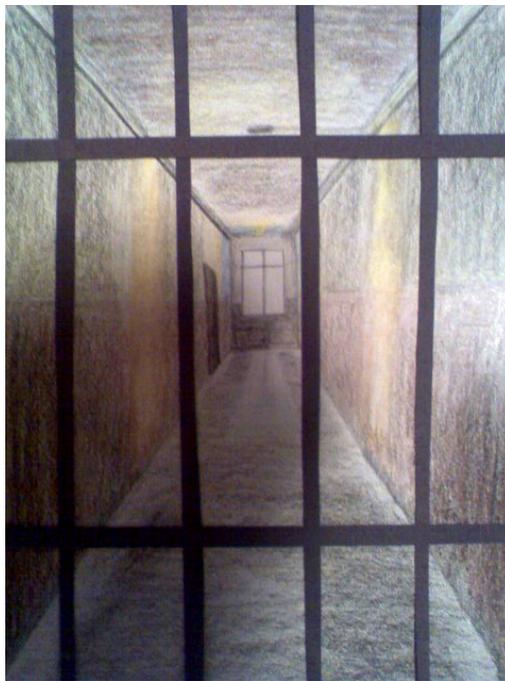


The Prison Librarian

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A BleakHouse Chapbook

Reprinted from:

Bleak House Review:

An Occasional Online Literary Magazine

Number 2, January 2009

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Lethal Rejection: Stories on Crime and Punishment

Carolina Academic Press, 2009

(www.BleakHousePublishing.com)

Damn! After 10 years in this hell, I'm finally ready to take that long walk down the corridor to freedom, and all I can do is think about a story an old convict told me when I was still a new fish. Shit, it's probably made up, but it's in my head and I got to get it out.

You shoulda seen me when I first came into this joint. I was scared and soft, and all I could see was "*Sink or Swim*" written on every tattoo, uniform, and wall. I decided that I had to swim. I didn't want to end up like one of them floaters: weak cons treated like prison debris to be pushed, pulled, and used by anybody for any reason. A lot of fish – newbies – come up floaters.

I ain't proud of what I ended up doing in here to stay right. But like the old man taught me, I had to do whatever it takes to keep cons, guards, and insanity from creeping up behind me and taking away my pride. No sir, prison ain't no place for the weak. A man's got to stay angry, vicious, and heartless to swim with the sharks in these treacherous and hungry waters.

I'm not sure why, but that old convict schooled me well. Now I don't worry about nothin cause I learned how to lurk silently, like a shadow, leaving cons anxious, wonderin' when I'll strike. The old con could have just as easily decided to drown me in the black depths of this angry sea, where no one would listen or care about my cries for help. But he didn't. Instead, he took me in and told me this story that I keep remembering, the one I'm gonna tell you.

I guess he decided to make me the keeper of his story so that I could pass it along when he moved on, like he did. I ain't ever before been the keeper of anything but trouble and bad luck. But I guess he just took a chance, hoping that there was still something more human than criminal inside of me. God, I hope that old bastard was right.



The story he told was about a man, born Jack Jones, the meanest and most vicious street thug around, a man whose hard life had turned his heart stone cold. Those who knew him then said he was a "hell-raiser," a demon who cared little about himself and even less about others. And this joint didn't make him any better. He became even angrier, with

nothing to live for no more. He told everyone he wanted to maim and kill as many people as he could, so their souls could be as empty, miserable, and dead as his own. So, Jack Jones became “Murder and Mayhem,” or M&M Jones, a more appropriate title.

A swift and solid hulk of a man, M&M started his bit with only a five-year sentence for a savage beating that he inflicted on some folks whose only offense was to be happier than he was. But, within a few years, his sentence was increased to thirty years—for stabbing fellow convicts who he felt were not as strong, angry, or hateful as they should have been.

Eventually, M&M did stop stabbing people, but not because he had a change of heart or worried about getting more time behind bars. Not at all. It was just that, after years of being terrorized by M&M, cons and prison guards alike had learned to stay as far out of his reach as possible. And that was fine with M&M, because he was eager to do his time and leave prison. Then he could take his mission to the unsuspecting people in the free world who he blamed for his cruel and heartless ways.

It eventually became a custom for passing convicts to shout out questions to M&M – from a safe distance. It was always the same kinds of questions which always received the same answers. But the cons didn’t mind and apparently neither did M&M, because he spared the fearful convicts their lives.

“What’s happening, M&M?” cons would ask.

“Murder and mayhem when I get out; that’s what’s happening,” would come a stern response.

“What you so mad about?” would come another question from behind .

“Cause I ain’t killed nobody today,” an angry M&M would reply.

“What you gonna do when you get out?” someone would always ask.

“Make ‘em pay,” would be the answer, in a deep and deadly growl. And then the questions would start all over again, in an endless cycle of provocation and angry response.

Now, to free world people, this endless daily routine of identical questions and responses would seem unbelievable and considered the product of exaggeration. But, as any convict knows, prison is nothing but repetition and redundancy. Everything that a con says or does, is something he’s said or done over and over again.

And contrary to common belief, being a thug ain't all it's cracked up to be. No ladies, no nice cars, no nothin'. Just chipped paint on concrete, icy metal bars, trays of cold food, and your rep. You gotta stay hard, can't show no emotion around here or talk bout no feelings. Only way you'll last in here is to act cold and tough, and eventually that's all you become, but at least you're still alive. That's what the old con taught me before God answered his prayers and carried him outa this hole. You gotta find somethin' to keep you from going crazy, losing your brains. The old con escaped by tellin' stories to new fish like me. And M&M, well, he escaped by reading stories, one in particular, as it happens.

That's right, reading. In a world where most people communicated with their fists, enjoying a good read isn't how you'd expect a guy like M&M to handle his uncontrollable rage. But crackin' open a good book was the only thing that didn't incite or provoke Murder & Mayhem to act on his name, and crack open a few heads.

Once a week, for exactly two hours—which is all the prison rules allowed—M&M could be found in the small and shelf-bare prison library, sitting alone at a weathered wooden table, quietly turning the pages of a tattered book that he gripped awkwardly with his mighty, oversized hands. At first, other cons in the library would attempt to provoke M&M into one of his angry outbursts – like always, from a distance.

“Look who's got a soft side!” Or, “Hey! Is that a tear I see? Didn't know M&M stood for Mushy and Mellow.” But no matter how much they tried, as long as M&M was in that pathetic prison library, he would not respond to any of their questions. It was as if the book he read possessed him, engulfing him in a world so distant from his own that the massive, tattooed frame of his body could do nothing more than sit transfixed, awaiting the return of the M&M the cons all knew and feared.

The shabby prison library was run by a librarian, Sophia, a petite woman with long, fine strands of misty brown hair that cascaded down to her shoulders and fluttered like a dense curtain of weeping willows with every step she took. She would have drawn no special notice if she'd worked in a library on the outs, besides perhaps the snickers of young teens. But amidst the windowless gray walls of the prison library and surrounded by large men with angry tattoos, faces set hard to make them look tough, such a small and delicate creature seemed as out of place as a warm smile.

It was truly a sight to behold when the kind and innocent librarian would stand near the big and angry men as she made her rounds through the library. “Still working on that one? Let me know when you’re ready for the next. The county cleared out their duplicates again this month so I have some fresh books in the back,” Sophia would whisper calmly, in her soft voice, so as to not disturb the others. “I put aside a few mysteries, Nancy Drew I think. You may like them.”

And the cons treated her right for the most part, knowin’ the guards would make their lives hell if they gave her any shit. But even with two guards standin’ at the library doors counting down minutes, the cons in the library flinched, averting their eyes, the first time the librarian approached M&M. They did not want to witness what they thought would be a savage attack upon the fragile Sophia by a monster who openly detested kindness, as if it were a deadly enemy.

One man called out, ready to warn her, but she didn’t hear. The unsuspecting librarian stood alongside the seated M&M, leaned over and said, “Hi! I see you here a lot but you never ask for help. I’m Sophia, the head librarian here, and can help you find anything you are looking for. Do you have any genre or topic in particular you’re interested in?” Nothing. “Alright, well let me know if something comes to mind. A lot of the guys here like reading mysteries and spooky stuff so I grabbed one off the shelf for you. If you like it, I can find you more of the same.” Again nothing. M&M didn’t even lift his head, intent on making out the oversized words on the colorful page he was so enthralled by.

But as she started walking away, she heard a faint “thank you.” Just barely over a whisper, she knew M&M didn’t want the other cons to hear him sound soft, so she kept walking... like she hadn’t heard a thing. He appreciated that. Sophia helped him the next time M&M came to the library, and the next visit as well. From then on, they were regulars. The sight of the two of them together was so astonishing that the small and usually empty prison library soon began to fill with cons who would come to watch the unlikely encounter. Once a week, in an inexplicable union of opposites, M&M and the librarian would meet to exchange books and discuss which he would like to read next.

“Perhaps you’d like to read some poetry? Here’s one, *Tales from the Purple Penguin*. It’s poetry in the form of short stories. Or something about a lovely childhood in the South?” She would bring over a few books, and with a simple nod or gesture, he would

indicate the ones he wished to read. He moved slowly through the text and Sophia didn't want his requested books being torn up or tossed. She'd put them away in the back, labeled with his name on a sticky note: "Jack".

Their encounters were brief, easy, and almost natural, the old convict would tell me, which was entirely unnatural for the prison. She called him Jack and he was fine with that.

"Hi Jack, how's it coming along? Looks like you put a good dent in that one. Check these out and let me know if you want me to keep them in the back for you."

And he would nod his head, rarely lifting it towards her direction. She would never ask about content, she wouldn't even mention characters or author names. Some questioned whether he could actually read the words inside the books he grasped with such gratitude, and she didn't want to embarrass him if that was in fact true. Unlike the rest of 'em, she didn't want to humiliate him or taunt him. The guards would spit in his food and cons would try to rile him up so he'd act out and get sent to the hole. But Sophia treated M&M differently than they did, by treating him the same way she would treat anyone else.

For decades, the cons were disappointed that M&M seemed to have a soft spot for the librarian. It's not that they disliked the librarian, but in a world full of hate and anger, her kindness must have reminded them all of things they'd been denied for most of their lives: care and respect. She treated them not like cons, but like people. People who mattered. And M&M treated her like a person too, a person who mattered to him, rather than an object of his hatred for a life he found to be nothing but unjust. But no one dared to bring this up to him, for once he stepped out of those library doors, darkness returned and M&M was reborn.

Finally, thirty years after he had first arrived at prison, M&M's sentence was complete and the man stood ready, in front of the long corridor that would lead him to freedom. Every con in the joint stood near so they could watch M&M move one slow and heavy step after another, closer to the free world of unsuspecting victims. Decades of incarceration had certainly aged him, but they had in no way diminished his vitality or his rage. And, it was this undying, pent up fury that made M&M as dangerous as he had ever been. It was a frightening scene, as blood-thirsty cons cheered; eagerly anticipating M&M making good on his promises, fulfilling his mission with a vengeance shared by the inmates he left behind.

But, moments before M&M was about to reintroduce his rage to the public, Sophia walked out from a side room, stood directly in front of the walking mountain of hate, and stopped him in his tracks. As the story goes, every con stopped cheering to silently watch what they thought would be his first attack on the free-world. Instead, what they witnessed was something they would never have expected. The tiny librarian said, softly so no one could hear: “Don’t forget to read your favorite book, Jack. It heals the soul.” He nodded. Jack knew it was a sin to kill a mockingbird. He knew there lived a mockingbird in the heart of every person. But most importantly, he knew that prisoners, even the so-called hardened cons, were people too.



“Well, that’s what happened for real,” the old con told me. But as you might imagine, there are many variations to this story, with each recalling a different version of the words spoken between the two, and what book was given. Some even swore seeing M&M grin humbly, an act of humanity the monster had never before exhibited. But, whatever was said or given that day, everyone agrees that when M&M continued down the hallway, there was a new air about him. It was as though something heavy and unwanted had suddenly been lifted from his shoulders. The grudge he held against those whom he blamed for his misfortunes seemed to dissipate as his stern march turned to a proud walk, and the glare in his eyes began to reveal a broken soul, anxious to start anew rather than hold on angrily to the past. Despite this noticeable change in the man they had feared for so long, the cons resumed their cheers, maybe spurred on by hope for themselves, clapping and hollering long after M&M had left the prison.

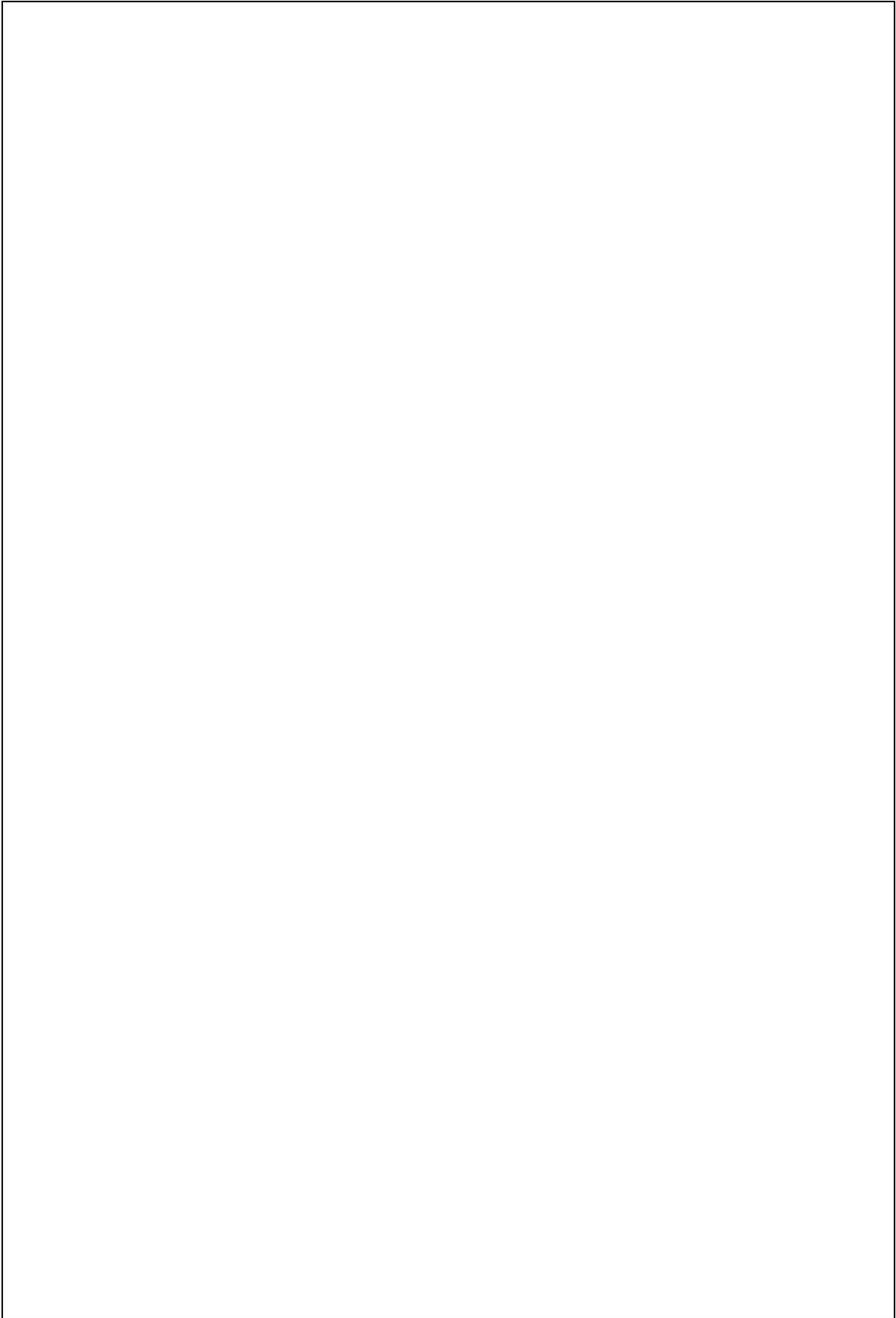
For weeks, months, and even years, those who remembered M&M eagerly searched newspapers, expecting to read that M&M had in fact implemented all the murder and mayhem he had spoken of. Never happened. Instead, a decade later, an article appeared in the local paper announcing that M&M had been named the “Citizen of the Year” because of some charity work he had done. The article explained that upon leaving prison, Jack Jones had gotten a job, gone to school, and gotten married. With his wife, he had opened a bookstore, Burnt Offerings, which had become a very successful enterprise. The reason for

the award, the article revealed, was that Jack Jones had donated a substantial sum of money for the building of a free public library in his old neighborhood. And at the end of every month, when he would clean out his shelves to stock newly released books, Jack would bring by any easy or interesting reads to the prison where Sophia, the librarian, would offer them to the cons as she had done with him years ago.

His life was changed, Jack explained to the columnist, not by thirty years of incarceration, but by a book he had received and the kind librarian who had given it to him. He wouldn't name the book, but simply stated that it taught him that inside a tough man beats a tender heart.

So, this is the story I've been thinking about as I find myself ready to walk down the same long corridor to freedom. The cons are all watching me get the last of my stuff, and I feel alone and scared. You see, like Murder & Mayhem, I too spent most of my time here tryin' to be hard, waitin' for my chance to get back at people on the outs, who don't seem to have a care in the world. But truth is, freedom ain't about takin off the cuffs or walking out of this prison. It's about leavin behind all the anger and the hate that got me here in the first place. That's what the old con taught me before he found his way outa here.

Man, I don't even know if his story is true or not. All I hope is that as I walk out of this terrible place, someone kind stops me and gives me a reason to leave the M&M inside me behind, like Jack did. Only then, can I truly be free.



Biographical Sketches

Sonia Tabriz (Author & Cover Artist) is a junior at American University, majoring in both Law & Society and Psychology. She is an active member of the University Honors Program, and also volunteers as an AU Ambassador to provide guidance and support to new students. Sonia was awarded the Outstanding Honors Sophomore Award for her achievements, and has earned a spot on the Dean's List every semester during her tenure at American University. Upon visiting the Maryland Correctional Adjustment Center, Sonia was intrigued by the intricacies of prison life and was inspired to explore an underground world with which most people are not familiar. Since then, Sonia has been published in and now serves as the Editor-in-Chief of *Tacenda Literary Magazine*. She looks forward to attending law school upon graduation and aspires to continue writing and creating art on issues of criminal justice and deprivation of liberty.

Victor Hassine (Author) is the author of the widely used text, *Life Without Parole: Living in Prison Today* (Oxford University Press, 2008), as well as several works of fiction, including *The Crying Wall* (WilloTrees & Infinity, 2005), which he co-edited and which contains several of his short stories. Official accounts indicate that Victor took his life April 27, 2008, during the 26th year of a life sentence he was serving in Pennsylvania state prisons. Victor Hassine was a vibrant voice for reform, a living embodiment of the humanity of those we confine in our prisons, and a person and artist who will be sorely missed.

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**NEC Box 67
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