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# BLEAKHOUSE ► REVIEW

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# THE DESPERATION DIARIES

by Shirin Karimi

**T**he clock on the corner of Wall Street seemed to scream out the time at me: 12:30. I could have been deaf to the screeching halt of the minute hand at the number 30. It wouldn't have made a difference. 60 years made that blissful 12:30 imprinted on every square inch of devoid metal in the cell. I disrupt the movement of the people on their way to the library, my arms swinging like blocks of wood by my sides, feet never raising too high off the ground but maintaining a close relationship with the narrow walkway leading to Willoughby's Coffee House. I stand in line patiently, oblivious to the doctor rushing to grab a coffee on his lunch break and the happy chirps of two girls, their cherub-like faces incongruous with the length of their cheerleader uniforms.

“What can I get for ya?” the barista barks at me, his fingers ornamented with puffs of whipped cream.

“I-I don't know yet.”

“Dude, there are people in line, whaddya want?” I can only stare with vacant eyes at the board displaying the options: 10 types of teas, then the macchiatos and frappachinos, in addition to 4 brownies, 5 scones, and the daily lunch special. I begin to yearn for my tray thrust at me with indifference, splattered with graying grits. Oh, if I close my eyes, I can almost taste the



*Cathedral Library: Siena, Italy* ▶ **Liz Calka**

globules of fat caught in a beautiful dimension of gravity, hovering between the smoke-filled air and impact with the greasy countertop.

I force my lips to form those words that the Dude so desperately needed to hear. “Tea-just tea.” I can finally scuffle over the other side of the coffee shop and open my hands to witness tiny crescents, flanked by miniscule teardrops of sweat, embedded into the skin. The Dude shoves a paper cup at me, sending a torrential rainfall of Earl Gray over the dehydrated masses. I wince at the pool of liquid that has accumulated at their feet, a perfectly good beverage lost to the ungrateful tile floor. Scanning over the tables, I hesitate in deciding where to sit. Well that table, that one has a lanky gentleman in a fraying plaid shirt switching between frantically typing away at his laptop and checking some tidbit in his biochemistry textbook. The table at the far right is taken by the teenage gaggle of short miniskirt and an even shorter miniskirt. Okay, I suppose I can ask the man over there reading his book, coffee sometimes painting the sides of the pages in a way that would have rendered Pollock jealous. “Excuse me, do you mind if I join you?” I sheepishly inquire. He holds out his weather-beaten hand and gestures to the seat opposite him. He finishes the page he is reading, triumphantly closes the book, and exclaims, “Genius. You read him yet?”

“Who?” He pushes the book across the table to me. It doesn’t look like any book I’ve seen before, such a garish red painted on the cover with the title arrogantly spread out like a banner.

“Dan Brown. God, I can’t put the book down. It’s like being back in high school again, you know, that first joint? You think you can stop after just trying it but you can’t and sooner or later, you’re digging in your dad’s wallet to pay the dealer. Yeah, I mean, I bought this book yesterday at Barnes and Nobles and I haven’t stopped! I haven’t read anything besides Watchmen since college and look at me now. What have you been reading?”

“Well, I haven’t really been keeping up with popular books but I’m quite partial to The Count of Monte Cristo.”

“Oh yeah, I saw that movie. Kind of bored me though, I mean, totally unrealistic. What type of loser just deals with jail for so many years even when he’s innocent? And why didn’t he hook up with that chick, Mercedes, right? I mean, once he’s out, he should tap that fiancée as soon as he can instead of just getting revenge. But take this book here,” he says as he taps the cover of his novel, “hotshot professor at Hahvahd is framed for murder of the head guy at the Louvre and he finds out that the dead guy is in a secret society dealing with Jesus’s family! How messed up is that! That’s fine literature right there man, it’s like a drug. Anyway, I’m peacing out, gotta get back to work. Nice talkin’ to you though.”

As he picks up his book to leave, my fingers run over the wrinkled pages of my beloved book in my backpack. He was a nice man but I would rather read with the image of Edmond Dantes, pitifully etching another notch in Chateau d’If’s wall

to mark each everlasting day, a constant reminder of wretched existence and the gradual decay of both body and spirit instead of some newfangled conspiracy novel. Dantes became my ally in my private Chateau d'If, he was my guide, dare I say he was my Savior in my moments of need. Jesus never did come to me as I sat on the toilet, my self-confidence draining with every burning tear that ran down my pitted cheeks into the private confines of the latrine. I wonder if prison was too much for even Jesus to bear.

My thoughts are interrupted by the sudden activity in the coffee shop. It is like a sudden sensory overload that I had learned about in a psychology book in the shrink's office. I glance at the young folks milling about, laughing about the school dance, the middle aged birds gossiping about Donna Henry's new nose, and the elderly men quietly reading their newspapers. I simply sit and look, soaking it all in, breathing the aroma of the present moment when a lady comes in. She has perfect posture, the type you read about in those books about finishing school, and she is carrying what looks like a very expensive handbag on her perfectly manicured hand. Flicking her hair over her shoulders, revealing dangling flower earrings that sparkle in the light of the coffee shop, she strides over to one of the high school girls sitting in between another boy and girl. The girl stops laughing at a joke when the lady comes up to her and asks to speak to her privately. They move quite close to where I am sitting and I shift my weight in a way so that they wouldn't think I was

eavesdropping, though I could hear every word. I had previously thought from the manner in which the lady had strode in foreshadowed some harsh punishment for the girl. To my surprise, the mother embraces her daughter and says very quietly, "You have no idea how happy I am to see you here. Don't you know how much I want you to enjoy being 17 years old, just sitting with your friends with nothing to worry about instead of constantly studying and working? The best times of your youth are those simple moments when nothing spectacular happens but you are enjoying life nonetheless."

**Relaxation gave me such stress, headaches as if I were a timpani drum being battered in a Symphony...**

I have to refrain myself from walking towards the foolish woman and chastising her in front of her daughter. What in the world does she mean, simple moments, not too much work? God, I prayed for work in those days, I begged for education. I would have prostrated myself before the Warden and beseeched him to let me wipe the shit off of the edges of the toilets. This girl, God forbid that she spends her time and her youth in what

normal people call relaxation mode. She will never know that that relaxation gave me such stress, headaches as if I were a timpani drum being battered in a Symphony.

I look at that girl, noticing her linen skirt that barely covers her tan legs, the fabric of the skirt doing little to conceal a knitted bikini bottom. Her skirt has dark splotches which at first I couldn't ascertain what they were until I realize that her wet bikini had left a reminder of the salty ocean on her skirt. A loose tank top reveals two thin, pale, parallel lines of skin that had escaped the penetrating glare of the sun and her curly hair is starting to frizz a little bit from the rough waves. Yes, my body, with folds upon folds of skin like a wrinkled duvet cover was once a lithe tan core of energy and rage. With every powerful stride that I took, strides with legs made out of compact bones and taut muscle that did not falter or trip, I could carry myself with so much power to the rec yard that my soul and my physical being seemed like two separate entities, the body compensating for the pitiful, rotting mind nestled inside a malnourished brain. I could run and savor the feeling of my sneakered feet creating mini craters upon the pavement, a small but nevertheless sure sign of my existence on this wretched earth. But, despite the hours, the uncountable hours, I could never enjoy the thin pale lines of skin, testimony to freedom to run anywhere besides the monotonous track. Those lines of skin that I never had were masked by the bright orange uniform that constantly mocked the sun, changing Helios to a silent battle.

I can see now that the girl has a boyfriend. He is sitting next to her, his long arm wrapped casually around her toned shoulders. Not clenching his nails into her skin in a possessive manner, but not indifferent to the intoxicating combination of youth and passion, a mixture more sublime than absinthe. She turns to face him and tenderly kisses him before turning back to their group of friends. I feel the tea rise in my stomach, a tumbling, churning tsunami of orange spice mixed with gastric acids. Trying to look inconspicuous but with the motivation of an Olympic runner, I stumble towards the entrance of the coffee shop, sucking in the invisible medicine of fresh spring air. I regain my composure, but oh, it was difficult. It is coming back to me and I start seeing It everywhere as I turn away from the couple and towards the window. There It is, in the crevices between the cobblestones, in the vanilla beans of that little boy's melting ice cream, in the wind the blows the barbershop sign back and forth like a pendulum. It is everywhere. That weed over there, a pitiful thing among the glorious tulips in the potted plant, that's me, ready to be plucked and discarded, an object to be born and reared and then discarded with oblivion, no longer relevant to this earth. It approached me, a five foot five menace towering over my quivering frame. I was forced down on the hard mattress, each of my vertebrae reverberating with the shock of the impact. I refused, I absolutely refused to accept what was happening to me as the inner sanctuary of my body was invaded by some barbaric soulless pirate. I could only close my eyes and in the privacy of my self-imposed darkness, see Its gnarled,

jagged claws that were splitting my skin become gentle hands, perfumed with lotion and adorned with oval nails caressing my body with both the intensity of a lover and the intimacy of a mother's love for her child. My fingers pushed up against Its body and I felt the healthy and toned striations of muscle beneath soft skin instead of the circular lesions of molted skin from cigarette burns. And as Its teeth scaled down my neck, biting voraciously like a rabid dog, I was transfixed at the sight of two perfectly pursed lips approaching mine, a pistachio shell being opened for someone to taste the delicious treat inside. It left me then, abandoning me on the bed that was no longer a plush sleigh bed with 400 thread count immaculate sheets, wrinkled from the act of love. The only reminder of those brief moments was the splattered blood on my beds, staining my sheets with anger and oppression. At least, the remnant of blood was the one thing that would have stayed the same in the dungeon that was my cell or the comforting bed that invited love and intimacy. God, what type of punishment is this, that a simple kiss from innocent lovers drags me to the ninth circle of Hell all over again? I know that I can move forward from that damned day 60 years ago but why, why must I be burdened with this tyrannical memory in my weak brain, the feelings of torment coursing through my thin veins with no release? Yes, I know that there is no answer to this question so I can only summon my resolve and ignore Satan sitting beside me, grinning at his accomplishments.

Thankfully, I am briefly rescued by an inquiring voice asking me, "Excuse me, I don't mean to bother you but where are you from?" I turn to the young lady with her parents, the emblem of exoticism spread across their faces with their distinctive green eyes and olive toned complexions. I fish out the line that I have kept in my back pocket since the 1st grade. And, no surprise, I receive the same responses: "Oh how interesting, were you born here? Your parents? Do you speak the language? Is it hard for you to go back?" The same stale, canned questions to which I bestow upon them a patient smile and my perennial answer to their curiosity: "It's so nice that someone around here is interested in our culture." After finding out that the family immigrated here a few years ago and are very happy to see a fellow neighbor from the homeland, my head begins to pound again, my skull like an oft-used anvil, as my mind reverts to those painful recollections so many years ago. "Where ya from? You ain't one of us. Where ya from asshole?"

"Nowhere, I'm from nowhere." And as my lips form those same words from 60 years ago, I can still feel the small leakage of bitter blood seeping through my tongue, my teeth firmly entrenched in the velvety safety. My fingers were motioning uncontrollably, ripping at the thousands of threads that once weaved a beautiful tapestry of relationships and ancestry, now simply a forlorn pile of strings with no attachment to anything temporal. I could sense the dust of my deceased family members traveling slowly into the air from their decrepit graves,

leaving me by myself with only the pathetic mound of strings, tangled and frayed with no hope of recreating that majestic embroidery. I had never thought that I could be so alone as in that moment of agonizing solitude, when the spirits of those who loved me, the country that raised me, abandoned one of their sons.

As I look around the coffee shop again, I am struck by the number of families who have so quickly invaded the small area. The giggles of small toddlers, the coos of infants, and the constant bickering of 7 year olds should make me happy, should force me to relish the amazement of life regenerating itself through these innocent beings, but it does not. Who could expect me to savor life in the company of these people who believe that they are doing great things for humanity by reproducing? They are only damning their children, even though I know that they do not see it right now. How can they possibly understand? When I was taken into custody, my sole purpose for making it through the eternal days was the prospect of seeing Mom, Dad, my brother, my sister on Saturdays. And yet, I can't describe it, when I saw Mom's beaming face as she looked at me with a hindered gaze through the glass barrier and when I heard Dad's deep baritone that used to comfort me with its rolling cadences and vibratos, I began to despise them. I began to despise them for existing, for torturing me with their coming and their leaving, for making me wait, for making me love so much, so painfully. I began to wish that I was an orphan so I did not have to ever be disappointed when a snowstorm delayed their arrival or

when the guard demanded they leave since the visiting hours were over. What type of child was I? A child that would have had it better if it were never born.

I simply can't take it anymore and I gather my tepid tea and my backpack to leave. The children are still there, the teenagers rushing to grab my chair so that a football player can join them at their table, and the line at the counter is longer than ever with the Dude wiping his sweaty brow in exhaustion and frustration. The door chimes as I leave Willoughby's and I let the door slam with a thunderous boom behind me. I glance at the clock on the corner of Wall Street: 12:45. There are so many options: I can browse the classics collection at Barnes and Nobles or pick up some stationary at Walker and Loden's or take a walk by the beach. But I forget myself, it's 12:45. Lunch time is soon ending. I must return to my bed now.

# BEHOLD

by Seth Shamon

The following stands as the autobiography of a college dropout named Tyler Ryan, written just weeks before his arrest and subsequent charges of first degree manslaughter and drug possession.

Based on a true story.

## Why I Am So Trill

I been called “Trill T” most of my whole life, so if you’re gonna understand me you gotta first understand what that means. “Trill” means both “true” and “real,” and ain’t nothin’ I ever done in my life wasn’t true and real. I grew up in Texas, deep in the Dirty South, and you better believe I ain’t never forgotten them roots. Everything I do, I do up big. Ain’t never known any different. I rock the freshest kicks, smoke the headiest weed, blow the purest blow and fuck the finest bitches. We trill nig-gas, and we few and far between, we constantly confronted wit’ fake shit. In fact, one of the defining characteristics of trillness is being able to differentiate between real shit and fake shit.

This world is composed almost entirely of fake shit. Fake people come to mind before anything else, but really fakeness pervades through our society on a much deeper level. I’m talkin’ bout religion, morality, and any other fake belief system that



*Exclaim: Firenze, Italy* ▶ **Liz Calka**

makes people do what they do. Belief in these ideals ain't ignorance, it's weakness. I live my life on my own terms. I don't need nobody telling me what to do, what's good and what's bad. I've had more than my fair share of run-ins with the law, but that don't stop me. The 5-0 is just one example of the enemy, the weak. Those of us wit' brains enough to realize that make it our mission to wage war on the weak, the people who are a part of this system. It's easy, I ain't even gotta go out of my way to do it. But if anyone gets in my way, I'ma fuckin' waste 'em.

Hood niggas respect and fear me. They don't give a fuck that my skin is milky white because underneath it they see that crimson devil-red blood pumping faster'n Usain. There's exceptions to that rule, but they wouldn't live to tell you the tale, now, would they? But it's all good. Despite all the haters and fakes, I get by. I don't just survive in this city, I thrive in this city. I push more than a kilo a week, so I ain't got a worry in the world. I run this city.

## Birth

People see my face and ask, "How old are you, son? You look like you were born yesterday!" Well, I'm twenty years old, but I wasn't born until I was about 18. Growin' up in rural-ass Texas, I couldn't wait for the day when I could get the hell away from my whack-ass parents. I was a smart kid, got straight As without really trying. Landed myself a scholarship at American Uni-

versity. Figured I'd study politics in the belly of the beast, work my way to the top. I didn't know shit about the school, but it was in a big city, and that's all I really needed to know.

When I got to the place, I couldn't have been more disgusted. Never in my life had I seen so many inferior, whack-ass mothafuckas in one place. Sure, rural Texas was whack, but at least the people there were worth a few cents. First I thought maybe this was just the way things were outside my Texas bubble, that maybe I had to adapt if I wanted to make it. But my instincts told me otherwise. In that despicable setting with all those worthless people, my disgust overwhelmed me. In the darkest of times, I grew wings and flew, and found a place high enough so that the worthless mothafuckas were no more than ants. I was born again. At that extreme height the fountain of delight surged out and filled my cup and my spirit. It is here that I found myself, and it is here I remain. Here no unclean, whack mothafuckas can drink from my fountain, and here I live like a strong wind, among the elements. "And, like a wind, will I one day blow among them and with my spirit take away the breath of their spirit: thus my future will have it."

## Growth

My rebirth didn't come out of nowhere. Not long after I got to school, I started working at Stussy, a dope retail store specializing in the freshest gear. My first week there, the security guard,

a big black dude named Bone, asked me if I wanted to score an eight-ball for \$200. “Why the fuck not?” I figured. I’d never tried coke before, but I was ready for anything. I got down on it that night. That shit gave me the wings, took me higher than any amount of weed ever had. My first time chalked up and I knew I had to get more.

I walked up to Bone the next day with a smile on my face and Jacksons in my pocket. He smiled too, “Haha, you a fuckin’ coke head already. But yo, if you wanna make some dough at this, I can get you two Os for \$2000. You bring that shit ‘round to all yo’ little friends at school, you make yo’self a nice lil’ chunk o’ change.”

Not long after that, I was runnin’ a multi-thousand dollar operation outta my dorm room. I wasn’t just a businessman, I was a fuckin’ business, man. I was livin’ large, blowin’ all my money on kicks, hats, tats, clubs, weed, and, well, blow. I started fuckin’ my manager at work, a fine Egyptian bitch named Zoya. She gave me a raise. Head of sales. I was makin’ it already, and I didn’t even need a college degree. But I decided to stay in school. Might as well, I ain’t payin’ for it. Switched my major to business though. Realized if I wanted power, I just needed to know how to make money, and save and invest it, shit like that.

It was also around that time that I discovered hip hop, I mean, really discovered it. I had heard shit like 50 and Kanye like ev-

“**It was all bout ‘caine, and all the money that comes along with it.**”

eryone else, but workin’ at Stussy exposed me to all kinds of phat beats. My boys Pimp C and Bun B told it like it was. It was all ‘bout ‘caine, and all the money that comes along with it. If anyone told me otherwise, fuck ‘em.

### Test

Once I got deep into the game, I started meeting new people, real people, and drifted farther away from that pathetic school. My new crew knew ‘bout ‘caine, knew ‘bout makin’ money, and knew ‘bout bein’ trill. They were sort of like a cocaine gang. But before I could be a part of that gang, I had to prove my loyalty. One of them, Ray, told me about some junkie who owed them over a thousand dollars, who they were getting tired of hassling. “Every night he posts up at The Players Lounge at MLK and St Elizabeth’s in Southeast,” Ray said, “You’ll need this.” He handed me a 9 millimeter. “Now, you don’t want to do anything stupid. Just go in there and find this dirty Mexican mothafucka. He’s usually sitting all by himself in a dark corner or something. Walk up to him, tell him Ray sent you, and ask him for the money. No, demand the money. \$1200. If he don’t cooperate, show him yo’ piece. But above all, be cool. Don’t do anything stupid.”

I tucked the piece into my pants and bounced. I got to my Explorer to find a yellow slip on the windshield. Another fuckin' parking ticket. God damn. I owed \$1800 in tickets to the District of Columbia. Haha, not like I'm ever gonna pay 'em. By the time I got to the bar I'd finished my second 40 of the night, so I was vibin' pretty hard, feelin' real good. I spotted that Mexican cockroach soon as I walked into that shithole. He was in a booth by himself, scarfin' down a pile of chicken wings. I walk across the room real cool-like, real nonchalant, and sit across from him. "You owe Ray 1200 bones," I told him, "Ray don't like when people owe him 1200 bones." He was flustered. "I told him I don't have no money." "Well, I don't give a fuck what you told him, you're gonna give me the money now or I'ma blow yo' fuckin' brains out." I showed him the piece. "I...I...I don't have no money! I don't have no money! I don't have no—" I pulled the trigger twice, gave him two nice holes in his head, and split. I jumped in my car, lit a cigarette, and cruised all the way back.

## Resolve

I don't know what kind of reaction I was expecting from my boys, but they weren't too thrilled when I came back with empty, bloody hands. "I told you to fuckin' be cool!" Ray yelled at me, "That blood ain't fuckin' cool!" After a while though, they got over it. Hell, we even laugh about it now. It's been nine months since then and I'd be lyin' to you if I said it I felt anything. If you act like a dirty cockroach, you best be prepared to die like

a dirty cockroach. I'd also be lyin' to you if I said I wouldn't do it again. I've killed more noble men than that mothafucka, and not one of them do I want back on this earth.

## Why I Am A Destiny

I am not a man, I am dynamite. I am the destroyer par excellence. I will be known for helping to bring about the destruction of all values and the destruction of this world. You must recognize that this destruction is not a harm. In reality, the harm that the so-called good do is the most harmful harm in the world. That's Nietzsche. No, what I'm doing is destroying the so-called good in the world and making everything real again.



**Author's Note:** One of my biggest mental difficulties in this course was the idea of writing about something that I had never experienced. So I decided to write the story of a(n) (ex-) friend's life of crime. The structure and premise of the story is drawn from Friedrich Nietzsche's autobiography, *Ecce Homo: How One Becomes What One Is*, fitting because it is Nietzsche's philosophy of self-determination and complete denial of morality that drives the real-life subject of this story. Though it is certain that the vast majority of offenders and prisoners have never read Nietzsche, the idea that the established systems of morality and law are unfounded, and that to truly flourish one must create one's own morality, is an idea perpetuated by subcultures, such as the hip-hop culture, driving many people to internally justify violent acts. Since the acts of finding oneself and building a unique set of values brings one above all others, killing a lesser being, a subhuman being, is perfectly acceptable.

# SHE SMILED

by Jamie Kamlet

**H**e has witnessed this scene too many times. Then again, one time would've been too many.

Detective David Daniel McCormick ducks under the freshly draped yellow caution tape and sets foot onto a parched lawn, browned by dehydration and summer heat waves. He stares for a moment at the unkempt home in front of him, and the wide-open door, no longer locking a family's secrets inside. He slowly climbs the front stairs and enters the house's interior world, instantly sensing the chaos and feeling the dank, heavy air of death. The floorboards creak beneath his size twelve shoes as he glances at the pictures on the wall of the entrance-way and makes his first snap observations: the family (two parents, one child—no, make that two children) are working-class Americans, getting along but not living in luxury. The walls are covered with a faint pattern of yellow daisies, and sunshine is streaming through the window on the back wall of the room. A weathered grandfather clock is the most obvious sign of life in the room, faithfully ticking away the time and making its presence known at the top of every hour.

Detective McCormick is scribbling thoughts in a worn notebook when another officer descends the stairs and beckons McCormick with a curl of his finger. McCormick draws in a breath and begins climbing to the second floor. He reaches the



*Prada: Firenze, Italy* ▶ Liz Calka

top of the stairs and slowly turns his head to the right. He gets his first sight of her—the woman from the picture, the mother. She looks as pale as the white sheets of the unmade bed on which she sits. She is staring blankly straight ahead into, and through, the eyes of the officer crouched down in front of her. The officer is speaking at her, fists clenched with frustration, in what is obviously a one-sided sequence of questions with few answers. The woman slowly turns her head and her eyes lock with McCormick's for a moment, a moment that seemed to last forever. Her eyes felt like ice, McCormick noted. He broke away from her spell and once again turned to the hallway ahead of him.

He moves more quickly now toward his destination, the room at the end of the hall, the one already saturated with officers, medics, and photographers. These personnel make room for McCormick, and as the surface beneath his feet changes from carpet to tile, McCormick tries one more time to brace himself for what is about to come into his direct line of vision. With each step, the scene comes into focus a bit more. With each step, the bathtub ceases to impede his vision a bit more. And with each step, the horror becomes a bit more real. Finally, everything was clear, exposed, and McCormick felt an instant pang of sympathy for the victim, a mere child, a stolen life. She killed her own child, McCormick thought. McCormick took a mental picture of the scene: off-white bathtub that looked overdue for a cleaning, silver faucets decorated with lime and rust, and the now cold water which looked as clean and pure as the life it had just taken.

He has learned from his twenty years on the job that jumping to conclusions is rarely appropriate or productive. But he has also learned to trust his instincts and at this moment, his gut is screaming with rage. She killed her own child. She drowned him. McCormick glances at the purple towel resting on the edge of the bathtub simply monogrammed “Sam,” and grimaces at the object's new-found uselessness.

McCormick turns back toward the door and with a flip of his hand, the crime scene personnel jerk back to action, creating an instant storm of camera flashes and chatter. McCormick walks back to the bedroom, this time entering, and moves toward the suspect. She looks up at him blankly and smiles. She smiled. McCormick could feel his body temperature rise five degrees as he tries to process the monster in front of him. There is no category for her in his mind, no rationale, no explanations much less excuses. McCormick grabbed her fleshy upper arm and with little effort lifted her from the bed to her feet. McCormick instructed the officer next to him to handcuff her and bring her to the station. The diligent officer wastes no time following the instructions and quickly shuffles the suspect downstairs. McCormick hadn't asked her a question, hadn't heard her voice, hadn't heard a defense, but he had looked into her icy eyes and had seen a smile, a wicked smile. And for McCormick, that was enough.



He has witnessed this scene too many times. Then again, one time would've been too many.

The sound of the woman's high-pitched screams could easily be heard as McCormick approached the iron-gated compound. The gold plaque arched across the gate read "Williamson," serving as a not-so-subtle territory claimer, as if McCormick needed a reminder of the residents' surname. Everyone in town knew the Williamsons, everyone in the county even. They were local socialites, clean-cut country club members, and their visibly loving family relations might even make the Brady Bunch jealous. He frequented the golf course while she cheered on their son's soccer team. McCormick did not need to scan the pictures on the wall of the front atrium to get a sense of the home's inhabitants.

The screams had quieted down to periodic snuffles and heavy breaths by the time McCormick made his way to the woman-of-the-house. McCormick enters the master bedroom and sees an officer sitting next a woman on a love seat in the corner of the room. The woman had a fleece blanket draped across her shoulders and McCormick could hear the officer whispering soft words of comfort. Before McCormick could address the woman, he feels a tug on his uniform. He turns to see another officer who gently informs McCormick that the horror scene will not be found on this floor. Instead, the officer displays his pointer finger pointed downward and directs McCormick toward the kitchen.

McCormick could not immediately see the body—the pristine marble island in the middle of the room obscured his view. But as angles began to shift, the bloody scene became increasingly clear: two black Gucci shoes that still maintained their luster, two crisply pleated Armani pant legs, and a work-shirt. McCormick could not guess the original color of the shirt, but would now describe it as blood red. McCormick instantly recognizes Barry Williamson, and almost as quickly acknowledges the butcher knife just feet away from Mr. Williamson's left ear. Only an autopsy will reveal exactly how many times this object successfully entered its target, but from the amount of blood, McCormick guesses no less than six. McCormick notices a blood soaked dishtowel wadded-up in an evidence bag on the floor. When he inquires about the towel, a crime-scene photographer informs him that the towel was originally found placed over Williamson's face.

McCormick feels numb, though he's not sure why. The country-club status of the victim made the crime a bit unusual, though McCormick had seen it before. He knows that appearances are far from being everything, and no one fully understands what goes on behind closed doors. Money doesn't buy you happiness, or so he had been told.

McCormick pivots on his heels and retraces his steps back upstairs to the master bedroom. The woman turns her head to look at McCormick as he gets increasingly closer. McCormick

can hear her whimpering from feet away and secretly pleads to himself that she is able to hold her composure until he is finished with his questions. But questions are not necessary. Before McCormick can open his mouth, the fleece blanket once covering the woman's shoulders is dropped like a curtain opening to reveal a grand Broadway stage. McCormick drew in a breath as his eyes began to scan what has been revealed to him: scratches, bruises, cuts are covering every inch of the woman's arms. She is wearing a thin t-shirt, but McCormick can clearly see that the scratches reach up her neck and are beginning to invade her face. This was an unfair fight, McCormick thought. His perception of Mr. Williamson as the clean-shaven gentleman quickly shifted to a dark coward, the kind of twisted soul that feeds on the fear of the vulnerable.

McCormick moves quickly toward the hallway and motioned a medic into the room. He gives instructions to address this victim's wounds and then escort her to the ambulance where she can be given due medical attention. McCormick sighs, looks around the room again and then heads back to his car. Observing the scene is the first piece of this deadly puzzle.



Guilty! The juror's voice is confident and assured as he delivers the verdict. The jury deliberated, more like discussed, the verdict for just short of two hours before announcing their

decision. The prosecution had painted a fairly clear and cold picture filled with dark images of a cruel mother and the wicked intentions of a monster. The Assistant District Attorney's opening statement was inundated with colorful phrases that sounded like it had been ripped from a thesaurus with the page turned to "villain." It didn't take much on his part to explain that a woman who kills is awful, a woman who kills her own child is heartless. An innocent life was stolen and this terrible woman, this malicious human, this evil creature is responsible. In an act that disturbed the natural progression of life, the defendant showed neither mercy nor compassion for her victim, a child whose only mistake was trusting his mother with his life. This defendant, the prosecution argues, deserves no consideration, no clemency.

In an attempt to appear more human, the defendant took the stand early in the trial but was far from helpful to her case. Make-up failed to make her up into something appealing. Her shabby appearance did little to evoke positive emotions. Her hair was knotty and untamed, the dark circles under her eyes kept others at bay, her perfume -- Hypnotic Poison -- accentuated by the scent of fear easily crept into the jury box, and the shackles around her feet and wrists were the perfectly condemning accessories. A soft-spoken woman already, her quiet tone made her seem distant and disconnected from the grave circumstances around her. With simple and direct words, she answered her own attorney's questions, claiming she had no

idea what happened that day; her fuzzy memory left bits and pieces of her story blank, and left the jury unconvinced and unsympathetic. Aside from a few deep breaths, the woman's voice stayed steadily plain.

The Assistant District Attorney, captain of the offensive team in this adversarial game, salivates as he approaches the witness stand. He places his hands shoulder-length apart on the cool, wooden bar separating his witness from the rest of the room; she is a caged animal and he is ready to pounce. He demands answers from her and tells her that the victim deserves better than "I don't know" and "I don't remember." He dances around the courtroom showing little restraint, barely even taking a moment to hear her answers. And then he does what her lawyers had hoped he wouldn't: he presents her with a copy of the police report filled out by Detective McCormick. He places it on the bar in front of her and instructs her to read aloud the lines that he had highlighted. Nearly blinded by the golden yellow color, she clears her throat and stares at the words printed clearly on the paper. She inhales, knowing that when the next breath escapes her mouth it will be accompanied by words that will seal her fate. Her mouth opens and she reads, *"I approached the bed and looked at the suspect. She looked at me and then completely unprompted, she smiled."* The Assistant District Attorney's next question was not directed at her, but rather to the jury. He questions what kind of mother kills her own child and then smiles? What sort of cold-blooded creature takes an innocent life and is proud? The prosecution rests.

The defendant, in a daze, fearful and timid, shuffles off the witness stand, her movements constrained by the security chains on her ankles. The bailiff has a tight grip around her elbow and is moving her at a quicker pace than she would like. The world is moving slowly for her and the silence in the courtroom is far too loud for her ears to process. The courtroom is nearly empty, it seems as though few care to bear witness to her fate. The initial local shock and outrage over the event faded as time wore on. She is yesterday's bad news.

Her frantic eyes scan the courtroom looking for his face. She wanted to find comfort in his eyes, consolation in his presence, but her husband wasn't there and all she could feel was the deep ache of loneliness in his absence. He had yet to visit her new concrete residence, he wouldn't answer her phone calls, and the only bit of mail he sent her came in a large manila envelope, the pages inside neatly declaring that the reason for the divorce was "irreconcilable differences." The post-it note stuck on the first page read, "Please sign and return at your earliest convenience," as if her daily schedule of twenty three hours of nothing might not yield a good time to dissolve her marriage. Her mind returns to the present as a photographer's flashbulb nearly blinds her. The bailiff released her elbow as she slides down into her chair. She sighs and stares straight ahead, numb to the process and ready to accept her future.

As the verdict is delivered, the newly condemned's face is hanging down. She is silent and dazed. Around her, those attending the trial breathe a collective sigh of relief but all she can hear is the sound of her eyes blinking, slamming shut with the weight of steel doors. She feels her lawyer's arm slide across her shoulders in an attempt to comfort her as he whispers an unconvincing apology. Jurors rise from their seats and shake hands as they exit the room. A job has been well done and justice has been served. The bailiff collects the prisoner and together they leave the courtroom.



*Guilty?* The juror's voice cracks, a causality of raw nerves, frayed by the crushing weight of uncertainty and responsibility. The courtroom erupts with the chaos of surprise and excitement. The jury was out for nearly three weeks and tensions ran high on both sides of the thick wooden door of the deliberation room. The twelve individuals had argued, disagreed, and bickered for hours a day trying to come to an agreement, one that never came. The hung jury was hung up on how to solve the task at hand: deciding the defendant's fate. Though her guilt was nearly undeniable, some individuals on the jury were uncomfortable with the verdict.

The defense painted a fairly clear and sad picture filled with dark images of a cruel husband and the wicked intentions of

a monster. The lead defense attorney, there were three attorneys in all, had an opening statement inundated with colorful phrases that sounded like it had been ripped from a thesaurus with the page turned to "victim." This was not a story of cold-blooded murder, he argued, this was a gloomy tale of a marriage once was filled with love but now characterized by loud arguments and constant turbulence. The defendant in this case was not a monster, but rather a loving wife who just could not please her demanding and overpowering husband. Of course a life had been lost and a period of mourning was not only appropriate, but necessary. But after that period had passed, understanding and perspective needed to be given priority. He asked the jury not to condemn this woman for an act of desperation, but instead try to identify with her, try to understand her, and then release her from this nightmare.

In an attempt to elicit sympathy, the defendant took the stand early in the trial and it could not have been more helpful for her case. Her delicate appearance instantly drew the jurors in. Her make-up made up for the hours she spent in the drab and cold cell, she was perfectly dolled up and ready to play her part. Her skin was evenly pale with a touch of rose rouge peeking through. Her dark and voluminous eyelashes blinked with quiet confidence as she rose from her seat at the defense table and walked to the witness stand. Her skirt reached modestly just below her knees, and her feet, generally used to being stuffed into high heels, sat comfortably in ballet flats that reduced her

stature considerably. She barely made a noise as she moved toward the wooden chair at the judge's side, her stage for what had to be the greatest performance of her life. As she lowered herself into the chair, her hair fell neatly and smoothly to the side, flawlessly framing her fragile face. She folded her hands in her lap so as to conceal her new bracelets, the not-exactly-Tiffany's addition to her jewelry collection. With passionate and emotive words, she answered her own attorney's questions, claiming she knew exactly what happened that day because it had happened so often before, leaving the jury intrigued and wanting to know more. Aside from a few deep breaths, the woman's voice stayed steadily vibrant.

The defense attorney barely said a word as the defendant, his perfectly prepped puppet, painted a portrait of a possessive partner, a husband with an uncontrollable temper. *She explained that her husband had come home from a three-week business trip in a jealous rage, and by golly she had no idea what could possibly have upset him so. He demanded answers from her and told her that he deserved better than "I don't know what other man you're talking about" and "I can't remember where I was this morning." He paced around the kitchen with a look of ferocity that haunts her to this day, she said. And then he did what she had hoped he wouldn't: he reached for a knife from the wooden block that sat on the marble island. As the clean silver escaped its wooden chamber, she felt the wind escape her and the room began to spin. The next part is not so clear, she told the jury, it's as if she hadn't even been there.*

*The next thing she remembers, really, is standing over his body. The knife wasn't even in her hands; it was on the ground next to her husband's face. That's when the panic overcame her and thoughts of her son popped into her head. She felt sick to her stomach and began to scream. She grabbed the dishtowel that was hanging cleanly on the stove and threw it over his face—to cover up that look in his eyes. And then she called the police. The defense attorney's next questions were not directed at her, but rather to the jury. What kind of woman doesn't protect herself from a dangerous man? What sort of passionate mother doesn't do whatever it takes to save from herself and her child from harm? The defense rests.*

The woman dabs her eyes with the pale pink monogrammed handkerchief she had removed from the sleeve of her sweater minutes before her story came to its climactic end. The courtroom was silent as she sniffled a bit and then looked up at the jury. She didn't say a word; she didn't need to. The bailiff has a strong hold on her elbow as he helps her out of the chair and directs her back to the defense table. The woman looks up as she slowly pads toward her attorneys. The courtroom is full, it seems as though the world was holding its breath until justice was served. The initial local shock and outrage over the event has barely faded as time wore on and the papers continue to plaster her picture on the front page.

Her frantic eyes scan the courtroom looking for his face. She wanted to find comfort in his eyes, consolation in his presence,

and her son was there sitting in the third row, her rock through this whole treacherous process. His artwork and letters decorated her new concrete residence, giving her a sweet taste of home and love while she was there. She looked forward to the days when he could visit, though the cold glass in the visitor's room that kept him from her was truly devastating. She loved him more than words could say and she hoped that he knew that, could forgive her for what has happened, and continue to love her. She dreams of playing with him at the playground, teaching him how to read, and tucking him in at night, the precious moments only a mother can truly find joy in. Her mind returns to the present moment as a photographer's flashbulb nearly blinds her. The bailiff releases her elbow as she slides down into her chair. She sighs and stares straight ahead of her, nervous the process will not go her way and ready to move on to her future.

As the verdict is delivered, the woman's face is hanging down, silently praying to a god that had so far been kind to her. She is silent and dazed. Around her, those attending the trial breathe a collective sigh of relief but all she can hear is the faint, perhaps imagined sound of her smile sliding across her face. She feels her lawyer's arm slide across her shoulders in an attempt to convince her this is real as he whispers a comforting explanation. Jurors rise from their seats and quietly exit the room. Their job was done, though questions still lingered in some of their minds. Her defense attorney collects her and together they leave the courtroom.



Another day, same routine. The guards call out at 6:30 a.m. announcing that her day as inmate # 429809 is obligated to begin. They declare that the sun is shining, an observation the woman has not been able to make herself in over five years. She opens her eyes and sees that same familiar piece of cold metal above her head, the bottom of her cellmate's bed.

For the first three years, she had a recurring nightmare, always of that fateful day when her life turned completely upside down. *She was trying so hard to get Sam into the bath, it was a daily routine they had. She had tried all the tricks in the book to get him into the tub, but her efforts had been exhausted; bribery, counting to three, and empty threats were no match for Sam's stubborn attitude. She would get him in for a minute but he would splash his way out again, finding increasing joy in his antics. Finally, she decided to pick him up and put him in the tub. She was furious, frustrated at his uncooperative state, and ready to pull her own hair out. Be firm, she told herself.*

*She picked him up and held on tightly as she walked toward the bathtub. There must have been some water on the floor, remnants of Sam's exploits, because her right foot slipped on the cold tile and she felt her body fall forward. She could feel her fingers sink into his soft skin as she tried desperately to hold on. As she fell, she felt the wind escape her and the room began to spin. And as her eyes closed in that moment, it sealed the end of a memory and created a gap in time she could not fill in, despite the greatest of efforts.*

*The next thing she can picture, and the next thing she can feel, is the cold porcelain of the bathtub. She is kneeling now, feet tucked neatly under her body and her forearms resting on the cool and flat surface of the bathtub. There is no moment of discovery or realization, just an understanding of what has just happened: her baby, her Sam, was dead. But she also knew that she didn't kill him, she would never harm him. He drowned, but not at her hands, she must have gone unconscious and couldn't get to him in time. She couldn't process her emotions fast enough and the next parts were just a routine, a reflex, as if a puppet master were guiding her through the steps: call the police, tell them what happened, listen to their questions, try to answer them, try and fix this situation.*

**Daydreams are her dearest and most trustworthy friends, but in the end they weren't going to save her...**

*Her memory again skips to when she was sitting with one of the officers and that tall, stoic detective came and stood in the doorway. She looked up at him thinking this all will be over now, he will know the truth, and so she smiled.*

The claustrophobic feeling of waking up from that nightmare has quieted down over the years, mostly because she knows there is never going to be an end, no hope for her cause, and

no light at the end of the tunnel. This is her home now and there really is no use in thinking any differently. Daydreams are her dearest and most trustworthy friends, but in the end they weren't going to save her from this hell.

She slides from her bed, the frigid place where she lays her head each night, stands upright in her cell, and takes a deep breath, inhaling the familiar smells of her surroundings. The smell of bleach radiates from her pajamas, becoming stronger each time the stiff fabric is stretched in a new direction, her cellmate's morning breath permeates the air around the top bunk, and the all-too-familiar stench of human excrements oozes from the not-so-private restroom area of their cozy living arrangement.

The day has barely begun before she hears his boots stomping in a rhythm that breeds fear deep in her bones. His baton clicks against each bar of the neighboring cells with a hollow sound that echoes in her ears for what seems like an eternity. She feels her heart quicken in pace, the fight or flight instinct kicks in, though she knows it's utterly useless—neither is truly a viable option. She counts the clicks in her head, clenches her knees, and makes two solid fists. Her spine is straight and she is staring straight ahead as she knows he is barely inches away. And then he appears. His jet-black hair slicked back and his clothes crisply ironed; he looks as slimy and disgusting as she knows him to be. His eyes mercilessly grip hers and hold her captive. After a moment's hesitation, he returns to

his rhythm and moves on from her cell so as not to call attention to this interaction.

*She first felt the full extent of his evil six months ago. She had finally gotten a highly coveted job in the laundry room of the prison, and was excited at the prospect of the change in pace, regardless how menial it seemed. On her fourth day he paid the laundry room a visit.*

*The guard moved toward the only other occupant of the room and barked at her to stand up straight. He inched closer to her, making every hair on her neck quiver. He was so close to her that she could smell his cologne, the pungent odor of corruption, as it burned the inside of her nostrils. She sensed his hand as he reached out toward her, and she tried desperately to will it away. She considered her limited options, knowing that screaming will do little more than cause the punishment to be harsher, and concedes to doing nothing. She stood there, becoming increasingly numb as his hands mercilessly conquered each new inch of her body without stopping to ask for permission. And then she felt herself leave, flee her body and the scene of the crime. She escaped his touch, the violation and the pain, and instead enjoyed a moment of ecstasy, completely removed from a body and a place she barely recognized. Instantly the quick sound of his zipper shocked her back into reality and once again connected her to the present moment. He was finished with her for the day, but there was no doubt in her mind that he would be back for more another time.*

She was right. The abuse has continued, daily, for six months now, and has become a piece of her prison routine sandwiched

neatly between afternoon chow and yard time. She does not even consider complaining, knowing that her words will fall on deaf ears, or even worse, his ears. Instead, she suffers quietly, going numb each time and waiting until the lights are out for the night and her tears can pour out in privacy. She knows that this is her life now and she settles into a life of depression and defeat.



Another day, same routine. The alarm clock calls out at 6:30 a.m. announcing that her day as a stay-at-home mother is obligated to begin. She opens her eyes and sees the same face she has woken up to for over two months. She stretches toward the eggshell colored ceiling and greets the sunshine that is streaming through her Venetian blinds. The man stirring next to her leans over and kisses her cheek, starting the day off the same way it had ended the night before.

*Her trial had taken a month and after the jury came back without a real answer, the case stood at a standstill. Her lawyer assured her there wouldn't be another trial, that the prosecution didn't have enough to try again, and he was right. The District Attorney dropped her case, afraid of the embarrassment of another hung jury, or even worse a verdict of not guilty. She was granted the opportunity to live again, pick up where her life had been interrupted, and continue as a normal citizen.*

*She was enjoying being a mother to her son, showering him with love, affection, and emotional security. He had been traumatized by the trial, but she tried to show him that having her back was the most important thing. Never addressing where he had gone, she removed all remnants of her former husband, storing pictures and mementos in dusty trunks in the attic, actions that erased all memories. She wanted her son to forget him, wanted to move past him herself, and wanted to get on with their future together. Immediately after the trial, she moved them to a new house across town, a fresh start and a fresh new coat of paint on the walls.*

*And there was the man, a dear friend of hers for years, that she was seen with shortly after the trial. Neighbors enjoying clear summer nights could see him enter through the back door at night, and leaving the house in the morning as they were picking up their newspaper. Suburbia respects no secrets, and gossip rapidly spread around town. The people who had once supported her, now sported sharp, judging eyes that were intolerable and followed her everywhere: in restaurants, down grocery store aisles, and at her son's middle school functions.*

But her recent life has suited her well. She lives a comfortable life, attending social events and tending to her son while the man with whom she shares a life places bread on the table in a silver napkin. Her routine is busy, filled with soccer games and parent teacher conferences, what she considers fulfilling and exciting. The man cares for her, loves her, protects her. He never raises his voice or points a finger, behaviors she appreciates immeasurably. She has settled into her new family and her new life, a life of happiness and success.



The pregnancy is what saved her. The guard's visits became much more frequent, and he had paid the laundry room a visit everyday for the last month. Soon her stomach began to swell up. She complained of severe nausea, and landed a ticket to the infirmary. Guarded by the confidentiality of a doctor's office, she releases her secret and, feeling the weight lifted from her shoulders, the doctor told her what she already knew to be true, "You're expecting." Though "expecting" wasn't her preferred term because it denoted some sort of excitement, she accepted that her body was currently housing what she considered to be the greatest blessing and curse she had ever known. She soon came to realize the implications of this pregnancy.



The pregnancy is what got her. The man's visits became much more frequent, he was spending nearly every night in her home. Soon her stomach began to swell up. She complained of severe nausea, and immediately made an appointment with her doctor. She sits nervously in the doctor's plush and comfortable office, and she fidgets as she waits for the doctor to tell her what she already knows, "You're expecting. You're three and a half months pregnant." She quickly does the math, knowing that her husband must have been out of town at the time of conception. She soon came to realize the implications of this pregnancy.



Justice comes for him. A prison-wide DNA collection and paternity test easily confirm her allegations and his crimes. Watching him walk away with his hands securely chained behind his back and his head hanging low gave her a sweet taste of freedom, one that she hadn't had in far too long. She felt liberated knowing that he would now be a slave to the correctional system; lose his autonomy, his identity, and all of his power. She was a glutton for this delicious idea. As the other officers lead him past her cell she caresses her ever-growing stomach, silently thanking her baby.

And justice comes for her. Due to his conviction, the rest of her sentence is suspended and she is given probation. Her release day arrives and she is given back her belongings, most of which are useless: a gold wedding ring that symbolizes abandonment in the form of a failed marriage, clothing that will no longer fit over her "expecting" body, and a photograph of her former family, her former life. An officer retrieves her at noon and leads her to the gates of the prison where she is given \$25 dollars for bus fare and a weak "good luck" from the guard. She is relieved to see that her mother is waiting for her and greets her with open arms. She buries her head in her mother's familiar chest and begins to release the emotions she held in through the interrogation at her house, through the trial, through her incarceration. Though she knows the road in

front of her is long, she also knows that she is free to walk it without chains on her feet, and a new baby in her arms.



Justice comes for her. Just like the woman, suburban neighbors could do the math as well, knowing full well that the baby did not belong to the woman's former husband. The District Attorney, too, caught the scent of this scandal, this affair, this new piece to the puzzle. A few detectives were sent back to pour over the clues again, see what they could find. With this new suspect involved, everything seemed to change. The District Attorney orders the apprehension of both individuals, and vows that this time, she will not get away.

The woman is again brought into custody, this time with a male companion, a fellow suspect, in tow. The two are separated into interrogation rooms, and asked the routine questions. They are asked about the nature of the relationship, when it turned romantic, and whether the victim knew anything about the affair. The woman knows how to answer these questions, how to play the game. She has been through this mill once already so the second time is simple. She feeds the officers a story about how she has always known the man, it was strictly a friendship, and there really was nothing for her former husband to have known about because there was no affair.

The man, however, has never been under such pressure, and as the sweat drips down his forehead, he begins to fold, eventually letting the house of cards crash down. *He and the woman had been having an affair for months. She told him that her husband was abusive and that if they could just get rid of him, they could be together. The man had fallen in love with her long ago and would do anything to have her to himself. On the day of the murder, the woman had let him into the house and told him to hide in the kitchen, supplying him with the long, powerful knife before she went out for the day. The man waited very impatiently for Barry to come home from his trip. When he finally heard Barry's feet pound through the atrium into the kitchen, his heartbeat sped up and before he knew it, he had lunged up from behind the island and was on top of Barry plunging the knife into Barry's chest using strength he didn't know he had. Finally, he either exhausted himself or realized that the gruesome task had been done, and he stopped to evaluate the scene.*

*He had nearly cleaned up the scene when the woman came back through the door. She called out his name, unsure exactly what kind of scene she was walking into, and slowly moved toward the kitchen. As the body came into her view, she began to panic, grasping her face in her hands and talking rapidly. But as she ran out of breath, she began to calm down, and as she looked from the body of her former husband to his murderer, she began to put together that her plan had worked, so she smiled.*

*She grabbed a dish towel off the oven rack and placed it over Barry's face so that he couldn't see what she was about to do next. She stepped over his body and fell comfortably into the man's arms. Before calling the police, the woman orders him to attack her, make it seem like she had put up a fight against her husband. He followed her directions diligently and began to push her around, scratch her back, and bruise her body with repeated strikes of his hand. When she felt like the scene had been set enough, the man exited the house and the woman called the police, beginning her greatest performance.*

This story was enough for the officers, capturing it all on tape and immediately booking both suspects. The trial was nearly as quick and before she knew it, the woman is standing outside the entrance of the prison gates. She rests her handcuffed hands on her belly, unable to concentrate on anything other than the fact that when the baby comes, the state will claim ownership over it right away. She knows the road in front of her is long, she also knows that she is going to walk it with chains on her feet, and a no baby in her arms.



# THE PRISON MILIEU: 12 POEMS

by Chris Miller

## Just Words

The accused shall enjoy the right to a speedy and public trial  
Wait six months. You're last on the list for the haggard PD.  
He shall have the assistance of counsel for his defense  
Plead guilty, buddy. You'll never win anyway.  
He shall be tried by an impartial jury.  
Come on, counsel, let's get this over with.



Cruel and unusual punishments shall not be inflicted.  
A thousand years to life, you'll never stain society.  
Prisons take your soul on demand.  
America the Beautiful  
Land of the brave.  
Home of the free.

## Stay

Living in a hole  
I long for freedom  
Pine for family, love, affirmation  
Security of self-control  
Bath of the gentle Son  
Sigh of the wispy wind



My fate lies with The Three Statues  
Yet, my humble pleas will never awaken their dormant hearts  
They will never peel away my label  
To find the soul beneath  
Never can I shed my past.  
Never can I regain myself.



Even freedom has its curses.  
Freedom does not come with a Bon Voyage gift basket.  
No skills to stay the scourge of crime.  
Nothing but sin to guide me.  
So I wait for my true parole.  
The kind only God can grant.

## Gateway

They say weed is a gateway drug.  
Gateway to peace.  
Gateway to happiness  
Gateway out of this reality.



Tranquil breezes fill my mind.  
Beauty of a blank slate.  
Purity of a life without travails.  
Nothing crushes my bliss, in the gateway.



Weed tells me I am good.  
Only weed can vanquish poverty, extinguish betrayal.  
Leave the existential me  
Suspended in a better world.



I want to reclaim my weed  
Indulge the promise of security.  
The boss say weed is bad.  
They send me here to be alone.



Prison can constrain my soul.  
But my demons remain.  
Nothing can help me.  
Nothing but my gateway drug.

## I Cannot Cry

Alone in the hole  
I feel the weight around my eyes.  
Ever present, never ceasing  
Dead weight bearing down  
Sorrows mixed with stones.  
Unrelenting pressure, ever always.



Winking furiously  
Rubbing, clutching with cavernous hands.  
All for naught  
The pain will not depart.  
Prison's manacles are not enough.  
My burden lies within.



I visit my demons.  
Those I have created and those whose roots lie beyond my ken  
I linger over every sadness  
Pushing, thrashing, craving release  
But it will not come.  
I cannot cry.



This last human refuge is denied me  
The anguish builds, the weight remains.  
Suppressed and unexpressed  
In a prison within me.  
I cannot cry.  
I cannot purge my soul

## Murderer's Pride

Two swift strokes  
Suffused with ardent hatred  
Exhilaration of torrential anger  
Piercings, severance  
Cause, effect  
Death.



Killing brings the joys of rage  
Validation of true strength  
Monument to subjugation  
Murder: Bring me ecstasy!  
Rejoice in my success  
Wallow in my power



I will not be the butt of scorn.  
I will not suckle the hand of charity  
Demeaning in its blessings  
Murder sets the score  
Money and brains won't save you  
My knife says I am king.



I bathe in blood  
Giddy with my triumph.  
Licking your beauty  
Deriding your privilege  
Latest product of my urges  
Another trophy in my contest of supremacy.

## World Outside

Daily the sparrow lands upon my slatted sill.  
Its gentle frame resting nestled in my calloused palm.  
It eats scraps scrupulously saved  
Gazing quizzically upon my visage  
Then its lazy wings unfurl  
Guiding in flight towards the limitless horizon



Each day I await the sparrow  
He is my proof  
Confirmation that life remains upon the globe  
Living, breathing, running, flying  
Something beyond the monotonous sky  
Something beyond the bloodstained walls



I can never fly away  
But the sparrow heralds life  
To savor, to adore  
Transcending captivity  
My spirit roams free  
I still have a part to play.



Daily the sparrow returns  
So long as my eyes can see  
So long as I can feed his earthly cravings  
Stroke his gentle breast  
Life reveals itself  
I have something to live for

## Hope

Living each day  
Clinging to a tantalizing world  
Of far-gone possibilities  
A visit from a distant family  
A letter of compassion  
A reprieve from a merciless Court



Prison is a mass of humanity  
In a world ruled by refuse collectors  
Feelings are never acknowledged  
Dignity is never bestowed  
Relief hovers like a seductive ghost  
A Bogart never fully embracing a form



Never the dictate of realism  
Yet, hope is reality's savior  
Defying logic  
Shunning conventions  
Never defined  
But ever present



Not the sole province of fools  
Cynic's folly  
Intellect's opponent  
We do not claim wisdom  
Hope is our lifeline  
Hope is our will to live

## Impregnable Fortress

In perpetual darkness  
Never to evade the walls  
A fish to colleagues  
A monster to guards  
Earthly pleasures vanquished forever  
I find refuge in my dreams



Happy dreams  
Of love and caring  
Of breathing real air  
Of having a life to live  
Skies dotted with fulfillment  
Water enlivened by humanity



Prison has robbed me of tangible control  
Rape, torture, condemnation  
Slave to those who hate  
Gone are the visible vestiges of personhood  
No recourse escapes elimination  
So long as it is seen



Yet, dreams are amorphous  
Unseen, unknown  
The guards curse their failure  
But beatings cannot kill dreams  
I have an indestructible portal  
My soul is linked to peace.

## Sky's Allure

He loves me.  
I am valued in his heart.  
He cares for my contentment.  
Revels in my person.  
Worthwhile for myself.  
Adored even in obscurity.



Hands soft in a rough world.  
Lovely chest, healthy in a world of starvation.  
His deep cobalt eyes cannot deny their love for me.  
Pure liquid of solace and joy.  
Lips ravenous, ready to receive me.  
Arms envelope me in their protection.



Our kisses passionate.  
Our love sincere.  
Prison partners with love to bind us forever.  
He is my beloved.  
I will give him my heart.  
I will give him my soul.



People attack me.  
People ravage me.  
They will condemn me.  
They will forget me.  
But Sky can have my body.  
For he will be my friend.

## Angel Eyes

I cannot run.  
I cannot hide.  
Mouse without a hole.  
Bird without its wings.



Validation, hope, solace.  
My angel resuscitates my heart.  
The sparkle of her smile.  
The twinkle of her angel eyes.



But more than this,  
Sonorous voice of true love.  
Succor of her warm embrace.  
Arousal of a warm caress.



In her angel eyes, I am still human.  
She acknowledges no change.  
I am not a number.  
My heart still beats with love.



I reach, I grope.  
I cannot escape my human bondage.  
But my mind will not be murdered.  
Her heart goes with me.



So every day I leave this world.  
Visit my past.  
Try to fly.  
Find my beloved angel eyes.

## Deafening Silence

Silence fills the black hole.  
There is no light.  
There is no time.  
Only me, suspended in a void



I miss the screaming and the beatings.  
Even suffering confirms that life is present.  
Now life only exists in my thoughts.  
But what recourse are they?



Memories bring color.  
But only the colors of hell.  
My life is betrayal.  
My history is struggle.



My punishment is not incarceration.  
I have been whisked to the bowels of a nether universe.  
My thoughts are my only company.  
Thoughts that haunt me, rob me of my soul.

## If I Were To Die

If I were to die  
What notice would it cause?  
Death is detachment from the Earth  
This I have already done.  
Living here among the tombs  
I am forgotten, shapeless.



The guards slide food through the shaft.  
We never lock eyes.  
They only see me when their adrenaline dictates torture.  
Even then, I am only recalcitrant flesh.  
They never look within.  
Never realize we were made by the same sculptor



Even family discard love.  
Memories can die  
If you let them  
Bonds can be diluted.  
Prison brings banishment.  
Death brings only relief.



We all want love.  
We all yearn for affection.  
Someone to affirm our humanity.  
But how can friendship stem from mistrust?  
How can segregation craft the ties that bind?  
How can adoration survive brutalization?



So what's left?  
For whom do I have meaning?  
Who takes pleasure in my being?  
Who cherishes my company?  
My soul died long ago.  
Will someone really notice if my body follows suit?

**Author's Note:** America's prisons comprise a hidden world, suffused with its own culture and morays. The necessities of survival in this isolated world confront prisoners with a variety of challenges that extend far beyond the inconvenience of confinement. Thus, this collection of poetry explores everything from drug use in prison, the prevalence of willing homosexual relationships, the morass of solitude, the pain of abandonment, and the power of hope. I have never been incarcerated, so I do not be able to offer the depth of perception that comes with true experience. At best, I offer the insight of a perceptive observer. Yet, after immersing myself in the many facets of the prison world, I hope that I can provide a portrait of the prison experience, as the inmates feel it every day. Through it all, it has become apparent to me that even prisoners retain their humanity and that thoughtful souls do not languish behind iron bars.

# WASH CYCLE: A SERIES OF POEMS ON LIFE IN PRISON

by David Brisson

## Blacksmith

Here works he,  
The fabled blacksmith  
Taking worthless bits of metal  
And turning them into tools  
There's no flaw or fault  
That he can't fix  
With the striking of his hammer  
Or the fire of his forge



Now they place me on the anvil  
Your honor, I present to you  
This twisted piece of iron  
Clang clang!  
The hammer falls  
Twenty years, he bellows  
And throws me in his forge  
I'll craft you into a stirrup  
Something society can use

## School Bus

Here we are  
On this godforsaken bus  
Going back to school  
School with no summer break  
A bunch of kids  
That would much rather be  
Outside playing cops and robbers  
Or breaking things



Some thought they graduated  
But now they're back  
And they don't talk  
The class clown yells out  
"Are we there yet?"  
And looks around for laughs  
He'll be dead  
In one week

## Time

Twenty swinging pendulums  
Standing in a line  
Twenty swinging pendulums  
Counting out the time



Ninety seconds soap  
And eighty seconds hair  
Shiver out the dirt and grime  
Avoid each other's stares



Sixty seconds rinse it off  
Wash it down your spine  
Grab a towel time is up  
Don't you fucking whine



Tick tock tick tock  
Routine is getting old  
Twenty swinging pendulums  
Shrivel in the cold

## Chimp

A chimpanzee shuffles in its cage  
Accustomed to hectares of jungle  
They say chimps are violent  
Not like us humans



We lock up chimpanzees  
To help them  
Certainly not just  
For the benefit of the public



This chimp gnaws its own arm

## Symphony

Instruments locked  
In melodic struggle  
Clash of brass and timpani



The audience transfixed  
Drinks up the theme  
No longer locked in by key



The first movement was fast  
Now two virtuosos weave  
*Andante Sostenuto*



A guard leans in to speak  
But his comrade holds up a finger  
Savors with his eyes held shut



Now the tempo quickens  
A beat unrestrained by bars  
Plunges towards the coda



The crescendo  
A chord is struck  
Sharp



Stabbing  
Again  
And again



A final note  
A final sigh  
It all fades out



One man lies face down  
A shank in his back  
The audience departs quietly

## Lighthouse

A lighthouse tells boats  
Where it is safe to harbor  
But not this one



This lighthouse warns those astray  
To stay away  
Lest they be caught upon these rocks  
Like us



For that shore is death  
And these rocks, a purgatory



They have scuttled many a boat  
And the lighthouse guards them  
Greedily



And so we are imprisoned here



Allowed neither to reach  
That sweet deathly shore  
Nor be released back out to sea



The men  
They sleep fitfully on their rocks  
No one to help them find their way  
Least of all  
That lighthouse

## Chess

I know how you play  
Open up with pawns  
And bring out the bishop  
You don't go easy on sex offenders



You know how I play  
Advance the front  
And back it up with knights  
I've changed and I have good recommendations



We know how this will end  
Encroaching castle  
Prejudiced board  
Checkmate



I'm here for another five years.

## Igloo

Welcome to my igloo  
Built for this harsh environment  
From the same cold, hard ice  
I find all around me



I have to prepare each morning  
For the cold  
Put on my parka  
To hide my tender skin



I'd like to go out more often  
But it's always winter  
In the land of killer bears  
And thin ice



They have thirty-four words  
For snow here  
Icing, blow, rocks, yeyo,  
Dama blanca, dust, pearl, and coke



My igloo may not look like much  
But now I call it home  
That picture from my grandma  
Keeps it warm at night

## Laundromat

They stash up these machines  
With filthy clothing  
So it can come back clean  
Wash, rinse, repeat.



They put in cash and close the loads  
Because who has time  
To wash their clothes?  
Wash, rinse, repeat.



The machine will never cry for me  
Just agitate rags  
And spit them back into society  
Wash, rinse, repeat.



And what about the shirt that is forever stained?  
No amount of washing  
Will make it wearable again  
Wash, rinse, repeat.



Maybe a stain can fade with time  
If we just keep scrubbing it  
But it wasn't true of mine  
Wash, rinse, repeat.



This person here, she is not philosophical  
She just wants a place  
To put all her befouled articles  
Wash, rinse, repeat.



Laundromats, there aren't enough of those  
What can we do  
With all our dirty clothes?  
Wash, rinse, repeat.

# SO IT GOES...

by Zachary Faden

**F**uck?! I ain't gay.

Every fish that comes into this place can choose to be a man or choose to be a bitch. This is a hard place and it don't go soft on the weak ones.

I was schooled in the system; an original baby-faced Blood. Petty shit dropped me in Juvie and then the Joint. In and out- I was the posterboy for the revolving door. Prison don't stop ya; it don't put the fear in you. It teaches you. I go in for possession; I leave a dealer. It escalates things. It's a criminal convention. You network, earn your cred, pick up tricks. You had a résumé, I had a rap-sheet.

The streets were ours. The money came easy. Fuck allowance; I was pulling down a G a week before puberty. The cops couldn't stop us. Spotting a narc became second nature. The awkward stiff's would try, but I'd been rolling since I was 8. I wasn't stupid.

Then the Crips showed up. They started invading. Pushing product with a lot of muscle. Trespassing and shit; stirring things up. Tagging our streets, making noise. It wasn't long until the BKs tried making good on their name. You couldn't leave the house without a piece.

One of my boys got hit in a drive-by. Fucking pussies.

I didn't have time to mourn. I needed revenge. I was heated, wasn't thinking right. Acted fast, acted dumb. I hit back during the day. An eye for an eye, the justice of the streets.

With my half-tear tat still fresh, the cops came calling. I thought I was invincible, untouchable. I thought wrong. The fuckers bagged me.

Now, I'm here- in the pen. Serving 20 to life.

You make do. You adjust.

When I got here, I was still thinking like street thinking. Like, I was still proud of my killing. I was a talker, running my mouth 'bout how even though I got caught I'd do it again. Honor and responsibility and shit. Word got 'round about my crime; everyone knew I wasn't some weak ass, soft fish.

But things change. This wasn't a 6 month stint, this was fucking heavy. It didn't hit quick, but it hit hard.

Prison changes things.

Two years in, I added another tear to my face. Marking another death- mine. The goddamn routines just wear you down. You ain't free to do shit. You get by, but you're half-dead.

Half-dead- that's how you gotta live prison.

 **You got your self and your thoughts.**

Shit's upside down here. It's alien and bizarre and uncaring. The hard walls, the harder inmates; the cold bars, the colder guards. You got your self and your thoughts.

At first the fear keeps you busy. Walking the halls avoiding eyes but aware of the hands. The politics of mess-hall seating. The crowded gyms. Fuck up anywhere and it's not the hole you get, it's the ground- six feet under. I knew this, I had a shiv by day two. Yeah, it pisses off the guards, but it saves your own ass. Solitary beats assassination.

You don't flinch, you keep hard. You have no direction but you keep moving. Once the fear stops overwhelming you and becomes a part of you, then you need a new escape, a new distraction. You can't deal with yourself, not 24/7.

Weights, books, card games- all meaningless, all just diversions helping keep you sane. Prison life leads you to consider taking dramatic measures- maybe suicide, maybe escape, maybe a descent into madness. Whatever works...but nothing ever does.

You can score drugs, smuggled in. Some manage to brew booze in their cells. Cheap shit, sometimes using the toilets as a still, but it's got alcohol in it. It don't go down easy, but it helps some.

The entire system is set up to fuck with you. The tiny cells- hot as Hell in the Summer and cold as Hell in the Winter. No privacy- they always watching you. Never alone- not in the halls, the shower, fuck, they even make you share the cage with somebody else. And, you'd better pray you don't get stuck with a loony. Hell, I've had my share of cellmates, and the pill-poppers are the worst. Those dumb motherfuckers are unbalanced, all shaky and shit. Naw, but I can at least kinda respect those poor bastards. They man child's but they try.

Ah, fuck, one time they paired me with a little bitch. It was all good at first. Then, word got 'round that this guy fucking traded snitch testimony during his trial for a cushy reduction. The rat never wised up. That fish was here for less than a year before getting comfy jobs; he'd deliver books to prisoners. It's not glorious, but it gets you out of the cell. Stretch your legs, take a breath. You know what they say, "snitches get stitches."

Yeah, we coulda hit him in the yard, I mean, this fool rolled solo, but he had it coming and I had no problem doing it.

The newbie was likable enough, but this wasn't personal. You pull shit, you gotta deal. Fuck, what did I care? 20 to life, depending on good behavior, means life- I ain't a nice guy.

No one listens in prison. You learn not to hear. It's dangerous to hear. You hear nothing and you say nothing. I had to teach my buddy this lesson.

It's not hard to get a shank. We can be real smart in prison.

The fucking punk always slept well. Not that night.

I grabbed the back of his neck and pushed his face into his pillow. Bitch tried screaming but had no air. The blade was on his neck. Try squealing now! The pussy struggled and I lowered a knee into his spine. With every blow, I forced his face further into the pillow. I was gonna enjoy myself, and I want him conscious. I wanted him to be aware of the pain. I was laying blows into his back, breaking ribs and whatnot. He didn't put up a fight no more, just whimpered like a little kicked dog. Fucking pathetic.

His pillow was wet with tears and his sheets were stained with blood. I cracked him in the back of the head. It was satisfying, but I wasn't finished. I ripped his pants off, laughing at the piss stains. Fucking coward!

I lowered my pants and punched the bastard again before having my way. The little bitch didn't know the rules, and I was gonna make sure he damn well knew them. He didn't even have the energy to scream as I broke him. The blood spilled out, and I couldn't stop laughing. Bitch had it coming.

I reached for the shiv, planning on finishing him. Then, I thought, "fuck it." Let him live, let this snitching bitch get passed around.

Ah, 20 to life is now life without. But, I'm in control.



*Silence: Ravenna, Italy* ▶ Liz Calka

# POETRY

by Samantha Dunn

## Silent Night

Diamonds sparkling  
Resting on a black velvet sky



Man smiling in the moon  
Clearly seen by the eye



Light beaming  
From stars and moon  
Cast shadows upon the earth



Tears streaming  
A woman cries  
And curses the day of her birth



Vacant eyes stare  
Toward the dazzling night sky



Blood running  
Over the hands and lap  
Of the woman who sits and cries  
The woman gasps  
Moving her hands  
Trying to stem the crimson flow



Trees stand tall  
Silent witnesses  
To the scene played out below



Slamming doors  
Angry words  
Chase to a deserted park



A senseless shove  
A staggering fall

A rapidly forming puddle of blood



It's over now  
Blood runs cold  
Lifeless in her arms he lies



All the while  
Diamonds sparkle  
Resting on a black velvet sky

## Shattered Stone

Blinding dazzling light  
Wakes me from fitful sleep



The cries of others in the night  
Unwelcome. Invade my dreams.



When morning comes emotion hides  
Tucked away behind masks of stone



With the fall of evening fear returns  
Bringing torturous thoughts of home



Once trapped alone behind the walls  
In dark with no escape



The feeling hidden all day long  
Bursts forth from behind the slate



Fervent calls to loved ones lost  
Echo through the dark



Pleas for help to those few trusted  
In the din depart



Tears trapped behind stoic faces  
Escape their imprisoning bonds



After day of banishing them to shadow  
Strength to hold them there is gone



When no light shines to expose the face  
Abandoned in night, in fear, we lie awake



The coming of memories' sweetness  
Serves only to burn the soul



Pictures of pasts and flashes  
Reminding us that we will never again be whole



More haunting than the sound of wind  
Howling across open fields



Are the sounds of pain and loneliness  
That only in darkness can we feel

## Her World

She's in her own little world  
Standing before the mirror  
Fascinated by how the "dickity" twirls  
She's a big girl for real



Her face is caked with makeup  
Bright red cheeks and lips  
She wants to be like mommy  
And mommy wears makeup like this



She's draped in a dress of mine  
Drowning her small little frame  
But mommy wears these grown up clothes  
And she wants to do the same



I try to snap a picture  
Without her knowing that I'm here  
I want to preserve the moment  
Of my little girl in there



She examines herself in the mirror  
She looks satisfied with what she sees  
She turns around towards the door  
Excited to show me, mommy



I force myself to turn away  
From that memory  
As tears roll down my face  
From my red eyes down onto my scarlet cheeks



Still so small standing there  
Trying to hide her face  
From all the people crowding her  
Asking questions about the case



I sneak up behind her  
Place my hand upon her arm  
I want her to know I'm there  
I'm going to teach her to be strong



She glances up at me afraid  
Eyes tainted with shame and tears  
She doesn't even understand  
The sentence of indeterminable years



She'd never sat behind the wheel  
She hadn't had her first kiss  
She hadn't graduated high school  
I think of all the things she'll miss



She'll never get her own apartment  
Never go away to school  
She'll never hold her baby to her chest  
Never walk towards her groom



Instead she'll serve a lifetime  
Of deep regret and pain  
They'll call her by a number  
They'll pretend she has no name



My baby girl, not yet fourteen  
Panicked and tried to run  
He wouldn't let her, he grabbed her arm  
And so she grabbed the gun



Her world is changed  
It's plain to see by the pallor of her face  
That little girl who once stood  
In her own little world, in her own little space

# POEMS

by Rosie Haimm

## Exhalation

I inhale.  
My arm breathes in the pitch I intend to play.  
I draw the bow over the strings,  
And as my 'cello gently cries out in song  
with her rich, robust voice,  
We exhale.  
We inhale.  
We sing, together,  
a song which always sounds too sad,  
And as we approach the cadence,  
Together,  
We exhale.  
We inhale.

I sway along with her curved chestnut body,  
letting her lead our dance.  
And as we soften and slow,  
We exhale.  
Inhale.  
Breathe in the fear and adrenaline.  
Swallow it down.  
The other inmates watch me  
Judging my vulnerability  
Eyeing my delicate limbs  
Waiting for me to blink  
for only a second too long.  
And as I start to choke on my breathe,  
I crave the song of my crying 'cello  
To give me the strength to exhale.

## Everlasting Fermatas

It's the piano of the cell that drives me mad.  
The forte world outside these bars that I'm missing out on.  
This staccato life of never know who will die tomorrow.  
The sforzando roar of the first punch,  
    and then it all goes by while you sit in the eye of the storm.  
I plead in mezza voce—get me out of here.  
And that's all this life is.  
A constant fermata held above my head.

## Ivory

I remember my piano.  
Time would stop  
as I lost myself in the music.  
Precious time would fly away.  
And I would fly across the keys,  
making them laugh with joy as I tickled the ivories.  
Now I'm in this jungle—  
Prison—  
without a machete to clear my path,  
and all I wish for is that lost time,  
spent tickling music out of my instrument,  
to find its way back to me.  
I try to fit in with the indigenous tribe,  
But all I truly care about  
Truly want  
Whole-heartedly need  
is to find my ivory in this jungle,  
so I can laugh again.  
But Ivory is a precious commodity here.  
There is no laughter in my prison,  
and I hardly remember my old ivories from back home.

## Subtle Modulations

They mull around like zombies.  
Moving around for the sake of movement.  
Or maybe its just nerves firing off commands without any control or purpose.  
We have created the living dead;  
Those who sleep while awake.  
They walk around this home,  
This Institution,  
These cold walls,  
Following the invisible lines on the ground that takes them from point A to point B.  
Their modulations are subtle,  
gliding through passing tones and common chords.  
They never quite know which key they are in,  
always residing in the awkward dominant.  
The have no direction, no forwards, no backwards.  
But it's alright.  
We're helping them after all, are we not?  
We're making the insane sane and the uncontrollable controllable.  
We are making the world a better place.  
We are taking the crazies off the street, and giving them a second chance.  
A second chance of life without purpose due to suppressing all self motivation  
(because the medications are too high).  
A second chance at over-doses of these prescribed medications  
(because the doctors think it's best).  
After all,  
We are making the world a better place.

## The Conductor

The conductor raises his hands.  
The orchestra watches in anticipation  
to begin their symphony.  
And as the guard raises his hands  
we begin our walk to the yard.  
The conductor gives a stern look at the violins,  
waving his hand by his waist,  
telling them to play a little quieter.  
The guard gives the Hispanics a stern look,  
making a fist by his waist,  
letting them know there will be no fights today.  
The conductor gives a reassuring look to the flutes  
gracefully encouraging them to play out  
and let their melody soar above the rest.  
The guard gives a reassuringly look  
to the newest and youngest addition to the pack;  
reassuring this 18 year old that he might make it  
through one more day here.  
The music is coming to its climax.

The orchestra is building.  
We prisoners are getting anxious.  
How long have we been out here?  
Do we have 5 minutes or 5 seconds left?  
Finally, the French horn blares.  
The timpani pounds.  
The bell rings out.  
Time to go inside.  
We shuffle towards the door,  
And the orchestra gets quiet.  
We lower our heads,  
the conductor raises his hands one final time,  
and we  
all  
are cut off.

## Inner Dissonance

I'm not mentally ill, you know.  
You think someone crazy would be able to get themselves in here?  
This was my out.  
My in to staying alive in this system.  
Plead insanity, they told me, It's your only chance at a life.  
Some life.  
No insanity here, I tell you, I put myself here.  
Those doctors think they put me here  
When they roll past me  
In their white scrubs.  
You're not all that with your white cups filled with crazy candy.  
I'm not insane.  
It's just these walls are so white  
Sometimes at night they pulse.  
Breathing.  
In and out.  
Not crazy at all, no sir, not me.  
It's just hard with all the white noise.  
The constant dissonance of tones clustered together.  
Why can't everyone just be quiet.  
No one cares, we aren't listening.  
Shut your mouth.  
I'm not crazy. I put myself here.

## Lullaby

I sit behind these bars at night  
and stare out at the moon.  
And as my cellie and neighbors  
begin to shut their eyes  
on our darkened cages  
I sing a lullaby that would even make Brahms shed a tear.  
I sing to the children  
    too young to understand  
    how long a life sentence really is.  
I sing to the old-timers  
    too deafened from doing time  
    to hear my suspensions and cadences.  
I sing to the parents  
    who wait in the mail line for hours  
    hoping for one word from their child,  
    one drawing from their toddler.  
But most of all, I sing to the stars  
    jealous of their freedom to shine  
    and spin light-years away from this place.  
    My universe.  
Every night, I chant my prayer,  
Singing myself to sleep  
Because a tear-soaked pillow  
is no fun to sleep on.

## Absence

Black.  
The absence of light.  
We cannot live in black,  
cannot thrive in the absence of light.  
I see my light in music—  
In the chords I play,  
In the songs I sing.  
And it's far too quiet here.  
All I hear is the loud silence,  
and the clapping of boots  
from the guards outside.  
I strain to remember the sounds  
of an uplifting D major chord,  
of a crying F# minor chord,  
of a C major chord,  
smiling at me and giving me dreams  
of a brighter tomorrow.  
But then I remember  
how quiet it still is  
in the prison of mind.  
A mind gone black.

## My Requiem

Lord have mercy; Christ have mercy; Lord have mercy.  
Kyrie eleison, Christe eleison, Kyrie eleison.  
I have sinned myself,  
I have sinned the world,  
I have sinned myself.  
I have no Gloria.  
But hear my creed,  
for it will be the only thing  
that will help you survive your fall down this hole.  
I came here because of a mistake—  
A mistake that I believed was the answer.  
I am still being crucified for my sins each and every day.  
And as I sit here in this cage of filth  
and see the fresh blood check in each day,  
I silently scream out to them  
my Credo.  
I find my Sanctus in the letters.  
The letters from my father.  
The letters from my son.  
The letter from the ghost that my wife has become.  
And as the Agnus Dei slowly approaches,  
I think to myself:  
I thought the day would never come,  
When I will be granted my freedom from this place,  
When I will be granted my peace.  
Dona eis requiem sempiternam  
—Grant them eternal rest.

# POEMS

by Wes Gifford

## **You know that feeling**

When your head is underwater  
And all the sounds around you  
Are muffled  
And heavy?  
Well, this box is like being underwater  
But the voice you can't hear  
Is your own  
And breathing's just the same

## **Sunlight fades and builds slowly**

Over ancient political stones.  
A primordial glaze  
a stony surrender  
coat the pillars of a drowned kingdom.  
Light slowly slips across this flat and paltry sun dial  
Faithfully counting to an infinite time.  
Watching it, I lay and steep in it  
And rage for its death.

## **I took the lives of twenty men**

Careers of forty more  
Four trucks, a plane, a father and son  
The same, they all gave in.  
How many bars have I seen you ask?  
Huh, none but the one that I passed.

## **Ol' hot shit wasn't so hot**

When my blood was cold  
And my gun was warm.  
I didn't run from them  
Told 'em the story,  
Whole truth, nothing but.  
Told em' I'd do it again  
Sept for Ol' Hot Shit  
Got his 21 guns.  
Plenty more screws though –  
I'll give ol' Hot Shit some comp'ny  
'fore them fuckers  
Wise up and fry me.

## **Those who lay me down to sleep**

Know for not a soul I shall weep  
For I who sinned 'gainst the state  
Die now by taxpayer mandate

## **At thirteen,**

He is too small for the helmet of an electric chair  
Too thin for the straps of a hospital bed  
Too bony for the adult sized needle  
So, he'll wait,  
Far too small for state issued pants  
And a regulation winter jacket  
Until the day he leaves  
In a tailored suit  
And fitted box

## God I miss you

The times I spoke, and you didn't answer me,  
And they tried to tell me your will.  
When empty I stared, prayed you'd come  
And raged – you played your absence well.  
Icy hatred, impassive rage  
Still warmer than iron sages.  
To feel you push me back  
When I struck at you  
Is better  
Than to strike  
At nothing.  
God, I miss you.

## You want:

The words, the sounds  
The and broken mind of a con  
Humble, eloquent, poignant.  
I'd like to see you write a sonnet  
About an endless river of Shit and plastic

## I had always hoped

I had always hoped that when I died, there wouldn't  
be much time to think about it.  
I had always believed that life would culminate in  
death, and there wouldn't be so much damn noise  
I had always thought I'd write more.  
Houses  
Two point Five million black men and  
Five hundred thousand white men  
Share a stone one.  
Fourty Three white men  
And one black man  
Share the White one.

## **I live in a 'cell'**

With my 'cell buddy' Jake  
Adorned by 'nonlethal contraband.'  
When he and I have 'improper differences'  
A 'trained correctional officer'  
Promptly 'subdues by chemical agent'  
And Jake is 'counseled'  
For his 'repeated sexual deviancies.'  
And Al is 'temporarily transferred'  
To my 'housing unit.'  
Later, between 'common facilities recreation'  
And 'scheduled off-time'  
A 'member of a Eurocentric militant group'  
Sticks a shard of broken tray between my ribs.

## **Sometimes**

Early in the morning  
Fog lies heavy on the yard  
And through plexiglass and dew  
Officers walk calmly on the clouds

## **I picture the song of the world**

Whose open melodies soar  
Entrancing, entwining the sky.  
A song of rounds, of untold parts  
Immemorial in verse and in time  
Some belt their parts, with triumphant force  
And for years will guide it along  
Others' hushed voices fade in just once  
With mute and eternal chord.  
In Ossining a poor man's sweat beats out  
The rhythms of his forgotten life  
In Angola, a bridge! An obtuse laugh  
A cry, the desolate refrain.  
And still in a place where no music plays  
No sounds may break down the wall  
I find there are those, whose voice is lost  
Song silenced by a choir of their own  
So I say just to you that this song of the world  
That goes unheard in the cold and alone  
It waits and holds on rest for the day  
Sweet verse breaks through hate and stone.

# LADIES & GENTLEMEN OF THE JURY

by Kellee Fitzgerald

## Frank

**T**rial juries are supposed to “render a verdict after listening to the evidence and arguments by all parties, following a set of instructions given by the presiding judge.”

Sure. That sounds easy enough. We all troop into this little room here, sit at a table and decide whether that woman out there deserves to live or die. We discuss it in a peaceful and friendly matter, and don’t stop until we reach a unanimous decision. Easy, right? I thought so. That is, I thought so until the trial began.

I grew up in Texas. We had very different ideas about prison and the death penalty down there. I’m not at all used to this hippy-sympathetic crap the defense attorney was spinning. A man kills someone, he should pay the price. A life for a life – simple, fair. None of this talking about how he was poorly treated as a kid, how society did him wrong. He takes responsibility for his actions. It’s so straightforward. Or it had been, anyway, when I was a kid and I would hear about these guys put to death. They were always real bad guys, too. It was never their first murder that got them stuck on trial. Everyone was better off with these guys dead.



Sunset: Firenze, Italy ▲ Liz Calka

Now though... Now it's different. Living here is a lot different than living in Texas. Everyone's so damn eager to talk about how all these criminals were wronged themselves, before they went and wronged someone else. And I get it the point, I do. I'm lucky – always had enough to eat, parents who liked having me around. Lots of people aren't so lucky. But just because you have some problems, you don't go take it out on someone else, and in the worst possible manner, too. We're not talking people getting in barfights. You end up on trial for a capital crime, you know you did something real wrong – like sick, inhuman wrong.

But it seems like its just me that thinks that way anymore. I know there's a couple folks gonna be in the jury room with me who think like I do, but just a couple. I get the feeling we're in for a long haul.

And there was me, getting my summons in the mail for jury duty, thinking it'd be easy, thinking maybe I might feel some kind of satisfaction from it – upholding the law and all that. Even when I heard I'd been picked for a capital jury, I still thought it'd be easy. People who end up here deserve it. I'd sit down with my other jurors, and we'd vote to send this guy to the chamber and pay for what he did, right? I had been so sure of it... So sure, even, about my own vote. Of course I would vote for death, the guy deserved to die for killing someone. But then they told me the defendant was a woman, and all that went out the window.

## Julia

I never thought about having to make this kind of choice before, because I couldn't conceive of an occasion where I would be forced to do so. I thought about trying to get out of it, using the excuse that my students would be jolted by the sudden transition, and that being left to a substitute for days or weeks would hinder their progress. But I ultimately decided, and my husband agreed, that it was my duty to respond to the summons and do my part to ensure a fair, impartial decision. I never imagined I would be chosen to serve on a capital jury...

When I heard that they wanted to ask me some questions and see if I was fit for a capital trial, I nearly stood up and marched out of the courthouse right then and there. No way could I sit on a capital jury! Being a capital juror means you hear all the gruesome gory details of a horrible murder, and then you're expected to sentence someone to die!

There was no way I was ready for that. I was completely prepared to tell them there was no way I could consent to a vote for death, no way no how. It's just wrong! For twelve ordinary people to play God, arguing with each other over whether a person should live or die... I understand that these criminals have done something awful, and they deserve to be punished for it. But how is it anyone else's responsibility to decide to take away a life?

It's no better than the murder committed by a capital defendant.

So there I was, all set to say I wasn't fit for a capital jury, thank you very much. But then they told me the worst part of all – the defendant was a woman.

I made up my mind right then and there that I would sit on her jury. Who knew how many other women would be assigned to the jury, willing to grant a little understanding? Men so often see things in black and white – I could imagine how easy it would be for this poor woman to be sentenced to death without a thought for why she ended up in this awful situation, or what had happened to her to make her so desperate.

I told myself then that I could vote for a sentence of death – if the situation warranted it. I just couldn't envision a circumstance where I would be willing to do it. Maybe this trial would present just such a circumstance, who knew? I could sentence this woman to death, I could, if absolutely necessary. That's what I said to the lawyers, at least. But I knew deep down that I would sit on this jury just to give her a fighting chance.

### Tyler

I was less than excited about the prospect of having jury duty, as I'm sure everyone else was, too. It's not that I was particu-

larly averse to the idea, I just enjoy my job too much to have to take time off and sit in a court room all day. Who would want to, in my position?

I work as a pilot for a private company. The company itself has nothing to do with planes, it would take more time than I've got to explain exactly what they do. Hell, I'm not sure even I could describe it accurately. I fly the corporate jet. I take the big execs around wherever they have to go. Most of them are pretty good guys and ladies, always treat me with the respect a pilot deserves. But what I love most about my job is that it takes me to all sorts of places I never thought I'd see.

 **I knew deep down that I would sit on this jury just to give her a fighting chance.**

I grew up in a... less than perfect setting. My neighborhood was pretty rough, and my folks weren't around much. Most of the kids I went to school with ended up in jail or worse. My older brother was one of the unlucky ones. He died when I was twelve, and I decided then that I would make something of myself. I think I have – I worked incredibly hard to get where I am, joining the military so I could learn to fly, and finding work with a private company as soon as my time was up.

I'm finally able to enjoy my life, for the first time in as long as I can remember. I have no particular opposition to doing my "civic duty" and all of that. God knows I had plenty of that in the military. It's just that I'm missing out on the company's annual conference in Beijing to be here today, and let me tell you, Beijing is one of my favorites.

I really don't mind that much, though – especially when I heard I was being considered for a capital trial. I saw plenty of crimes of capital-caliber go down when I was a kid, and believe me, I was looking forward to the chance to see someone who got caught in the wrong, and make them pay for what they did. The guy who killed my brother should've ended up on trial for capital murder, but he had friends who hid him pretty well. As far as I know, he's still out on the street.

Someone charged with capital murder deserves a harsh punishment, and I'm willing to dole it out. Lots of people talk about "mitigating circumstances" – I'm sure we'll talk about it a lot in the jury room. Supposedly bad things that happen to you make you less responsible for committing a crime. The way I see it, killing someone puts you at fault in a way nothing else can. I have no sympathy – I grew up in a pretty tough place, but I got myself out alive, and without killing anybody else. When they told me it was a woman who was on trial, all I thought was – oh well, whatever you did, I'm sure you're gonna deserve it.

*They filed into the room, one right after another. The twelve of them wore expressions of varying degrees of enthusiasm. Some of them looked pleased to be there, others as if they themselves were on trial. The one thing they shared was their sense of having been shell-shocked, and mutual uncertainty as to exactly what to do next.*

*Nobody wanted to be the first to sit. They had already gone through an ordeal together, having just come from the courtroom where the prosecutor and defense attorney had bickered over Tracy's innocence or guilt. Even that had not been simple – she had killed the man, that much was certain. Eyewitnesses had seen her leaving the apartment, covered in blood and chattering incoherently about how it was over, and he could no longer hurt her. Not to mention the fact that she had nodded every time police had asked her, "did you kill him?" while questioning her. And the fact that she told anyone who asked her flat out – "Yes. I was there, I was the one holding the knife. I attacked him, and he later died." The jurors looked at each other, surprised to have it stated so baldly in front of them. Perhaps this would be easier than they thought... But she had had more to say. "I am not guilty of murder. No one can call what I did murder. I plead not guilty."*

## Frank

Well, even getting everyone to agree to a verdict of guilty was tough enough, much tougher than I thought it'd be. Jeez, it took us nearly a week to get that far. I thought, you know, I'm sure deciding for the death penalty or not would take us ages,

but the initial guilty verdict, that oughta be a piece a cake. We sat down there in that little room they gave us, I still only knew one or two names of the whole bunch, and everyone kinda turned toward me, like, “Okay, what happens now?” Which, yeah, I figured, I’m the foreman, I gotta get the ball rolling. So I looked around and said something like, “This part’s easy, let’s give them our judgment so we can get to work on the hard part.”

It was almost funny, I could tell right away, about half the folks were looking at me real eager-like, leaning outta their chairs or nodding their heads, like “Yeah Frank, I’m with ya, let’s do this thing.” Then the other half, they were looking confused, or upset, one guy almost looked like he wanted to hit me.

Someone spoke up, I later found out his name was Sam, me and him actually ended up almost being pals by the end, but anyway Sam held up his hands and said, “Hold on, now. This is a really important thing we have to decide. Sentencing somebody as guilty of a capital murder isn’t something to take lightly, even if it looks like an obvious choice. We have to sit down and discuss this.” So we did. We took a vote first thing, just to see how everyone was feeling about it. Our first vote, eight of us voted guilty and four not-guilty. The ones who voted not-guilty...let’s see. There was Sam, my buddy...there was Julia, that cute little school-teacher, she ended up giving us a real fight later on. Then there was two other ladies, Grace and Teri.

Well, of course that caused some problems – three ladies not wanting to convict another lady. One of the fellas right away said that they just wanted to help out their own kind, and they shouldn’t be doin’ that cause this Tracy was gonna make a bad name for all the rest of ‘em. That got them riled up pretty good, there was a fair bit of shouting right there at the start. Now me, I didn’t think they were looking out for Tracy because she happened to be female, I just thought that they were kinder by nature, they wanted to see the good in everyone, they had more sympathy than the rest of us.

Now the other two ladies, Grace and Teri, they changed their minds pretty quick. They said they just wanted to make sure that we talked it through, and didn’t jump to the wrong decision, so they slowed down the vote. And yeah, I can understand that – I guess you don’t want to decide someone is guilty of murder in only five minutes if there’s even the smallest chance that they’re innocent.

Sam was pretty well set against it. He’s a real smart guy, I think he had the most schooling out of all of us. He kept talking about how the prosecutor hadn’t gotten his burden of proof, and said over and over again that Tracy was “innocent until proven guilty.” He didn’t think that the prosecutor had proved one hundred percent that Tracy did it. Sam even drew us a graph trying to convince everyone of his point – it showed how sure we should be that she was guilty versus how sure

we really were, that the burden of proof was too high... well, I wasn't too sure exactly what he was going on about half the time, but his point was, unless we were one hundred percent absolutely sure, we couldn't call her guilty.

Then there was Julia. She raised some hell, lemme tell you. It seemed like she was dead-set against this entire trial to start with. She kept saying that there was no way that Tracy was capable of committing a cold-blooded murder, that there had to be something else going on that we didn't know about. I just don't think Julia wanted us to be able to consider the life or death decision – she seemed like the type who was really opposed to the death penalty, really believed it was wrong. She didn't want it to be an option – didn't want to give anybody that choice.

## Julia

This whole process was a mess right from the start. First of all, I don't think that poor girl's lawyer had a clue what he was doing. I was friendly with Carl the court stenographer, and he was able to tell me all about what happened during the parts of the process that we as jurors hadn't seen. Carl told me that at the very beginning, when they were about to ask what she was going to plead, when that lawyer walked into the courtroom he was still arguing with her under his voice, looking really angry at her. When they asked him what the plea was and he gave her this look like he thought she was crazy, and looked at the

judge to say “Not guilty,” but while he was saying it he was shrugging and shaking his head like what he was really saying was, “Ok, I'm done here, don't expect anything else from me today, I wash my hands of this.” And really, I think that's what he meant, because I didn't see a decent bit of effort from that man for the rest of the first part of the trial. He just sat back and let the whole thing unfold around him.

I could tell the second we walked in the courtroom that the prosecutor had clearly done his homework, and by that point I had, too. Not that I had much downtime between being chosen for the jury and the start of the trial, but the second I heard I had been selected, I started researching everything I could about the proceedings of capital trials, and criminal trials in general. So I had almost expected Tracy's lawyer to do a poor job – after all, she was a schoolteacher with two children to support, and her husband was long gone by this point. I heard later on that he assumed she must've been having an affair with the guy who died, thought she killed him because he left her, or cheated on her. Either way, he left her with the kids and not a bit of money. Good lawyers definitely don't come cheap.

But anyway, like I said, the prosecutor had put together a really nice argument. He almost got me riled up with the rest of them. Of course, it didn't hurt at all that he called witness after witness, all claiming that they saw Tracy running from his apartment, covered in blood. But who stopped to think that,

oftentimes eyewitnesses alter their story to coincide with that of the first person to speak, just to avoid making waves? Or that sometimes they are just plain wrong, that they didn't see what they thought they did? And besides that, who's to say that, even if she was there, that absolutely makes her guilty?

There was also the issue of the fingerprints. Now, as little faith as I had in the witnesses, there was no disputing the fingerprints. I mean, if had been just one or two... but they were all over the place, everywhere. Even on the knife. As much as I would like to believe that Tracy was completely innocent, that knife told me otherwise. It told me she had been there when he died, or very nearly beforehand. But that in and of itself couldn't make her absolutely, one hundred percent guilty of capital murder. But that's not what the prosecutor said. He built his whole case around those witnesses and that knife.

They even brought it into the courtroom, the knife... it was still bloody. That was very upsetting to me. Some of the men on the jury were craning their necks, leaning out of their seats to see it better. I didn't want to see it at all! Some of my fellows on the jury seemed like they were in it just for the blood and gore. Well, they couldn't have gotten a better case. This one was full of it. We were shown photos of the crime scene, and the body – it was to help us understand the physical set-up of the scene, to show us where the knife was in relation to the body and the rest of the room, to help us see that it couldn't

possibly have been self-inflicted. That's what the prosecutor told us. I personally think he just wanted to get everybody nice and worked up about how bloody and horrible of a sight it was, how disfigured the body was, to get us all to jump to a guilty verdict nice and quickly. I had a different reaction. I resented the prosecutor for making us sit through that – once or twice I was very nearly physically sick. It was disgusting and uncalled for. We would've understood the layout of the scene from a description, or a basic diagram. But no, he insisted on showing us the real photos, in order to “get a real sense of the scope of this atrocious crime.” I can be a pretty stubborn person at times, and the more pictures he flashed in front of us, the more I thought, “Nice try. I'm going to make this verdict as hard as possible for you.”

But don't think I intentionally slowed the whole process down just to spite the prosecutor. Even now I still believe that, whatever happened in that apartment that day – and nobody can ever know for sure – it was not capital murder. Tracy is just not a cold-blooded killer. She doesn't even have a criminal record, nothing against her to suggest that she is the kind of person who brutally murders people. She has two small children who love her more than anything. Has anyone else even stopped to consider what would happen to her kids if she is sent to prison, or worse, given the death penalty? After her husband took off, there was no one but her to look after those children. I won't try to deny that what happened to that man was horrible, I feel

very deeply for him. But whether Tracy is responsible or not, sending her to prison, or killing her, doesn't fix anything. It would just make this entire situation worse.

When we first sat down in the jury room together, and Frank looked around and said we should just give them our decision so we could move on to the hard part, I just about fainted. How anyone could make up their minds so quickly about just a serious issue... Thank goodness Sam spoke up. I was worried I would be the only person in the whole jury who cared about this woman's life.

He and I actually got to talking soon after our final vote on Tracy's guilt. I had wondered why he reacted so strongly, and insisted that we put the issue through a proper discussion. Especially since he was the only man to have such an opposition to finding Tracy guilty. Some of the other men were opposed to a sentence of death, of course, but that came later. First she had to be found guilty, and no other men seemed to have a problem with that part. Sam, though, provided sort of a rallying point for myself, Grace and Teri. He gave voice to our concerns, it seemed.

I thought it was fantastic, what he was doing, but I wasn't sure what it was that set him apart from the other men, so I asked him one day. He told me that he had a son, not much younger than Tracy, who had been in the Army and died overseas. This

happened almost five years ago, but he told me that the pain of losing his boy only got worse with each passing day. I can't imagine experiencing that kind of suffering. Losing my children would be the worst kind of torture conceivable... But anyway, Sam told me all about his son, then mentioned how he had seen Tracy's parents sitting in the courtroom. No one had pointed them out to him, he could just tell by their faces, how distraught they looked. He said he couldn't bring himself to inflict the pain of losing a child on another parent, no matter what that child had done.

Whatever his reason (and I have to say, he had a very good one) for supporting Tracy the way he did, I was very grateful for the support I got from Sam during the initial guilt phase. He was able to support his argument using legal jargon that even I had trouble keeping up with, and like I said, I had been doing some research. He was definitely the most intelligent of all of us, and he did try to bring his legal theories down to a level we could understand, though it was clear that, at times, nobody had a clue what he was talking about.

Grace and Teri weren't much help, once they saw that most people were leaning towards guilt they gave in pretty easily. I didn't see much merit in Troy's argument that we women were just looking out for our own kind. Not that it wasn't offensive, because it was, very. But the two of them were just looking to stir things up, I think. And me, well... It has nothing to do

with my being a woman. It has to do with the fact that nobody else in there, with the exception of Sam, wanted to give this girl a chance to get her life back. Her being a woman just made it all the easier for me to picture myself in that very situation, with nobody fighting for me.

Looking back now, I suppose I did get a little too argumentative early on in the decision making process. But at the time I felt really ganged up on, especially once Sam finally changed his mind. His reasoning was sound, he said that even though he didn't feel the prosecutor had succeeded in proving he guilty, he personally felt she had done it, and should be punished, just not by death. He didn't believe at that point that there would be much support for the death penalty once the second phase of the trial began, and we heard from Tracy's family and friends. He was wrong.

## Tyler

I knew, obviously, that a trial for capital murder would be time-consuming. But what I didn't expect was for the first part of the trial to take as long as it did. The legal arguments and witnesses and all that, sure. We had a lot of people to hear from and a lot of evidence to see. But I thought that our part would be a snap. I expected we would sit down, take a vote and that would be that. I couldn't believe the fuss that some people were causing. I saw Sam's point, sure, when he was using all that le-

gal jargon to say that the prosecutor couldn't prove without a doubt that Tracy had killed this guy. But we had the evidence right there. A bloody knife with her fingerprints all over it, plus all the witnesses – what more could you ask for in a murder trial?

I honestly stopped listening to the four who voted for innocence after Sam gave his little legal speech. That aspect was the only thing that would have slowed me down in my decision - not feeling *sorry* for Tracy, not even making sure we didn't jump to a hasty conclusion. We had plenty of time during the trial itself to make up our minds about her guilt. And in this case, it was just so glaringly obvious. The fact that anyone was considering the possibility of her innocence was offensive to me. First of all, she admitted to attacking him. Don't tell me she got carried away and his death was an accident – she went there, to his apartment, and hid there, waiting with a knife for him to come home. That takes any “accident” part right out of it. And then to think of how violent she was - I mean, my God, look at what she did to him before she killed him. She *tortured* him. She fucking *castrated* him. I've heard about murder victims being butchered before, but I never understood it until they showed us those pictures. Anyone who does that to another person is sick, and doesn't deserve another chance. Doesn't deserve the privilege of life.

All this talk about innocence was disrespectful to the man who was killed. In my mind, the killer needed to be brought to

justice as quickly as possible. Any time wasted in jury deliberations was a slap in the face to the victim's memory, and his family. Luckily for me, most of the other jurors agreed with me, in this respect, at least.

I couldn't believe how long it took us to sway the four who wanted to find Tracy innocent. Especially Julia. I got a little rough with her eventually, I do feel bad about that now. But she just wouldn't listen to reason, to the facts staring her in the face. So I tried a different approach. I must admit I bullied her. I got right in her face, accused her of having some sort of motive for trying to let Tracy walk free. Then I told her to imagine it was her husband who was killed, and if she would want her husband's murderer not to have to pay for the crime. That made her cry, and I do regret being so harsh with her. But I can't knock it entirely, it worked.

It would've been much quicker work, though, without Adam's input. He feels a lot like I do about prison and the death penalty, but he expresses it in a very different way. I did go a little too far trying to sway Julia, it's true, but Adam is a different story entirely. He was pretty quiet the whole time we were in there. He only spoke up when someone asked him his opinion. That was our mistake, I guess. We all had had our say, everyone said a little piece about why we were voting the way we were, so that we all understood each other. Then somebody noticed Adam hadn't said anything yet. Yeah, he was quiet all right, but

once he got going... The things he was saying were worse than anything I badgered Julia with. I don't think he was intentionally being cruel, he just has very strong feelings about the death penalty and he wanted us all to know it. I agree with his sentiment, that those who commit the ultimate crime should pay the ultimate price. He just expresses that sentiment in a much harsher way than I do. What was it he said? "I would gladly see every violent criminal fry in the electric chair, if not swing from a noose." That upset most of the women, Julia especially. I asked him later what made him feel so strongly about capital punishment. I wondered if maybe he had been affected by crime in some way, like I had. But he hadn't been, and he didn't really have an answer for me. I'm starting to think he's just the kind of guy who revels in watching other people suffer, only that's not socially acceptable, so he takes out his feelings of aggression on prisoners. I'm surprised a guy like that made it through jury selection. I can't imagine he was able to hide his enthusiasm for violence and punishment very well. Maybe the questions they asked him just weren't geared toward figuring out how much he supported the death penalty.

## Frank

After all the holy hell we just went through deciding that Tracy was guilty, none of us were very eager to jump back into it for the second part of the trial. But at least we had a couple weeks of sitting in the courtroom to look forward to before

we got locked back in that god-awful jury room to argue with each other again. Have you been in there? You wouldn't believe how tiny it is, and how hot it can get in there. Nobody cherished the thought of being cooped up in there for an even longer time than we spent deciding, innocent or guilty?

The first thing we heard during this second part of the trial was "aggravating circumstances." I gathered the gist of what that was supposed to be before it got started, but wasn't too sure what the point of it was. I figured, aggravating – like how you aggravate somebody, bother them, right? You make things difficult for them. But aggravating circumstances – I didn't know which side they were supposed to make things difficult for. Honestly, it took me near 'til the middle of that whole circus to make up my mind WHO this was aggravating.

Once I had it worked out, though, my gosh did that lawyer go overboard. Now we'd already seen all the pictures and the knife, we'd already had a real graphic description of the murder. But they did all that again, to drive home the point that it was an especially cruel crime, and should have the harshest punishment alongside it. This is where I had some real trouble, not with understanding what was going on, (I had most of it figured out by then, plus Sam was always willing to figure stuff out and explain to the rest of it). No, what I had trouble with here was figuring out what the heck I should vote for – life or death?

See, in any other trial... Most folks who get tried for this kind of crime are men. And men usually overpower someone weaker than them, or they're too hopped up on drugs to tell the difference. And they deserve to die, in my opinion. I've always thought so – that someone who takes another person's life should experience that injustice themselves. But sentencing a lady to die like that just seems *wrong*. I was raised a gentleman, raised to treat a lady with respect at all times, even if she isn't acting like one. What Tracy did, no lady could ever do that, unless the guy really truly deserved it. So I wasn't sure how that division in my mind would work itself out. Either Tracy was a monster, and didn't deserve the courtesy of my respect and should be sentenced to die, or the guy had it coming to him, and she should be spared the death penalty.

I was having a hell of a time deciding. I didn't want my whole decision to hinge on the fact that she was a woman. Wouldn't it be sexist of me to let that effect my viewpoint so much? I should be able to make my choice impartially, like Sam kept telling me. It didn't help me any that Tracy had never taken the stand at all and told us her version of things. I couldn't get a handle on her because she hadn't said a word the entire time. Lucky for me I guess, that changed as soon as we got to the second part of the penalty part of the trial, and we heard all about "mitigating" factors.

## Julia

The sentencing phase of the trial was even worse than the guilt phase. We began with hearing about all the aggravating factors, everything that made the murder “heinous.” At least my fellow jurors had the decency to look disgusted when they showed us the pictures and the knife, this time. But still, the overall effect was unnecessary. I was still unconvinced that Tracy was one hundred percent guilty, and this whole aggravation thing was just making it worse.

I had been looking into other death penalty trials with the little free time I had, and I made sure to focus on this “aggravation” part of the trial, because that seemed to be the most confusing part – I wasn’t exactly sure what exactly it meant, or what the point of it was. So I looked it up, and in most cases where the defendant had actually been found guilty of capital murder, there had been a much greater number of factors which were considered “aggravating.” For example, many cases involved multiple victims, multiple murders. Often the victim was very young, or very old, or weakened in some other way. There were also a good few hate crimes, or crimes committed for the financial benefit of the criminal.

The only aggravating factor working against Tracy was the fact that the murder was “especially heinous, atrocious, cruel, or de-

praved (or involved torture).” Again, this assumes that a murder took place and that it was her doing, which, even now, I still don’t entirely agree with that. But even so, that statement is so vague, who are we to decide what is “atrocious and cruel” and what isn’t? And compared to what? To a pleasant, humane murder? What qualifies me and the eleven other people in that room to discern one crime from another? We had no training, no examples to learn from even. We were thrown in there on our own to decide if somebody lives or dies – how is it that we were given that kind of power?

Anyway, the prosecutor knew that the only aggravating factor he had to go on was this “heinous” business, and let’s not even get started on that. That one word caused us an entire day of arguments in the jury room. Most of us weren’t sure exactly what it meant – I just assumed it was synonymous with cruel and atrocious. They’re all words that mean horrible and brutal, right?

Sam was quick to speak up and say that we needed to be absolutely positive of every part of the definition. That it was imperative for us to understand absolutely every part of this procedure, since we were facing such an important decision, literally life-and-death. So we spent an entire morning with a dictionary, hashing out every nuance of every word on the list we were given of possible “aggravators.” We then spent a further five hours arguing as we tried to come up with a common definition for each word.

The low point of that day came when Stanley decided to finally contribute to our discussion. He told us that he didn't really care what "heinous" really meant, that to him it sounded like something dirty that was only legal in the South, so that's what he was going to base his decision on. Typical immature male response, right? That set me off. I wish I could say I really yelled at him and put him in his place, but I was so shocked, all I could muster was a cold glare in his direction, followed by blatantly ignoring anything he had to say for the rest of the deliberation process.

His comment really stuck with me, though. How could someone so obviously uncaring be allowed to sit on a jury? I wanted to know how in God's name he even made it through the selection process. I couldn't sleep for a few weeks after that. It shook me, to know I was part of such an obviously flawed system. I wanted to change it, to be the one who was able to sway everybody else, once it became clear that the majority of them favored death. I just had no idea how to do it. After I put up such a fight over the "guilty" verdict, nobody seemed to take me seriously.

I swear, Rodger and Tyler, they felt the most strongly in favor of the death penalty due to personal circumstances, and I sympathize with them, I do. It's horrible, the things they went through – Tyler with his older brother, and Rodger, whose sister got attacked by someone who just wanted a few dollars

to get high. I understand how they can feel so angry toward any criminal, and want to see them punished harshly. I just don't agree with it. And every time I started to make my own case about sparing Tracy the death penalty, the two of them would just look at each other and roll their eyes. "Here she goes again."

I could understand their frustration, at least during the first part of the trial, when we had to decide Tracy's guilt or innocence. I'm a very stubborn person, after all, and I suppose most people were expecting the decision of guilty or innocent to go a little more smoothly, or a little more quickly. But like Sam said, this was not a decision to be taken lightly. And I didn't give up my position without a fight – only when my every argument had been exhausted twice over, and I could no longer deny that Tracy had in fact been responsible for that man's death, did I finally cast my vote for guilt.



*The defendant behaved much as one might expect of someone standing trial for capital murder. She kept her head down, she was very quiet. She never spoke unless absolutely necessary. She had refused to take the stand during the guilt phase of the trial, even at the price of her freedom. She didn't say a word to defend herself from the accusation. Then she was found guilty. She had a very surprised countenance, as if she couldn't believe that anyone had believed her responsible for the crime. She almost appeared to go in to*

*shock, and sat through the prosecutor's presentation of aggravating factors wearing a dazed, slightly panicked expression. Hearing the details of the crime re-hashed in such a brutal fashion seemed to stun her.*

*Tracy sat up straight as the prosecutor began to wrap up his discourse. She leaned over to whisper something to her lawyer – the first time throughout the entire trial that she had spoken without first being addressed. He gave her a startled look, and quickly nodded his head.*

*The defense lawyer stood as the judge called on him to present any mitigating factors that may influence the jurors' decision. He strode to the front of the courtroom, spinning on his heel to face the jury. "I would like to point out how distressed my client has been over this whole ordeal, and how much she regrets how these events unfolded. I can say with honesty that although Tracy believes she acted out of necessity, she is deeply sorry for any pain and suffering caused by her actions. But I'm not going to stand her and try to convince you of this – after all, I wasn't there, I cannot tell you exactly what happened. I would like to present to you some mitigating factors, and in order to do this I call to the stand one Ms. Tracy Walker, to give you an honest account of her ordeal."*

*The jurors looked around at each other, surprised and slightly eager to hear what Tracy had to say. She had been so silent throughout the entire trial so far, everyone was curious to hear what her response to being charged guilty would be. A tense silence filled the courtroom as Tracy approached the stand. Her lawyer followed, and began to ask her questions.*

*"Ms. Walker, I understand there are a few things about your involvement in this crime that you would like to share with the jury." Tracy nodded.*

*"I understand you would like to tell the courtroom about the previous relationship you had with the victim" An excited murmur ran through the room – previous relationship? As far as anybody knew, jurors included, Tracy hadn't known the victim at all. Wasn't the murder completely random?*

*Tracy nodded again, leaning forward to speak into the microphone, so the whole room could hear her weak voice. "We were acquaintances. A friend of a friend, we first met years ago. I only ever saw him two or three times. But the last time I did... The last time I was afraid for my life. He attacked me, beat me, and then, he raped me."*

## **Tyler**

Sitting in the courtroom while the lawyers tried to argue for and against the death penalty was unlike anything I'd ever experienced. The entirety of that second part of the trial was so surreal to me. I'm no stranger to death and tragedy, obviously. My stellar upbringing provided for that. But to actually watch people volleying for the life of some stranger was incredible. I almost expected the two lawyers to get in a tug-of-war match, Tracy in the middle.

Now, I'm a full fledged supporter of the death penalty. I've made that crystal clear through the entire process. I have no sympathy for criminals, especially those who kill other people. But personally, I think the part where we were shown all the aggravating factors had the opposite intended effect. It's supposed to make us want to vote for Tracy to be put to death, right? And yes, that is my belief and nothing I saw or heard in the trial changed that belief. But really, for all those on the jury who were undecided and weren't sure what they would vote for... I think the aggravating factors almost made them reluctant to want to vote for death.

It was just such a gruesome process. Some of the ladies got physically sick, I myself felt nauseous the whole time. The prosecutor was cutthroat; he was as graphically descriptive as possible in giving us the details of the crime. And I understand why, I know he wanted us to feel for the poor guy and get up in arms about what Tracy did to him. He wanted us to be so disturbed by the crime that we saw no other option but the death penalty. However, some of us, the undecided ones like I said, they started getting angry at the prosecutor for taking it so far – enough is enough, right? It was disrespectful to the dead man, I think, the way he was carrying on. The pictures he showed us were absolutely unnecessary. I know that the victim didn't have much family... but if it was my family member or friend who was killed, I wouldn't want photos of their mutilated body displayed and blown up for an entire courtroom to see, like some kind of damn sideshow spectacle.

I could tell that the more he pushed about what a brutal crime it was, the more some jurors closed off and refused to be swayed by his arguments. Julia was the ringleader for this – she was anti-death penalty right from the start, and she used the prosecutor's brutal tactics to try and get more people on her side.

His argument may not have had the effect the prosecutor intended, but it was powerful all the same. I mean, we were told all about the details of the crime during the first half of the trial, but not to this extent. We had known, of course, that she stabbed him to death with a knife, and that she castrated him before she went ahead and killed him. We had known that he had dozens of stab wounds all over his body. We hadn't known the extent of his wounds – that she had methodically avoided all major arteries and organs, to ensure that he suffered for as long as possible before he died. We hadn't known that she made sure to use a blunt knife, and twisted it to make sure the cuts weren't clean – that they were rough and ragged.

And of course, we hadn't known about Tracy's supposed past with the victim. This didn't come up until we were hearing about the mitigating factors, I guess because this was supposed to be one. I'm still not sure if I believe it or not, though, even now. It seemed pretty coincidental that she suddenly decided to take the stand and tell us all about how she knew the guy, how he was the friend of a friend who had assaulted and raped her years ago. She hadn't thought of telling this to anybody be-

fore, during the guilty/not guilty part of the trial? But once her life was on the line, she suddenly had a motive for the crime?

Not that having a motive makes her any less responsible, any less guilty. She claims that she has felt continuously threatened by this guy for the past ten years, after he attacked her once, ten years ago... How do you figure that? There was no indication that he was planning on a repeat performance. He wasn't sending her threatening notes. Christ, there wasn't even any proof that he had raped her in the first place!

That's why I wasn't sure if I should believe her. Who says she wasn't just making up some sob story to make us all feel bad for her? Make us pity her, so we wouldn't give her the death penalty? It's like she was trying to punish him for it, but had a few screws loose or something. She could've gone to police all those years ago, and let him be punished the right way. I mean, there's no excuse for rape... if he really did do it, he should've been sent to jail – not murdered!

**Treating her any different than we would treat a man is sexist.**

Anyway, that little testimonial of Tracy's made things hell back in the jury room. All of a sudden all the women were up on their soapboxes about feminism, and women's rights. Not that I have a problem with that. I'm all about equal rights for women, and I have no sympathy for people who take advantage of women, especially rapists. But the female jurors were trying to make feminism an excuse to vote for life instead of death. I just can't support that. So what if Tracy's a woman? Treating her any different than we would treat a man is sexist, no matter if the different treatment is beneficial to her or not.

I refused to have any more or any less sympathy for Tracy due to the fact that she's a woman. The twelve of us are supposed to be a jury of her peers, we're supposed to be impartial, right? Judge her exactly as we would any other person? Well, let me tell you, there's no way all the jurors thought that way. The women saw themselves as Tracy's peers, all right, but they didn't see the rest of us, the men, that way. Some of the men were just as bad. Frank kept going on and on about how Tracy was a "lady" and he was a gentleman who had to treat her with the respect she deserved. Well, sure, Frank, that's fine, to give her respect. But there's no way he would've given that same respect to a man in Tracy's position, that's for damn sure.

Then there was Adam... like I said before, he has a very different viewpoint when it comes to capital punishment. He has a different viewpoint when it comes to most kinds of crime, as

it turns out. After Tracy gave her testimonial about how the victim had raped her all those years ago, and we were hashing it out in the jury room, he started ridiculing the women for suggesting that Tracy's actions made sense when viewed in the light of a rape. He went on and on about how she probably deserved it, because women these days are asking for it with the way they dress and act. That got are asking for it with the way they dress and act. That got everybody in an uproar, pro-death or not – we as jury members had never been so united as in that moment – eleven of us against the one outlier. The one crazy outlier.

My god, I don't know how he even made it on to the jury with ideas like that. Isn't the whole voir dire process supposed to weed out people like him, the ones who are just socially...off? I mean I know jury selections are supposed to be random, and I guess maybe Adam was the representative of that portion of our population that is just a little bit nuts. His behavior during our jury deliberations didn't help his case any. All twelve of us usually ended up at the same place for lunch, we'd try and talk to each other about something not related to the trial. It was nice, we got to know each other outside of the confines of the jury room – it even helped sometimes in understanding why one person held a particular viewpoint. Like Casey, the only woman who felt a pull towards voting for death the entire time. She explained to me how she had grown up in a small town, very conservative, with a very low crime rate. She was raised to

think that all criminals were bad people, regardless of the crime or the situation that drove someone to commit that crime. She was taught that they were bad people who could not be fixed, and that made her more willing to vote for a sentence of death.

But anyway, Adam was the only one who was always reluctant to join in our conversations at lunch, unless they revolved around sports or another completely neutral, non-personal topic. He was also the heaviest drinker out of the whole bunch. I myself would often have a beer or two with lunch, to help me relax a little. Many of my fellow jurors would do the same – but one or two drinks only. Adam would order whole pitchers for himself, and be half-drunk by the time we got back to the jury room. On several occasions I know I smelled pot wafting off of him. And hey, I'm not one to judge someone else for drinking or smoking pot – come on, I do that shit, most of the people I know do it too. But we were on a jury trying to decide if somebody should live or die. When you have a job that important, you don't come to work drunk or high. You just don't. It's disrespectful to the whole system and damn irresponsible.

I'm surprised nobody called Adam on his behavior. I thought for sure one of the women would've brought it up during one of our many arguments, or that one of the guys would've pulled him aside and told him to get his act together. Although I never mentioned it to him, so I can't complain about everybody else's failure to bring it up. I was just shocked that he would

have the nerve to act like that, and that there was no authority to keep him in line. That, I thought, was a huge problem with the whole trial system – we as jurors had nowhere to report, there was nobody to guide us. Nobody would even answer our questions – not the judge, neither of the lawyers. The only thing anybody would tell us was to “consult the jury instructions” if we were confused. Right, OK, the jury instructions. They caused more problems than they helped to resolve.

Now, I consider myself to be a pretty smart guy. Sure, I never had much of a conventional education, I never went to college, but I managed to work my way up through the ranks in the military and got myself hired at a prestigious private company. You need to be pretty intelligent to be able to do something like that. But never in my life have I seen such a complicated and vague document as the jury instructions. Half of the words we looked up in a dictionary, we spent ages on “heinous.”

We also argued back and forth for hours about “life without parole” – the other option besides death, once Tracy had been found guilty. Casey, once she had committed to voting for death, focused on that one statement and made that her argument for trying to sway all the other women. She kept telling us that prisoners sentenced to life without parole are released all the time, and pose a danger to the public. Julia didn’t like that one bit, and spat back that Tracy only acted out against a

person who posed a threat to her, and that since that person was now dead and buried...no one else was at risk from her.

I had a lot of problems with that whole train of thought. First of all, (and I made sure to consult a lawyer friend after the trial was over, to make sure I was right) life with out parole means life without parole. The sentence is never going to magically change, and the prisoner is not going to be released and go on a killing spree. But neither did I agree with Julia’s assertion that Tracy was no longer a threat to anybody, because she had done away with the one person who had wronged her.

I mean, first of all, she could’ve just made the whole thing up – maybe he didn’t rape her, maybe he was just some random guy. But taking for a fact that this guy did rape her, it had been ten years, then she all of a sudden decided he needed to die for what he did to her? That alarms me more than anything. Who’s to say that Tracy doesn’t have some old boyfriend who broke her heart, or a friend who stole a love interest or something? Then, years later, Tracy decides that this person just needs to die, to make up for past grievances? Nobody even knew that she and the victim had known each other – all kinds of past acquaintances of hers might be walking around, just biding their time until the day that Tracy decides she’s had it, and needs to strike back...

## Frank

The last week or so that we spent as a jury has gotta be the most stressful thing I've ever experienced. From the minute we stepped back in to the jury room after hearing about Tracy and her motive for what she did, we were split about even over who wanted to vote for death and who wanted to vote for life. I was voting for life, originally. Hearing Tracy up there on the stand, talking about how she had been raped all those years ago, well honestly it did tug on my heartstrings quite a bit. And it made me see her as weak and defenseless, like she had no other choice but to defend herself against him. It also just seemed wrong, to me, to sentence such a frail creature to death... it broke my heart to see her so upset, pouring her heart out to us, dressed in a grimy jumpsuit about six sizes too big for her, and with chains wrapped all around her. I just felt such pity for her, I couldn't bear to vote for her death when she already looked so tiny and broken.

Tyler had some heated words with me about that – about the fact that I would gladly have sent to death any fella who done the same thing Tracy did. Told me it was just as sexist as telling ladies they oughta stay in the kitchen instead of having jobs, and that if women were really equal to men they should receive the same treatment in the justice system, and the same punishments. I had to agree with him, in the end. If I had no

reservations about executing a man, I had to at least consider the same option for a woman criminal. In my gut I still think it's just wrong, but I had to leave my emotions out of it – that was part of my job as a member of that jury.

I changed my vote about halfway through the time we spent making the decision. It was real tough for me, of course, but I could tell that's the way that everyone else was leaning. By the time I was ready to vote for death, only three other folks were still fighting for life. Sam still didn't want to have anyone's death on his mind, though his argument that it couldn't be proved that Tracy had done it just got weaker and weaker every day. I mean, she had admitted it on the stand, right? Said, "yes I killed him, but I had a good reason why." And besides, she'd already been found guilty, we all decided that, all voted on it during the first part of the trial, Sam included. Now he was trying to go back and say she wasn't really guilty? He just felt bad after hearing Tracy's awful story, and heck, I felt real bad too. But like I said, I couldn't let my feeling bad keep me from making the right decision, legally, and I think Sam finally saw that too.

So he was the next to change his mind after me, and then we only had two ladies to deal with. Casey had already swayed the other ladies, and it was just Julia and Grace. And then it was just Julia. She held on for a good long while, it was a week or two where only she was hanging on, and every one else trying

to make her change her mind. And, don't get me wrong, she was pretty persuasive, had some pretty good arguments, but all her arguments seemed to center on making Tracy innocent, when we had already decided she was guilty. She got her emotions too wrapped up in it. I did the same thing, at first, but she refused to quit. A couple times she broke down crying, it almost seemed like she wanted us to feel sorry for her, and change all our minds to make her happy. Or to make us feel guilty, I'm not sure... Either way, it took us awhile to wear her down. I expected that we would eventually, but I was real surprised at how long she Julia held on.

## Julia

Everything that led up to the final vote for Tracy's life or death was the most harrowing thing I've ever experienced. I had anticipated from the very start that I would be fighting a losing battle. I fully expected to have to argue my point all alone, and put up with all sorts of disparaging comments from other people about how I am too "soft," or slowing things up on purpose. I didn't expect to be attacked for it personally, though. And I thought I would be able to do a better job of convincing people to stay on my side...

I was surprised that Frank's original vote was for life, especially considering how eager he had been to vote for Tracy's guilt straight away in the guilt phase of the trial. Given his eagerness

to see her convicted of the worst possible crime and sit trial for either death or a life in prison, I didn't expect any kind of sympathy from him. So, like I said, it surprised me to hear him vote for life, though I did appreciate having him on my side, if only for a little bit.

He was always a friend to me, Frank was. And he could understand my perspective, got where I was coming from, even if he didn't agree with it. Unlike most of the others, he treated me with respect, although he did become slightly patronizing right after changing his vote. He told me that I was letting my emotions cloud over my good judgment, but he was confident that I would be able to set aside my feelings and make the right choice in the end. As if his changing his mind meant that everybody else immediately had to agree with him, and anybody who didn't was just plain wrong? But I can't give him too hard of a time for that – most of the rest of the jury was much, much worse. In fact, of all those who voted for death first thing, only Tyler was decent to me about it. I think he felt bad for speaking to me so harshly the first time around, to make me vote for Tracy's guilt. He made it very clear that he did not agree with me, but at least had a sense of decency about it.

Everybody else, though... Adam was by far the worst. I don't think anybody shared his harsh opinion about the death penalty – he was the only one who reveled in how violent and harsh the whole process is. And he was the one to ridicule me, day

in and day out, for not wanting to vote for death. He never tried to invalidate my reasons for voting for life by presenting a stronger argument of his own, he would just tell me that I was wrong, and I was costing everybody more money by dragging out the process, and giving Tracy false hope that since we were taking so long maybe we would return a sentence of life in prison – and, of course we would end up sentencing her to death. – Adam seemed so positive of that from the very start.

At first it was easy for me to disregard the poor treatment I was experiencing. I knew I was doing the right thing, standing up for Tracy when almost no one else would. I was prepared to deal with the harsh treatment that was doled out to me. But as our time in the jury room wore on, it started to get to me – I found it harder and harder to deal with the stress of having to be the only person willing to stand up for Tracy, having my beliefs and ideals attacked each and every day, being made out to be the “bad” guy. It was incredibly trying.

Now, even though Adam was the most cruel of everyone, and enjoyed personally attacking me, that doesn't mean the rest of the pro-death jurors weren't ruthless as well. They just restrained themselves a bit more when it came to questioning my sanity and mocking my intelligence – they wouldn't come and say it straight out, but I could tell what they were thinking. Even the other women, once they had all switched over to voting for death, they talked to me like I was too frail to deal with the pressures of the jury room.

Maybe they were right, maybe I was too weak to deal with it. I was certainly too weak to sway the rest of the jury to see my side of things – I fought my battle as long as I could, told them again and again that Tracy was acting in self defense. Even if that man was posing no immediate physical threat to her, she still felt that she was in jeopardy, and had to act to protect herself. That's what I believe, but what I was unable to convince anybody else of. And what I was unable to hold on to, in the end. Because eventually it just became too much. I couldn't handle the disparaging remarks and judgments any longer. I was only one-twelfth of that jury, I can't let myself shoulder all of the responsibility for Tracy's fate anymore. And besides, she's getting an automatic appeal – the next highest court, put into place to check up on our work. They wouldn't let our decision be the only factor deciding Tracy's fate, right?



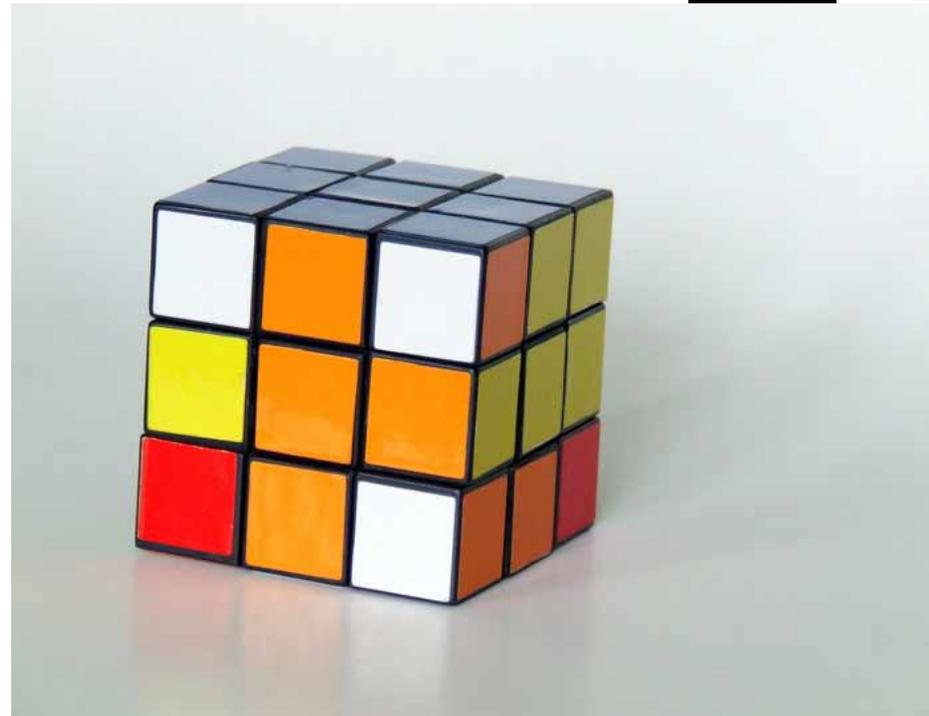
**Author's Note:** Criminal justice in America today is a huge system consisting of many different smaller components. Only in a perfect world would each part of the process – from arrest, all the way through the trial process and incarceration or probation/parole – function with complete legality and fairness. Problems are bound to occur every once in awhile. However, the American system is currently functioning so unsuccessfully as to present a cause for heightened concern, and a call for change. The problems and prejudices plaguing our justice system are many and varied, and will not be fixed quickly or easily. This work of fiction presents only a few of these problems, in hopes of displaying just how truly stunted our criminal justice system can be. Only through increased awareness can we begin to fix some of these problems.

# RUBIK'S' RAINBOW

by Jonas Varnum

“Jesus Christ,” officer Williams cursed. “Not again,” he thought, dreading what the scene might be like. “731 reporting to dispatch.” It was his third code red in as many nights and the two previous ones had not been pretty. Williams looked down at the glowing clock in the car: 4:32. “Doesn’t it ever stop?” he wondered.

When Williams was shifted to night duty a month and half ago for the summer he knew it would be a nightmare. Summertime always was an escalation. Escalated crime, escalated drugs, escalated death. As he raced to the scene, he recalled the simple mistake he made back in April that led to the punishment of working the worst shift of the worst time of the year. He knew that fucker was a routine abuser. Every night the girlfriend cried as the dealer constantly pushed drugs and the run-ins he had with Williams in the past proved that he was always packing. So when Williams heard the poor girls screams from a block away on routine in the middle of the afternoon, he hardly thought about the probable cause of entering. “Get out of my goddamn house, you cop fucker,” the woman yelled. The phone calls came pouring in – unlawful entry, burglary, attempted robbery – the chief had to switch his duty. Now he was doing this shit.



As he turned from East Capitol St onto Minnesota, the update came over the radio: “suspected homicide – three dead, multiple gun shot wounds.” Williams had presumed as much. Benning and Minnesota was this summer’s nightmare. Last year it was Shipley Terrace in Southeast, the year before that it was Trinidad just a few miles down from this new criminal cafe. Fenty would undoubtedly put up roadblocks the next morning in what seemed like what has become standard procedure in the District.

Williams stepped out of the car, and, noticing the dismal drizzle coming down, began briskly crossing the street towards the Shop Express at the corner of the intersection where the assembly of officers stood inspecting the ground. Following their gaze, he realized the officers were not huddled around talking, but gazing over carcass number one. “Hey Mike,” they called over. “You ever seen anything like this?” a long skinny trooper asked Williams as he joined the group. Williams bowed his head. He was a veteran of 15 years. He had seen this all too often. When he was a senior in high school he was the fastest kid in the Potomac. The day before the Potomac Challenge, he was walking home from Roosevelt High on Iowa and watched his best friend get shot 20 feet in front of him in broad daylight on a drive by. That was supposed to be the safe part of the city. As he held his friends’ bleeding head that day, he realized he wanted to become a police officer to stop the endless random violence. Mike Williams had seen plenty like this.

“It’s a fuckin mess, Mike. We counted 22 rounds in this doe. Then there are two more on top of that with 12 and 10. Had to have reloaded. The ballistics are everywhere – it’s a bloody mess man. We’re still canvassing, but we haven’t seen anything. Couple crackheads over there have given us the runaround, say there was another person that got out of the car, but we’ve only found these three so far. I mean it’s possible someone will turn up; we’ve only been here for five minutes. The crack heads came up to us immediately saying they saw everything. Based on what they said, we think there may be one main shooter, maybe an accomplice, but they’re so doped up who knows. They’ve agreed to testify though, ha. Oh here comes the ambulance. We’re gonna need to search the cars before they get to them.” Seeing the blank look Mike gave him, the officer pointed.

Turning, Mike saw the wreckage. On the other side of Minnesota, an SUV was lodged inside the burnt out Deli that long ago had seen its last customer walk out its decaying wooden doors. The SUV was a natural accordion at this point, scrunched up as it whistled its dying hisses. There was still liquid dripping out of the bottom, trickling down to the broken glass that littered the sidewalk. Williams noticed the large chunk of shattered back window lying next to a run over fence that had once barricaded the entrance to the deserted property that sat lonely between the Deli and Benning’s westbound bridge. The rain was coming down harder now, and as he carelessly plodded over, he looked closer at the glass, confirming his suspicion that the large chunk

had been kicked out from the back as the exit for whomever was driving.

“Seen the other one?” the question came in his ear.

“Hey John!” Mike exclaimed. He noticed how terrible his excitement was, but couldn’t help feeling relieved that his best friend in the District was there that night to help. Returning to the more appropriate somber form, Mike replied simply, “No,” and turning to another officer order, “Get in there and turn it inside out – check for drugs, bullets, everything.”

“When did you get here John? This place is a mess. They said it was a homicide, but this crash should have killed anyone anyway.”

“I followed the ER. We were working further up Benning,” Mike’s friend replied. They stepped onto the rundown fence, and Williams saw the other car. It was facing the approaching officers and its hood pointed towards the Shop Express. John spoke for both of them, “Seems like they swiped at each other, locked wheels and then spun out. I’d say they were racin’ up Minnesota and when they tried to unlock, they both spun off left. The Honda was lucky enough to not go through the ditch.”

Williams agreed. By the initial look of it he was surprised that the SUV had not crushed the ancient rusty brown Honda Ac-

cord that was right before him. Somehow it had wound up miraculously facing Minnesota with nothing more than the front right headlight smashed and the bumper hanging off, but otherwise the Honda was surprisingly intact. As Williams walked towards it, he noticed two other officers already sifting through the front seats searching for every piece of evidence that could be found.

One of the officers flicked on the headlights. The left beam still worked and pointed directly at Mike. Cringing away from it, he turned around, tracking the light’s beam. The light clipped the right part of the eye of the large peacock that colored the mural on the left side of the Gift Shop next to the Shop Express. As Williams moved out of the way of the light, it extended its gaze on the entire back alleyway of the Shop Express. Williams thought he noticed something move from the dumpster out of the light. Peering through the rain, he noticed the dumpster shifting weight, followed by the lid shut unexpectedly. Williams began jogging over. He crossed through the light’s beam again and brushing his now soaked dark hair from the constant drizzle, saw a black man with a baseball hat and gray tank top hurdle the dumpster and take off running.

Sounding the alarm, Mike pursued down the alleyway. As he turned past a beat-up, broken-down pick-up, he tripped, flying face first into the concrete. Looking up, he saw the man turn left and vanish into the confines of the muggy, protective trees

that made up the park that ran parallel to Benning Rd. Officers streamed past Mike chasing the perpetrator, but as Mike stood up he heard John from behind him: “Shit, Mike, you do have a knack for uncovering evidence.”

Turning around Mike looked at the protruding leg of the broken corpse of a teenage girl. A red Victoria’s Secret thong was scrunched pathetically between a red pool of blood and one of the girl’s unconscious inert legs. The other leg was badly lacerated, and as Mike pulled the body out from under the truck, he noticed the large circle of skin cut out from just below the scalp. It was as if a disgruntled Rottweiler had gotten hold of a five year-old’s doll and mutilated it. The hair, matted and pulled out in clumps, remained behind as the police took the Barbie-like figure into the light. “Now what do you got John?” Mike asked. “The two cars drag-race up and down the fuckin worst street in the District, crash, proceed to have an argument, one shoots the other 22 times, sees a fucking 12 year-old girl in the street at 4:00 in the morning and rapes the fucking shit out of her?!” Mike cried outrageously.

“What the fuck, John?! What the fuck is wrong with this country?”

## Two Months Later

Vincent knocked a little harder on the glass door outside the D.C. Correctional Detention Facility. Smiling up at the camera, he waved to where he knew the CO’s sat inside. Vincent was in a hurry. He needed to see his clients before the count started and he only had another 45 minutes. Walking in, he threw his pack off his shoulders, shoved it towards the officer, pulled out his badge and authoritatively said, “PDS” to the official through the metal detector. They waved him through, he signed in, filled out the paperwork, and picked up his bag, grimacing as he noticed the dirty CO’s hands had touched the pristine subpoenas he still wished to serve later that day.

Walking over to the receptionist he asked for a handful of people and told her that he has already been there numerous times. “This is your second trip today, Mr. Jules,” she dulls out in her annoying scratchy voice.

“Ummm... thanks, ma’am,” Vincent responds, half amused, half pissed that the D.C. jail hasn’t forced her into mandatory retirement yet. Honestly, he thought, if there was ever a riot, you think this old kook could really handle the control room where all the doors to the outside are handled? He waited patiently for her to give him his visitor’s badge and, once he had it, walked over to the entrance door. As she pressed it open, Vin-

cent checked his watch: 3:20 p.m. Forty minutes he thought, striding through the doors to the elevator at the end of the hall and pressing down.

Inside the elevator, he pressed two and waited for it to budge. He had learned long ago to never go to the floor where his clients lived on. Always check floor two first, then go down lower, and if you have to come back up to the first floor, do it only as a last resort. The COs on the first floor were simply idiots and Vincent knew that he would be have to add an extra twenty, thirty minutes if he had to go up to the first floor.

That's another thing, why do we have to go down to see the prisoners and back up when we leave, Vincent thought. He was always perplexed at the reasoning behind having the prisoners live underground. When you walk up to the jail, its size looms ominously over you. Next door to the jail was the Criminal Treatment Facility, where they held the fortunate prisoners that needed particular care, special privileges, or were lucky enough to be snitches that needed protection and therefore could not afford to be in the jail. CTF looked very much the same size wise as jail and when Vincent had taken tours of the prisoners in CTF, they were all on the top floors, not the bottom. The basement grounds in CTF were where the haircuts and dental and education areas were. Did the jail just switch that around so prisoners could never look outside? Come to think of it, does the jail even have places for dental and educational areas? Why

doesn't everybody in jail get the dental? How come it's only for people that snitch?

The elevator opened breaking up Vincent's daydream. He walked over to the maintenance officers and slid his papers through the hole that reminded him so much of the barrier between him and the ticket takers at the movie theatres back home. "They're three of them," he said. "I'd like to have Morrison go last, but don't really care about the order of the other two. Actually those two shouldn't take long at all. You should probably pull them all at the same time actually." He waited, but no response came from the officer. He took the papers back, walked over to the sliding metal door, paused as the officer pressed the button in the cage to open them, and then sauntered over to legal room number three.

Vincent always chose the third legal room. Perhaps it was a rare instance of OCD, but for some reason Vincent had always liked the chairs in the third room the best. He had no idea why – the four orange chairs were the exact same in all seven legal rooms, and they encircled the middle card table consistently in every room as well. He could see his surroundings the best in the first three rooms too, something simply months of investigating had taught him to do as a basic instinct.

From his seat, Vincent could survey the entire floor from the door leading to the prisoner's cells to the elevator that he

came down on. He looked at the clock on the wall to the left, 3:30. Vincent hated waiting for prisoners. They never had any concept of how long he had to wait. Then again, he thought, how long do the prisoners have to wait for anything – a meal, exercise, a visit? His eyes diverted from the clock to scan the rest of the room. There was the lone prisoner talking to what was obviously his loved one through the telephone. Behind the prisoner a CO waited inside the corridor away from the conversation, but still close enough that the CO could handle any situation the prisoner could potentially throw at him. Vincent looked at the empty orange seats that stockpiled the room. He had seen the seats mostly full upon occasion in the morning as the majority of visitors do generally come around 10:30 to 11:00. Today though the empty seats added to the all too familiar orange blur that encompasses jail – orange inmates, orange seats, orange paint. Everything was monotonous, equal, and depressing, Vincent thought.

He noticed the CO at the door to the prison cells move and watched the inmate walk by the 6” by 6” window that resides on each prison door. It was Damion Randolph. Vincent had never actually met Damion, but still needed to have him sign a couple of formalities. Damion actually had a different attorney than the one Vincent worked for, but as Vincent was going to jail that day anyway, he would do a favor for his compatriots. As Damion walked through the hallway, Vincent sized him up, sure that Damion was returning the favor. After all, Vincent

was the only one in the legal representation area at present, so Damion had to be wondering who the hell this random white-collar was.

Damion was not a large individual so his short stature added to the thickness around his body. He was maybe 5’8” and weighed around 200. Completely bald, he had a long thin scar stretching from his left ear to the beginning of his jaw line making his face look like a disfigured bowling ball. His nose looked like it had been smashed in some accident or another and overall Vincent had a sneaking suspicion that this punk knew had to take a couple.

When Damion came through the next set of sliding doors, always operated by the officer inside the caged off glass box that divided the visiting area and the legal representation area, he awkwardly waited for recognition from Vincent. Vincent finally motioned for Damion to come and sit next to him, introducing himself when Damion entered.

“Hi Damion, my name is Vincent Jules. I work in the investigations department at the Public Defenders Service. Lee Fowler, the attorney you spoke with the other day about the incident back in June, asked me to come by today to see if you wouldn’t sign a couple of things.”

“Okay.”

“You see, Ms. Fowler was hoping you could sign off on a release of your medical records from the hospital. She thinks that the prosecution can use the forensics from the bullet that you were shot with. We’re just checking all the avenues. As you know, we’re not given anything...”

“Yah, I got you. So what you want me to do?”

“We need you to sign this medical release form. It’s standard procedure and will allow us access to all your records from your stay at Howard Hospital from June 14th until your release.”

“And why didn’t Mrs. Flower have me sign it when she left?”

“We didn’t think we’d need them at the time?” Vincent held out a pen and the filled out paper already. “Where was it by the way? The bullet I mean,” Vincent asked curiously.

Damion shot him a look of cold resentment. Lowering his gaze, Damion simply pointed to about two inches above his heart. Vincent’s jovialness diminished almost immediately. He mustered a “Jesus,” but had to clear his throat as the last syllable barely escaped his lips. He meekly watched Damion in handcuffs struggle to sign the sheet of paper, realizing just how

close Damion may have been to never be able to sign anything at all. Feeling rather embarrassed, Vincent issued a “thanks” and tried once more to end the conversation relatively friendly.

“Let us know if you need anything Damion. Ms. Fowler definitely is working to help you in any means necessary.” Damion simply looked away towards the inmate still talking to his loved one. He had completely stopped caring about whatever it was this Vincent had called him for. The only thing Damion looked forward to was going back to his cell, alone, unbothered.

Vincent watched this transformation with humility and guilt. He had been to jail a few times before since starting this job as an intern investigator right after graduating from college. He had become accustomed to people simply not wanting to talk to him. Vincent watched Damion walk through the doorway leading to the prison cells. He could not shake the awkward exchange that had just passed between the two of them. It was funny, he thought. Every time the cold shoulder had been given to him, he had remained happy and tried again. However, Damion was different. Vincent felt like he had insulted him. Maybe it was simply that Damion was a prisoner, and if a convicted criminal did not have the time to talk to Vincent, who should?

Vincent’s pensive streak snapped abruptly as another prisoner came through the door almost immediately. He was considerably taller than Damion, maybe three or four inches taller,

skinny, had glasses and short, curly black hair. Vincent could not help but notice how every time he saw Jamal Lawrence, he looked exactly like somebody Vincent would see walking out of his college cafeteria.

Jamal looked smart because he was smart. Jamal however was doomed due to the knack he had for always being in the wrong place at the wrong time. He was in his third year at UDC when he went to a party where there was ecstasy. He simply hadn't realized it when a girl had slipped E into his pocket. When the police showed up they broke it up, but some kids were under 18 and were sick enough that they needed to be transported to a hospital. Jamal was one of the few who was a legal adult and finding the E in his pocket, the police took him into custody. At the station they noticed his name came up in the database with a guilty plea to possession of a controlled substance, PCP, when he was 18. Here he is now being indicted for possession with intent to distribute (PWID) to minors and simple possession charges. Together the three rack up to potential serious time and Vincent knew it.

Vincent stood from his chair as Jamal came into the room. He smiled, trying to start over from his debacle with Damion, and extended his hand, "Hello Jamal, how are you today?"

Jamal, who due to the fact that he was only booked on drug charges, was not handcuffed, responded in a quiet, meticulous

manner, "I am good, Vincent. Thank you for asking. How are you today?"

"I'm good thanks. So Natasha and I are just..."

"Vincent, can I ask you a question?" Jamal interrupted. Vincent laughed inside. Stealing a look at the clock he noticed it was 3:50. He sighed, knowing he wouldn't beat the count, not with Jamal and his slow methodical manner. He would just have to wait the count out in order to talk to Morrison.

"Yah Jamal, sure, what's up?"

"Do you like conversations?"

"What?" Vincent was confused. He had come to know one constant since becoming an investigator: nobody ever wanted to talk.

"Do you like conversations? You're a smart man. I just enjoy conversing with smart people. I do not get to do it enough in prison," Jamal continued.

"I love conversations Jamal." Anyway, Natasha asked me to go over a couple of things." He unconsciously checked the clock as he pulled out his case jacket. "You got a status hearing in two weeks..."

“I know about my court dates Vincent. I also noticed you check the clock again. There really is no reason to you know. Court will start here soon. I am now committed to be here for the next hour if you would like me to. Would you like to have a good conversation with me, Vincent? There is something much more on my mind than my court dates. And I like conversing with you Vincent. You are a smart man.”

Vincent sat back. This was a new one for him. Since working at the Public Defender’s he had experienced some weird occurrences. His first week he served two subpoenas to one schizophrenic woman whom swore that her two identities would be at court at the same time. Many times he had canvassed neighborhoods and had people open their doors in bathrobes or boxers. This was the strangest though. Maybe it was the guilt still built up from his conversation with Damion or perhaps Jamal’s calm, detached voice was so relaxing that it put Vincent at ease.

“Okay Jamal, let’s have a conversation. What do you want to talk about?”

“Freedom.”

“Freedom?” Vincent was baffled.

“Yep. I think I found it Vincent. I found in here.”

“Well that’s good.” Vincent thought Jamal had gone to the way-side. A quick week in prison sure makes them loco, he thought.

“Have you ever solved a Rubik’s cube Vincent?”

“Nope, I sure haven’t. I’ve seen it done many times. In fact, my brother can do it in like 2 minutes, like that guy from that movie you know. I have always wanted to though. It’d be really cool.

“I can do it. I’ve got one in my cell. I solve it over and over again. It makes me happy. It was the first thing I asked for when I got in.”

“Why was that?” Vincent was curious.

“Well, I told you Vincent. I wanted to find freedom. I don’t think you have it though. You need to solve the cube, Vincent.”

“Why’s that Jamal?”

“Well, let me explain the cube. The cube is made up of colors. Six colors to be exact – orange, red, blue, yellow, green, and white. And I can solve it Vincent. You know what the object of the cube is right Vincent?”

“Sure, Jamal. You got to get each side of the cube to have a solid color.”

“Nope. You must think beyond the cube Vincent. That is why I think you are wrong and you cannot solve it. I believe that the cube should actually be solved by not allowing any one color to touch the same color on any surface. That is the only way to solve the cube. Let me explain this to you Vincent, in prison terms because that is why we are both here today.” Vincent sat back, staggered by what Jamal was talking about.

“Before I came here I was on the outside world. I was free. We will give freedom a color. We will have yellow demonstrate the outside world because yellow is happy and the outside world is supposed to be happy from where I am in this prison.

“Now, The police are actors of the state. They deserve another color and we will give them red because red represents blood. I believe the government’s police can take the outside world away from us and strip us of our life. They kill us and thus should have red.

I then think that prisoners come to prison and prison is a new color, orange, because everything in prison is orange. I think that is a rule in itself, Jamal laughed. We are all orange. I did not sign up to go to Syracuse, Vincent.

“Anyway, prison is orange. But it’s all part of the big old Justice system. In here, we began to see the government’s system develop. The system of you and me and us talking here today. The system of Natasha and your glorious Public Defender’s Service. The system of my court date in two weeks that you so nicely came here today to remind me of. We’ll give the system blue because the system makes me sad. The system sucks Vincent and it makes me sad. But we’ll get to that.

“So we are left with two more colors Vincent. We still have green and white. I am pretty sure you have been able to follow me this entire time am I correct?”

“Yes Jamal. I understand what you’re talking about.”

“Well what do you think green is Vincent?”

“I don’t know Jamal,” Vincent conceded. “What is it?”

“Green is money. It’s all about money in this world. You see the cube together is our world. It is the world that we live in. And what is the world without its money. Yeah, green is the money that you have that I do not. Green is the money that Natasha gets for representing me even though I do not pay her a cent. Green is the money that I was not born into. I went to college Vincent, but I was one of the few from my area and I am sure

that you have seen how green my neighborhood is. Where are you from Vincent?”

“Denver, Colorado.”

“Ha. That is my point. Did you move here to go to school? Where did you go to school?”

“Yes I did, George Washington University.”

“And now look at you. What are you trying to do? Change the system? You spend an amusing amount of money going to school and now you are doing what? Let me ask you, why are you working at the Public Defender’s?”

Vincent sat back. He saw what Jamal was getting at. Money was power and only those who had it made the decisions. The money was so disproportionate that it created a never-ending cycle and only the privileged were able to be on the side of money.

“I want to fight the system Jamal. I want to change it. I became a Public Defender because we understand the cycle is broken and we will fight for every right you never were awarded. Public Defenders are the champions of liberty. Every American, no matter how poor, is born with innate fundamental rights and securities. We cannot let those with power, in your green cat-

egory, strip your privileges away constantly. That must change. You are right – I am here because the system must change. The indigent people of America must be awarded a voice too.”

“Vincent, I believe that is the ultimate fallacy,” Jamal’s calm voice struck in. “You see, we do not need change. We do not want change. The indigent people of America have their rights and we have our culture. The people with money, in the green category, constantly try and fix America. The politicians, the lobbyists, the advocates all preach that the system is broken – that America must change the system. Does the green ever listen to what the people truly want? I do not think so. I believe the indigent simply want to let our culture be left alone. I was a fool back when I did boat, but PCP has become the drug of choice in the District, and we will continue to use it no matter the laws. We will continue to smoke marijuana and get doped on crack. We do not care about the green part of America. We are happy. We do not want change, but the green will continue to think its imperative. We do not strive for what you strive for. So why do you constantly try and change it so that we will? That’s what the green is Vincent. The green are those with the money. It is not those that you fight against – the police are not the green. The lawyers are not the green. It is not those that ‘strip your privileges away constantly’ as you put it. They just follow. You just follow too Vincent.”

“Oh really, Jamal?” Vincent had heard enough. Here he was busting his ass to ensure that this guy who was facing ridiculous charges for simply attending a party and having a girl stuff E down his pocket and the guy says he is happy with what the police do. “If that were the case do you think I would honestly be here right now? I just follow people? Well, if I stopped tryin to help you and get you out of this mess what do you think you’d be doing – sitting in prison for 20 to life that’s what. You should be getting no more than 3 and you’re gonna be doing 20 to life, Jamal. That’s your green party Jamal.” He paused. “There’s your Rubik’s cube right there.”

“Wait a minute Vincent. Do you think that the police have screwed me and therefore you are coming to my rescue? Do you think that is what I am trying to tell you? Cause it’s not.”

“Jamal,” Vincent said, half-smiling, half-weary of the strangeness that had occurred over the past half and hour. Vincent wanted to yell at Jamal for being crazy, for not being grateful of the help that is being Vincent was giving to him. Vincent wanted to ask Jamal how Jamal thought he could lecture Vincent. Finally, Vincent just conceded. Sighing, he asked, “What do you want to tell me Jamal?”

Jamal gazed at him. It was a searching, piercing look. Vincent continued to be mesmerized by the complete role-reversal. Jamal continued, “Well the colors touch each other. They all in-

teract, you see? But let me finish – we have one color left. The white color represents the innocent. They don’t want any part of the cubic mess. They are the people that are never touched by any of the system’s true nature. Yet they are the masses that must be satisfied. They let the red government continue to propagate its authority. They must be pleased and when the red government places the criminal in jail because the green part put the law there, the white masses are satisfied, completing the cycle. White completes the cube.

“The Rubik’s cube is what I want to talk about Vincent. I solved it Vincent because I know that it was not meant to be one color. It’s meant to have each color only touch different colors. But I cannot get each color to not touch itself. That’s the way to solve the puzzle. I might get 20 to life. I might get three. But I just wanted to talk about the reasoning behind it all Vincent. You are trying to solve the system? Well I solved it for you Vincent. We are all interconnected and we all need to stay that way. But we cannot. I cannot figure that out. Figure out how to make each color only touch the other one and we will all understand ourselves. Then you will solve the Rubik’s cube.”

Vincent looked Jamal up and down. Why was this kid here, he thought. It was a crazy concept, but Vincent honestly never believed he would be talking to a criminal about symbolism and analogies and the system and most of all, the bloody Rubik’s cube. This is a goddamn waist of talent, Vincent thought.

This kid has more potential than half of the world out there and look at this place he is confined in. Vincent thought more about it – he remembered coming down the elevator and wondering why prisoners were kept underground. This was a box with no windows and no way to escape it, and Jamal was inside it. Jamal was inside the cube he had just so pointedly described.

“How did you think about this Jamal?”

“Well Vincent I do not know that answer. I just got here and I like to solve things. That is what I did all my life. I want to be a mathematician because I can solve things Vincent. That is why I went to college. I asked for a Rubik’s cube to help me pass the time. I had always wanted to solve one of those. When I finished it, I put the cube on the edge of my bed and looked at it. It looked wrong, like it was dead. I did not like it that way. I wanted the cube to be happy. I wanted the cube to look colorful so I tried to make every color go one each side. Then I realized that too many colors touch each other. It is like the elementary cafeteria where the whites were grouped with whites and the chinks were with the chinks and the blacks were nowhere to be found. Hoo Hoo Ha. Those blacks.”

Jamal finally sat back satisfied with his answer. He believed he was right on this issue and he would dwell on this forever. He thought of his Rubik’s cube as his friends – the yellow freedom that he had stripped away from him, the red government

that fought against the freedom, the blue system that the green fought to change when the people inside the system had developed their own culture to include the system, the fearful white outsiders that made the system possible, and the orange prison that now secured him inside the never-ending Rubik’s cube. His eyes drifted to Vincent and studied him for his reactions. He looked completely perplexed. Why was he so puzzled, I just told him the answer, Jamal thought. Actually what was he doing here in the first place?

“Hey Vincent, what are you doing here?”

“Oh yah,” Vincent said, snapping back to reality and, grabbing a stapled witness grid from his pack, tried to regain his composure after the baffling series of events that had just transpired before him. “Umm, we’ve been having some difficulties finding some of the people you were at the party with. We have Marcus, Troy and Dante’s addresses from databases, but they never seem to be there. We’re just trying to clarify where they live, and if you know of any more people that were at the party?”

Jamal had stopped listening, peering placidly past Vincent towards the door that would lead him back to his cell. It was as if after the conversation he had simply turned off, like a light bulb burning out after an electrical surge.

“Jamal?” Vincent asked, almost fearful of what was going to happen next.

“Marcus lives at 18th and U in Southeast. Troy is with his grandma now in Laural. Dante moved somewhere near Columbia Heights,” the placid response trickled out.

“Yah we tried the one in Columbia Heights – off of 14th.” Vincent trailed off. Jamal had stood up and motioned for the officer. “Wait, Jamal can you tell me anymore. Hey I want to go over a couple more things.”

Jamal turned around, studying Vincent before responding, “No you do not Vincent. I took up too much of your time as it is. Besides count is almost over. You really got anything else for me? I do not know any more than I have told you.” His systematic voice cut off the conversation.

“No you’re right. I don’t have anything else. Thanks Jamal. Thanks for the conversation.”

The smile that slowly crawled onto Jamal’s face took as long as Vincent thought the entire meeting would. Jamal nodded his head and walked out the legal room, paused as the door opened from the guard in the glass chamber and walked down the corridor that led to his home.

Vincent looked around in a daze. He had not realized the two other lawyers who had come and were idly filling out paperwork because count was still in session. He hadn’t noticed the baby come in with the mom sitting in the waiting room eagerly awaiting the father that obviously can’t come home. He only now heard the baby crying. He looked at the time: 4:45. Count should be done soon.

Standing up, Vincent waved at the CO and mouthed bathroom, pointing to the visitors’ area. He hated going into the bathrooms at jail with the filth that constantly piled up within them. Walking in he chuckled as a New York-sized rat slid into a crevice in the corner. Locking the door he looked over at the stall-less john and pulled the seat up. “What a day,” he gasped under his breath. “And I still got Morrison’s statement. Well at least Natasha will be happy with my work. Yah, Natasha, I met with your client Jamal today. Ummm, he’d like to stay in jail. Actually, I’m pretty sure you should just give him a fuckin Rubik’s cube when he takes the stand and just let him talk.” Vincent laughed.

Walking out, he overheard the dispatch radio attached to the belt of the CO maintaining the doors. “Count is cleared,” it belted statically. Quickest count I’ve ever waited through Vincent thought. “Hey, could I get Morrison up here please.” The CO barely looked up. Honestly, Vincent thought, who would want to be a CO? Why would you do that? They do not give a shit about anyone – prisoners, visitors, themselves. Who would do that?

He went back to room number three and sat down on his orange chair. Green he thought. It was the only thing that did not make sense to him. The government's system he hated. He had always believed though that the government pushed for criminals to serve so much time for the sole reason that when the defense argued how unjust it was and/or made a plea deal, the government could put the criminal in for a proper amount of time and still look like it was doing the right thing. It was a balancing system created to simply appease the masses. The masses – the white color. Funny how race comes into this, Vincent thought. But could we honestly be so disillusioned that the people in power were completely wrong? There were days where Vincent felt like every tiny piece of investigation he did was for nothing. It was as if the system had already decided what his client's fate was – client was going to plea, client is guilty, client made a deal – so when he investigated it did not mean anything. Ultimately nothing he did would change the outcome of his client's cases. So why was he trying? Maybe he was just part of a large system that the Rubik's cube was inside. The Green tried to better the system to mollify everybody, but it never changed anything. Ultimately, the Rubik's cube was a system inside a system.

Vincent glanced over. Morrison was walking towards him. Vincent forgot how scary Army was. Morrison's friends called him Army because his name was Antonio Richard Morrison – his initials spelling ARM. They attached the Y to his name when

they realized the Morrison would always be the biggest of the group. He was 22 years old, looked 30, and at 6'2", 220 pounds of muscle, Army was the perfect nickname. Morrison's long dreadlocks completed his intimidating package. As Morrison turned towards Vincent, Vincent noticed a large white bandage that covered the top right corner of Morrison's head and trailed down to his eye.

“**Ultimately, the Rubik's cube was a system inside a system.**”

Vincent took a moment to gather himself. His day had started out with an errant comment to Damion and followed with one of the most numbingly awkward encounters of his life. But he already knew Morrison's story. When Natasha had him for pick up he had told her his story. The two of them came down later to rub out some of the details they thought Morrison might have left out. Vincent just needed to get a couple things down in a statement about the timing. He was a bit worried about this unexpected injury on Morrison's face though. Army might not want to talk.

“What’s up Army? What happened?” Vincent asked, half coolly looking at his notes, half towards him. Morrison grunted in response. Vincent decided not to pursue the matter. “So you talked to Natasha last week and she said we’d be down here to get your statement. She was in court earlier this week and the jury should be finishing up deliberations today on a different case so she’s still booked. You still want to take the statement though, rihgt? This helps us, you know.” Again, no response. Vincent pushed his seat back even farther, not wanting to seem aggressive in the least. “Long day? I can come back if you need me to?” Vincent said with special attention to the pronunciation of ‘need’ as he wanted to make sure Morrison knew he had to talk to Vincent.

“Nah man. I understand. I fell by the way,” Army said without looking at Vincent.

“Hmm... sorry to hear about that,” Vincent replied knowing full well Morrison did not fall. “So yah I mean I guess I just want to ask you a couple more questions about what happened that night.” He waited patiently for a response. When nothing came, Vincent tried again: “I know it was raining right, and we established earlier it wasn’t one of your cars, and that you had gone to the club that night and you and Michelle got into a fight when you got home with Bones and D.R.”

“Yah it was rainin,” escaped the quiet answer. “I was walkin down the road...”

“What road Army?” Vincent was wondering what he was talking about.

“40th. I was walking down 40th from my place on Dix to go to that carry out place you know, Yum’s, or whatever is there on the corner at Minnesota and Benning. And that’s when I saw her.”

Vincent was quiet. What the hell, he thought. This wasn’t Morrison’s story. “What?” he managed, shaking his head.

Morrison was silent. He looked towards the clock and started fidgeting with his handcuffs. Sitting up, he continued. “I didn’t realize how late it was cause I was pretty messed up see. When we all left the club we didn’t go straight back to my house like I told y’all earlier. D.R. had some PCP and we got pretty messed up.”

“When did you get up on boat?” Vincent had never heard any of this. He knew the statement would be pointless and that Army may be in a lot more trouble than Natasha and him originally thought. He started listening intently to every detail so that he could write it in the memo, knowing that he wouldn’t be able to repeat it with Army unless they needed a statement.

“About 2:00 when we left the club on H Street. We finally got

back to the house at around 3 and were hanging around when Michelle came downstairs. She got mad at me cause the baby was crying and I fuckin went out with my boys. So we were gonna go roll outside cause I didn't want to deal with her you know, and I hear this crash and the bitch had fuckin thrown a lamp at me. So we pieced."

Vincent was shocked. People never talk to him. Damion proved that point. These last two though would not shut up. It was crazy.

"D.R. wanted to go get laced again, but Bones was tired so he was just gonna leave. Then we saw this big ass black SUV come by us out on 40th street, and it fuckin turned around and started coming straight towards us. When we saw the windows roll down we all split you know. The shots started raining down on us from all over the place and as I was the only one who was packin, jumped a fence heading towards 41st, and returned the fire. I heard the car go speeding after D.R. and Bones, but thought fuck it, turned and ran to the park across Benning. Then I started getting real paranoid you know cause like what happened to D.R. and Bones. They would have come after me you know. I'm fucking Army too you know, don't take no shit, and was the only one packin."

"Yah, man. Alright." Vincent knew that the less he said, the more Morrison would talk.

"That's when I started walking down towards Yum's. I was starving and still pretty high cause the boat and after I waited a bit in the park I just got bored. I got bored and I got real fuckin pissed. I was pissed at Michelle, I was pissed at the fuckin SUV, I was pissed at D.R. for gettin me high all my life. I didn't care if that SUV came back, I was going to fuck them up. So I started walking down the street and I noticed this little old brown Honda sitting in the parking lot by CVS and I see a light flare up. So I start thinking I'm gonna see what's up. I just didn't give a shit anymore. I crept closer and its fuckin girls, so I say shit, this is gonna be real good man. I'm gonna clown them you know."

This whole time Vincent has noticed Army getting real antsy like he was on a rush. He saw the color of Army's deep brown eyes becoming redder and redder. Vincent calmly shifted positions so that he could better see the CO officers in the control room in case Army went crazy. Vincent had heard stories before of clients going crazy on the intern investigators. He himself had never been afraid of any of them. He was a big guy and knew how to take care of himself. Still, Army was too and there was something spooky in his voice. He zoned back into the story. And from the look of it, Army was a lot more of a criminal than Vincent thought.

"I busted open the front passenger window and they all shrieked. Told them to shut the hell up cause I had a gun. They

were fuckin kids you know, 15, 16 years old. Just wanted to smoke some dope in their momma's car. Then the two in the back bailed out and I started chasing after them when I saw the SUV drive by on Benning. I didn't give a shit about the kids no more, just wanted to put some bullets into that SUV. I wasn't even out of the parking lot either so I come back to the car, and the fuckin girl is still in the front seat, can't get her seat belt off, so I tell her she better hang on cause we goin for a little ride.

"Took the car down to Benning and started goin after them. Pretty soon, I found them at East Capitol goin west, you know, so I turn right and speed up after them. They still driftin and then they roll their windows down again. I do too, getting my semi ready. Meanwhile the bitch is fuckin screamin in the passenger seat so I'm yellin at her to shut it. They turned onto Minnesota and we caught 'em."

"How fast were you goin Army? Must have been flying if you caught up with that SUV on a turn."

"Yah, we was. Must've been goin 90. I pulled up on their left so the bitch would be between me and them, our tires locked and they started shooting from their back seat. I opened up too with mine and hit their front left tire. That fucked us both. The SUV buckled forward, went in front by my right bumper and I tried to turn left you know, but it got tangled up. The SUV went through the intersection at Benning and Minnesota and we broke off and I started spinning crazily."

"So it was you in the car?"

"Yep. We were pretty fucked up too, but the car was in good shape, it just wouldn't start. I looked over and saw movement within the SUV, which was fuckin scary cause here I was with one clip and a screamin bitch who was trying to scramble out of the seats crying about how Janice's mom gonna kill her. I tell her, fuck you bitch, get out of the car and follow me or we both gonna die. The seatbelts were all fucked up and the airbags had popped out so it took us a few seconds to get out of there.

We started running towards the Shop Express and I heard a couple of shouts from the SUV then turn to see the back window get pushed out and these two dudes get out with one more right behind them. We started sprinting straight to the park and we hear gunshots rang out and I jump behind this truck. The shots kept comin though and I didn't feel none of them goin pass me so I looked out and see two of the fuckers from the SUV dropped on the street. Then I hear D.R.'s voice saying, 'Get back here Bitch, I'm not done yet.' And I hear 10 or so more shots, followed by D.R. yelling, 'Bones, get their pieces. The blue crew comin.'

Army paused and looked at Vincent. Vincent wondered if Army knew what he was doing. The story seemed true and accurate and Vincent thought that it could hold up in court. It wasn't the best for Army because Army wasn't with D.R. and

Bones between the time of the initial neighborhood shooting up until the murder of the shooters in the parking lot. Still, there was one more thing that Vincent needed to hear. He definitely did not want to hear it – this had been a messed up day anyway – but it made the case and Vincent had to try to get it out of Army.

“What happened to the girl Army?”

Army dropped his gaze. The entire time Army had been telling his story he had been racing through it as fast as he drove the stolen Honda. Now he stopped completely.

“Did you do it?” Vincent’s question broke the stand-off.

Army’s answer came back softly, meekly, like a little boy trying to apologize to his angry father for breaking an expensive tool. “My hand was on her mouth already so nobody would know we was behind the truck away. I knew that if D.R. or Bones found us they’d be pissed at me for running off to the park. I knew I couldn’t let the girl go either cause she could rat man. She’d go to the cops. Then I started thinking about the cops and Michelle and D.R. and Bones and I got really pissed off again.” Army’s voice started getting really angry. Vincent eyed him wearily; he knew where this was going.

“I looked at her and laughed inside me. I was Army man, you know. I couldn’t be touched. I should have died with those fuckers from the SUV. Who did I think I was taking them on in a fucking Honda. It was one on three and look who was still fucking alive. They fuck with Army and look what happened to them. I didn’t give a fuck anymore after that. Why care, you know man? They dead and gone and I hear with this prime time. What’s this little sweet ass girl gonna do anyway you know. Besides, she wanted to be cool right. I leaned up to her and was like, ‘You want to be cool right? That’s why you were smoking with your friends, right?’ I didn’t give a fuck no more man.

“She looked at me like I was a fuckin nightmare and started squealing. I told her to shut the fuck up and took a piece of glass I found by the pick-up, thrust it into her neck and told her, ‘You wanted to be cool so shut the fuck up. You gonna be real cool tomorrow after I fuck your nigger ass. You’ll go tell your friends how you got fucked by an Army man.’” She started crying and whimpering so I put the glass to her and said, yah you whine like the bitch you are and I’ll fuckin make sure you ain’t wake up from this.” I didn’t want to kill her, I never did. You need to be in control though when you doin shit like this. Then I cut her jeans off with the piece of glass and felt it go into her leg. Rippin my pants off, I got in there nice and deep.” Army stopped. Vincent looked up. He realized they had stopped making eye contact as the conversation continued.

“While I was having my go at her I kept banging her head on the bottom of the truck. I felt her body go limp as the sirens started coming all around me. I had no idea where D.R. and Bones were, but I needed to get the fuck out of there. I pulled out before I got off so the blue crew wouldn’t get no evidence on me. Sad though – I hate it when I don’t finish. Then I saw lights from all around me and one car light was parked on Benning so that it shown directly into the alleyway. I pushed the body underneath the pick-up then jumped into the dumpster right next to me. I don’t know why I didn’t run off, but that light was shining between the park and me. Finally, as I was watching the cops, I saw this tall lanky guy walking over to the alleyway and I freaked. He saw me so I sprinted off.”

When Morrison stopped talking, the silence was chilling. Vincent thought back to his training: expect the unexpected. He had joked that day about the reasoning behind that paradox. If you expect the unexpected, then the expected will ultimately be what you don’t expect and then your screwed. This though, was the icing on the cake. He wondered what would have happened if Jamal had been here. This loony deserves his own color Vincent thought. Vincent knew he needed to keep his appearance, but this was maybe too much.

Mustering up the remaining courage he possessed, he asked, “Why did you tell me this Jamal?”

Vincent turned pale as Army smiled. Vincent was sitting next to a cold-blooded rapist who had ravaged an innocent 15 year-old girl and just had the arrogance to tell the whole story and then smile. “What am I charged with?” came the unexpected reply.

It dawned on Vincent. Morrison was not confessing for confessing sake. He was snitching on D.R. and Bones. Morrison was charged with four counts of homicide and one sexual assault in the first degree. Morrison was going to snitch on D.R. and Bones. Vincent nodded signaling to Army that Vincent understood. Army then pointed up towards his bandage. Oh Jesus, Vincent thought, wondering if something happened to Bones and D.R. Wait, they weren’t locked up. Vincent had just checked yesterday.

“My boys started talking on the street. Couple people in here heard I was a child rapist. That ain’t no fun thing to be going around you know. But D.R., he’s the one that started it all on the street. He’s on the street talking man. He told Bones, “If we testify then old Army never get out and we always be safe.” See D.R. got it in his head that I paid them guys in the SUV off and that’s why they drove down after him and Bones and not me. They want me clipped in here so they started telling people on the street I’ve been raping chil’ren. That rep sure to get you messed up in prison,” he pointed again to the bandage.

“Tell Natasha I raped the girl. Tell her I never met to kill her. I feel really badly about what I did. But I did not kill those bastards in the SUV. That was all D.R., I’m sure of it. I ain’t no killer. I don’t like none of that shit. I feel real bad about the girl. I didn’t want to kill her. I ain’t no killer. D.R. though, he’s the killer.

“You never saw D.R. kill them did you, just heard his voice?” Vincent asked.

“Nah, I never saw them. But I swear it was them. I heard ’em too. So go after them okay? You’re the investigator, right. That’s who you need to investigate.”

Vincent conceded. “Alright, I will. We’re not going to take a statement today because I want to talk this over with Natasha, okay? Is that alright if I talk this over with Natasha and she’ll decide if we need a statement?”

“Yep.”

Vincent stood up, signaling for the CO. “Okay then, is there anything else you want to tell me Army?”

“Nah man, I’m good.”

“Good luck to you then. Put some Neosporin or something on that bandage too. Take care of yourself, we’ll help you out.”

Morrison rose to his feet and shook Vincent’s hand, “Thank you,” he said before striding out, following the same footsteps of the other two convicts Vincent had watched walk out early.

Vincent put his papers back into his pack and stepped out of his number three room. Walking through the sliding doors, he nodded towards the COs one last thank you and waited for the elevator to come down. Stepping inside he pressed “G,” and let his mind loose on the day’s wild events. He could not process all that had happened in the last two and half hours. He was supposed to get a medical release form signed, discuss Court procedure, improve a witness grid, and finally take a 2-3 page statement about events and a time frame that his attorney and he were completely sure of. Instead, he had learned more in a short afternoon than his entire internship so far.

The elevator opened and Vincent strode up to the command area. Trading in his visitor badge for his PDS ID, he glided through the metal detectors and into the cool summer breeze. His mind had not stopped going over the past events since the elevator had transported up away from the windowless dungeons. Antonio Morrison had detailed how he had raped a fifteen-year-old girl because he “didn’t give a fuck no more.” Vincent sifted it through his head? Why was he defending people like this again?

He strained his mind back to what Natasha had told him. When you get down think about the good things. The glass is always half full during our fight. That's true I guess, Vincent said to himself. I mean if this works out Morrison may get life with the possibility of parole and watch the two best friends that he grew up with take the life without. That was all due to one night where people stopped caring about anything because they were high.

**“That group will ultimately always be forced to live within close proximity... never breaking the binding cycle of mistrust...”**

His mind continued to wander. He thought about Jamal and his conversation. What did he want to talk about? Freedom? Natasha's message came streaming in. When Vincent started at PDS, Natasha had cemented what it was a Public Defender stood for. Freedom. Freedom is an ideology she had said. It is a thought process that gives the men and women of this country happiness and peace. Not everyone is born free. Look at the ghettos and slums of the urban cities and you will see citizens that deserve the same freedoms as every American starving to go to school. Freedom was an ideology Vincent realized. He passed by 19th Street and instead of turning right to take his

routine walk from the jail to the Stadium Armory Metro Station he kept walking. Something else was on his mind.

Vincent thought back to Jamal and his simple desire of wanting to have a conversation. “I don't get to talk to anyone Vincent. You are a smart man. I would like to have a conversation with a smart man,” the aloof voice came back to him. A conversation is more than many prisoners are able to have. Maybe a conversation is Jamal's version of freedom, Vincent thought. Maybe that was all he was searching for when he wanted all those colors to touch. If all those colors could converse with each other, what would happen then?

The mind kept racing. Natasha had once told him the biggest thing that destroys freedom is mistrust. The issue of mistrust is the only right granted to a sect of American citizens, she had said. This sect includes the indigent fighters, the blue-collar hard-workers, the beggars, the frightened, the tired, the poor, the masses yearning to breathe free, the wretched refuse that has become America's population, the homeless. Vincent had noticed the ironic references to America's protecting statue. Give us your poor, the wretched refuse. The number of people that looked to the Statue of Liberties' beacon of hope as they crossed the Atlantic searching for hope. Where are those people now?

That group will ultimately always be forced to live within close proximity to one another forever, never breaking the binding cycle of mistrust they were born into. Natasha's speech continued. Their opposite, the sect of law enforcement officials, of middle class Americans, of business dealers, of politicians, will never live in constant fear of survival. They do not worry about the government stripping away the basic civil rights of life, liberty, and property, guaranteed to any individual whether American or not. They're biggest worry is paying the taxman – of giving money to the government that feeds on them and that protects them. But who do the middle class need protection from Vincent? she had asked. The government, society, media, and even us deem that sect the indigent. And the mistrust begins. The idea that this entire group of people, the majority of America that fills our cities and makes the metropolises run, are forced to commit crimes in order to survive stems the mistrust America has for one another.

It was just what Jamal had described, he thought, turning onto some unknown, dimly-lit street. The Rubik's cubes' white color was at the base of it. The mistrust arises from those outside the system of politicians. The problems began with the average ignorant soul who believes that the criminal is the person who smokes boat or has "E" placed into his possession. The government preys on this criminal and as long as the criminals are prosecuted, the white people stay happy. The government then gets its money from the same green people that pay to have

it change for the 'better.' That illusion keeps the white people happy, the red people in charge and the green people important as it strips the yellow freedom from the orange people that are in prison due to the sad blue continuously cyclical system. He chuckled. Taste the rainbow, he thought.

Vincent thought it was odd that everybody conversed with him today. He had become accustomed to prisoners pulling a Damien and giving him a look of utter distaste. Actually, he almost enjoyed it when he knocked at a house searching for answers to the crime and the fat black woman that opened it in her torn gown slammed the door in his face. But what if all people needed to do was to simply converse with one another. Would that give us all the same freedom that Jamal sought? He turned the corner at G Street onto Pennsylvania, and walking into the CVS, he thought he'd give a shot. "Excuse me, sir," Vincent said to the manager. "Do you have any Rubik's cubes?"

# BREAKING ALL THE RULES

by Rachel Cupelo

**R**ules are meant to be broken. I learned that early on in life. That's probably why I spent so much time in prison. There are other reasons too, of course, but rules, well, rules were never my strong point.

Prison is full of rules. Some seem important, others less so. All get broken at one point or another for the sake of convenience. And I vowed never to break a rule in here, as I had everywhere else. That is, until I met Troy Santino.

Troy was built and tall, dark hair and eyes, with an obvious swagger, a deep baritone with a heavy Brooklyn accent. I shuddered when I first saw him – sneakers and jeans, wife-beater, full sleeves of prison ink, someone's pride and joy. He smiled at me and introduced himself there on the yard. His Aryan Brothers looked on – what he lacked in the purest whiteness, he made up in power. I had a hard time believing he would bother associating himself with someone like me.

“McKellan, right?”

I nodded, shaking the hand he offered. “Call me Ronnie.”

“Ronnie McKellan.” He stated my name, his smile friendly and predatory all at once. No one approached us, but some besides

the supremacists looked on in curiosity.

“It’s nice to meet ye, Ronnie. Now you tell me, why haven’t ye joined the Brotherhood over there? They good friends, decent protection. You look like you could use a little protection.”

I shook my head. “They wouldn’t want me.”

“Why, ‘cuz ye Irish? I’m an eye-talian, they let me in anyways.”

I shook my head again, but said nothing.

He nodded, as if in understanding, pulling a contraband cigarette from behind his ear and lighting it with the single match he found in his pocket. “You’re a baby-raper then, huh?”

“Shut the fuck up,” I muttered.

“Little boys or little girls?”

I stood up then, a stance of challenge. He smiled more broadly, sucking on the filter. “You ain’t afraid,” he murmured. “That’s good. You’re the lowest on the totem pole, ye know. They ass-rape your kind in here, Ronnie. Best to keep your head low, show no fear. You’re smart.”

I backed down, heaving a sigh. “Girls. Got caught with a thirteen year old. She looked eighteen.”

The smile turned into a smirk. “Sure, that’s what most of them say.”

“Well, what are YOU in here for?”

“Manslaughter.”

“What was the occasion?”

“He was a fucking punk. He got in my way.”

“You don’t deny it.”

He threw the cigarette down. “No point.”



I didn’t think much of Troy after that until he moved into my cell. I hadn’t had a roommate those first few weeks, and I was anxious to get one and get over my disappointment. Troy moved in and within an hour he was completely in my way and talking my ear off. I wanted to punch him in the jugular. Instead, I reached for my toothbrush.

He blocked my way to the sink.

“Excuse me,” I said, pointedly, trying to go around him.

His hand went up, pressing flat against my chest as I moved. He pulled back. “You’re rock-hard. I wouldn’t have taken you for a weightlifter.”

“I bench a couple hundred and some change,” I replied, gritting my teeth. “Now, if you don’t mind – “

Both hands then, on my shoulders. “Ah, but I do.”

“Man, what is your problem?” Troy’s grip was tight; I couldn’t shake him off.

“No problem,” he replied, with a smile. “You’re...cute.”

“Great!” I gave him a shove. “They put me with a faggot.”

He grinned. “And I got stuck with a baby-raper.”

Troy: 1, Ronnie: 0. You couldn’t accuse him of being stupid, at any rate.

“Just get away from me.”

“But I got assigned to this room for a reason, Ronnie.”

Understanding dawned. “You bribed the guards to move you into my cell?”

He laughed at this, softly. “They did a fellow Aryan a favor.”

“But, why?”

“I’ve had you on my mind a while, ever since I met you in the yard.”

“Oh, I’m sure the Brotherhood is loving this.”

He shrugged. “I been here for a long time. I have some clout. There’s a lot they and everyone else in here will forgive. Sure, a few snitches and guards wanna see me miserable, but that’s always how it is.”

“So what do you want, exactly?”

“You.”

My mouth went dry. “Fucking faggot.”

“So you’ve said.”

“You don’t deny it?”

Another shrug-and-smile. “Nah. I like cock, always have.”

“Well, you’re talkin’ to the wrong guy. Remember what I’m in here for?”

Troy moved forward, invading my personal space, his nose inches from mine. “I’ve caught ye lookin’ at me. A bunch ‘a times.”

“Doesn’t mean a damn – ”

“I’m making you an offer,” he spat,  
“and if I were you, I’d take it.”

And then he pushed me against the bunk, my shoulder blades hitting the metal frame painfully. He looked me over for a minute, bit his lower lip, an appraisal of lust. And then he grabbed me by the front of my shirt, pulled me toward him, and swung me back against the wall. My shirt went over my head, up

my arms, trapping my wrists and hands. He pressed his body against mine, one hand keeping my arms up and out of his way, the other pressed to the wall.

I could feel myself shaking. I was terrified, but somehow kept my head and didn’t fight him.

“What are you gonna do if I say no? Rape me?”

He let go of me as if touching me burned him, but his body was still uncomfortably close.

“I don’t have to ask, and I certainly don’t have to take. Other men beg me.”

“I’m sure they do.” My voice was tinged with sarcasm, and his eyes narrowed further.

“I’m making you an offer,” he spat, “and if I were you, I’d take it.”

I laughed. “Now why in hell would I let you fuck me? What’s in it for me?”

He backed away and I quickly pulled my shirt down.

“As I explained to you out on the yard, you’re on the low end of the totem pole. They ass-rape boys like you to teach you a lesson.”

“About?”

“Pickin’ on someone your own size. You hurt a woman or a child? As far as we’re concerned, you ain’t a man.”

“I couldn’t help it,” I snapped.

“I don’t care what that head-shrinker told you about your impulses and shit, in here it don’t matter.”

“And you fucking me will do what, exactly?”

Troy sighed heavily, as if the explanation were a burden. “It’s not directly the sex, but the facade thereof. It’ll make you my bitch. I claim you, no one can touch you without my permission.”

“Ok...” I wasn’t entirely sure what to say. “And you’ll just put up this little affectation out of the goodness of your heart?”

He laughed, and my blood chilled because I knew what he was going to say. “Nothin’ comes free in here, Ronnie. I’ll expect compensation.”

“So you’ll actually make me your bitch. D’ya think I was born yesterday?”

“Not for nothin’, but it ain’t a bad deal. Lotta guys ‘round here do it.”

“I’m not a fucking faggot. I’ll take my chances.”

Troy put up his hands, as if to fend off blows. “Suit yourself. Let me know if you change your mind.”



Later that evening I came back from the infirmary with a fresh black eye and torn lip, courtesy of a Crip who was deeply offended by the red t-shirt I wore during our pod’s hour in the library. I was still twitching, waiting for further attack, as I walked back into my dorm pod toward my cell. Troy was already there, and when he saw me, to my surprise, he didn’t laugh or even smirk.

“Jesus Christ, what the fuck happened to you?”

I told him and he shook his head. “Damn niggers. I can’t believe they won’t split this joint up by race. It’s cuz they saw you talkin’ to me and my guys at dinner. They know who associates with Aryans.”

I shrugged, as if it didn't bother me, dabbing at my face with a towel at the sink. I winced. It hurt like hell. "He's in the hole for a few days, and they're moving him to a new unit. I heard the nurse talking."

"Still, it ain't right. Can I getcha somethin'? I made a trip to commissary today."

He was trying to be nice and it made me feel like unraveling and screaming. He was too unpredictable – one minute halfway decent, the other snarky and mean. It made me feel like he was always plotting his next move, planning to screw someone – notably, me.

He got up, took the towel from my hand, and ran it under the faucet, patting my lip for me. "You have to learn to trust me," he said, as if reading my thoughts.

I pulled away. "Why should I?"

He went back to his ministrations. I stayed still. "Because you've been here a month and you've got most of the routine down, but you haven't made any friends to help you deal with the worst parts of it. I'm offering friendship. Others would too, if you'd let them."

"You're not offering friendship," I spat. "You're offering protection in exchange for sex –"

"What do you think friendship is around here?!" His voice rose, and I shrank back, still on edge. "Look, I know you're only here a few years, and I know you think everyone hates you because you're a child molester. I get it, ok? I was a newbie once too."

I did feel like everyone hated me, that was true. Why I had done what I'd done to that poor girl, I couldn't begin to explain to myself or anyone else. Whatever had been missing in my lonely life had exploded, and I'd hurt someone to make myself feel better. I knew I deserved to be here, but that didn't make it any easier.

Troy sat down on his bottom bunk, the towel still clutched in his hand. "I know its rough. I thought people hated me too, because my case was so awful. But I got over it, I started talking to people –"

"You became a white supremacist."

"No, I became friends with them, because around here you do what you have to do to make your life easier. It's not a sell-out, it's survival."

I shrugged, not sure what to say. He had read my mind, anticipated my fears. People who had known me for years didn't have me figured out the way he did. I'd never felt understood, not for a moment, and Troy's ability to do so endeared him to me. I was careful not to show it.

He hung the towel back up. "I'm extending friendship. Take it, use it, use me. Everyone makes some kind of deal with everyone else –"

"Not always sex, I'm sure."

"You're obsessed with this fucking bit, aren'tcha?" He grinned playfully. "And definitely not. But that's what I want, for what I can offer."

I hadn't looked at him since he sat down. In fact, I was hunched over, clutching the sink, staring at myself in the mirror. I didn't recognize myself, was the truth, and that compiled with my unease made me want to rip the sink out of the wall. I watched him, through the mirror, get up and walk toward me, arms encircling my shoulders, his lips pressed to my cheek. It was an oddly comforting gesture and instead of pushing away I leaned into him.

"Let me help you," he murmured.

"Ok," I said, leaning further back until he cradled me. "I'll trust you."



The trouble began almost immediately. I was sitting in the common area in the pod the next evening, picking at whatever passed for dinner with the other 40 or so residents, minding my own business. Troy was on the other end of the pod, discussing the retrieval of some ordered contraband with his fellow Aryans, so the seat next to me was empty. I jumped a little when one of my podmates sat down in the seat next to me, his roommate on the opposite side.

The one next to me was handsome, dreads almost to his shoulders, built like a football player and dressed head-to-toe in blue. His friend was similarly attired. I smelled trouble but bid them good evening. The one next to me smiled and held out his hand, "Whitman."

I shook it, not sure whether that was his first name or last, not really venturing to ask. "Ronnie McKellan. What's up?"

"Well, Ronnie, we wanted to apologize for a certain friend's behavior last night in the library. He didn't mean nothin' by it, I'm sure you know."

A night's sleep, along with, well, other activities, had done me a world of good, and I was feeling generous. "Hey, you can tell him no hard feelings. I get it." I didn't really, but that was beside the point.

"Thanks, man."

A pause. His friend still didn't speak, just stared, so Whitman ventured forth. "So, uh, what's goin' on with you and Santino?"

I almost choked on my food. "I'm not entirely sure what you mean."

He grinned, "Aw, c'mon, the entire unit heard you two goin' at it last night. You musta been good for him to be makin' all that noise."

He wanted details. I'd always been told those were private, but clearly that particular code of decorum didn't fly here. So, I said, "I appreciate the conclusion as to my...well, skills – but I don't want to talk about that just now."

"Ok." He leaned closer. "Then let's talk about later this evening, in the laundry room. The CO on that shift always falls asleep for 'bout an hour, don't know if you noticed, but we could have some fun, and you could show me."

He was running his hand up and down my arm as he said this, and I edged away, just slightly. "Another one, huh?" I must have said it a little too loudly, because he gave me a dirty look.

"Yo man, I am tryin' to keep it on the down low."

"I don't follow."

"You whities call it bein' in the closet or some bullshit. I don't want my fellow brothas' to know I'm a punk."

"Well, you're not being very subtle."

Undeterred, he leaned closer. "Aw, c'mon baby. Let's have some fun – "

Suddenly, a hand snaked forward and pulled him back by the dreadlocks.

"If you wouldn't mind keeping your tongue out of the gentleman's EAR, Whitman."

Troy stood above us, looking like the wrath of God, smirking but eyes glinting dangerously.

“Man, we was just talkin’.”

Troy got into his face, lowering his voice. “Go talk to someone else, and kindly stay away from my bitch.” He looked over at Whitman’s roommate and smiled flirtatiously. “Hey there, sweetheart.” The roommate leaped out of his seat and tried to lunge across the table, but slipped and almost bit it on the concrete.

“Hey, gents, break it up.”

A young blond CO motioned with his hands, and Troy dropped Whitman’s hair. He had the decency to look contrite. “Sorry, Charlie...er, CO Graham.”

“Get back to your table, please. You can talk to your roommate later.”

“Yessir.” I swore I saw Troy give the CO a wink before he leaned down and kissed me on the mouth in front of everyone. I smiled as I watched him swagger away.

Whitman glared. “Fuckin’ faggot.”



“Don’t worry about the Crips,” Troy told me later. “Whitman used to be my bitch, and he’s still bitter that I got rid of him a

few months back. That’s probably the real reason why he had one of his crew jump you last night – cuz they knew I had my eye on you.”

I heaved a sigh, anxious about all the trouble I seemed to be causing. He reached over and rubbed my shoulders. “Don’t sweat it. They’re just jealous.” He smacked my ass playfully. “If you haven’t noticed, I’ve got a reputation. They just want what they can’t have.”

I rolled my eyes, but it seemed he was right. I had the catch of Hopewell Unit.



As it turned out, I had plenty to worry about. Whitman and the Crips were not nearly finished messing with Troy’s property. I found this out one evening exactly a week later as – you guessed it – I was doing my laundry. Whitman, his roommate, and a guy I’d seen rarely on the unit, cornered me while the CO slept, pushing one of the washing machines up against the door and raping me one at a time, while the other two watched.

When I came back from the infirmary three days later, Troy looked as if he hadn’t slept the entire time. Immediately he reached for me, and a part of me wanted to let him, but I found myself flinching, my anger growing exponentially as I looked

into his exhausted, bloodshot eyes.

“Fuck you,” I muttered. “Don’t touch me.”

“Ronnie – “

“NO.” I was so furious at him that I wanted to kill him. “You told me I was going to be safe. You’re a fucking liar.”

His arms went down to his sides and his fists balled up. His eyes narrowed and his lips twisted. “I never said it was a guarantee. I told you it might help. It’s not my fault.”

The truth was, I knew this, but I wanted to find a way to blame him. He’d lured me to him in my time of desperation. I wanted to feel that he’d taken more advantage of me than I’d agreed to. But he hadn’t.

It didn’t mean I was feeling forgiving or generous. “Whatever,” I snapped, not looking at him. “I’m going to bed.”



The nightmares were horrible that night. I could feel my own blood, hear my own pained cries. It was as if it were happening all over again. I woke up screaming, flailing my arms. I

wouldn’t open my eyes but dimly, I heard Troy telling me that it was ok, it was just a dream, that no one would hurt me with him right there. I kept my eyes closed, pretending to be asleep. I felt the thin mattress shift as Troy climbed over me, laying down on his side and pulling me against him, left arm around my abdomen, left leg entwined with mine. I felt his shoulders shaking, heard the continuous, murmured apologies, and finally his tears as they fell from his eyes down the back of my neck.



“Hey Ronnie!”

I grumbled, annoyed to be so rudely disturbed from my nap.

“Ronnie, get up.”

It was Troy shaking my shoulder. I opened one eye and looked up at him. He was smiling, which could only mean a few things: either he’d just acquired another bitch (I had long become simply a roommate with certain privileges), or he was plotting some other kind of mischief. I opened the other eye. “Who’d you mess with now?”

“Ronnie!” he smirked at me for a second before turning to faux-shock, “I’m hurt!”

I smiled and shook my head. “Not like you keep it a secret. Now who is it?”

“Not that,” he replied. “It’s time for Special Rec.”

The five pods that made up Hopewell Unit were experimental, hence the shared meals outside the cafeteria, and what they called Special Rec. Sometimes it was dodgeball, or a cooking class. One time someone came in to teach us how to knit. It was whatever the officials and volunteers could scrape up for the month, and though it was usually exceedingly childish or corny, everyone signed up just to leave the pod.

I hadn’t, however, and I told Troy as much.

“That’s ok,” he said. “I worked it out with Charlie...er, CO Graham.”

I sat up and reached for my shirt. “What is it with you and CO Graham, anyway? Was he, too, your bitch once upon a time?”

Troy threw his head back and laughed, then kissed me. “I’ll tell you what, you go ahead and ask him that, see how many teeth you have left.”

I gave him a look, at which Troy shrugged. “He’s guard duty for Special Rec today. I’ll have him talk to you before it starts.”

Several months had passed since I’d been raped, and things were mostly back to normal. Troy had had the Aryans – most notably their leader, Wilde – beat the Crips responsible within an inch of their lives, putting them in intensive care in the hospital across town for several days. The days had settled into a comfortable routine, albeit mixed with the occasional events of Troy’s explosive temper and my unsuccessful dodging of every black inmate I saw.

When we made it to the gym, I groaned when I saw the stereo set up in the corner, two of the volunteers already demonstrating the swing dance moves we were to learn that day.

“You’ve got to be kidding me.”

Troy gave me another kiss, and a few of the inmates around us hissed and, predictably, called us faggots. He pulled away. “Loosen up. It’ll be fun. And, honey, lose the hairy eyeball.”

Just then he waved to a shorter, dark-haired man across the gym, standing next to CO Graham, grabbing my hand and pulling me over.

“Hey Nathan. Well, hello there, CO Graham.”

“Fuck off, Troy. Hey there, McKellan.”

I nodded my greeting.

“So Charlie,” Troy took a quick look around to make sure no other COs were within twenty feet. He shrugged then, remembering they really didn’t care. “Why don’t you tell Ronnie how come we’re such good friends.”

CO Graham smiled and glanced over at Nathan before he spoke. “Noticed that Troy and I are tight, huh?”

I shrugged. “Just curious.”

He nodded. “Well, I was there when Troy committed the crime that got him sent here.”

I gave Troy a questioning look.

“It was back a bunch of years ago, when I was living in Texas for a while. I met Charlie’s brother, Sam, at this shitty little gay bar. He and his friends were sick of being pushed around by homophobes, so they started a gang to bash the bashers. I joined.”

“I was out with them the night everything went down,” Charlie broke in. “There was a shootout. My brother killed two people and got shot in the back. Troy over here, well, he ended up wrestling some guy for his gun and the gun went off in the other guy’s face.”

My face betrayed my surprise. “So THAT’S why you’re in here? Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Well, you never asked.”

Charlie smirked. “Really, he didn’t want to admit that he’d been hanging around with a bunch of college students when he got in trouble. He’s quite a bit older, if you haven’t noticed.”

Troy gave him a look. “I was immature and impulsive. Anyway, how’s Sam?”

“Good, actually. Got him a new wheelchair. Auburn’s ramps are terrible.”

“Wheelchair?”

“Sam’s a quadriplegic from the shooting.”

Not sure what to say to that, I turned to Nathan. “So, where do you fit into all this?”

He smiled. “Charlie’s a friend of mine from college. He helped me through a very difficult time when my fiancé died.”

“I’m sorry.”

“It was a while ago. Actually, two of his killers are here. They’re in one of my writing classes.”

Charlie had been fiddling with the stereo. “Do you see them today?”

“Right after Special Rec. And then I have to get to the airport and pick up Joe.”

Troy smirked. “Nathan’s loverboy has been digging up Celtic gold in Europe the last two months.”

It was all a little much for me, to be frank. Between Troy’s crime and his friends’ propensity towards correction and advocacy, I didn’t quite know what to think. But when I looked over at Troy – who had long since begun fake-boxing with Nathan – I realized the contradictions didn’t matter. Certainly I was not one to judge how we all got to our place in life, and getting to

know his friends endeared him to me that much more.

“If I’m going to dance,” I said, breaking up the party, “I better do it now before I lose my nerve.”

Two hours later I was laying on my back on the gym floor, sweating and out of breath. Troy picked me up off the floor and twirled me around several more times until I threatened to vomit. Most of the other inmates had left, but we had been helping the COs clean up.

Troy moved to pick up one of the posters for the Special Rec, which had fallen on the ground. He stared at it for several long moments, squinting, tilting his head from side to side, and finally threw it down on a table. I picked it back up. “Troy, you ok?”

“Yeah, I’m fine.”

“It looks like you had trouble seeing or something.”

He clenched his jaw, looking aggravated. “Don’t worry about it, Ronnie.”

“But if you’re having trouble, you need to see an eye doctor.”

“I can see just fine!”

He must have noticed how I pulled back at his outburst, because the tension in his face softened. “There’s nothing wrong with my sight. It was...the letters. I can see the letters, but I don’t know...” he trailed off, waved the matter away with his hand, and started collapsing a table. I stopped his hands. “What’s wrong, sweetheart?”

He wouldn’t look at me. “I uh, I can’t...read.”

I looked at him disbelievingly. “You have a large vocabulary for someone who can’t read.”

“That’s cuz I used to make my older brother reread things to me until I had them memorized. As you saw, I can’t even read that sign.”

I ran a hand through his hair. “Do you want me to teach you how to read?”

He nodded. “My Ma, she likes those romance novels. I’d like to read her a chapter when she comes to visit.”

“When’s her next visit?”

“Really soon, but she visits every month.”

I smiled. “So we’ll just surprise her, then. We could probably manage that.”

Troy pulled me to him and gave me another kiss. When he pulled back, the grateful look in his eyes almost broke my heart.



I underestimated Troy’s abilities. I figured it would take a year to get him where he wanted. But

I found early on that Troy was a quick study. He already knew his letters and most sounds, he just needed help putting them together. We made it part of our routine to go the library every week, and I had him read out loud to me every night before we fell asleep.

Four or five months later, I lay in my top bunk as Troy read to me, haltingly, from the Bible. He yawned through one passage and came to the next:

“Do you not know that the unjust will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither fornicators nor i-id – “

“Idolaters,” I corrected.

“ – Idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor sodomites nor thieves nor the covetous nor drunkards nor revilers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God.”

I heard him chuckle below me. “Shit, Ronnie, do you think Corinthians covered everyone? According to this list we are super-fucked.”

I got down from the bunk and leaned into his bed to kiss him on the nose. “Yeah, us and everyone else in this place.”

“My ma is comin’ tomorrow.”

“You ready to surprise her?”

He smirked. “Yeah, and here’s another surprise: you’re coming with me.”

“She’s not on my visitor list.”

“I had Charlie take care of it. Will you come?”

I kissed him again. “Of course I will.”



Mrs. Santino was delighted with Troy’s newfound skill. She laughed and clapped her hands when Troy was finished reading her a chapter from the latest Danielle Steel novel. Troy’s older brother John looked on in disgust at the display. It was childish, I had to admit, but as prison held so few pleasures I saw no reason to deny a single one.

Mrs. Santino was probably the sweetest woman I had ever met. She was tiny and thin, with a head full of thick, curly, obviously-dyed dark hair. Charlie had allowed her to smuggle in the cookies and disposable camera, and we sat and talked until the cookie tin was empty and the camera film all used up. I wasn’t used to so much attention and so I went outside on the visitor’s porch to take a break. John followed me out there a few minutes later.

“So my psycho faggot brother found yet another one stupid enough to manipulate.”

I looked at him incredulously. “Excuse me?”

“You have to know he’s just using you for whatever perverted shit he can come up with. And do you know why he’s in here?”

I nodded. “He accidentally shot someone during a fight.”

“He shot a straight man, because that man was trying to get him to walk away from a life of sin.”

“I’m no angel.”

“I know, you’re even worse. Raped a teenage girl. You two are perfect for each other, I get it.” And then he turned and looked at me, hatred in his eyes. “But how dare you sit there and talk to my mother like she means ANYTHING to you. I try to keep her away from my brother as much as possible, but it’s not easy. Back off.”

He walked back inside and I followed behind. I must have been scowling pretty badly, because Mrs. Santino took one look at me and laughed.

“Let me guess,” her voice twinkled with her merriment. “Johnny threatened you to stay away because he’s afraid you’ll corrupt me into loving you just like Troy.”

John glowered but she kept talking. “Let me save you the trouble, Ronnie. Troy may have done something wrong, and he may like men, but he’s still my boy and I love him. The thing about having kids is loving them even when their last redeeming quality is gone, and Troy is nowhere near that point...isn’t that right, Johnny.”

He muttered something to himself and went back outside. She laughed again. “You’ll have to excuse John. He’s got some old-fashioned ideas about things.”

Troy smirked. “That’s a great way to put it, Ma. Couldn’t have said it better myself.”

She gave him a light whack on the back of the head. “You be nice to your brother. He does a lot for you.”

“I know, Ma, but that doesn’t give him the right to harass Ronnie.”

She took my hand and gave it a pat. “This is true. Troy’s lucky to have found you, that’s for sure.” She smiled at her son. “He’s so handsome!”

Troy went flaming red to the roots of his hair. “MA!”

“Oh, give it a rest, baby boy. Ronnie and I have to finish gossiping about you. Go hug your brother, make him squirm.”



I hadn’t been in that pleasant a mood in a very long time. As we walked back to our cell after dinner that night, I was still smiling. Troy noticed and wrapped his arms around my neck, giving me a kiss.

“Have fun today?”

I nodded. “Your brother leaves something to be desired, but your mother! She’s a really good person.”

“Yeah she is.”

I went to grab my toothbrush, but he put a hand on my arm and pulled me back toward him. “You know, you’ve never mentioned your parents.”

I shrugged. “They were assholes.”

“Yeah, my dad was a bastard too. Ma was happy when he left.”

“You know, she told me she would write to me too? I love her already.”

I went back to my toothbrush.

“She loves you too, you know.”

I smirked. “Naturally.”

“And...so do I.”

The toothbrush clattered to the concrete. “Sorry?”

“I said, I love you.”

“But our deal – “

“It stopped having anything to do with that a long time ago, and you know it.” He pulled me toward him again. “I don’t know what I’d do without you, and when I’m away from you I can’t stop thinking about you.”

“You lay it on thick,” I teased. “But I wondered when we’d feel the same way.”

“How long?”

“A while now. It was worth the wait.”

The smile he gave me was affectionate and contented. It was rare to see him this way and I loved it.

“Say it again,” I demanded.

He laughed, pulling me even closer. “Well, if you insist. Ronnie McKellan, I love you.”



Three years passed on Hopewell Unit, and I was about to be paroled. Not much changes in that place, and so I was ill-prepared for what was to come. Prisons as large as the one that housed Hopewell never had the resources to get you prepped for parole, and even if they did, I don't know that it would have taken. All I could think about was Troy.

Troy took it better than I did. He still had four years on his sentence, and he was used to disappointments, so he tried to take it in stride. We'd write every couple days, he said. Would I get a home line so I could accept collect calls? Of course I would. No visits, but we'd figure things out. We'd become famous on the pod not for our disgusting displays of affection – which were, in fact, frequent and nauseating to the point where even the guards sometimes told us to break it up – but for our exclusivity. Rare on the outside and even moreso in prison, we'd decided to stay away from other men on the unit.

Even more astonishing to me was that Troy vowed to keep to himself until he got out. I'd told him not to bother – I knew how he felt about me – but he insisted. When I jokingly suggested that perhaps he'd gone soft, he replied seriously that he knew it and didn't care.



And yet, despite all reassurances, when I left the prison that day and got on the bus towards Buffalo, I felt lost and scared and absolutely heartbroken. I spent a few weeks in a halfway house until I found a job as a janitor in an office building, a shitty two-room apartment in the ghetto. I was shocked to have found a job – after all, I couldn't be within a thousand feet of anyone under the age of sixteen.

Troy's letters, and visits from his mother, sustained me. I would get about three letters a week, usually all at once on the same day, written in the half-cursive, half-print I'd taught him on the pod so long ago. Mrs. Santino would bring over piles of food every Sunday, always claiming I looked too skinny. Usually Troy would call just before dinner, so that he could speak to me and his mother at the same time. I spent all week waiting for that phone call, every week, the anticipation sometimes more than I could stand.

And then one Sunday, about six months later, he didn't call. I didn't think much of it – Mrs. Santino and I assumed he was busy. But then the letters stopped coming a few days later. I gave it a few weeks – I didn't want to make any assumptions. But when Mrs. Santino went to visit, and Troy refused to see her, I started to panic. I called Charlie every day for a week until he finally picked up the phone.

“Shit, Ronnie, I dunno what’s going on. My wife just had a baby; I’ve been on leave the last seven weeks.”

Mrs. Santino was ringing her hands, but I was becoming unglued. I stopped sleeping, working nights and then spending all day walking through Buffalo. Eating became nearly impossible, though Mrs. Santino now spent several nights a week in my kitchen, trying to ease both our minds.

It didn’t take long after that for the old feelings to surface – the ones before Troy. Suddenly every young girl became a conquest – something, anything, to take my mind off my troubles. I tried to fight it off, but found myself walking closer and closer to schoolyards and playgrounds. And then, one day, I got in trouble again.

She was ten years old and the second I grabbed her I knew I wouldn’t do anything to her. I was by then consciously aware of the fact that I wanted to break my terms of parole, just to make sure he was ok. I let her go and waited for the cops to show up.

It took several more weeks for me to actually end up back in prison, and I was bouncing off the walls. Mrs. Santino would visit, and I would know even before she opened her mouth what it was: no, Troy still wouldn’t see her, and Charlie wasn’t being told anything.

When I arrived back in Hopewell Unit, Charlie grabbed me and pulled me aside before anyone else could finish processing me, pretending to discipline me.

“What happened? Do you know?”

He nodded and I swore I saw the sheen of tears in his eyes. “He needs to tell you, Ronnie.”

“Ok, well, let me in there.”

He pulled me back. “I put you in as his roommate, but if he reacts violently, don’t be surprised. We’ve tried twice since, putting roommates in with him, and he beat the living snot out of both.”

“Since WHAT?”

“Talk to him, Ronnie.”

The Troy in that cell was not the man I knew. This Troy was more built than before, but pale and sleepless, jumping at the smallest noises. When I opened my cell door and walked in, he nearly dove out of his own skin, flinching and hiding his face in his hands where he sat on the bottom bunk.

I shook my head in disbelief. “Shit, Troy...”

I went over and put my hand on his shoulder, but he shrugged me off. His hands would not stop shaking.

“Troy, talk to me.”

His voice was a whisper. “I can’t believe you let yourself get sent back here. You stupid fuck.”

“I couldn’t help it. I was too worried about you.”

“I’m fine.”

“You are NOT fine. You are a mess. What the hell happened to you?”

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Troy – “

“I said I don’t want to fucking talk about it!”

His pulled a fist and went to connect it with my eye, but then realized what he was doing and walked over and punched the concrete wall instead. I heard the bones in three fingers crunch and winced. He hadn’t moved from the wall, his back against

it, clutching his broken hand against his chest.

He gulped air, trying not to cry. “Please don’t make me talk about it. I’m begging you, don’t make me.”

And then I knew. I went to him and pulled him into my arms, and he let me.

“It’s ok, sweetheart. You don’t have to do anything you don’t want to do.”



When Troy came back from the infirmary a few hours later, he was surprisingly quiet and dry-eyed. He took my hand and pushed me into his bed on the wall side of the bunk, then climbed in after me, pulling my arm around his abdomen. I stroked his hair and waited.

“It wasn’t the first time,” he finally said.

I didn’t say anything.

“I was in juvie. Twelve years old. I’d broken into a couple houses to get some stuff to sell. Ma and John and I needed the money.”

He sighed, deeply. “My roommate was sixteen, and he was...” he shook his head then, in disbelief, “...just HUGE. He towered over me. He could have crushed me like a bug.”

“He came back from class one day, all pissed off about something, and he just pushed me up against the wall and did it. When I complained to one of the guards, he took me into an office and did it too. I was in and out of juvie and jail and prison for years, and it happened every single time until I met Wilde.”

“Wilde? The head of the Aryans?”

Troy nodded. “I was with him for the two years I was in Auburn, before I came here for manslaughter. I was his bitch.” He spat the word. It no longer amused either of us.

“The thing about Wilde was that he loved his little conquests. I was pretty and I followed the rules, he said. He liked that. But he thought I was smart, too, so he started grooming me to become one of them.”

He chuckled bitterly, running his hands over the black swastika tattoo on the inside of his left wrist. “I actually bought into it for a while, until I saw some black kid get beaten to death on the tier. After that, I pretended. And when I ran into Wilde

and his crew here, I pretended some more. I thought...well, who knows what I thought.”

I kissed the tattoo and he shuddered. “What happened this time?”

“I fell out of favor with the Aryans, to put it mildly. Charlie was gone on leave, so he couldn’t protect me when a bunch ‘a other COs brought me in, demanding info on Wilde’s contraband ring. I didn’t know much, but they beat the shit out of me until I talked.”

With my finger, I traced a scar on his cheek. Now I knew how it got there.

“Wilde found out who snitched and let all of them know that I was a white traitor. He put a hit out on me. He wanted me dead. I was on my way to the library when ten of those fuckers cornered me on a break from the kitchens. They beat me to the ground and then...” he grit his teeth, “every single one of them...they just did whatever they wanted to me...”

“You have to say it,” I whispered. “You can’t deal with it until you say it.”

His entire body was shaking, and I was sure that if I looked, I would see him crying. Instead, I buried my face in his hair and waited.

He took a deep, trembling breath. “They...they raped me. Over and over until I begged them to kill me. I probably would have died had one of the COs not come running down the hall after an hour or so, having noticed that all of us were missing.”

“I’m sorry, Troy. I’m sorry I couldn’t protect you.”

He turned to face me. When he saw my tears he began to sob. “I hate them. I fucking hate them.”

I pulled him to me and rocked him until he fell asleep. I knew I wouldn’t be able to. The nightmares would be too intense.



Slowly, over the next several months, Troy pulled himself out of his self-imposed exile. Wilde and the Aryans had been taken off the unit, so we made friends with some of the new guys. Bit by bit, Troy learned how to walk down the hall without crouching in the fetal position at every noise, how to kiss me without expecting me to turn on him. But there was an undercurrent of rage that wasn’t there before, a temper that showed itself more frequently. He got one of the new guys in the pod

to turn his swastika tattoo into a Celtic cross, and put my initials underneath. People were careful around him. Everyone knew what had happened, and to Troy, that was the worst of it.

The tenor of Hopewell had changed as well. Inmates were heavily screened before being allowed to live on-unit, and even then officials wanted to put Troy and a few others in protective custody. Charlie put a stop to it.

It was more difficult for Troy and I to do what we wanted in a unit now known for its prison rapists. We found quite a few creative ways to cover the square-foot window in our cell door, but every once in a while, a CO would catch us sleeping in the same bed and throw Troy in the hole for a few weeks.

But, slowly, things got better. Troy started sleeping, eating, going to rec, and seeing his mother when he was up to it. When he simply couldn’t, I would go see Mrs. Santino in his place. When she’d found out what happened to him, she’d been devastated, not to mention homicidal. Had it not been for Charlie and I, I was convinced she would have contrived a way to put an end to Wilde and his crew.

I couldn’t say I blamed her. When I saw them, it took everything not to jump and shank them where they stood. But then I remembered Troy, who still wore shank-proof vests of old

magazines under his clothes when he went anywhere outside the pod. I couldn't fuck up, for him.

Love survives in the strangest of places, something I'd figured out years before but which never ceased to amaze me. Troy and I endured every test, every trial. When terrible dreams plagued him for nights on end, we dealt with it. The first time he found a way to laugh again, we celebrated. As for what Troy and I did, well, I never knew what to call it. Having sex, making love, fucking...none of those described it quite right. I can't imagine there was a name for the fighting, the jealousy, the power struggle, the tenderness and affection all rolled into one act committed on our shared bunk every night. Every time he got thrown in the hole, I walked around, lost. I couldn't help but wonder what life would be like for us on the outside. We talked about it together, trying to decide where we'd end up, what we'd do first.



And then Troy got sick. Nothing much at first – a cold that wouldn't quit, a bronchial infection, typical winter illnesses. So I was shocked when he ended up in the infirmary with pneumonia. Charlie got me in to sit with him as soon as possible, but it wasn't for several days.

He'd looked so healthy the past several months, and now his face was white, his breath rattling, hooked up to an IV.

"How you doin'?" I pushed his hair out of his face.

He shrugged, "Kinda sick, apparently. They said I'd be out in a few days."

But he wasn't quite looking at me, and he gnawed on his lower lip.

"Now what's really going on?"

Troy heaved a breath. "They took a blood test. They...they think I have HIV."

My blood went cold. A knot formed in my stomach. I squeezed his hand until I saw him wince.

"Oh, God, Ronnie, I haven't been with anyone else. Please believe me."

I wanted to laugh, cry, and grab him into my arms all at once, for thinking of my feelings when he was obviously terrified. "Jesus Christ, Troy, I know that."

“You need to get tested.”

“I will.”

“Charlie used to get me in for an HIV test every six months. But I haven’t gone since, well...you know.”

Horror and rage grabbed me at the idea that they may have taken one more thing from him, but I kept my head. “Let’s talk to the nurse.”

The nurse was huddled together with Charlie and the head nurse at the other end of the room, and Charlie looked horribly upset. They made their way over when they saw me wave.

“Hi Mr. Santino.” The head nurse was very sweet; she smiled at us both. “We have your secondary test results.”

Troy smiled back, though weakly. “What’s the damage?”

She sat down. “To be frank, severe. You’ll survive the pneumonia, but after a re-test we found you are HIV-positive.”

“Well,” I broke in before she could say more, “people live for years with HIV.”

Her face fell. “Not in Mr. Santino’s case. We consulted with the testing lab, and when they came up with your test results they decided to contact an HIV specialist. Mr. Santino has a new, rare strain of the virus – largely drug-resistant, and in any case fast-moving.”

Troy took another deep breath. He looked like he wanted to break something. “Meaning?”

“Meaning your viral load is already high, and your T-cell count very low. You don’t have HIV, Mr. Santino. You have AIDS.”

Cue my tears. I started crying all over him, and he gave my shoulder a little shake. “Get a hold of yourself.” He turned back to the nurse. “So...I’m dying. How long?”

She looked like she felt horrible for making me cry. “Well, we can try some drugs – “

“Fuck the drugs. All my friends tell me they’re horrible. I won’t take them. So how long without drugs?”

“Eight months, maybe nine.”

I lost it, and Troy, trying to act tough and look annoyed, told Charlie to get rid of me. “I can’t deal with him right now. Get

him tested and get him out of here.”

I knew what he was doing, so I was only a little angry. I knew, when I crawled into my bunk that night, that he too would be crying himself to sleep.



He was in the infirmary for another week or so before he came back to the pod. I was looting our commissary stash when he walked in, a little pale but otherwise looking much better.

“I heard you’re clean.”

I nodded. I’d found out a few days before that I was negative.

“They tested Wilde’s crew. Half of the guys that got me were positive, and two had my strain of the virus. We haven’t seen them in a while, but they’re dying, I guess. The warden had to report everything to the CDC.”

I still didn’t say anything, didn’t look at him. I couldn’t.

He pulled on my arm until I was forced to look up. “Oh, and look what Charlie hooked us up with.”

He was grinning and shaking a box of condoms. I wanted to fucking kill him.

I didn’t realize I had punched him on the side of the head until he fell.

“Goddammit, Ronnie, what the FUCK was that for?”

I immediately grabbed a towel and ran it under the faucet, pulling him up to a sitting position and pressing against the bruise forming around his eye.

“You think this is all a fucking game?” I hissed. “You think it’s no big deal? You’re DYING.”

He grabbed the towel from me and stood up on shaky legs. “YES, Ronnie, I realize that. But what’s the point of obsessing about it? There’s nothing we can do, and I’ll be damned if I’m going to spend the last months of my life being hateful and bitter about what they’ve taken from me. I just want to spend the time living. You understand that, right?”

I started to cry, again. The idea of losing him, of going through life without him, was too much. I couldn’t bear the thought of watching him suffer even more than he already had. I wondered aloud how he held it together.

“Because the last six years have been amazing,” he told me, pulling me into his arms. “I used to feel sorry for myself, because I was in prison, because I’d fucked up, until I realized it was the best thing to have ever happened to me. You learn a lot about yourself in here,” he smiled, “and you meet people that change your life. I don’t regret any of it.”

I didn’t either, of course, but I was too clouded by grief to voice it. He seemed to understand. He took me by the hand and pulled me out into the pod, doubling back to grab a deck of cards. “C’mon, let’s just forget about it for a while. The guys are having a pitch tournament, and I’ve got money to burn.”



It took Troy a while to get noticeably ill. I was the only one who knew about the lack of appetite, the weight loss, the headaches, the fatigue. He bore most of it with good humor, but as the months went by and he couldn’t go to special rec, and then only lasted ten minutes in the yard, I would sometimes find him depressed.

Six months later he finally had to be moved to a single cell in the infirmary. Charlie pulled some strings and got me moved from office work to nursing assistant duty. Even then, I missed Troy terribly at night. I would wake up crying and not be able to get back to sleep. After that, I started working double shifts

in the infirmary. No one told me I could or couldn’t. I just refused to go back to my cell until I was practically dropping from exhaustion.

The head nurse took pity on me and let me sit with Troy whenever I wanted. He slept a lot now, which made it easier somehow to worry over his sunken eyes and skeletal frame. But when he was awake it was a test of mental strength. He was in more agony than any painkiller could ever touch, but he never complained. He would blow me a kiss, whisper in his now-raspy voice that he loved me, and close his eyes as I read to him from a book I had taken out of the prison library.



Troy died in the evening, late summer. I’d been working the infirmary since five in the morning, but as he’d taken a turn the week before, I was afraid to leave. The nurse told me Troy had been asking for me and ordered me to go sit with him. He slept almost constantly now, waking only when the morphine wore off. He would press his lips together then, refusing to ask for more, but I always made sure he got it.

When I walked in this time, he woke and smiled.

“Are you in pain?” I asked.

He shook his head and gave me a tiny smile.

“Don’t lie to me. Tell me if you need something, that’s what I’m here for.”

He shifted a bit. “I’m fine,” he whispered.

I sat down on the bed beside him. “How are you feeling?”

His smile widened and he reached out to mess up my hair. “I just told you, I’m fine.”

He saw the worry in my eyes and feebly patted the blanket. “Why don’t you lay down with me? The nurse don’t care.”

I helped him lay down on his side and squeezed into the bed beside him, facing him, stroking what was left of his hair, running a hand up and down one stick-thin arm.

“Are you tired?”

He sighed. “Yeah, sure am.”

“Well then why don’t you get some rest? I’ll be right here.”

He kissed me. “I know. And, just in case I forget to tell you later, I love you.”

“I love you too, Troy.”

He closed his eyes. “I’ll miss you sweetheart.”

It was then I knew. He’d called me in because he knew that if he went to sleep again, he wouldn’t wake up.

I held him as his breath slowed and finally, with a rattling gasp, stopped. It was an hour before I went and got the priest to deliver last rites.



Just as Troy had chosen to stay in prison instead of being sent to outside hospice care, he chose to be buried here. Mrs. Santino agreed to it with surprising grace.

“Well, it isn’t like I have a burial plot for him. A mother never expects to outlive her child.”

I pulled her close to me by the gravesite in the prison cemetery, kissing her forehead. She smiled up at me. “And after all, he met you here.”

The funeral was short but well-attended by most of Hopewell Unit. Fellow inmates hugged me, shook Mrs. Santino's hand, offered their condolences. The COs were less emotional, unless you count Charlie, who sobbed into Nathan's shoulder like a child the entire time. I had nothing left to cry at the moment, and I had nothing left to feel, except for the knot of grief and despair wounding its way through my chest and stomach.

Mrs. Santino pulled me aside and hugged me close, then pulled something from her pocket.

"I want you to have this."

It was a picture of Troy and me, from her very first visit. Our arms were around each other, we had her homemade cookies stuffed in our mouths, and we were grinning. He looked healthy, and we looked happy. In love, even.

"You'll get out soon, and then you can go through my collection and pick out some more. But for now, you'll need something for your cell."

I thanked her, kissed her again, and walked away before she could watch me break down.



I left prison the following spring. The last snow had come and gone and the air felt balmy and cool. I went to live with Mama Santino for a while, much to John's chagrin. After that I moved east, settling in the Adirondack foothills. Nathan helped me get a job at a local AIDS hospice. It was exactly where I wanted to be.



A few months later I was at work, in the middle of a counselor licensing course, when Charlie Graham walked in. "How ya' doin', Ronnie?"

I stood up and hugged him, then showed him what I was up to.

"I can't work with kids, obviously, but I'm getting clearance to counsel my adult patients."

"Great work, Ronnie. Now, I have something for you."

He handed me a slightly crumpled envelope.

"What's this?"

"It's from Troy. He asked me to give it to you once you left prison."

I tore it open with shaking hands, unfolded it, and read it aloud:

*Dearest Ronnie,*

*I hope you're doing well, sweetheart. If you're reading this, I must be gone. I'm sorry that I had to leave you; I know how difficult that must have been. Thank you for understanding. I asked Charlie to deliver this letter to remind you of the things we went through together, and how they changed us. Hopefully it will remind you that you can continue to be, on the outside, the kind, generous, and wonderful person I knew on the inside. We broke all the rules, you know, but we did it for the right reasons. I know you'll never go back to prison, but it's tough out there, sweetheart. Keep this letter with you, and may it help guide your path. Don't regret a single thing, Ronnie. I know I don't. Give my love to Ma and Charlie, and I'll see ya' later.*

*All my Love,*

*Troy*

Troy was right. We broke all the rules, and it changed my life. I never went back to prison, and I don't regret a thing.



*Grow: Firenze, Italy* ▶ **Liz Calka**

# THE WAITING ROOM

by Sonia Tabriz

“Sorry I’m late m’am, I...”

Excuses. They all had excuses.

“There is a clipboard on the table. Fill out the forms.”

He sat down, a young lady by his side and two little boys.

“Will he be leaving his things with you?”

“Yes m’am,” a soft, rather worn voice responded.

She was tired, and it showed.

I turned to the man, who looked more like a boy despite his 19 years. “Let me know when you’re done, alright? Then we can get you, uh, get you processed.”

He sat there with a crinkled brow, looking tense. Maybe a little confused.

“You need any help?”

Some of them struggled; needed help understanding it all.

Their minds were somewhere else, understandably I guess. This sort of thing doesn't happen every day.

"Thank you m'am. Um, for the address?"

I replied. "Don't worry about that. I'll fill out the bottom half, just need your signature and we can assign you what you need."

The boy finished the form, pen moving real slow, heavy almost. Then he handed me the clipboard.

"Alright, let me get you in the system here. Give me a few seconds."

Those few seconds passed like hours for him I'm sure. Always hated filling these things out right in front of them. Like I played a role, had a hand in it.

He just stood there waiting, and turned to the sound of the kids tearing apart a magazine. Taking a deep breath, he was ready to lay it on them for fooling around.

But he exhaled instead. A deep sigh. Shaking his head and even chuckling a bit, he looked over at the lady who was now balled up in her chair.

"You got your hands full," he said.

"They are just like their dad," she said, trying to force a smile.

I typed in the last bit and gathered his things.

"All set."

He looked over at her and tried to return that same forced smile, but gave up as he saw her fighting back the tears that welled up in her eyes. "I love you," he said, "don't you dare forget that. Come here."

He glanced over at the boys but I suppose he didn't wanna disturb them. They were better off not knowing anyway.

By then she had gotten up from her seat and his arms were wrapped around her, a sense of security she knew she was about to lose. "It'll be okay baby. I'll be waiting for you alright? I'll be waiting. We are gonna fight this. You'll make it. We'll make it."

She lied.

He knew it.

But it was easier that way. You just don't know how these things will work out. Nobody does, really.

“Alright, Inmate 69338.” He looked startled. It's a helluva change, right then and there, in front of his family. “Follow me.”

He let go of her, turned around, and dropped his head.

He didn't look back.

Nothing left to see, when you come right down to it.



*Branches: Washington, D.C.* ▶ **Liz Calka**

# CONTRIBUTORS ▼

## David Brisson

Originally from Rochester, New York, Brisson is a recent graduate from American University with a B.A. in International Politics. He is currently doing non-profit work in the D.C. area with an eye on further education in the near future. Aside from writing, he enjoys other intellectual and recreational pursuits like learning foreign languages, composing/recording music, and traveling. His work has also been published in the *HazMat Review*.

## Liz Calka

Calka is an award-winning photographer and undergraduate student at American University majoring in Visual Media and minoring in Graphic Design. She serves as Artistic Director of BleakHouse Publishing, and has created covers for multiple BleakHouse publications including books *Origami Heart* and *A Zoo Near You*, and *Tacenda Literary Magazine*. She also created and maintains [www.bleakhousepublishing.com](http://www.bleakhousepublishing.com). Calka was the Guest Editor and designer for this issue of BleakHouse Review, and her photographs are featured throughout.

## Rachel Cupelo

Originally from Upstate New York, Cupelo is a second year graduate student at American University, majoring in Justice and Public Policy studies. Her primary interests in the field include corrections, juvenile justice, and LGBT family policy. She has spent time working for both the District of Columbia Family Court, as well as two nonprofit organizations dedicated to the special needs of youth in the Criminal Justice System. She has been practicing her other passion, writing, for much of her life. She is the proud recipient of the 2008 Tacenda Magazine Literary Award for Best Poem, and the GLBTA Resource Center 2009 Academic Award. After graduation, Rachel plans to attend law school.

## **Samantha Dunn**

Dunn is a recent graduate of the Political Science and Philosophy programs at American University. She hopes to attend the University of Southern California in the fall of 2010 to pursue her Master of the Arts in Social Work. She will continue to write both poetry and fiction in her spare time.

## **Kellee Fitzgerald**

Fitzgerald is a recent American University graduate, with a degree in Justice. Her award-winning short story, "His Last Words," appeared in the January, 2009 issue of BleakHouse Review.

## **Rosie Haimm**

Haimm is an undergraduate honor student at American University majoring in Music with a concentration in Vocal Performance. She will graduate in May 2010. She is currently working at the Washington National Opera in their Education Department. Her poems were inspired by the presence and absence of music in the prison system.

## **Jamie Kamlet**

Jamie Kamlet graduated from American University in May 2009 with a BA in Psychology and a Minor in Justice. A published author of fiction, Kamlet is currently serving as an AmeriCorps member at Academy of Hope in Washington D.C.

## **Shirin Karimi**

Karimi is an award-winning honors student at American University majoring in Literature and pursuing the Pre-Medical Program. She is a writer for the *Catalyst* science magazine, a chemistry research assistant, and a volunteer at Georgetown University Hospital. Karimi is a Consulting Editor for BleakHouse Publishing.

## Zachary Faden

Originally from outside of Philadelphia, Faden is a postgraduate, Master of Science student at the University of Edinburgh, studying Intellectual History. He completed his undergraduate studies as a member of the Honors Program at American University, receiving a B.A in History and a B.A. in Philosophy. His poetry has been published in *Tacenda Literary Magazine*.

## Wes Gifford

Gifford is a Junior at American University, where he is majoring in Russian, Journalism and International Affairs. He was encouraged to write fiction and poetry in two of Robert Johnson's undergraduate courses – Deprivation of Liberty and Prison Stories. His experience in the two classes has motivated him to explore the fields of justice and criminology, and potentially take on an academic concentration in International Justice.

## Chris Miller

Miller is an award-winning writer specializing in poetry and nonfiction prose. He maintains a strong interest in prison reform and often uses writing as a means to advocate for those whose voices remain unheard. Miller is currently a junior at American University's School of Public Affairs, double majoring in Political Science and Law & Society. He hopes to become a criminal defense attorney.

## Seth Shamon

Shamon is a junior at American University, double majoring in physics and philosophy. This piece is based loosely on the life of a former AU student, presented within the framework of Friedrich Nietzsche's autobiographical work, *Ecce Homo*. Seth wrote this piece after reading first-hand narratives on crime and imprisonment in Robert Johnson's Honors Prison Stories course at AU.

## Sonia Tabriz

Tabriz is an honors student at American University majoring in Law & Society and Psychology, the Managing Editor of BleakHouse Publishing, and the Editor-In-Chief of *Tacenda Literary Magazine*. Tabriz's book, *Lethal Rejection: Stories on Crime and Punishment* (co-edited with Robert Johnson), showcases many of her original writings. Her fiction has also appeared in *A Zoo Near You*, as well as a number of literary journals including BleakHouse Review, *Tacenda Literary Magazine*, and Admit2. Tabriz's color drawing, "Hope Behind Bars," served as the cover art for the Spring 2009 edition of *Tacenda Literary Magazine* and her painting, "Hate Behind Bars," served as the cover art for *Miller's Revenge*. Some of her black-and-white drawings appear alongside her poetry in *A Zoo Near You*. She has also designed the text for several books and publications. Tabriz is best known for her fiction and art but has also published works of general and legal commentary.

## Jonas Varnum

Varnum is an honors undergraduate student at American University. Through his writing, Jonas has examined the justice system from both the perspective of the government and the defendants, and the culture clash that creates the dissonance between the two. His studies have led him to write several fictional pieces on the subject. Jonas is a Consulting Editor with BleakHouse Publishing.