Geographic* that detailed how relatively passive animals like gerbils become more aggressive when they are kept in confined places. When their space gets reduced some of the larger gerbils will attack the smaller one. If complacent animals like gerbils react in that manner, imagine what would happen if instead of gerbils, the animals being held in confinement were wolves.

All over this country, men are brought up in environments that turn them into wolves. Being raised in poverty, without adequate guidance, and in neighborhoods that look like they had witnessed air raids, we learn to do whatever is necessary to survive. Everything is temporary, even amongst groups of friends; you realize that the next man is expendable if he gets in your way and tries to keep you from eating.

Some of today's most infamous and notorious prisons, places like Riker's Island and San Quentin, are civilized versions of the wild environments where wolves roam. Inside these places men of different colors and backgrounds are held together while each of them pays off his debt to society. Once they are placed into these environments, the men, like wolves organize into packs. Like wolves, prisoners join groups because there is safety in numbers as each protects their own. It's sad because even though there are all they for the same purpose and survival is their ultimate goal; they frequently work against or even attack one other.

Like any wild animal that was taken into captivity for any significant length of time, the prisoner's handlers are not sure what to do in order to prepare them for their *Tacenda*

eventual release. Most people do not learn significant skills during their time in captivity and come out similar to the way they arrived. Some feel that they need the pack and the security they found while in prison.

Choices
Marc Cowans

Eight years ago, I lost my power. Since then, I've become wiser and stronger but still I remain powerless. All prisoners know that the ultimate power, the power to choose, to control your own destiny is something you lose once you step inside these walls. Eight years ago, as a broke and desperate young man, I decided to rob that 7-11 for some quick cash. Now the state makes all decisions concerning my everyday life and long term future.

This is what it truly means to be a prisoner; you are no longer free to see the people you care about whenever you would like to. You can't just decide to splurge and go to the mall to buy the latest Nike sneakers. It's a challenge to express your own individual style in state issued clothes. As a prisoner, you're not even permitted to eat what you would like; I'm like the orphan Oliver asking my caretakers for some more gruel. To an outside observer, I am indistinguishable from any of the other prisoners with which I share my living space. I guess that makes it easier for the system and society to avoid looking at our individual pasts and the things that may have caused us to offend. They'd much rather label people like me "animals" and "menaces" and hide us from their sight.

I don't want to give the wrong impression about life in prison; there are still plenty of choices to make. The choices prisoners make are different from the choices people on the outside make, frequently you're choosing between the lesser of two evils. No one goes into prison intending to join a gang or become a human canvas. My poor choices are the reason why my wife left me and why my son is now ashamed to call me his father.

Some nights I yearn for the days when I once again will be free to choose instead of making lemonade out of the lemons life hands me each day. Maybe I'll be able to redeem myself for the mistakes I made in the past. Whatever happens, I fully understand now just what it means to be free. Freedom is not having society view you with mistrust and contempt. Freedom is being able to embrace your responsibilities. It's funny, in the eight years I've been incarcerated, I've gone from viewing responsibility as something to be shirked to anticipating the day when I can fully embrace it.

<p>Hey CO Christopher Dum</p> <p>Hey CO What's life like on the outside? Oh, that's right. You don't know 'cause you're here 9 to 5 Or maybe 5 to 9 That make you feel alive?</p> <p>Hey CO, Truth is we both in the can Me for my deeds You for that retirement plan Both of us calming the scared civilians Stirred into moral panic by politicians to fight the war on crime in primetime Think anyone's got an idea who's winning?</p> <p>Hey CO Whose hand's on top, yours or mine? us deviants, monsters, outcasts doing time but still getting by We drank at the same bars sweet-talked chicks in the back seats of cars just turns out we got dealt different cards</p> <p>Hey CO, You know I'm still me Still doing my thing No thoughts of being discreet You wish you had balls like these Could pretty much do to me what you please</p> <p>Hey CO, What's this thing they call corrections? Half of us be out & back 'fore the next election Not like I'm learning some lesson so we destined to class reunions alumni behind bars case studies in regression</p>	<p>Hey CO, You and me got targets on our backs we alert to the con and sexual attack living out our sentences like tours in Iraq post-prisonmatic stress disorder no rumor it's a fucking fact</p> <p>Hey CO, You know the word "re-ha-bil-i-ta-tion"? When I get out, you speak at my prison graduation DOC caps and gowns and diplomas Make sure mom and dad get invitations Get CNN to cover that situation</p> <p>Cruel and Unusual That spells CJ, CO There's criminal in justice But what am I saying? It's them, not us who need to know</p>
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Editors

Robert Johnson, editor-in-chief of this volume, is a professor of Justice, Law and Society at American University. He is the author of an original collection of poems, *Poetic Justice: Reflections on the Big House, the Death House, and the American Way of Justice*, as well as two collections of short stories, *Justice Follies: Parody from Planet Prison*; and *The Crying Wall and Other Prison Stories: Fiction True to Life*. Johnson's best known work of social science, *Death Work: A Study of the Modern Execution Process*, won the Outstanding Book Award of the Academy of Criminal Justice Sciences.

Kirsten Hubschmann, assistant editor, is a paralegal specialist with the District of Columbia Public Defender Service. Kirsten graduated from American University in May 2006 with a bachelor's degree in justice. While attending American University, Kirsten worked as a writing specialist and as a teaching assistant. In her current position, Kirsten works on issues related to the treatment of prisoners, rehabilitation, and reintegration.

Christina Hammond, production editor, is a graduate student at American University. She will receive a master's degree in comparative politics in May 2008. Christina is currently working as a research assistant in the Justice Law Society department looking at issues such as life without parole as an alternative to the death penalty, ending violence in prison, quality of life in prison, and experiences considered worse than death.

Contributors

Jonathan Abbassi is a Junior at the American University majoring in Law and Society and Arab Studies with a Minor in the Arab Language. Jonathan is on the Executive Board of the American University Chapter of the Phi Alpha Delta Law Fraternity, International. Jonathan hopes to attend law school and has yet to decide which social injustices he wishes to defeat first.

Kerri Carlson graduated magna cum laude from American University in May of 2006, with a B.A. in psychology. She is currently working as a paralegal with the government contracts and private equity groups at Hogan & Hartson LLP in Washington, DC. Through several years of volunteer work at the National Institute of Mental Health, Kerri was able to discover a passion for healthcare and is planning to return to graduate school for her Master's degree in Health Administration. Originally from Massachusetts, she now resides in Arlington, VA. In her free time, she enjoys sailing, traveling and oil painting.

Katherine Chang graduated with University Honors in Law & Society in May 2006. She's currently working as a trial paralegal for the Civil Litigation Division of the United States Department of Justice. She plans on going to law school next year. While in Professor Johnson's class, she enjoyed reading the various books focusing on the great impact prisons have on people, and has an enduring interest in crime and punishment.

Marc Cowans, from West Berlin, New Jersey, is a senior at American University where he majored in Justice. After completing his undergraduate degree, he plans to pursue his Master's in Public Policy and focus on urban affairs and economic development.

Christopher Dum is a Master's student at American University, and also a graduate of the AU class of 2005. He currently works as a professional investigator with the Capitol Group in Washington. Chris hopes to pursue a Ph.D and teach at the college level. His research interests include prisons, punishment, violent crime and sex offenders. A proud Pittsburgh sports fan, Chris also enjoys movies, cooking and the outdoors.

Taylor Rose Ellsworth graduated from American University in May 2006 with a BA in Law and Society and University Honors. She took an array of classes, including those on the death penalty and creative writing on prison topics, which allowed her to grow as a writer and learn about the mysteries of the prison world. She is currently working full time at Planned Parenthood as a counselor and educator providing comprehensive health care services. She also is deeply involved in research on autism and has been working as tutor for a young autistic boy over the past two years.

Margaret Heald is a senior at American University, majoring in Political Science. Margaret currently works in the field of political fundraising, a path that she will continue after graduation in May 2007. Originally from New Hampshire, she enjoys outdoor activities such as camping and horseback riding, as well as cheering for the Red Sox and Patriots.

Jeremy Knobel is a graduating senior at American University majoring in Political Science and C.L.E.G. (Communications, Law, Economics, and Government). Jeremy has acted in over 13 major performances including *Oklahoma*, *Anything Goes*, and *Of Thee I Sing*. This is his first venture into script writing. Jeremy's senior thesis deals with the political and social factors contributing to the adoption of state sentencing guidelines.

Katlyn Miller is a sophomore at American University from Anchorage, Alaska. Katlyn is majoring in CLEG (Communications, Legal Institutions, Economics and Government) and minoring in Finance. Katlyn also is pursuing a certificate in Advanced Leadership Studies offered by the American University School of Public Affairs.

Thais H. Miller is a freshman at American University majoring in Literature and minoring in Music Performance. Thais was inspired and motivated to write poetry dealing with the justice system while taking Professor Robert Johnson's Justice, Law, and Society course, "Deprivation of Liberty." After completing her undergraduate degree, Thais hopes to pursue her Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing.

Kathryn Nimick is an undergraduate at American University, majoring in French and European Studies. The inspiration for her poetry came mostly from other prison stories and the raw emotions experienced by the incarcerated. She first stumbled upon prison culture in Prison Stories, a writing course at AU offered by Professor Robert Johnson and plans on pursuing further research of prisons and the judicial system. She graduates in May 2007.

Debora Pfaff is second year doctoral student in the Department of Justice, Law, and Society at the American University. Debora is currently working as a research assistant with the department, examining, among other things, the organizational determinants of corruption in police departments in the Caribbean. She is also an adjunct professor during the summer, teaching a course on terrorism and civil liberties.

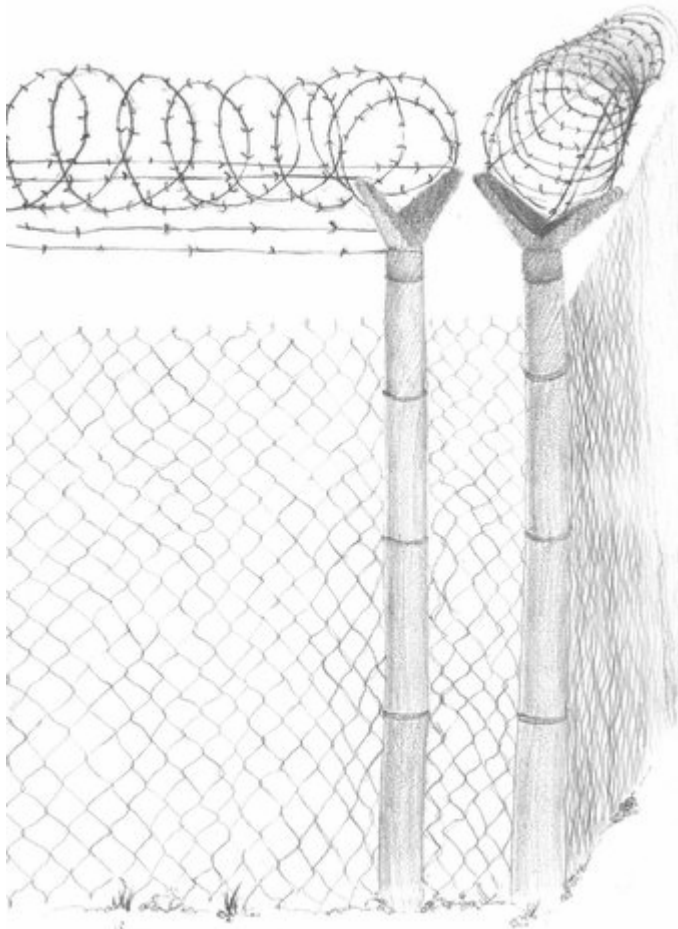
Eve Polak graduated from American University with a major in Finance in August 2006. She was born and raised in Poland, and is currently back home working in the crazy world of investment banking. Her dream is to live her life without the feelings of regret and wasted time.

Eleanor Potter received a BA in Fine Art at the University of Wales in Aberystwyth. Eleanor completed her art foundation course at the Wimbledon School of Art in London, U.K. She has had her work displayed at the Goethe Institute in Washington D.C. as well as at exhibitions in the London area. Her artwork is featured prominently in *Poetic Justice: Reflections on the Big House, the Death House, and the American Way of Justice* by Robert Johnson (Conservatory of American Letters, 2004).

Mark Stern is an honors student at American University. He plans on graduating in May 2007 with a degree in Public Communication and Marketing. Over the past four years, Mark has served as President of the Class of 2007. He has also served two years as the Coordinator of the University's prospective student recruitment program, AU Ambassadors. Born and raised in Montgomery, Alabama, Mark plans on attending law school next year.

Melissa P. Tanguay graduated *magna cum laude* from the American University School of Public Affairs in May 2006. She double majored in Communication, Law, Economics & Government and Public Communication, and is also a graduate of the University Honors Program. Melissa became interested in studying law as an intern for the District of Columbia Courts while she was a student at American University. She is now a first-year law student at the Penn State Dickinson School of Law in Carlisle, PA and is committed to helping people in the pursuit of justice.

Becky Thoman is a recent graduate from American University in Washington, D.C., where she completed an honors degree in public communication with a minor in applied physics. Currently, she is an administrative assistant at Transport Logistics International and works at the 9:30 Club, a popular live music venue. She plans to continue her education in Australia, where she will pursue master's degrees in international communication and international business. In her spare time, Becky enjoys traveling, surfing, playing with her dog and going to shows.



Drawing by Eleanor Potter