

BLEAKHOUSE REVIEW



**Robert Johnson & Carla Mavaddat
Editors**

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About BleakHouse Review

BleakHouse Review is an online literary magazine that provides a venue for studies in human liberty, both its deprivation and its achievement. Some people find freedom behind prison walls; others, ostensibly free, build prisons for themselves in their everyday lives. The interplay of persons and settings, limits and possibilities, form the palette on which our artists work, examining daily life with imagination and care. BleakHouse Review is edited by **Robert Johnson** (literary content) and **Carla Mavaddat** (art and design).

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Why the Corrida

by

Claire Callahan

They say I did it.

They say I took it. Took a man's life. And one of their own at that. A man so close to them, like a brother, but still a perfect stranger to me—dead at my hands.

Or so they say.

Romero, breathless, swallows hard, fighting for air. He'd just finished a forced march from the basement of the jail to the basement of the courthouse, a place of justice with its own players and its own rituals. The most mortifying of these, the 'running of the felons', the unceremonious herding of the defendants in fast-moving lines from the jail transport vans past the media en route to the court house, a blur of bodies, buildings and cameras. At 6'6" and 210 pounds he towers over most men; but you wouldn't know it looking at him now. Head down, heaving for breath, perched precariously on a thin metal bench, Romero shrinks to half his real size. Dark purple rings frame his eyes as he scans the speckled cement floor, sticky from dirt and spit and other debris, things he doesn't want to imagine. His head hangs heavy, like a ball on a chain, supported by his hands, which enclose his face, hiding his pain. He shifts to the left. To the right. Trying to make the bench give—if only just an inch underneath his weight, in a fruitless search for some small comfort. But the bench is unyielding; like the court, it seems, its position fixed. In no shape to call the officer back over for another plea, another chance, another explanation, Romero leans back against the wall. After all, their minds are already made up. Presumed innocent? Not likely. So he waits, bracing himself against the truth pushing its way to the forefront of his thoughts.

*They want someone to blame. And they say that someone...is **me**.*

Yes, he had run, and yes, he had struggled to free himself from the cop's grasp... or at least he thinks he did. His memory is hazy; he's not really sure what happened. It was mob scene. The game. The field. The drinking. The explosion of cheers...the applause. Then the riot—fists flailing, bodies flying. Really, what else could you call it but a riot? Everyone turned to instinct, each movement raw and uncertain once that fist hit his face out of nowhere. Excitement had morphed into anger, confusion...all of the action compiled in a matter of seconds. Whatever he did he did without thinking. He just reacted. Punch the cop? Strangle him? Maybe. He knew, if he was sure of anything at the time,

he had to get out. He had to escape from that swelling mass of thrashing limbs. And surely, if he attacked the cop, it was in self-defense. He was in a fight for his life, wasn't he? What else could he have done? And he wasn't the only one. That much he knew, but they are making him doubt that now. This much he now knows for sure: He is the only one they caught, captured, and now brought here to the court, the arena at the heart of the law. In this adversarial system he enters as the enemy, the one who has to pay for the dead officer.

None of this mattered that night, of course, especially once the other cops leaped onto his back, forcing him to his knees. The scenes flash through his mind like a comic strip; the six policemen charging after him, their eyes blazing, the barrels of their guns glaring at his back until his labored breath finally gives out and he gives in, his frantic bid for freedom over.

Letting out a grunt, Romero tries to clear his throat of the lump threatening to rise and choke him. But it does not help. All he wants is to make them see him. Make them hear him. I have to try again. So he lifts his body from the bench and walks towards the iron bars that hold him. Wrapping his fingers around the bars, he looks around to get an idea of what he is up against. Suddenly, a door slams shut down the corridor—the sound reverberates against the metal bars in his hands. Shaking, he can hear the sound of his heartbeat.

*They are not going to listen. They want to fight.
And they want to win.*

Beneath the scorching midday sun, the bull beats his hoof on the ground shooting puffs of dirt up from the dry earth. Slowly, he lowers his head, his dark eyes rolling upwards, peering through the wooden gate, unaware of what awaits him inside the arena. All he knows is that he wants in, to break free of his wooden pen and meet the cheering crowd hungry for the fight. On the other side of the gate is the torero- his match, his prey. The crowd roars in waves, crashing down into the center of the arena, honoring the bull's nemesis, who is dressed in a traditional beaded yellow jacket and red pants that gleam under the rays of sun. As the torero twirls his cape, the crowd is fixated on his sinewy frame. He flicks his cape to either side of the arena to pull the crowd in with his routine. Behind him the bull charges the wooden door, backing up a few paces to run forward and crash into it, shaking its hinges and scraping it with his horns. The crowd leans in, hanging off of the edges of their seats as the bull bursts through the door, charging into the ring.



The bull takes a lap around the ring, steadily approaching his prey. As he draws near, the torero pulls a scarlet cape along his side, causing the bull to stop short and size him up. As he sees the red cape rise, the bull snorts a defiant gust of hot air sensing that, if he takes this moment to charge, his horns will only puncture cloth, not flesh. The force of the gust raises the dirt into a hazy cloud around the two fighters, briefly suppressing their violent impulses. To run. To jump. To charge. *To kill.*

Romero senses that his new world is basic and primal, a court, still, but only one of last resort, featuring predator and prey, locked in a violent ritual. Standing behind the courtroom doors, Romero can already feel the heat of the jury's eyes searing into his skin. Preparing himself to assess the scene waiting for him, he fights down the hard rock of salvia forming in his throat and steps through the doors as they open to a full room, all eyes glued on him. He takes his seat as the warring prosecution and defense teams begin their routine, speeches spun from words seemingly without end, weaving connections among facts, or alleged facts, embracing witness after witness, dancing around each other. Their web of accusations hangs suspended in the closed world of the courtroom, and from it he dangles, caught in the intersecting strands of truth and lies.

They pull apart the evidence for the defendant in a verbal tug of war until he stands before them - no longer human - a mere pile of bones, the sinews dis-

solved in the acid of hostile words, lying there, on the floor, in a heap. At least this is how Romero feels—not just naked but barren, denuded. All he wants is a chance to get up and fight his accusers *mano a mano*, to take the bull by the horns, to be a real man, a man who can by his sheer force make the jury believe his words, not theirs, the words of the enemy, the words they seem to hang on with such conviction. Now a player in the ring, the court room is filled with mute and oddly menacing spectators, poised and waiting. Romero is forced to fight for his life; but not freely, like a man, never forgetting that he has to act according to their rules. Taking a moment to lean back in his seat, he watches his defense form a cloud of doubt around the prosecutor's accusations, hoping it will encircle the jurors and shield him from a certain sentence of death. At this moment, the prosecution swoops in, dispersing this temporal, protective fog, and with a flick of his wrist, somehow produces behind him a witness to the crime. The credibility of the witness is questionable, at best. Who can say, really, what really happened in the midst of the chaos of that night? Romero listens as this stranger spews lies, pointing at him, stabbing him with his words, drawing blood for all to see, giving the prosecutor his victory over what the state believes it rightfully owns – his life, claimed as payback for the life that was lost.

All the while the jury sits silently, peering at Romero through the mounting haze of fact and fiction, their culprit now slouched forward in his seat, mortally wounded. He follows the lines in the slick hardwood to avoid their gaze, wishing he could rise and shatter the deafening silence and make them believe the truth. His truth. The whole truth. So help him God.

The bull is restless from waiting, watching, and seeking cues from his rival to plot his next move. He moves with the torero, sliding to the right, turning to the left, hoping to synchronize their movements long enough to find his window of attack. Instantly, he springs off of his thick, muscular hind legs, launching himself at the matador's frame. The audience gasps; their collective breath hangs anxiously above the bull and his prey. *Could the beast really win?* The bull charges forward, his horns aimed directly at the matador's stomach. It would take but one jab into the soft belly of the matador for the bull to emerge victorious.

Finally, it is Romero's turn to approach the court, to somehow resurrect his case from the ashes left in the wake of the prosecutor's assault. He clenches his teeth, scraping them along his molars in an effort to steady himself, ready himself to launch his words. *Maybe now they will hear me.* Thrashing about like a wild beast would not help him prove his case, but if words can wound, Romero must use them to make his attack. Self-defense, nothing more and nothing less.

Just like before. I must put up a fight. The prosecuting attorney steps in front of him and lowers his brow into a furrowed line, pushing Romero with questions, parrying with him, pinning him down. Anxiously, Romero shoots a glance at the members of the jury, his eyes searching their faces for some sort of confirmation. *My peers? Can any of them understand? What are they thinking? Who will they believe? I see them... Do they see me?*

Suddenly, the crimson cape swooshes in front of the bull in place of the torero and the animal emerges on the other side of it, enraged, thrashing his head from side to side in a desperate attempt to strike his tormentor in any way he can. Man and beast had exchanged spots like this for twenty minutes, feeling for each other's weaknesses. The torero thinks this next strike will end it all. And it is the beginning of the end. Outside of his limited peripheral vision, soaked in glossy sweat, the bull feels a sharp sting into his side, then another one deep into the muscle in the back of his neck, delivered by unseen spears wielded by the unseen man. Running forward, the dying animal stumbles to regain control of his head, angling his body to the right before colliding into the side of the rounded wall, revealing an open weakness on his left—his rage and quivering muscles a poor defense against the matador's cunning and relentless attack.



The jury moves silently, deliberately. They have rested, and they are ready, committed to playing their part just right. They file back into the courtroom, their shadows sliding along the wall, a man's fate in tow, a verdict poised on their lips. *Guilty*. No one cheers as the sentence—*Death*—pierces the silent room like a knife lodged into Romero's racing heart, cutting off all human reaction. The twelve phantom, now faceless, members of the jury shrink away from him, back against the wall. It's over. Romero hangs his head and slowly drags his feet towards the door, escorted arm-in-arm by a pair of guards—the capital sentence almost visible, like a dead weight on his sagging back.

Romero does not know it, but this is but his first in a series of deaths. More will follow outside of the courtroom, on death row, and finally, in the death house, each more final than the last.

The bull leans forward, his front legs stretched out just inches from the torero to meet "the third death." Three acts; three deaths; three men enter the arena to help the matador complete this, the final stage of the fight. It is now that the torero and his helpers must kill the bull for his crimes and sins, ultimately for being what he is, a wild animal in a tame world. Only then will man be cleansed of his own crimes and sins, his lust for the pure pleasure of fighting unto death, the bull's loss exemplifying the final conquest in man's battle with nature. The bull's heavy muscles slide him further into the ground as he bows his head to accept his fate. He cannot sustain another blow. This one will be his last. His eyes widen, and the last spear sinks in, tearing between his shoulder blades to puncture his heart.

The crowd's reaction is immediate. Elated cheers echo off of the edges of the arena as the spectators recapture their breath. What spectacle! The fans pour into the center of the ring, funneling through the gaps in the wall to reach their victor. Men, women and children cling to the gleaming torero, in awe of his strength and courage. They applaud his strategically brutal blows. For them, it is simple; man has once again defeated beast. The beast, yet again, is dragged out of the arena, lifeless and heavy, his fur glistening with tears of sweat and blood.

Romero is injected. Lethal chemicals course his veins. Paralyzed and expressionless, he lays still. Words fail him as he drifts into oblivion. This will be the final blow. He has waited for it for years, alone, the spectacle of his crime and punishment no longer of interest to the society that once thought of nothing else but sending him to his death for the death they claim he so carelessly caused. With only his executioner and official witnesses to watch, he takes his final breath. *Is this what they wanted? To dominate me? To annihilate me? To cleanse the world of my violence in place of their own?* His eyes flutter, and for a moment,

everything is still. Romero is dead. And as the curtain closes the state emerges victorious. Man has once again defeated beast. But no one cheers. And no one takes a bow. If there is satisfaction, it is muted, discrete. This is not entertainment for all to see. Not suitable for public viewing. No, this is justice, solemn and sincere.

Or so they say.

Photographs by Michael Crouser from the book Los Toros (Twin Palms Publishers 2007)

Poems by Zoé Orfanos: Victimless

Clouds blur her face, hovering over her coffee.
Thin fingers reach for her skin and dissolve.

At the sink, her mother scours the coffee pot,
black tears seeping from the grounds.

By the stove, her daughter's braids lash at the air
as she spins the walls together.



Montreal, Canada: Carla Mavaddat

Lethal Rejection, The Poem*

A permanent stain of brick, steel and glass
Flashes behind my eyelids.
Locked in barbed wire,
I see nothing but grey concrete.

I smile
Beneath the cool sheets *I'm starved*.
The scent of fried red meat flames
As the black knife becomes a mangle of plastic
Beneath my mother's gaze.

Did I do this?
The meat is ragged
With jumping veins everywhere
Blood and tendon—queasy

Words cascade from a fleshy face
All the time in the world
A thick neck held like a sausage
Christopher, are you all right?

At the table, my throat fills
Girl-cut steak, blood and tendons
Pretty poison, sweet as perfume
Wrapping around my windpipe,

Cut up like a giant steak,
Strapped into a still shot
Beneath my mother's face.

*An adaption, in poetry, of Robert Johnson's short story, Lethal Rejection.

District Attorney, a Portrait

Papers shuffle against an iron-grey suit
as he places the pencil to his mouth.

His teeth find the notches and fill the grooves
as he reaches for another file.

You ask him why he uses pencil.
He smiles. *I don't like stains.*

Opening another manila-colored case,
your name emerges from the graphite smudge
beneath his thumb. A smudge that matches
the small mark left on his temple as he places
the riddled pencil behind his ear.



Pecs, Hungary: Carla Mavaddat

Fit

Prison cells constrict.
If God can fit through the bars,
He'll sleep on the floor.

Dream

I was a murderer.
I sat in a scratched, silver chair.
A heavy screen squatted close by.

I watched myself speak.
My skin was stretched across the monitor.
Neither of us flinched.

My eyes and nose and mouth conspired.
They made her grey alien face.
And though I didn't know her answers

I recognized my voice.

Poems by Monika Sok: My Skin

Crossing Saigon
is like walking between
the Straits of Malacca
lined with exhaust pipes
and motorbikes
straits tightening
to the movements of my body
as I inch closer
to the pharmacy.

I was careful
to side-step the motorcycles,
weaving around me
circling past me
but I was not careful
enough when they burned
my skin.

It was a cavernous burn,
crackling yellow stalagmites,
oozing stalactites
on the back of my legs.
I ached for medicine, anything
before it could turn
into a black scar
that had no chance
in fading.

It was its own island
of ugliness.
It was something small,
insignificant.
but it mattered so much
in Saigon.

At restaurants
beside my friends
the waitress would make
the blunt observation
that I was not white.
And the wife of my cousin
would tell me in shock,

You are so black.
But I thought
we were the same people.
The longer I lived there
The darker I became,
I was a scar.
This must be why
my mother bought me
a number so high for sunscreen
that I would no longer feel
the sun.
It stamped
on my epidermis
a glistening paste
of whiteness,
unintended as I sweated lies
in the heat of the rainy season.
Long sleeves, sweaters, sun hats
high fashion
for the world's hottest runway.



Antipolo, Philippines: Carla Mavaddat

Completing the look
to compel the looks,
I added a surgical mask
to protect me from pollution
and people.

But it did nothing.
When I returned home
the air dropped its jaws
at my sunny complexion
that my father best-loved.
Only at the terminal
but not on the plane,
could I feel the sun
in his anticipated embrace.

I took his hands
and caressed the scar on his wrist,
a scar that had no chance
in fading.

It was its own island
of ugliness.
It was something small,
insignificant,
but it mattered so much.

Remember Him

Epigraph: The myth is that my grandfather was friends with Pol Pot before he spearheaded the genocidal Khmer Rouge regime. In this poem, Pol Pot looks down at my dead grandfather, laying on the ground with his feet cut off.

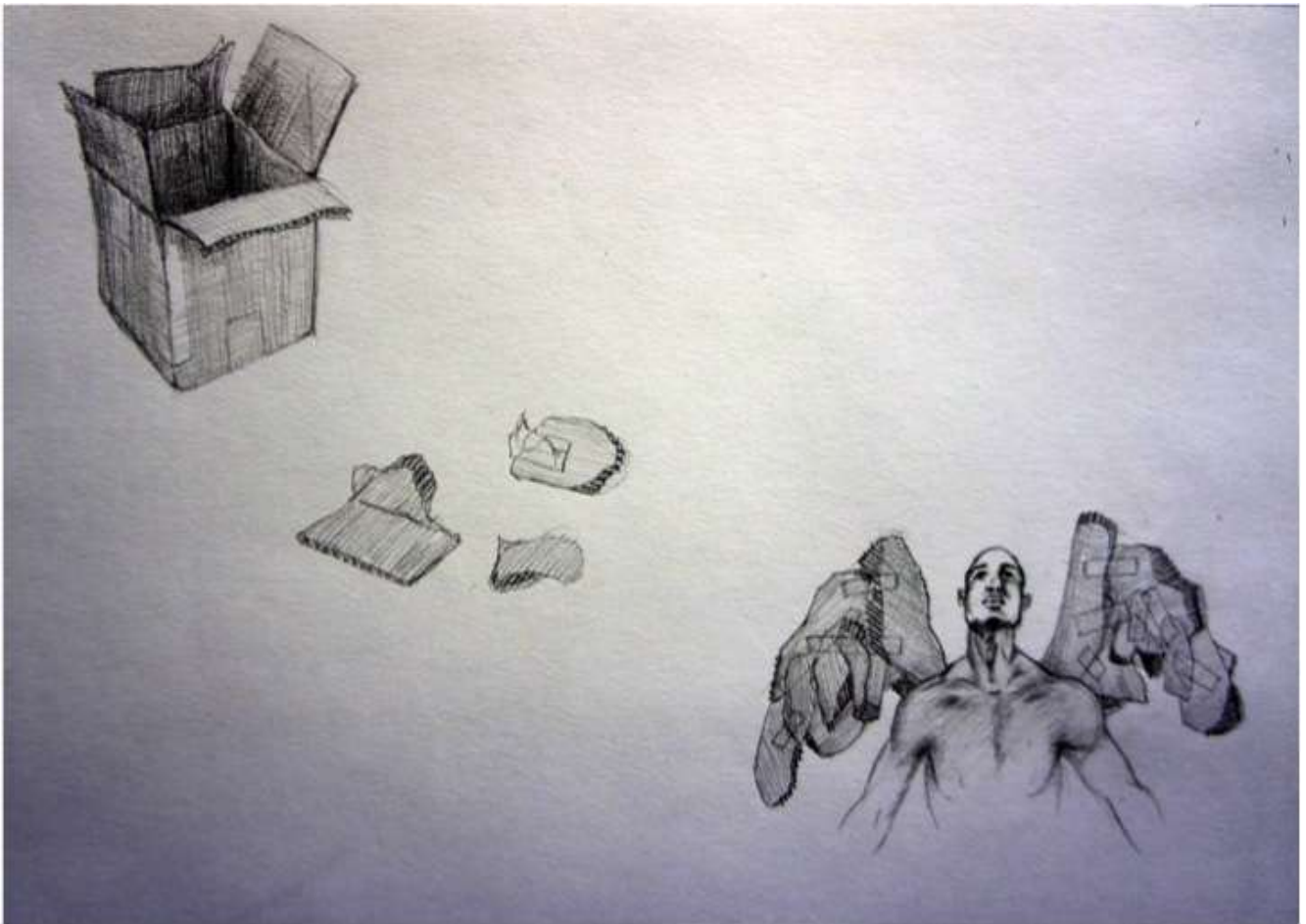
Remember my grandfather
on the swings,
his feet continuing
the pendulum of motion.
The long walks to school,
the losing race home,
the winning passes
in soccer fields
kicking dirt
in your enemies' faces.
Remember his feet,
how you washed them thoroughly
like they were your own,
removing the dirt
underneath his nail beds
before letting him
enter his own home.

Remember him before this
when you were his friend,
playing footsie
underneath turning tables.
in a school so small
its classrooms like boxes,
the tables like crackers,
your bodies like salt.

My grandfather, then a young man
whose blood had smeared the trees,
whose skull had cracked a hammer
whose arms had stabbed a machete.
Remember him,
tiptoeing, tripping over utopian pipe dreams.
You claim they were new clear nights
when his feet severed themselves,

stretched themselves
from his own legs.

Soles now dismembered,
like his disemboweled stomach,
like his disintegrated teeth,
like that disappointed smile
that remembered him.



Life in a Box: Rachel Ternes

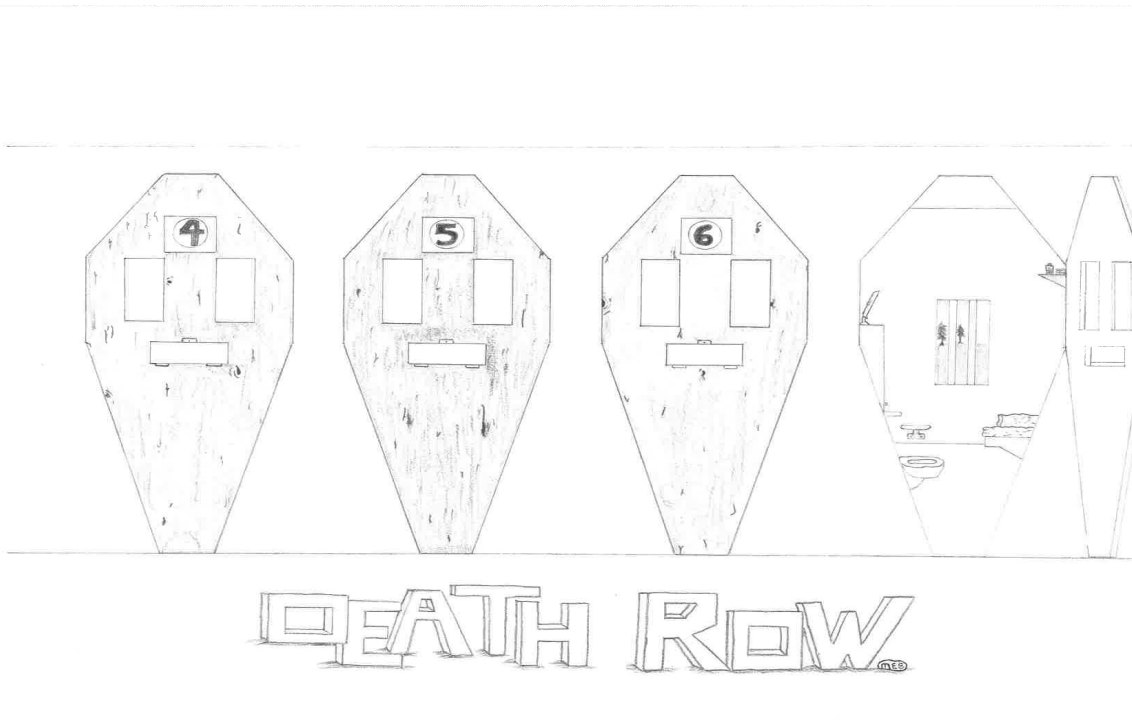
I Didn't Know by Jada Wittow

I didn't know that when I pushed him, he would fall and hit his head
I didn't know he would die
I didn't know I could be convicted
I didn't know I could be housed in an adult prison

I didn't know what was happening to me
I didn't know what would happen to me
I didn't know a cell can be a home
I didn't know anything

I was only 13.
Now I'll never grow up.
Not really.

You didn't know?



Death Row: Michael E. Ballard

A Small Favor
By
Susan Nagelsen and Charles Huckelbury

I knew something was wrong two minutes after we sat down to dinner. Courtney did nothing but poke around in her caesar salad, finally balancing a crouton on her fork before slipping it tentatively into her mouth. At first I thought I had screwed up and put anchovies in her salad. I love any kind of fish, but she won't eat them, claims they smell like dirty sneakers. I looked and didn't see any in hers, so it had to be something else.

She had been quiet while I put the salad together and barely laughed when I told her about one of the idiots at work who had scorched his pants trying to press them with a waffle iron and then wore the damned things with the imprint anyway. I'm the one usually smiling because Court makes everything fun, but now she sat across from me with that distracted look on her face. I knew she had worked out earlier and should have had an appetite, so when she didn't eat, I knew whatever was bothering her was serious. After a few more minutes, I finally put my fork down.

"Okay."

She looked up at me, her fork still poised above the salad. "Okay what?"

I smiled at her. Married fifteen years and she still starts out this way. "Okay you, that's what. I put one of your favorite meals in front of you, and you don't even touch it. Even before that, you leaned against the counter and watched me make the salad and didn't say a dozen words even when I put too much lemon in the dressing. Now I usually know when I've done something stupid, but I can't think of anything I've done lately, so it has to be something else chewing at you." I put my elbows on the table. "You want to tell me about it?"

She tapped her fork against the side of her plate twice, thought about that for a second, and then put it down. I waited while she dabbed at her mouth with her napkin. Then she was ready. "It's Betsy," she said.

"Betsy?"

She nodded.

“As in Betsy at school or Betsy over on Western?” I thought I knew which one. She was one of Court’s best friends, and they saw each other two or three times a week. In fact, they were as close as sisters and I’m sure shared secrets that I didn’t know about. That was all right. I liked Betsy, and she was definitely good for Courtney. I like anything that’s good for Courtney.

She nodded. “Betsy Costa.”

“What about her?” I asked.

She sighed slightly. “It’s not about her, actually. Well, it really is, but mostly it’s about Seth.”

I leaned forward a little. This was familiar territory. “What’s he done this time?”

Courtney fiddled with her napkin, then tossed it on the table. “He woke her up last night about one in the morning and told her he wanted her to move out.”

She shook her head. “Just like that.”

“At one in the goddamn morning? That couldn’t wait?”

She shrugged and then shook her head again. “You know what an asshole he can be.”

You bet I did. A week didn’t go by without Betsy either calling Court or coming by to tell her about something Seth had done or not done. There was the black eye; there was the time she caught him cheating on her, and we can’t forget the fact that he makes her pay half the rent even though he makes four times as much money as she does and owns the house. Betsy was a sweetheart, so out of principle alone I hated to see her involved with a jerk who thought hockey was more important than her birthday. The real problem was that Betsy was a fragile and damaged woman who believed that Seth was what she deserved. Well, I believed she deserved a lot more than someone like him.

“Oh yeah, I know Seth and a hundred more just like him. He’s pulled this kind of stunt before, but they’ve always kissed and made up.”

“Not this time. He told her that his son was moving in with him, and he didn’t want to share the house with her while he was there.”

“Jesus,” I said. “He talks like the kid’s six years old. He’s twenty-goddamn-three, and it’s none of his business if his father’s living with a woman. Or a man or a barnyard animal, for that matter.”

“I know,” Courtney said. “It’s just an excuse to get her out of the house. But there’s more to it. When Betsy left for class this morning, he changed all the locks.”

“Without telling her, of course.”

“Right, and then he left.”

“So she couldn’t get back in.”

“Yes, so she called him, and he was at a ball game with some friends and said he would be home later.”

I chewed my lip, liking Seth less and less as we went along. “What’s ‘later’?”

“She didn’t wait around to find out. She got a hotel room for the night, and called him this morning. He told her that he had left the house unlocked so she could go in and get her things. She wanted me to help her move, but I couldn’t, Dillon. I didn’t want to be in that house in case he came home.”

“Good call, honey, but all you had to do was let me know, and we could have gone over there last night and gotten her stuff.” I grinned a little. “Even with him there, say, at three o’clock in the morning.”

She smiled at me. “Yeah, I know, but I didn’t want to get you involved then.”

I noticed the ‘then’ at the end of the sentence. That got my attention. “So what happened?”

“She got Jason to go over there with her and help. He’s only nineteen, but he’s her son, and he’s bigger than Seth in case he came home and started in on her.”

“Okay, where is she now?”

“Her sister sent her enough money to rent a room for a week. She stored

most of her clothes and things in one of those mini warehouses in Concord. She's got enough money from her divorce settlement to get an apartment, but it's hard for her, Dillon. She shouldn't have to be doing this now, not with exams coming and everything else."

"Agreed, baby. It takes a genuine asshole to just toss somebody out in the street like that, especially after they've been together over a year." I got up and went to stand behind her. I leaned over and put my arms around her while she laid her head back against my chest. "Anything I can do to make it better?" I asked, more rhetorically than expecting an answer. Or if I got an answer, it would be her usual: just hold me, which was always okay with me. But this time she surprised me, and although her voice didn't get louder, something about it changed.

"Yes, I think there is."

I was grinning from ear to ear on the inside when I heard that, but I did my best to keep it to myself. I was hopeful that she wanted me to take action; however I was willing to be patient to see what she had in mind.

I pulled my chair over next to hers and sat down. I picked up her hand and squeezed it a little. "Just say it, and it's done." Silly me, I thought she was going to ask if Betsy could move in with us until she found a place, but my sweet, beautiful wife had something else in mind.

She kept her head down, then took a deep breath and looked at me, blue eyes shining with a glint I hadn't seen lately. "I think I want you to shoot that son of a bitch, Dillon."

Now that was a surprise. I need to explain a little here. At one time, shooting a guy would not have been a major event for me. Before I met Courtney, I lived in a world where that was more or less as common as picking up a gallon of milk on the way home from the office for other people. She knew bits and pieces about my history, but I had left that life behind and promised her I would never go back. We had even argued about my having a gun in the house. And now, after a long time without one in my hand, the woman I loved more than anything in the world wanted me to shoot a man. What else could I do? Besides, if ever a guy needed shooting, it was Seth. I patted her hand.

"If that's what you want, sweetheart, then he's as good as shot."

"Dillon" she began.

I put my finger on her lips. "You don't have to explain. You don't have to say anything. You want it done, it's as simple as that." I smiled at her. "And yeah, I know what it took to get you there. I just want you to be sure, because once it's done, you can't take it back."

She kissed my finger, then took my hand in hers. "I'm sure, but I just want you to shoot him a little."

Shoot him a little. Only my wife would think like that. How the hell do you shoot someone a little? Use a .22 instead of a .45? Shoot him in the foot instead of the head? Once instead of six times? She must have seen the look on my face because she helped me out.

"I mean don't kill him. Just teach him a lesson and make him hurt. Maybe it will scare him enough to make ... to make

"To make him a nicer, warmer human being, who loves children and puppies and gives to all the major charities," I finished for her.

She grinned in spite of herself and slapped me on the shoulder. "No. I don't think even you can do that." Then she turned serious again. "I've thought about this a lot, Dillon, even before all this happened. Betsy's so sweet and good, and he does things to hurt her because he knows she won't fight back."

I nodded. "That's the problem, sweetheart. You got a guy here who's fat, stupid, and got nothing going for him, so he's gotta pick an easy target, which means women and kids and maybe even small animals. Like I said, I've known a lot like him, and they all act the same because they've gotten away with it for so long."

She stared at me. "Nothing ever happens to him, Dillon. It's not right."

"Then it's about time something does." I touched the tip of her nose. "Now tell me what he knows about me."

"Just that you're my husband, hate sports, and work at Home Depot. He's only seen you twice, once at Cynthia's wedding and then at the reception when my book came out. Why?"

"Well, sweetheart, when this goes down, the cops are going to start looking for people with a motive who would shoot the asshole, and I don't want to make their short list. On the plus side, he's probably got a lot of enemies, so he'll be

trying hard to put a face on the guy behind the gun.”

“Oh, he would never think you would, Dillon.” She smiled, and I swear it had a touch of mischief in it. “Betsy said he thinks you’re a wuss because I boss you around and you work in such a wuss job.”

“Instead of something really manly like driving a propane truck?”

She shrugged. “Who knows?”

“Who cares?” I pulled my chair back to my salad and pointed to hers. “Okay, business is settled. Now eat. I didn’t spend most of an hour slaving over a meal just to have you turn up your nose at it.”

She picked up her fork but paused with it in the air and looked at me.

“When ...?”

“Give me a couple of days to look at it. He’s a citizen, so it shouldn’t take longer than that. They still in that house on Hall Street?”

“Yes.”

“Okay, tell Betsy to stay away from him for a while, not even go over there if he calls, and let me worry about the rest of it. She’s always good about following your advice, so make up some story about teaching him a lesson by ignoring him, making him jealous or something, just as long as she stays out of the way.” She started to take a bite but stopped again. “Tell me the truth if I ask you something?”

“Always,” I said with my fingers crossed.

“Do you have a gun? I mean, now?”

I folded my hands in front of me and looked at her for a few seconds. “Remember when we moved in here?”

“Yes, but—”

I put a finger to my lips. “No buts. When we moved in, I promised you no guns, even though I was still a zillion percent paranoid and had nightmares about someone breaking in here and trying to hurt you. I promised you, and I kept that

promise. There isn't a gun in this house."

She tried to keep from smiling but couldn't. "How about somewhere else then?"

I shook my head and grinned. "Okay, so you've learned how to ask all the right questions, but the answer's still no gun. Anywhere."

That seemed to make her feel better, but she wasn't done. "So how will—"

Again I shushed her. "That's not something you need to worry about, but I'll tell you this much. You got an idea of how I lived before I met you?"

"Of course."

"And you know guns were as common for me as books are for you."

"Yes, you've made that clear."

"Once you've been in that kind of life, it's always easy to find a gun when you need one." I pointed to her salad. "Now, enough talk about bad guys and guns. Eat."

On the way to work the next morning, I called a guy I knew from the gym where I worked out. I met him just before lunch and picked up an alley sweeper, a cut-down 12-gauge pump shotgun with a pistol grip and made specifically for shooting people in tight places.

"You're lucky," Ron told me. "This is the last one. Funny how when things turn bad in the economy people start buying guns. I got more business than I can handle."

I handed him three hundred bucks for the gun and a box of shells. He looked at me kind of funny when I paid him.

"You want an alley sweeper with an 18" barrel and a box of 8-1/2 birdshot? What, you got a covey of quail somewhere gonna start a riot?"

I shrugged it off. "It's for Courtney to keep around when I'm working late. Get a better spread with the birdshot than with double aught and only nine pellets. She's never handled a gun before, so I want something that'll hit the target without her being a good shot."

Ron started to say something else but checked it. "If you need anything else, give me a call. I'll be at the gun show at the Merchandise Mart all weekend, so use the cell number."

The shotgun was still in the box, so I put it in the trunk along with the box of shells. I had a few more purchases to make, and then a little recon work would be all that's left. One thing about guys like Seth: they're predictable. They're comfortable with a routine, and most of them have gotten away with playing that tough-guy role for so long, they start to believe that nobody would dare fuck with them. I smiled when I thought about that one.

But there were certain factors I had to consider. For one, I had been out of the life for a long time, and this kind of work has a rhythm to it that grows from a certain mental approach and practical application. Add in the rhythm of the city itself, especially at night, and it's easy to forget how to dance. I thought I still had the skills, even though I hadn't been operational in a long time. Not that Seth would prove difficult, but I didn't want to make the small mistakes that can get you a long vacation eating bad chow with guys who stink and can't spell "cat" if you spot them two letters. But what the hell? Court said do it, and that was all I needed.

I already knew just about all I needed to know about Seth's schedule from Courtney. We've got a minor league team in town, and he always caught the home games, usually with one or two of his buddies, according to Betsy. It was the end of the season, and I guess they had a chance at the title or whatever. The next home game was Thursday night and started at 6:30. Seth and his crew would have a few beers after the game and then go their separate ways. I guessed three hours would be enough to see it and get a little buzz on. When Thursday rolled around, I started getting ready early.

Courtney came into the bedroom and sat on the edge of the bed to watch me. I winked at her while I pulled on black cargo pants. "Not to worry, love. Everything's gonna be just fine."

She didn't look like she believed me, and I knew she was reconsidering. Sending me out to shoot someone was going to bother her for a long time, and it said something about her friendship with Betsy that things had reached that point with Seth. For me, it was a walk in the park, but I knew Court had some tough nights ahead of her. I needed to keep her from changing her mind because I was psyched for the mission.

"You and Betsy going to see Bonnie Raitt at the Capital Center, right?"

"Yes. . . . Dillon?"

I smiled at her and kept getting dressed. "Honey, stop worrying. Just go listen to some good music and keep Betsy occupied. Talk to someone you know and introduce Betsy so you'll both have a solid alibi if anyone asks. And keep your ticket stub."

That startled her. "Me? You think I need an alibi?"

I pulled on a black cable-knit sweater and tucked a pair of pigskin gloves into one of the cargo pockets. Then I raised my eyebrows at her. "You never know, Kid, when the cops will figure out what a dangerous desperado you really are behind that sweet, innocent mask of a college professor and bleeding-heart liberal." She put her hands on her hips. "I'm serious, Dillon."

I smiled again and walked over to her. "And so am I, honey. You never know how things like this will play out, so just to be safe, I want you and Betsy in a very public place when Seth gets his surprise. No, I don't think the cops or anyone else will think you knew, not even Betsy."

Courtney shook her head. "She's—"

I put up my hands. "I know what you think, but trust me on this. You aren't good at wearing a mask, honey, and Betsy's perceptive enough to pick up on your reaction, so I won't be surprised if she puts it together. But I'm not worried about her. Even if she went to the cops—"

"She would never do that," Courtney said, shaking her head vigorously.

"Even if she went to the cops," I repeated, "that still wouldn't mean anything." I kissed her lightly. "The cops have ways of squeezing people, but all she could tell them was that the two of you were together when it went down." I put my arms around her waist and pulled her close to me. "Look, let me handle this end of it. All you have to do is go listen to Bonnie play that slide guitar." I kissed the tip of her nose. "Maybe she'll even do 'Let's Give Them Something to Talk About.' Be kind of appropriate, you ask me."

She tilted her head to one side. "What am I going to do with you, Dillon?" I grinned, patted her butt, and picked up the car keys. "We'll explore options when you get home."

It was a perfect night for it: no moon, dry, and cool. I loved October for a lot of reasons, and sending an asshole to the emergency room was as good a reason as any to be upbeat. Seth made it even easier by living within walking distance of a multiplex that was showing the latest Mission Impossible flick. I parked in the center of the lot, adjusted my knit cap, and eased out. I didn't like using my own car, but I didn't have a clue how to steal the new ones with all the gizmos on them. Made me feel like a real antique when I thought about it.

The shotgun was on a sling under my right arm and covered by the black leather jacket I had bought the previous week. I carried an empty box inside a BonTon bag, hoping it made me look like any other late-night shopper.

I passed a few shops in the mall, most still open and trying to milk the last bit of profit from a tanking economy. A few had their Christmas decorations out, right next to the jack o' lanterns and skeletons which made me wonder what was wrong with the retailers in this world. I caught my reflection in one window and thought I looked like a thug on the way to do something nasty, which was exactly right. Well, maybe an old thug. That put an extra spring in my step because the last thing I needed was a cop thinking the same thing and stopping me for one of those "routine" searches. I got to the street and hooked a right into a narrow alley. Seven minutes later I was squatting next to Seth's garage.

He had graciously left the side door unlocked for me, so I stepped inside. I listened for a couple of minutes but didn't hear anything but a small motorcycle pass on the street. The garage itself was a mess: a beat-up lawn mower jammed under a work bench on the opposite wall, a few paint cans on a shelf, and two shovels and a rake lying on the floor, which told me Seth didn't park his truck in the garage. The whole place smelled faintly like cat piss. No wonder he didn't bother to lock the door.

I pulled out an iPod preset to the local station that carried the ball game and turned it on. The reception was pretty good, so I got to hear the Fisher Cats take the lead in the bottom of the seventh with a two-run homer. The rest of the game was boring with a capital "B." Just before it ended, I tried a country station and got a song about some woman waiting by the door with a shotgun to shoot the son of a bitch that had beaten her up. I grinned and whispered, "You go, girl" to the stink in the garage. Then it was time for me to get serious.

The first thing you check when you're doing something you shouldn't is the back door. By the time Seth was headed home, I had my exit planned. The houses were all pretty close together, which meant the shots would bring the neighbors, so I had to shoot and scoot before they saw me hauling ass back down the alley

the same way I had come. The touchy part was carrying the shotgun back to the car, but I didn't have much choice. The factories test fire the goddamn things now and keep a record of the ballistics and extractor marks, so it would be easy to trace. I would have to cut it up and sprinkle the parts in Vermont. If I could make it back to the parking lot without being stopped, I was in good shape, and I thought I could cover that distance before the cops even rolled on the call. I listened to a little roadhouse music that started my foot tapping and stayed with that station for maybe thirty minutes, long enough for Seth to have a brew or two and be on his way home. I killed the radio and slid it into my pocket, then racked the slide on the shotgun and slid an extra round into the magazine. Almost show time.

Fifteen minutes later, headlights splashed across the front of the house, and I watched Seth's truck make the turn at the corner sixty yards away. I eased out of the garage and put my back up against the edge of the house behind some sort of bush that looked like it had been sucking up steroids. If he parked in the driveway where he normally did, it would be a piece of cake when he walked by me on the way to the front door. And good, ole Seth did exactly what he always did.

He pulled the truck up almost to the garage, shut it off, and then sat there for a minute or so. I thought he had seen me and considered just stepping out and giving it to him through the windshield, but Courtney said she wanted him shot just a little, so I waited to see what he would do next. I could see him clearly enough to tell he wasn't on a cell phone. Finally, he opened the door and got out. He was fatter than I remembered from the last time I had seen him three months ago, with a sausage roll on the back of his neck and a butt that he couldn't squeeze into an Adirondack chair with a can of WD40. He burped, then lifted his left leg and farted twice. Yeah, Seth was a class act all right, and I was even happier to be where I was. He pushed his ball cap up and started toward the house, tossing his keys in the air and catching them as he walked. He was maybe twenty feet away when I slid the shotgun's muzzle between the bush and the house.

"Hey, shithead," I said. He stopped immediately and turned toward the sound of my voice. Which was precisely what I wanted him to do. He had on some kind of trendy pants with snaps running up and down the fly, the kind high-school kids would wear, and the metal glinted dully in the light by the front door. That's where I put the load of shot. I pumped another one in him on his way down, and damn it, as much as I wanted to, I didn't have time to hang around and watch the reaction after he hit the ground.

The only consolation was I could hear him screaming as I hauled ass down the alley. I swear, you could have heard that bastard down in Boston, he was yell

ing so loud. He cried for his mother, a doctor, someone named Celia, any goddamn body who might be able to make the pain go away. I kept thinking what a great submission to America's Funniest Home Videos it would have made as I ran along the grassy part of the alley to keep the noise down. By the time I made the turn to the mall, I had my breathing under control, the cap and gloves tucked in the pockets, and looked—I hope—like just another citizen on the way home after a long day at the office.

I hit the lot just as the movie let out and was ten feet from my car when two guys in their twenties brushed by me talking about the movie being the best one yet. I thought about trying to talk Courtney into going to see it, but I knew she'd rather wait for the DVD. Well, there were certain advantages to watching a movie at home.

I slid behind the wheel and popped a Fleetwood Mac CD into the player and pulled out of the lot just as Stevie Nicks started in on "Gold Dust Woman." Damn, I love that song. I headed up 93 for 89 and was on my way to Vermont to take care of the last of this business. I looked at the clock on the dash and figured I'd be home with Court by 3:00.

She was sitting up in bed pretending to read, but I knew better. "Hi, sweetheart. How was Bonnie?" From the look on her face, I could tell Courtney had paid about as much attention to Bonnie Raitt as she had the opening numbers on the Hong Kong stock market.

"Are you all right?" she asked immediately, searching my face with that look she gets when she thinks I'm hiding something from her. "I was getting worried; it's really late, Dillon."

I shrugged. "Sure, I'm all right. Why wouldn't I be?" I slipped into bed and put my arm around her and pulled her close to me.

"Stop it, Dillon. You're acting like you've been home watching a goddamn movie. You know what I mean."

She was wearing a tank top and some leopard panties, and all that thick, blonde hair was spread on the pillow. This was one of the few times we both weren't thinking about the same thing. I pulled her closer to me.

"Honey, everything's all right. I promise. No glitches, no problems, and most important"—I kissed her—"no witnesses."

“Is he ... ?”

I nodded. “Along about now, Seth is one of the sorriest assholes on the face of the planet, and I mean that both ways. He’s alive and breathing, if that’s what you’re worried about, and he’s very sorry for whatever it was he did to whoever it was that shot him.” I pulled back a little and grinned at her. “But by tomorrow, I’m not sure he’ll be glad he’s still around.”

Courtney frowned a little and started to say something. “Just be patient, sweetheart, and I promise that you and Betsy will have something to celebrate.” We finally asleep with our arms around each other, but morning came quickly. The quiet lasted only until she walked into the kitchen while I was making omelets to go with rye toast. She had the start of a smile on her face while she leaned against the counter.

“I just watched the local news. Seth was the lead story.”

I kept the metal whisk working as I talked. “Jesus, he beat out the fire in Dover and the guy from Weare getting a Silver Star in Afghanistan?”

“Yeah,” she said. “They even had a doctor on who led the surgical team. Apparently, the operation was a, ah, fairly new technique.”

I added mushrooms and peppers to the mix and some sautéed onions.

“How so?”

“They had to amputate most of his penis, along with both testicles.”

I carried the bowl over to the stove. “Nah, I don’t believe it, at least the last part.”

“About his balls?”

“Right.” I poured the eggs slowly into the skillet and waited while they began to set.

She moved up to the side of me and watched while I added slices of provolone. “Why not? You’re telling me you didn’t shoot him in the groin?”

I leaned over and gave her a quick kiss. “Of course I shot him, sweetheart, but since he didn’t have any balls to begin with, it couldn’t have been my shot

that took them off. And I'll bet his prick was so short that 'most of it' was a couple of inches, tops."

She slapped my shoulder just as I slipped a spatula under the eggs. "You're terrible." But she grinned when she said it.

I looked at her sideways. "After all, you said just shoot him a little, so I figured between the legs was the place where I would do the least damage. It was either that or the head, and this way"—I mimed a snipping motion with two fingers—"we empty that particular gene pool."

She pushed me again and tried to keep from laughing. "Easy, love, you nearly made me ruin the omelets."

The phone rang before she could say anything else. She picked it up while I put the bread into the toaster and folded the edges of the omelets up tight. I knew who was on the other end when Courtney looked at me and nodded.

"Yeah, I just saw the story myself. Yes, it was a terrible thing." She looked at the ceiling when she said it. "No, I don't think you should go over there." She nodded. "I know all that, but I'm sure he'll have a lot of people visiting, and you two weren't on the best terms anyway. Besides, he'll probably be sedated after the surgery. The TV said the damage was extensive."

I grabbed my crotch and started hopping around the kitchen, saying, "Ouch, ouch." Courtney snorted once and mouthed "Stop that" at me before going back to the phone.

I stopped clowning, put the omelets and toast on plates, and arranged them on the table, then poured juice for us both. By the time I had sliced the honeydew, Courtney was off the phone.

I poured her coffee as she sat down.

"Everything okay with Betsy?"

She had to try hard to keep from smiling. "She sounded all right, but I think she's worried more than she should be, especially after everything that son of a bitch did to make her life miserable." She shrugged. "But Betsy's like that. She doesn't believe it's ever right to wish anything bad on someone."



Montreal, Canada: Carla Mavaddat

“Sort of like you,” I said, cutting into my omelet. “Before you came to your senses.”

She took a sip of coffee, held it, and looked over the cup’s rim at me. “Before I married you, you mean.”

I chewed for a few seconds before answering her. “Funny how those two things seem to come at the same time.”

Her eyes crinkled when she picked up her fork. “What am I going to do with you, Dillon?”

I spread strawberry preserves on the toast. “I think that’s the same question you asked last night, and I still have the same suggestion.”

She grinned and pointed to my uniform. “You’ve gotta go to work, smartass. If you’re still in the gardening section, I thought Betsy and I would come by and get a few things. That new apartment of hers is so dull.”

I speared a piece of melon. "Yeah, just pull around back. I think we've got some new stuff that hasn't been put out yet. Maybe that will get Betsy's mind off that asshole for a while. I can't believe she still gives a shit what happens to him." I shook my head. "People are damn sure weird, honey. I don't think I'll ever figure them out."

She was quiet then, and I knew she was having second thoughts about having me take care of Seth. I reached across the table and took her hand. "Honey, listen to me. Don't start second-guessing it. You did the right thing for Betsy. You got her a little payback, and you probably saved some other woman a world of hurt in the future. Guys like that, they keep going until somebody makes them stop." I shrugged. "Problem with Seth was nobody made him stop before, so he kept hurting people, good people like Betsy." I kissed her palm. "Now he won't hurt anyone else, I betcha."

She let me hold her hand, always a good sign. "Yeah, I'll bet this will slow him down a lot. I mean, he won't be able to ... do anything, will he?"

I thought about that for a second. "I doubt it. He won't be able to insert rod A into slot B, that's for sure." I frowned.

"What?" Courtney asked.

"Just wondering."

"About what?"

"The technical part of it. I mean, if they cut off most of his prick, that means he's only got a stub left, which means he won't be able to even aim the thing, so he'll have to sit down when he pees." Courtney started to say something else, but I was on a roll. "Jesus, can you imagine the look on a woman's face when he drops his pants and shows her something that looks like the reset button on a DVR?"

Courtney coughed and blew orange juice through her nose. She grabbed a napkin and wiped her face and a couple of spots on the table.

"So, yeah, I'd guess he'll have a brand new attitude." Then I nodded and promised her, "Count on it." I sat back in the chair while she wiped tears and finally stopped coughing. The sun streamed through the window behind her, lighting up her hair.

"And you would know about things like that?"

"Only from stuff I've read." I grinned and bit into the toast.

A Voice From Inside: Juvenile Life Without Parole

By Allison Stoddard Gruber

I. Introduction

Something happened last week, something that hadn't happened for a very long time. Last week, last Tuesday to be exact, I found out what it feels like to have hope.

When you have nothing left but yourself, and you don't even really own that anymore, there are so many things to miss that sometimes it's hard to focus on any one. But most guys can tell you those few things they would give anything to get back. For me it wasn't the physical things: my mom's cooking, my Nintendo, a soft warm bed; and it wasn't even the intangible things that get to a lot of guys: freedom, quiet, control; for me it was the ability to dream that I missed the most. Not sleeping dreams about flying hamburgers or talking toilets or whatever else my subconscious serves up after lights out, but dreams for the future. Plans, hopes, dreams-- hell the concept of a future at all. At 15 I didn't really have a plan, nothing longer term than trying to impress my bros and dodge my mom's nagging, but I guess it's like they say, "you don't know what you've got till it's gone."

Well, the Supreme Court of the United States of America just ruled that my being here in this cell is 'cruel and unusual punishment.' And damn if I ain't glad for the few classes they still offer us or I wouldn't understand the importance of that decision, much less be able to spell importance. But when all that is left to do in a man's life is to wait for it to end, any distraction, even school, helps the time pass faster towards the end.

I am in prison on the charge of first degree attempted murder of a police officer with sentence enhancements for the aggravating factors of gang affiliation, use of a firearm, and narcotics trafficking. I was 15 years old when California locked me up and threw away the key. For the first time in a decade, I have hope that I may not die in the cell I am writing this from. My name is Jamal Lewis. I was sentenced to life without parole as a juvenile, and this is my story.

II. Stamped and Molded

There was a time, a while ago
When I did not sleep to a grown man's screams
but rather
to my mother's lies
"There is a God and He loves you"
She said.
And I believed her
As the young and the innocent are
So easily fooled.
But now I know
God only loves the worthy souls
those who keep their future for themselves
And I am not one.
In fact, I am no one.
There was a time when I could have been someone,
I think
But I was stamped and molded wrong.
From something was created
Nothing

The Early Years

I'm not a big believer in fate. To believe in fate would be to believe that I belong in a cell, that I was only ever destined to have 15 years of freedom. But, looking back on how I got here, I sometimes have to remind myself that it wasn't fate, because it sure seems like the odds were against me. I'm not trying to blame my mistakes on some Higher Power, but let me tell you the events that led to my life in San Quentin, and let you decide. There is no one moment in time I could pinpoint as the beginning of my story, but a good place to start is back in 9th grade.

It had been just me and my mom for as long as I could remember. My dad had never been around, he left Ma when she was pregnant with me, and just never came back. It wasn't that big a deal though because where I lived most kids either didn't have dads or wished they didn't. When I was 9 years old, my best friend, James Jr. (everyone called him Lil' J), slept at my house for a week 'cause his old man went on a bender and was swinging his fists at anything that moved. Before that, I had been one of those little boys who dreamed about his Dad one

day coming home and apologizing for thinking he ever could have been happy without his family. When I saw the bruises on Lil' J's mom's face when she came to pick him up, I decided right then and there that I was better off living with my Ma than I ever would have been if my dad had stuck around. If he didn't want us, then we didn't need him.

That's not to say that Ma and I had it easy, but we got along alright. There were good times and bad times, but they were pretty predictable, and that helped. When she was drunk, she would get real sad and cry about all kinds of things—my dad leaving, or our constant lack of money, or sometimes over nothing at all. We got along best when she was high. Now my Ma never hit the pipe or anything like that, but she would of smoked pot day in and day out if she could have afforded it.

I was one of the few guys on the block that didn't mind school so much. I was awful at math, but everything else came easy enough to me. I got pretty good grades up until I started cutting a lot of classes to hang out with my boys. We lived right in the middle of the NBT zone, between the Rollin' 60s and the Hoovers. If you lived in South Bureau long enough you would eventually get some pressure to set up. Nowadays it's more than pressure, a lot of guys in here joined up to get protection for their families. But, back then the Crips sets around my area were still on the rise and hadn't fully built their presence on the streets. There were still a lot of guys who weren't joined up, but people looked up to those who had with a mix of fear and respect. I wanted to be looked at like that too, and soon enough I was offered exactly that.

In the fall of '99, when I was just starting my freshman year of high school, Ma got picked up for smoking on the street. That had been a good week for us moneywise; Ma had cleaned some houses after her shift at the diner and picked up some extra cash. Normally, this would've been a good thing, but she spent her extra cash getting a couple of ounces of weed. The cops found it on her, and because of the quantity she got slapped with a year of felony probation. I wouldn't have known anything about all this, but few months later recruiters started to get serious about me and Lil' J.

Some of the NBT's had started cruising past my house and walked home from school with me and Lil' J. I wasn't used to getting noticed by guys who were older, bigger, and more respected than me. I craved the attention, listening to their stories about protecting the neighborhood and keeping our families safe when even the cops were afraid to answer calls out here after dark. I had heard from my Ma that gangs were put on earth to corrupt the youth and would lead nowhere but to violence and prison. But the homies that would come and talk to us weren't trying to start trouble; they were trying to keep us safe. They

had a meaning, a purpose to their actions, which was a lot more than I felt I had at the time. I wanted so badly to be a part of their group, not just to be respected by them, but to be a part their family. Because that's what a set is, the other members are your brothers and sisters who you would do anything for, and they'd do anything for you, and together you are closer than blood.

The older boys hanging around her son did not go unnoticed by Ma. She absolutely in no way wanted me to join up, and she was ready to do whatever it took to stop me. So she did the only thing that might have worked to keep me out of NBT, she up and decided to move us to my aunt's place in Texas. I yelled and screamed and begged and pleaded, but she wasn't having any of it. Ma has always been stronger than she lets on to most people, and I think she would have moved mountains to get me away from the temptation of gang life.

But the one thing stronger than my mom was her parole officer. She came home one day swearing like I had never heard before, cursing her P.O. out with every swear in the book and then some. Not only had he reminded her that she had to stay in the state, but that her parole was dependent on steady employment, so even moving to a different city was out of the question unless she had a job lined up. Her work at the diner was what kept us from going hungry week to week, and she didn't have money saved up to pay for rent while looking for a new job. Texas was the only option because we could have stayed for free until we got settled, but Ma still had months on her parole, and her P.O. flat-out refused to grant her a transfer.

Within a month I had been initiated into NTB, wearing the bruises and cuts with pride. I think the guys went light on me when I got beat in, maybe because everyone knew I was recruited for my ability to paint, not fight. But the shock of fear at having one of my friends, my homies throw a punch at my out of the blue before getting joined by his boys, was replaced with pride when I was officially a member of NTB. There was already a Jamal in the set, so I went by Myszief, my original tagging name. Being part of the set was everything I imagined it would, and the importance of protecting and rep'ing my homies the 'hood quickly surpassed everything else in my life.

It's almost funny how the worst moment of your life, those moments you would give anything to take back or just have wiped from your mind, are the ones that are most etched into memory. And you never know one of those moments is coming until you are right in the middle of it. After all, the day that landed me in this cell started out normally enough.

It was the first day of school break in the summer of '92. I woke up to Lil' J pounding on my window, yelling at me to get my ass outta bed and to the shed.

So I got up and threw on my gear which back then was a black hoodie and tee, jeans, and my Nike Airs. Lil' J and I biked over to the shed together; we used to do almost everything together back then. Walking into the shed always felt like going home, at this point I was probably spending more time in that dingy room than I spent at my own apartment. My mom hated when I would go out and hang with my homeboys, but there was nothing she could say to make me stay home, not after I got jumped in and became official. I had gotten NBT inked on both forearms with Lil' J a few weeks before, a reminder that we were in this for life and proud of it. My boys were my family now, not that I would have ever abandoned Ma, but she just didn't understand.

That morning we were meeting up to plan out where to hit next. For almost a year, the set had been in a tagging war with the '40s. They had been hitting walls in our territory, and we weren't gonna stand for that. Being newer and younger than a lot of the other NBTs, I didn't have a real say in the planning. That was mostly Big Tee, Tyrone had been in the set longer than any of the other homies and his word was close to law. Big Tee made the call that Lil' J and I would bike down to Leirmert Park, packing 4 canisters each and all the filled pens we could stash. He and some of the older homeboys were gonna drive down and meet us with more paint and watch our backs while we worked. I didn't know at the time, but they were also heading down to do a deal with the Hoovers we'd clicked up with who hung around Leirmert.

When Lil' J and I got to the park we went straight to it, working our piece over the 40s tags. I had been tagging with him for years, since way before NBT became our lives. Lil' J would mostly work outline after I laid out the rough shape. While he filled in, and we worked the black, I would do shading and coloring, tossing each other cans when they ran low. It was always my designs that we used, Lil' J wasn't the artistic type, but he has a good steady hand and having him fill the outline cut the time it took to finish a tag in half. When hitting a wall, the battle between speed and quality is constantly raging. On the one side, the tags represented the whole set, so I really didn't want to show NTB as anything other than impressive; on the other hand, tagging is illegal and the longer you've got a paint can in your hand, the higher the chances are of getting caught. Sometimes though, it doesn't matter how fast you work.

The homies dealing with the Hoovers heard the sirens first. I could get into a kind of a trance when I was tagging, focused entirely on the work. The lines and shades were all I saw, the feel of cold metal in my hand, the smell paint in the air pulling all my senses into the piece. I heard my name being yelled before I registered the sound of sirens. Lil' J and I flew into action, grabbing canisters and throwing them into bags, before we realized there was no time. Krazy yelled for me from the car, and I pushed Lil' J toward his bike. Because he had only been

working the black paint, and like me was covered with a black hoodie, his role in the tag was nowhere near as obvious as mine. I was covered in neon streaks of paint, made all the more obvious by my black clothing.

Lil' J biked off as fast as he could in the opposite direction of the sirens while I ran for the car. The boys threw open the back door as the Hoover's car screeched away around the corner. We started driving with the cops in the rear-view, lights flashing, speeding after us. In the front seat Ronny yelled "Fuck" over and over while turning every corner as fast as he could to try and lose the Cops. Bones was grabbing baggies of crack and a few that looked like heroin off the dash and throwing them in the glove as fast as he could. The glove fell open to reveal more drugs than I had seen in my entire life, which at this point had been largely limited to seeing a few baggies of crack and some weed at the shed.

I began to understand why Ronny was trying so hard to avoid the cops, and why he, Bones, and Krazy looked terrified. Getting rolled up for tagging would have been bad, mostly cause I hadn't been recorded by the cops yet as a member of the NBTs, but it would be absolutely nothing compared to getting pulled in for dealing crack. The other guys in the car were all over 18 and would be tried as adults. Krazy and Ronny had records, and put on top of that, they would get real time if the cops managed to stop us.

Ronny swung into an alley that was blocked halfway through by a green city dumpster. There was another chorus of "Fucks" shouted off in the car as he slammed the brakes on and we fishtailed to a halt, with the car stopped diagonally across the alleyway. Two cop cars pulled in, trapping us between them and the dumpster. Bones whipped a handgun out from under his seat and fired off a few shots at the cop cars as we piled out of the other side of the car. Ronny had smacked his head on the steering wheel when we stopped, and was just sitting there, staring straight ahead, until Krazy and I hauled him out of the car to the pavement. Ronny hit the ground, with Bones getting out nearly on top of him, when all hell broke loose.

I had heard before that in moments of extreme panic or stress time seems to slow down. Well, this was the complete opposite. The sound of shots was suddenly coming at me from seemingly all sides, bouncing off the walls of the small alley. The officers were yelling to one another while Bones threw Krazy a handgun and tossed me the spent gun he had started the shootout with. Ronny was sitting against the car while I gripped the gun, the warmth from its barrel slightly surprising me, before I dropped it on the ground. Bones had probably used all the rounds before handing it to me, knowing that I had never shot a gun before, but dropping a possibly loaded gun could be added to the seemingly endless list of mistakes I made that day, starting with getting out of bed.

Bones got hit with a round in the shoulder and fell. Krazy, by that point, was out of bullets, and we waited till it was silent on both sides. The cops yelled for us to stand with our hands up and come around the car, slowly. I followed Bones and Krazy, doing what they asked, and listened to Krazy try and explain that Ronny was still behind the car but unarmed. We laid on ground spread eagle as they cuffed and Mirandized us. My cheek was pressed against the warm rough pavement, and I felt completely numb. I had no idea how my afternoon had gone from working a wall, one of my favorite activities, to laying in this alley, listening to Bones whimper as his torn up shoulder was pulled back into cuffs. My last moments in free air, and I was barely even there.

III. Creatures of this place

They leer
at me through their Cell doors.
Animals in cages, hackles raised high
Creatures of this place.
Faces marred,
scarred with ink, old wounds and hate.
It was not, however,
the faces that scared me most.
It was the eyes.
not reflecting light but absorbing it.
Could a person's eyes change color
From brown or blue or green
to black?
If eyes are windows to the soul
Is what I'm seeing
the abyss within?
And in time, will my own eyes turn
to black as well?



Brooklyn, New York City: Carla Mavaddat

BleakHouse Review

Beginning a Life Behind Bars

When I think about my first few weeks here, they come to me (added me) in uneven chunks of time--flashes of memory surrounded by a blur of sounds and faces. That time was little more than a barrage of tests and medical exams, shouted commands and endless interviews. With no time to adjust, I was on constant sensory and emotional overload. My mind recorded the events as though I was in a dream, a nightmare my mind could not fully process or wake from. A few moments emerge from the haze, crystal clear and burned into my memory forever, beginning with my first minutes inside.

Stepping through the barred doors of San Quentin, the first thing that struck me was the air. It was thick in my mouth, wetly filling my lungs as I pulled a deeper breath hoping for a dry relief that wouldn't come. Growing up in Los Angeles I knew what it was like to live in a haze of hot smog-filled air. This was like nothing I had ever experienced before. The air was not just heavy with humidity, but weighed down with the stench of thousands of sweaty men. It had a stale quality, which I now recognize as the result stacking men like animals in buildings with closed doors and windows that open less than 4 inches, if at all. The stench was so strong that not (got rid of a couple words that were there accidentally) only could I smell San Quentin, I could taste it. However, most disorienting of all was the sound. Clanging, yelling, stomping—echoing endlessly off the concrete, metal and stone, assaulting my ears.



Smoking Man: Rachel Ternes

The noise was deafening. The guards on either side of me were ushering the group I had traveled with since we left County this morning down the hallway. There was no time to adjust to the new surroundings, not that I had been given time to really adjust to any of the events that had occurred over the past month. The guy walking next to me, covered in tattoos from his neck to his fingertips, was staring directly ahead, walking unflinchingly forward. He looked disinterested in everything going on around him, concerned only with putting one foot in front of the other. It was immediately apparent that he had been through this process before, and seemed unsurprised to be going through it again.

Some of the younger guys and one soft looking white guy were glancing around like me, trying to get a hold on this cinderblock zoo that was now our home. I reacted just like any first timer, or “fish,” does—with unrepressed shock and fear. My head swiveled back and forth, but the images my eyes were taking in seemed to get lost somewhere on the way to my brain. Then my gaze locked on the faces staring out at me from inside the cells.

There were men of every shape, size and color in those cells; but the more I looked the more they all looked the same. As I walked, their faces blended into one face, all bearing a single expression that I saw reflected back from each cell we passed. A face with an angry sneer, daring me to come closer, to try something, to ever think that I would be safe here. Beneath the anger was a dead look that scared me even more, if that was possible. These men had hardened from their time in here, trapped and soured like the air. From the scared faces around me, to the impassive guards, to the inmates in their cells, there was not one welcoming face to be found. It became apparent that as much as I didn't want to be in San Quentin, San Quentin didn't want me.

There aren't good days and bad days in here. There are bad days and worse days and days when breathing just doesn't seem worth the trouble anymore. My first one of those days, those very worst days, was the first time my mom came to see me in San Quentin. The visiting rooms here are different than they were at County. In jail it's like what I used to see in the movies, glass dividing the visitors from the inmates, plastic chairs set up on in rows on either side of two-way speakers—they call it 'non-contact visitation'. For most of us in prison, we get contact visits: in a big white room with chairs and tables attached to the floor and a vending machine filled with cheap junk food. We have to wait until we are in General Population to use the visiting room instead of the non-contact set up. Ma can't get up here very often, so she waited to take the time off until we could have a contact visit. It's almost funny because I remember expecting that day to be a good one, finally a day worth getting out of bed for...

I woke up this morning excited for the first time since I got here. For once,

when the wake up bell startled me awake at 6am, the nerves playing in my stomach were excitement instead of fear. Last week when I called my mom, she told me that she had finally gotten enough time off work to make the 6 hour drive up to San Quentin. While I hated the idea of her seeing me in my SQ blues, they weren't really all that much worse than the orange County threads, and those were all she'd seen me in for months.

Visiting hours started at 7:30 in the morning and only went till 2:30 in the afternoon. To make it here as early as possible, Ma planned to drive up yesterday evening and spend the night at a cheap motel somewhere nearby. I could hardly believe it; I'd be seeing Ma in less than two hours! Even the sheets of rain lashing against my cell's window couldn't get me down today. A friendly face, a reminder of the outside world, the only family I had ever known would soon be literally within my reach. I grinned my way through my morning activities, getting dressed, brushing my teeth, making my bed, even morning count. It was a good thing that I am not prone to breaking into song or dance, because my heart felt light enough to do either. However, just smiling can be dangerous in prison, and a musical dance routine a death wish. Or, at the least, an invitation for some decidedly unpleasant attention.

The guards came and got me at my cell, and we went through the search routine that was beginning to feel almost normal. Visitors' security is similar to airport security; they only have to go through metal detectors and maybe a pat down before entering the visiting room. I am infinitely glad that the war on drugs in prisons, which everyone—guards and inmates alike—knows gets inside through visitations more than any other way, has not yet extended to strip searching visitors. If I thought for one moment that my mom, or in a lot of guy's cases wife and kids, had to "bend over and grab 'em" like we do, I would never want her to visit. While my dignity has been nearly entirely stripped, the system has at least left our loved ones alone, so far anyways.

After the search I was lead down the block with the other guys who were lucky enough to have visitors, and we were each taken to a table in the visiting room. My arms were taken out of the cuffs once the guards got me secured in my chair, which was a relief, I didn't want Mom to see me in chains. The guards backed off a few feet then, and left me to stare at the door and fucking will it to open. If eyes could burn through steel, I think the combined looks of every guy in the room would have melted the door in seconds. When it swung open, creaking like some clichéd scene of an old horror movie, I think I stopped breathing.

First to walk in was a round older woman whose paper white skin, grey hair and glasses made me think of Mrs. Claus. She was followed by a younger Mexican woman, with a baby on her hip and a little girl holding her free hand. The baby couldn't have been more than 6 months old, though to be fair I have no idea

about these things, but it was just so small. I watched as the little girl clutching her Mom's hand looked around the room before spotting the guy directly to my left. He was a big guy, also Mexican, with full sleeves inked on both of his arms, and a nose that had been broken one too many times. He had clearly seen his fair share of fights because in addition to the bent nose, he wore a scar across his chin and another sliced through his eyebrow. If I had seen him on the yard, I would have steered clear or looked around for my boys, but the moment he saw his little girl his face lit up, and the effect was startling. The little girl yelled "Daddy!" and practically pulled her mom's arm off trying to run to him. When he pulled her into his arms, he looked like Christmas had just come early, and I guess in a way it had.

I glanced back at the door just in time to see my mom walk in. And in that moment she was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen. She caught my eyes and smiled. It didn't reach her eyes, but then it never does anymore, not since she first saw me in County orange. It took me a minute to notice that her hair and jacket were dripping water onto the tile floor. I asked her what had happened, and she told me that they could only bring clear umbrellas into the prison, and she hadn't had a chance to buy one before she drove up. She handed me twenty damp one dollar bills, and from the pocket of her pants produced a picture of the two of us from when I was around 8 or 9.

She had sent me a few pictures last month, but this one was a personal favorite of mine. We are both laughing and Ma's hand is holding my head against her side. It reminds me of the best moments between us, when there were no drunken tears or drugs or gangs, just us. She asked me a few questions about how I was doing in here, and I told her only the good bits, like how I was assigned to laundry duty which was away from the heat and sun that the yard-men faced every day. I had already hurt her enough for a lifetime without adding to it with the dark reality of life inside San Quentin.

When told her that I had been placed with a cellmate named Slouchy she laughed out loud at his name. I explained that his influence was keeping me safe in here. I didn't tell her that his influences, and protection, were a result of our allied sets, and I certainly didn't tell her the fate of most young, small inmates. No mother should have to know how close her son came to being owned by another man, a fate worse than death in my opinion. Slouchy alone probably would not have been able to keep me safe, but I had a few other things going for me as well. The Hoovers and by extension NBTs were well situated in the power structure of San Quentin's gangs and though I was not a long standing member, the tats on my arms clearly showed my allegiance. I also quickly began to make allies inside through my ability to ink.

Slouchy had asked me the day I moved into his cell what a scrawny little kid like me was doing rolling with NBTs, but when I told him I was Myschief the tagger, he had actually known some of my work. Slouchy got excited telling me that their best inker had transferred out of SQ a few months ago and no one had yet been able to fill his role. I wasn't too sure that I could draw as well as skin as I did on paper and walls, but once Slouchy got an idea, he saw it through to the end. That was how, a week later, I ended up with a prison ink gun in one hand, and one of Slouchy's homies in the other. The gun was really just a needle in the barrel of a bic pen, attached to a walkman's motor, and powered by an AC adapter. I started out small, just outlining the barbed wire I was going to be putting all the way around his arm. The vibrating threw me off at first, but I found a rhythm and it was easy from there.

I told Ma that I'd found out I had real skill with inking, and that it would help me make money and friends inside. She wasn't all that surprised, but made me promise to keep drawing on paper as well as skin, to keep a notebook like I did before. Then her face got really serious, and for a moment I was sure she was going to tell me that one of my boys from home was in trouble, but I couldn't have been more off base. She took my hand in both of hers and said "Jamal, now I know they have you take your GED in here, and you may not see any point to working at school now, but it would do your mother proud if you take your time in here to learn." She looked me right in the eye as she asked me to do this one thing for her, and there was no way I could say no to her, not after all I had but her through. "I swear Ma, I will do my very best for you," I promised.

The rest of the time we had together was spent talking about happier times, eating terrible food from the vending machine, and holding hands, taking advantage of this brief contact we could share. My mom's request in that first visit that I try to take education seriously even though I would never be free to use it in the outside world, shaped the next decade of my life. After passing the GED, I was able to join the Prison University Program when it came to San Quentin in that offers inmates a chance to take college prep courses as well as actual college classes. I only did it for my mom, but now I realize that those classes help me survive in here, hanging on to a part of myself from before prison, before trials, even before gang life. It would become tradition when Ma visited to wait until right before she had to leave to talk about the new things I'd learned, a happy note to close on until I could see her again.

At the end of the first visit we had no routine to fall back on, no way to help ease the pain of the end of our time together. Not knowing when she would be able to come again made me that much more reluctant to let her go. In the last months in here I had built a wall around myself. I had trapped my emotions inside of it and other's emotions outside, living safely in the middle. After a few

early bouts of depression it became almost easy to accept that this would be my life. After all, all I saw were other guys serving their time; living in cages becomes a new kind of normal surprisingly quickly when it is all you see. But seeing my mom knocked down all of my carefully constructed barriers, and reminded me of just how much I was deprived of. How much I would always be deprived of.

To my horror I almost began to cry when Ma leaned in to hug me goodbye, her scent bringing with it memories of a home that I would never see or step foot in again. We broke apart looking away from each other, quickly schooling our faces back into masks of composure. I wasn't sure who was being strong for who at the moment, but neither of us was willing to give in to the emotions threatening to emerge. I watched her leave the room with the other visitors, many of them glancing back tearfully at their loved ones. Mom looked back once, and held my gaze for just a moment before her chin began to quake and she looked quickly away as she walked around a corner and out of site.

I felt as though a spear had been thrust through my chest, knocking the air out of my lungs and leaving nothing but pain in its wake. I don't remember the leaving the visiting room, the subsequent search or the march back to my cell.

IV. The Man in the Mirror

The mirrors here
They reflect faces of the unloved
Their surfaces as broken and cracked
As the men in them
I became a man in this mirror
A face
I did not recognize staring back
Lathered in soap
Blood trickling down a jaw, a throat
Victim
To a cheap razor
Running over virgin skin
Never having needed it before.
Learning through furtive glances,
Hopeful tries
Ending in painful mistakes
Learning through pain, just as
I have always done
Before.



Washington DC: Carla Mavaddat

Becoming an Inmate

There is a rhythm to the yard. There are the guys who run, the guys who lift, the dealers and their customers with matching expressions of carefully constructed casualness, all moving, occupying this single cement square. The rhythm of the yard is not perceptible at first, but after enough months have passed, the chaos begins to form a pattern of sorts. I have often thought that since arriving at San Quentin I have gained skills I never would have on the outside. Not job skills or people skills, but the skills needed to stay alive inside. Most of these develop out of need, as a form of defense, and none is more important than observation. Keeping my eyes open and my guard up is the only reason I have as few scars as I do.

One of the pieces of advice my first cellmate in General Pop, Slouchy, passed on was “always, always keep your eyes open Lil Chief, but be careful what you seeing.” For my first year or so in I figured Slouchy was telling me to be careful what shit I saw because there are some things just witnessing can put your life in danger.

I remember a time about 3 years back when a new kid, he couldn't have been in longer than a couple of months at that point, got beat unconscious in the mess. He had been real clean since he got in, keeping to himself, just trying to do his time and get out. The story circulated without hours of the beat down, which for prison gossip, is actually pretty slow. Turns out that a few days earlier he had been walking in the corner of the yard behind the weights, an area that serves as the office for a kind of black market of commissary goods run by the Mexicans.

Now the kid probably had no idea what was going on back there, or maybe he really was spying like the Mexicans were saying, but every version of the story has him back there when a particularly intense exchange went down between the Mexicans and a group of Neighborhood Crips. Those groups would normally never interact without some blood getting spilled, but this trade was apparently for a large amount of Oxycontin, which is in high demand around here, and the promise of a good price for good drugs will create a temporary peace between almost any groups. Even with a hot deal creating a temporary truce, both groups brought extra muscle to the exchange, and not just low level guys either. After all, better safe than dead.

Well, three days later a handful of guys from both groups were thrown in the hole, all guys who had been there for the exchange. They got some of the powerful guys, but not everyone who'd been there. The guys that remained in the General Pop decided that the new kid must have snitched to the guards, and they went for blood. Although I was among those who doubted that the kid had anything to do with the guys put in solitary, the beat down is the expected response in

the case of a snitch. In this particular situation, I'd bet that there was no snitch at all.

When two rival groups interact in the yard it disrupts the rhythm, and anything that changes the flow of the yard gets noticed. After all, it's not just the inmates who have perfected their skills of observation. The guards might not have caught on in this case had the Mexicans and Neighborhood Crips brought fewer guys to the deal. As it was, the guards had more than enough incentive to shake down the boys, snitch or no. Sometimes it's easier in here to assume that someone is snitching on you and your crew than give the guards any credit. Smart guards are a lot more of a threat than stupid bigoted guards. We do what we have to do to maintain any semblance of safety, even if it is only in our minds. So the unspoken rule has formed that whenever you get punished for something, always find an inmate to blame.

After a decade inside, I've passed on Slouchy's advice to more fish than I can count. I know that eventually they will understand, just like I did, that there is more to it than they first hear. There's a difference between being aware of your surroundings and really seeing them. And while it can physically protect you to "always, always keep your eyes open, but be careful what you seeing," once the advice sinks in, it can also keep you sane. There is so much despair here, so much pain and hopelessness, so many abuses against human nature itself. If any one man looked, really looked, around himself, and took the things he saw in year after year, he would go insane. Caring, looking, seeing... these are weaknesses in this place, and any weakness here must be overcome.

I used to hear the screams at night. Screams and pleading that faded quickly to whimpers and then, just days later, to the silence of a broken man. Slouchy would say it was God that saved me from that fate. While I still thank God nearly every day that I never got turned out, I would say it was Slouchy. Well, a combination of luck, Slouchy, NBT allies and an ability to make images come to life with just a needle, ball point pen, and walkman. There are other screams in the night, caused by monsters in men's heads instead of their bunks. Reliving the pain of the past each time they fall asleep. From time to time, we all fall victim to the demons that lurk in our subconscious, waiting to prey when we are at our weakest.

I used to see the scars on guys' arms. A few slashing deeply across veins, reminders of failed attempts at freedom. Others shaped like cigarettes or cigars, just like the ones Lil' J wore from the times he really pissed off his old man. I'd see the haunted look of the dying. Men wasting away from some disease or another, given just enough meds to keep them alive but not to truly ease the suffering, or the fear. I used to see it all, take it in and let it mark me as well, but

everyone has a breaking point and I reached mine less than 6 months in.

If I sound callous or cruel, it's because that is what this place has made me. I have seen guys get out, given a second chance at life that I would never have, and end up right back inside. There is a part of me that blames the guys for wasting the opportunity I want more than anything, but most of the time I blame the system. The more time that passes, the more guys I watch come and go until their strikes and freedom are spent, the more I find fault with the system and not with the men. They push men out the door with \$200 dollars (less if they needed clothes or were in for less than a year) and a list of rules and requirements.

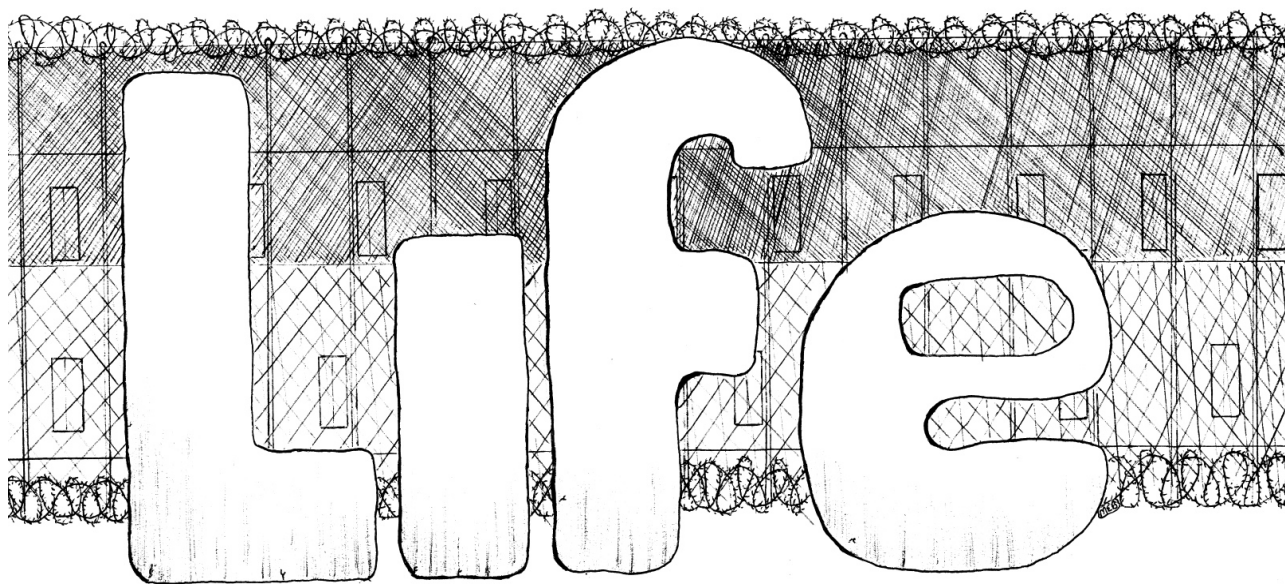
Well, a lot of those requirements, like securing a job and housing, are not possible with just \$200 dollars and a felony on your record. Keeping your P.O. happy is made even harder by the restrictions placed on spending time with known 'associates.' Yeah, that makes sense if we are talking a bank robber or something, but mostly parolees are guys like me whose homies are all they know, or the guys in here for drug charges whose whole world outside is made up of other junkies. They tell guys who get their first taste of freedom for years or even decades to stay away from everyone they knew, to choose to remain in the state of constant loneliness that we are forced into here, and then are surprised when they fail. So I don't blame the guys anymore, but to be honest these logical failures in the system weren't what got me to stop hating every guy who wasted his freedom. I finally got it, really got how hard the system works to get guys back in just as soon as they get gated out, when Jimmy got his parole yanked after three weeks out.

Jimmy had lived one floor up from me, on the 5th tier of C-block, and was one of the boys I played chess with from time to time. He had been in for just over 7 years when he got paroled. In the week or so between hearing he was getting out and his day of release, Jimmy wouldn't shut up about how he was gonna do right by his family, how he was going to be a real dad to his little boy, how he was going to be home in time for his kid's 10th Birthday. Maybe it wasn't fair, but I was living through him in some ways, he was going to be able to walk out of these walls a free man, to a family of his own, things I would never have. When I heard through the rumor mill that he was back in country for violating parole I could have killed him. It was a damn good thing he was.

A couple of weeks later I was playing chess with a bunch of other lifers. We get together about once a week to play chess or cards to just talk. Sometimes it helps to be around other guys who know what it's like to know you'll die in here. I guess at one point it reminded someone enough of group therapy that they started calling the meetings 'group' and it just stuck. Well during group this

particular week we started talking about Jimmy. One of the guys had gotten a note, or a 'kite,' from a homie in county that knew Jimmy, and had asked him what his P.O. got him for. Turns out Jimmy had a pocket knife on him that had a two inch blade. Now somehow the P.O. saw it and took it out to measure the blade because knives longer than two inches are considered weapons. While the knife was two inches sharp, the metal went another quarter inch below that before the handle. Well the P.O. measured the blade as handle to tip, and just like that Jimmy is back in, probably for another year.

During that group was when I saw what I had been denying for so long—the system really was out to get us. I spend a long time thinking that my case had been a fluke, that the jury and judge somehow thought they were protecting society or something like that. But when it comes down to it, innocent until proven guilty only applies to Americans that can afford a decent lawyer. What happened to Jimmy wouldn't happen to an upper-class white man, but what's worse is that eventually we just accept that this is how it works. We accept the food that is barely fit for animals, the cramped quarters and the violence that fills them. In the end we even accept the fear, though for me that was one of the final realities I acknowledged.



Life: 1.) The quality by which living organisms are distinguished from dead organisms, or inanimate matter; 2.) Living organisms collectively; 3.) The interval between birth and death; 4.) A matter of living; 5.) Liveliness. —lifeless adj. —lifetime n.

(Webster's New Pocket Dictionary 2007 Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.)

Life: Michael E. Ballard

The fear is still there, in every breath, every step, every thought. But it's different now. When I first got here, the fear was so extreme that it was almost debilitating. Terror is an interesting thing, because while at first it puts all your senses on high alert, after a while it becomes a fog you have to fight through to do even the simplest things. That kind of sheer terror simply cannot be sustained; it fades subtly into a different brand of fear. Sometimes I am jealous of the fish, with their darting eyes and rapid breaths. That fear is on the surface, a way of handling the environment you have been thrown into. Once you are around here long enough it becomes easier to accept it into your bones. To fear everything and everyone becomes a way of life, and the ideas of comfort and trust are almost laughable.

It's not so bad though, to be afraid or angry all the time—it's better than being lonely. In a place that is never quiet, never still, it is amazingly easy to feel alone. But even loneliness can be adjusted to, given enough time. I honestly think that man can change to handle anything, if he must to survive.

V. Dreaming Once Again

Dreaming
Was once a freedom
From an imperfect life
of foodstamps and cramped apartments and shame.
I'd dream of fame and riches
The dreams of a fool.
What would I give now
To dream
Of what I awoke to then
Of laughter and family and warmth
Of freedom.
Now I dream of cages built of darkness
Invisible Walls
Pressing in on me until I cannot move
Cannot breathe
No up, no down... no escape
Nothing but me and the blackness.
I wake up
And face the cold metal bars of reality
Until tomorrow when
the darkness will claim me
Once again.



New York City: Carla Mavaddat

Finding Hope on the Inside

I've spent the most of last decade living in daze. Not because I am over-medicated like some of the guys here or straight up crazy like some of the others, but because I just couldn't bring myself to care. Every move I made, every lap in the yard, every folded set of blues, every chess game, it was all done because it had to be, done to survive. After 5 years inside, I had reached a point where I knew who my friends and enemies were, I'd found out most of the tricks to surviving in here, and the gravity of my sentence had finally sunk in.

When I first came to prison I went through the same series of emotions every fish does: shock, anger, and depression. According to some of the older lifers in here who I meet up with once a week, the last stage is acceptance, but that one seems to have passed me by...twice. The first time I went through this progression was upon my arrival in San Quentin. The shock didn't wear off fully until I was placed in General Pop and each day went from a battery of different activities to a rigid routine.

At that point it was a damn good thing that my roommate, Slouchy, was a homie because otherwise he would've been in his rights to beat me down when I started having fits of anger. The littlest thing would set me off, once it was just the sound of the sink dripping, and I would be screaming and cussing, punching the walls (or in that one case, the sink) and kicking my bunk. Slouchy would let me tire myself out, or if I got really out of control, push me up against the wall until I chilled out. I must have done something right in a past life, cause having Slouchy as my first cellmate truly was a godsend and a lifesaver.

It took less than a month to burn out on the anger, and then the depression hit like a fucking brick. There is probably a more elegant way to say that, but not a more accurate one. I had finally grasped that I would die in this cinderblock hell, and nothing short of God himself could save me from that fate. It hit me straight in the gut and knocked the wind out of me. The ache didn't subside, and I spent the next 3 months trying to catch my breath. Whenever I would start to forget about where I was and how long I would be there something would remind me, and the feeling of being punched in the gut would return with a vengeance.

Unlike the shock and anger, I can't pinpoint when the ache in my stomach subsided, or exactly when I began to breathe again. The depression did not fade into acceptance, but into numbness. I learned to use this numbness as a shield against both the things I saw and heard around me and the things I had to do each day. I threatened men that owed me for tats I had completed, threatened

them with who I knew, who I could get them reassigned to live with. I could lock them in a cell with a man who wanted their blood or their body, I had the pull to do it and they knew. But it was as if I was watching someone else say and do these things, someone harder and crueler than I ever thought I could be.

Almost a year ago, the world I had built around myself came crumbling down. The Supreme Court handed down their decision in *Graham v Florida*, and they had sided with a guy just like me who was serving out his time in Florida. What had previously been a world of grey desolation, of walls and chains, was pierced by a ray of sunshine I never thought I would feel again: hope.

One of the many ironies of the prison system is that those of us who are inside (some never to rejoin society, not even able to vote) are more informed than most of the people outside these walls. It's not necessarily a case of "you don't know what you've got till it's gone," but a matter of time. We have so much time, nothing but time in some cases, and limited methods of filling it.

One of the privileges that those of us in General Pop are allowed is owning a radio or small TV. The TVs cost over \$200, so they are generally owned by inmates who have been around long enough to have some cash saved up, or who have friends or family on the outside with enough money. The radios are dirt cheap, not even half a week's wages, so anyone can get one. There aren't a lot of stations or channels available, so at some point during the day almost everyone listens to the news for a while. I know so much more about the day to day happenings of the state and country than I did when I was free to live in that world.

Whenever a case is at the state or national Supreme Court that could affect the guys in San Quentin, guys who understand what it could mean spread the word around the joint. There are times when I hate the way news, stories, any kind of gossip really, spreads from tier to tier and block to block in what seems like minutes, but this is one of the few ways I appreciate the rumor mill in here. While we hear about the big developments on the news, the smaller cases that don't get covered are heard about from family members, friends, or even lawyers. I knew the Sullivan and Graham cases were going to be decided soon and had even talked about what they might mean for me in group. None of the other lifers here would be affected, but I got on well with most of them and they were hoping for my miracle, but like me—expecting nothing.

One lifer in my group didn't saying anything, which wasn't too surprising coming from Sam, but he sent me a kite later that week, which shocked me for a few reasons. Sam and I had never gotten really close, not that I have gotten 'close' with anyone in here, but aside from a few times in group, I had never

talked to him before. Sam had been in for around 20 years, so far as I could tell, and though he is only 40 or 50, he looks ancient. 20 years in here has marred his face with deep lines, occasionally crossed by old scars, a mask of hardship.

I wasn't just surprised that he had contacted me because we weren't 'friends,' but because, if I'd had to bet before I got that kite, I would have said he couldn't read, much less write. Sometimes guys who can't write their own notes will get their buddies to write them out for them, maybe trade a cig for the work. But Sammy was the kind of old timer who didn't trade with other guys, didn't ask for nothing and wasn't asked for nothing in return. He had crossed out words, and misspelled others, but I could read the message.

"the courts fucked All of us good i aint saying i'm gunna stop prayin for you lil Chief, but i dont see no reason they would do differant this time. the white man who make these desisions are not looking out for you or me or noone in hear. i've seen too many man break in hear when they get and loose hope. stay strong lil brother"

I could read the message, but I couldn't follow his advice.

Sammy's advice was more than just good, it was right, he was right. I did my best to stay realistic, to force down the hope blossoming in my chest, until the court came down in favor of Graham, of all juveniles just like me. Though I still don't know what exactly will happen at my appeal, if I will ever actually get out on parole, I can't help but dream.



Solitary Kite: Rachel Ternes

I don't know if I can put into words the way that this small ray of hope has affected me. It's as though I have been asleep for a decade, doing only what was expected of me to survive and occasionally to make my Mom happy. I had taken classes because she wanted me to, and it helped pass the time, but now I had a reason to want to learn. I have been two classes short of graduating with an Associates Arts degree, but have been putting off finishing those classes because the idea of sitting in my cell with a degree was somehow even worse than sitting in my cell with nothing to offer the world at all. But now, I might one day be able to actually do something with it.

My passion for painting, not inking or tagging, but actual paint on paper, has returned for the first time since before I got in deep with NTB. I sent my mom the first work I completed, and the letter she wrote back was filled with a happiness I hadn't heard from here in a decade. San Quentin even has its own inmate run paper, the San Quentin News, that is published every couple of months. After I finish writing this, I am going to try my hand at my first news article, an application piece to be sent to the paper's staff.

There is a part of me, whether it is a result of my many years in SQ, or just natural survival instincts that knows this new outlook brings equal parts hope and danger for my future. The barricades I spent years constructing around what's left of my heart have been torn down, ripped open to allow this light in. My future is no longer certain, and it is this uncertainty that I have craved during the nights where I had to convince myself it was worth it to keep plotting towards my eventual death inside these walls. I don't think anyone but a fellow lifer could understand the freedom one feels not knowing where their last minutes will be spent.

However there is also danger in hope. There is always a chance that California courts where to rule that *Graham v. Florida* should not be retroactive, should not free those of us already behind bars, only stop more children from sharing out fate. Or that, if granted a possibility of parole, it is denied to me time and time again. Knowing that my last breath, whenever I take it, will taste of San Quentin... it would be too much. I have given myself over to the hope too fully and cannot return to the half life I must lead to survive here.

But for now I will push those thoughts away. After all, I promised Ma a painting before her next visit, and I have just decided what I to for paint her: a mustang on the plains, the wind whipping his mane against the remaining leather of a broken harness.

Blue Eyes

By Rachel C. Cupelo

“Lolita, light of my life, fire of my loins. My sin, my soul. Lo-lee-ta: the tip of the tongue taking a trip of three steps down the palate to tap, at three, on the teeth. Lo. Lee. Ta... “Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, exhibit number one is what the seraphs, the misinformed, simple, noble-winged seraphs, envied. Look at this tangle of thorns...”

My eyes hurt. I shut the book, pinched either side of my nose to ward off the coming headache. They were frequent now, with the never-ending light and noise, grating on every nerve.

I brought my attention back to the book, rubbed the worn paperback cover lightly with the tips of my fingers. The cover, black and white and shades of gray, just a slim pair of girlish legs in saddle oxfords and lacy socks, made me smile, reminded me of *her*.

Oh, Nabokov had it right. The man knew what he was talking about. I wondered briefly how one could write so perfectly about that kind of love, those special moments, without being a pervert himself.

A pervert. I supposed that’s what I was. That’s what they called me, anyway. Pervert. Baby Raper. All manner of unsavory names and labels, meant to tear me down, tell me I was a lesser mortal. I had to laugh. I already knew how much less I was.

That’s why I wasn’t able to resist her.

I’d never felt that way before her. A lot of guys in my situation say shit like that, but I promise, it’s true. She stirred something within me – a fire, a passion, totally beyond my capacity to understand, let alone deny. She was perfection. She became, in a way, my reason for existence.

Listen to me wax poetic. Like I said, I hadn’t always felt that way about girls – women – her age. I hadn’t always felt about *her* that way. Before I get ahead of myself, I should probably go back and start at the beginning – the most logical course of action after a situation that, even I can admit, got completely, and totally, out of control.

Her name was – is – Darla. But I called her Blue Eyes. Those eyes stood out, dark and piercing, knowing, searching. From the moment I met her I felt every flaw exposed beneath them. But she had been a small child then, and I'd thought nothing of it, too intent on dating her mother, enjoying their company. The nickname stuck from the first time I thought to use it, because Darla didn't quite fit. As far as names go, Darla was too dainty, too girly for the clumsy, plucky tomboy I knew. She was Blue Eyes, always.



Paris, France: Carla Mavaddat

I met Darla for the first time when she was seven, some years after her deadbeat sperm donor had walked out, leaving her mother with nothing. She didn't remember him, which I think Leah was grateful for. In time, we married and the three of us made our own little family. It was a satisfying life, and I couldn't have possibly been happier.

And then everything changed. When things began to change, they changed so slowly, I felt only vaguely aware of them. And even when I was very aware, I ignored them. Then I got hauled away in handcuffs.

Was it worth it? Well, you be the judge. I already know the answer.

It all began with a bra.

Rather, a discussion of one. It was a humid afternoon, the summer after Darla had turned twelve. We were out in the front yard, all three of us, spreading mulch for the flowers Leah would plant the next day. It was so unseasonable hot, even for July, that I sent Darla in to get us lemonade.

“Why don’t you take a break, Blue Eyes?”

She looked up at me hopefully, smiling. “Really?”

Her mother and I both nodded.

She mopped the sweat from her forehead in an exaggerated motion, blew an even more exaggerated breath, and ran for the door. “Thanks Chris!”

She never called me “Dad.” Secretly, I was glad for it. I knew what I was to her, and where that counted. I didn’t need the label to go with it.

This thought was broken by my wife. I looked over at her, huffing, wiping bits of mulch from her cheek.

“What’s that, dear?”

“Our daughter. Child needs to start wearing a bra.”

I shrugged. “Didn’t notice.” Because I hadn’t.

“Regardless, I’m taking her to the mall tomorrow after I get these flowers planted. Seventh grade will be awkward for her, I fear.”

I squirmed uncomfortably. “Yes, please do that. Without involving me, if you don’t mind.”

“Don’t worry, she and I have already had a discussion, hashed it out. You’re such a baby!” She slugged my arm with a dirt-covered glove, leaving a mark. “I remember the last time she and I had girl talk. You turned green and isolated yourself in the basement with a six-pack, and then wouldn’t speak to us for days.”

“It was very traumatic,” I quipped.

Just then Darla came out the front door with the lemonade, and, upon quick observation, I could see that my wife had a point. She didn't look much like a twelve year old anymore. She was tall and thin, but already her hips were rounding, her chest fuller, her gait less awkward than it used to be. Becoming a woman before my eyes.

I caught myself staring and quickly looked away, taking the lemonade with a murmured thanks. No, I certainly hadn't noticed before.

But it wasn't long before I started noticing a little more. Via the typical teenage growth spurt, she seemed to change overnight, and by Christmas she looked, well, almost legal. It should have been a father's worst nightmare, but I found myself to be oddly pleased. I was a lucky man to have such a beautiful daughter.

But I pushed it to the back of my mind. I knew what I was feeling wasn't right, so I pushed it away, ignored it, hoped it would stay away, prayed I would forget it.

And for a time, I did. Life went on. It was a few months later, at Darla's thirteenth birthday, that I felt it again. It took me by surprise, really. I was pouring soda, twelve of her little friends running around underfoot. She and Leah were pressing candles into her cake, smearing each other with frosting and giggling up a storm. I looked at them, smiled, and Darla...well, she *smirked* back.

I know what you're thinking – I was imagining, justifying, but I swear, to this day, I know what I saw. It was what she said afterward that sealed the deal:
"Like what you see, Chris?"

I spilled an entire cup of soda down the front of my shorts, and all fourteen women burst out laughing.

"The cake, Chris! Doesn't the cake look great?"

I was a goner.

And then the questions about sex started. I should have expected it; seducing me or not, she was thirteen and she was going to be curious. She cornered me one Saturday in the living room, plopping down next to me on the couch. I had been watching the third day of the Masters, waiting for Phil Mickelson to sink a particularly crucial putt, but with her in close proximity, of course I

couldn't concentrate.

"Hey Chris?"

I didn't take my eyes off the screen. "What's up, Blue Eyes?"

"Can I ask you a question?"

"Sure."

"Any question?"

I turned my head just enough to give her a look out of the corner of my eye, smiling slightly. "Ask me the question and I'll see what I can do."

"It's about sex."

I almost laughed out loud. Of course it was, because karma and I were not in accord.

I started channel surfing mindlessly. "I figured you would know all about that stuff already, thanks to your mother."

She scoffed. "Of course! I know the mechanics and how it works and all about condoms and birth control –"

I choked on my beer. "Of course you do."

She patted my back while I finished coughing. "Yeah, Mom was great about all that. But, well...."

I wiped my mouth with the back of my hand, grimacing at the Sam Adams sprayed all over my shirt. "Well, what?"

"Well, I just wanna know....how does sex actually feel? I mean, I heard it feels good and stuff, but like, just nice, or, like, really, REALLY good, *youknow-whatImean?*"

Almost immediately the front of my pants tightened and I broke into a sweat. I *could* not do this. There she was, with practically no clothes on, leaning with her chest up against my arm, innocent eyes and voice, asking me to explain something her still partially childlike brain couldn't process yet. God help me,

her lips looked so pink and pouty and pretty, the mere mention of sex, let alone how it feels, made me want to press her into the couch and show her.

“I, uh, think you should talk about this with your mother.”

“That’s just it, Chris! I would if I could, but she actually got all uncomfortable and wouldn’t tell me anything and – “

I put up a hand to stop her. “Well, Blue Eyes, like me, your mother is probably just *really* uncomfortable with you having...*those* feelings. I mean, Christ, you’re a baby.”

She gave me a disgusted look. “I am *almost* a woman, thank you very much.”

Despite my discomfort, I had to smile. She really had no idea. “Yes, well, as you pointed out, sweet pea, you’re not quite a woman yet, and those are some very womanly feelings. Your mother doesn’t want you confusing your feelings and getting caught up with someone too old for you.”

She rolled her eyes. “You two must think I’m a total moron. Besides, I *like* older men.”

She said it with a smirk that thirteen-year-olds shouldn’t have, and my mouth literally went dry. I grabbed my beer, chugged it, then forced a laugh. “Yes, well, *that* is precisely what your mother is afraid of.”

I stood up. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’m gonna grab a shower.” Had to grab a shower to wash the sweat off and take care of business, that is. Impulsively, I leaned down and kissed her temple, forcing myself away before the smell of her hair drew me back in. My face still close to hers, I dropped my voice to a whisper.

“But if you really must know, Blue Eyes, sex, when done properly, feels really, REALLY amazing.”

Before I could get myself into any more trouble, I started walking away, up the stairs towards the master bath. I could hear her behind me, shouting, “But what does that mean, ‘*done properly*’? Chris?!”

I ignored her, shutting the bathroom door behind me.

“Man, you better put that shit away.”

My cellie pointed at the book in my hand. My fingers stilled over the pages, frozen, the only thing betraying my nerves.

“What the fuck is it to you?”

“You know that head shrinker has the COs watching us. You wanna do your whole fuckin’ time?”

I rolled my eyes. “Whatever.”

“Dude, c’mon. We got group anyway.”

Reluctantly I stood, folding the book into a tube and slipping it into an open spot I’d made deep in the middle of my cheap mattress. It wasn’t the best hiding place, but I was too lazy to find something better. Hey, I hadn’t gotten caught yet.

“Man, you are makin’ us late. Get your cracker ass movin’.”

I moved, albeit slowly. I hated going to the shrink. He’d make me talk about all of it, the moment everything went down...

It was full-on summer, so hot we spent days upon days with the air conditioning cranked up, the windows tightly closed. Any time I wasn’t at work or with the girls, I spent in the cool dark of the Man Cave.

The Man Cave was my place in the estrogen-heavy house. Sure, it held the laundry room, some storage space, but the rest of it was mine – the big-screen television, worn leather couches, wet bar, and the office where I took care of the paperwork from my auto shop. There was also the computer. We had a desktop upstairs for family use – Leah’s email, Darla’s homework – and my work laptop. But this was my personal desktop. I told Leah it held backups of our files – taxes, pictures, the like.

This was true enough, but really I was a closet computer whiz with a porn problem. It was an addiction I’d had long before I married. I reasoned that what Leah didn’t know, didn’t hurt her, and added passwords to the folders contain

ing my file downloads.

The problem had begun last fall, when, in my desperation to forget my growing obsession with Darla, I started downloading kiddie porn. I started trolling the pedo chat rooms, making friends and asking the best way to destroy the trail on my files. Within weeks I'd learned how to hide my downloads in other files, and use overseas ISPs to keep the feds from tracing me.

Before you ask, I knew it was wrong. That shit was illegal for a reason. But at the time it felt like the only recourse I had to protect my stepdaughter. Men in my situation can't just ask for help, you know, not without consequences.

So I kept it to myself, even when it was no longer enough, even when I'd already crossed so many lines with Darla there was no going back.

And that hot, unrelenting Saturday afternoon was the day I crossed the first of many lines that summer.

BlueEyes408: hey chris

She was instant messaging me from the family computer, upstairs. Against my better judgment, I replied back:

CarGuyChris: Hey Kiddo. What's up?

BlueEyes408: nada just wanted to chat

CarGuyChris: What about?

BlueEyes408: haha boyz...
The sigh came from deep within my chest.

CarGuyChris: Get down here. We'll talk.



Montreal, Canada: Carla Mavaddat

I heard her feet on the stairs, and quickly closed the video I'd been watching, typing in a password to keep it streaming.

She bounced onto the couch, gave me a big grin.

"What are your romantic troubles this week, Blue Eyes?"

She got right to it. "How do you know if a boy likes you?"

"Darla, do you have a boyfriend?"

Another big grin. "No. Would you be jealous if I did?"

I decided to ignore the second question. "That's good. I think you're too young."

She pouted. "Don't treat me like a baby. You know I hate that."

"And you know your mother would have an aneurysm. To answer your question, if a guy likes you, and he happens to be a teenage boy, he'll go out of his way to talk to you, hug you, things like that. If he does, let me know, and I'll beat him up."

"Chris! Be serious."

"If he's really shy, he won't dare make a move on you. If he does that, I like him. He can hang here whenever you want."

She rolled her eyes. "You are the worst."

"Bottom line is, we're all gross and say stupid things, and you're better off not dealing with us at all."

She gave me that smile that drove me nuts, the one that meant she was plotting something. "I don't think you're gross. I like the things you say."

"I was properly trained by your mother."

"Whatever it is, all my friends think you're super hot."

And there it was.

“Did you tell them that that’s inappropriate?”

“Of course not! There’s nothing wrong with liking a mature man.”

I sighed, completely exasperated. “Blue Eyes, men are never mature, not even when they’re 90.”

“You’re just saying that to make us stop.”

That was true. I didn’t want to give the Heartbreak Kid any ideas. Sue me.

“I mean, I *guess* one of us ends up ok every once in a while.”

“What does that even mean?”

I shrugged. “Respectful, a good listener. Someone who thinks you’re beautiful, cares that you’re safe and happy. Being good looking doesn’t hurt either.”

“Those sound like pretty high standards.”

I laughed out loud at that. “Oh, Blue Eyes, sweetheart, have high standards. You’ll be better off.”

“So, I need to find someone....like you!”

There was that smile again. I forced myself to return it. “Better, I should think.”

“Nah.” She threw her arms around me. “You’re perfect.”

And then, she kissed me. Not the way a daughter kisses her father, either. And, God help me, I returned it.

I heard the garage door go up, took the opportunity to push us apart. “Your mother is home. We can’t.”

She nodded. The understanding in her eyes, what she knew would happen the next time we got a few minutes alone, was unbearable. And I felt powerless to stop it.

“Go,” I urged, pressing one last kiss to her forehead.

"I love you," she murmured, then turned away and ran up the stairs.

She went away before I could answer. So later, after she and my wife were asleep, I opened the door to her room and quietly slipped inside. Pressing my lips to her lavender-scented hair, I whispered:

"I love you too."

When her eyelids fluttered, I crept away before I could be found out.

The head shrinker's name was James, and his questions seemed to flow together. I couldn't concentrate. I could never concentrate when I went back to that place.

I felt my cellie nudge me, hard. I looked at him, my eyes beginning to clear. He motioned to the shrink. Apparently I was being asked a question.

"W-what?"

"I asked you, Chris, if you would tell us about what happened the night you lost control."

I nodded, swallowed. My mouth suddenly felt dry. I remembered that muggy, late summer night Darla and I finally came together. I remembered the bitterly cold October afternoon Leah caught us, finally, after so many weeks of hiding and dodging questions. The handcuffs, the questions, the moments of relief just after being arrested, the grief and rage and want after realizing the strength of the wedge that had been jammed between us – all of it felt tangible, as if I could reach out and grab the memory, hold it in the palm of my hand...manipulate it.

I had been speaking. I hadn't realized that. The last of the words came out in a rush:

"...And then, we had sex."

I heard the groans around me, the reproach. I snarled back.

"What? We did!"

"No," James replied calmly. "You committed statutory rape. She was too young to consent."

"Whatever."

"Not 'whatever,' Chris. You have to own up to what you've done. No one can help you until you do."

He made me stay after the session.

"We're concerned about your progress, Chris. My supervisor wants to pull you from the program."

I flopped back into the chair, rolled my eyes. "Do what you need to do."

"I'd rather not have to remove you, but some disturbing things have come to light."

"Such as?"

He heaved a sigh. "Such as that copy of *Lolita* you've kept checked out of the prison library for 3 months, that you keep checking out for the maximum time limit. Such as the letters getting smuggling in from your victim, and the letters from you being smuggled out. I could go on."

I smirked. "She isn't much of a victim if she still wants me."

"She's a *child*, a child you took advantage of! Like I told you, if you can't come to an understanding about what you've done, no one can help you!"

Watching him lose his temper was fun. I laughed. "I took advantage of no one. She came to *me*."

I saw the fear in his eyes. It was funny. It made me feel powerful.

"And if she came to me again, I'd do exactly the same thing, without hesitation."

He stayed standing, though I could tell he wanted to sit. He ran a hand down his face, his worry and exasperation so obvious, so naked.

"You know, when I first met you, Chris, I thought I'd be recommending

you for early release. It appears I'm wrong. You're a predator; you manipulated me."

"Surprise!" I grinned. I didn't care anymore.

He stared at me, as if in awe. "For now you're out of group, and there's going to be restrictions on your mail and library visits. It's individual therapy and consequences until I see some improvement."

I felt the laugh well up, tried to keep it together. It was just so *funny*.

"You honestly think you can keep us apart forever? It doesn't matter who you tell what. Eventually I'll be out of here. And the first thing I'll do is find her."

"Is that a threat?"

"Nah." I waved the thought away, slouched in the chair. "It's a promise."

He kicked me out of the meeting room eventually, allowed me to go back to my block. I knew my book was already gone, the cell stripped, but it didn't matter. I'd read it dozens of times, I had it memorized.

I walked in, kicked off my shoes, and laid down in my bunk, closing my eyes. I smiled, began to recite the words verbatim, relishing in the way they rolled off my lips and tongue:

"This then is my story. I have reread it. It has bits of marrow sticking to it, and blood, and beautiful bright-green flies. At this or that twist of it I feel my slippery self eluding me, gliding into deeper and darker waters than I care to probe..."

"The following decision I make with all the legal impact and support of a signed testament: I wish this memoir to be published only when Lolita is no longer alive. Thus, neither of us is alive when the reader opens this book. But while the blood still throbs through my writing hand, you are still as much part of blessed matter as I am, and I can still talk to you...I am thinking of aurochs and angels, the secret of durable pigments, prophetic sonnets, the refuge of art. And this is the only immortality you and I may share, my Lolita."

Yes, I would find her, my Blue Eyes. After all, she was mine.

** Selections taken from Lolita, by Vladimir Nabokov.*

**BEHIND BARS:
Voices—A ONE ACT PLAY¹
By
Moana Rawlins**

**SCENE I
“COURT OF ONE SOLUTION”**

SET: Courtroom; minimal set. Defendant, 35 year-old woman who obviously about five months pregnant, is handcuffed in front of her belly. She stands five feet behind podium where she will stand when the court clerk calls her name. Behind her stands her alter ego, dressed and posed to mirror the defendant. The judge (an elderly man with white hair who peers over his glasses as he addresses people) sits opposite and above the defendant, in front of a prominently displayed American flag. Beside the defendant, is her attorney (middle aged man in a business suit) and beside the judge stands the probation officer. A court clerk (middle aged woman) sits at a desk facing the audience in front of the judge’s bench.

JUDGE
(Addressing the COURT CLERK)

How many cases on the docket today Jean?

COURT CLERK

Thirty-two with fourteen arraignments this morning and two trials this afternoon Your Honor.

JUDGE
(Irritated)

How is it we’ve got all these cases this morning? We’ve got three hours to get all these continuances and surrenders done.
Well, let’s get started. Call the first case Jean.

¹ Editor’s note: This play in six scenes examines the lives of women incarcerated in America. From courtroom to segregation cell we look at the ways in which women navigate this oppressive, restrictive, and punishing environment. The writer’s real experience of being a mother and becoming a mother while incarcerated are represented in the scenes and the play concludes with a section of poetry. The writer is drawing on her experience. The playwright notes that the sixth scene of the play is intended to include current writing of women who are or once were imprisoned in America. The author, Moana Rawlins, has two children, lives in Whately, MA and is currently enrolled at Smith College as an Ada Comstock Scholar.

COURT CLERK

The Commonwealth calls Amy Smith to the stand to answer to the charge of violation of probation Your Honor.

(DEFENDANT and DEFENSE ATTORNEY approach the defense bench, ALTER EGO follows closely behind)

PROBATION OFFICER

Your Honor, the probation department requests that you sentence Ms. Smith to the maximum sentence allowed for this particular violation of her probation.

JUDGE

What was the nature of the violation?

PROBATION OFFICER

Your honor, Miss Smith left this Commonwealth without permission. She told this probation officer that she left because she had relapsed into active heroin addiction and went to Florida. She returned to the Commonwealth two days ago. Now, Ms Smith left her daughter with her parents six months ago when she left and it seems she's come back pregnant with another child your honor! I guess her parents will be raising more than one of their grandchildren Your Honor.

(Pause)

Probation had Ms. Smith's urine tested, and the results were negative for drugs, however—this defendant has a history of violations and this department is requesting you sentence her to one year in the house of correction for leaving the Commonwealth without permission from this department.

JUDGE

(to the DEFENSE ATTORNEY)

Does the defendant wish to respond before I impose sentencing in this matter?

DEFENSE ATTORNEY

Your honor, Miss Smith is a 35 year-old woman who is mother to a seven year old daughter. She is a native of this town, and has spent nearly all of her life in Hampshire County. Miss Smith has struggled with heroin addiction for many years and has had some success with this in the past...

(Courtroom freezes. ALTER EGO walks past defendant and approaches to address audience)

ALTER EGO

No one in this courtroom will hear from the defendant today. They won't hear about her, either. Certainly not from the lawyer she met in the holding cell an hour ago. Not from the Probation Officer who's been intimately involved in collecting and managing cups of her urine. She won't be able to tell anyone that she really doesn't know why she can't stay clean and out of trouble. You won't know how deeply she loves her daughter in spite of the fact that she left her behind-or that she naively believed the move would bring a new life for her and her daughter...

You won't hear how this baby's father fired a .44 inches from her ear and said, "Next time I won't miss..." or how, she waited for him to fall asleep and crept into the house to get her purse and car keys...how she fled back here as fast as she could.

She came back to her daughter. She came back to spare this child the life she was living. She came back because she had nowhere else to go. And so, in silence she will receive this sentence and believe as they do...that she is beyond redemption.

(Pause)

(ALTER EGO walks to stand behind the defendant. Lights up in courtroom)

DEFENSE ATTORNEY

Your honor the defense asks that you allow Ms. Smith a suspended sentence. She will report to probation weekly and live with her family in Northampton.

(Pause)

Your honor, if you accept Probation's recommendation it will mean this child will be born in the prison, which wouldn't serve anyone in this case.

(Lengthy, uncomfortable silence for ten seconds)

JUDGE

(Loud slam of gavel)

One year. Call the next case Jean.

(Light fades. Scene ends.)

SCENE TWO
"BIRDS OF A FEATHER"

SET: Cell with two beds and a toilet/sink combination. Bars separate the two actors from the audience, who observe this scene through the cell bars. Two women are in the cell on opposite sides. The older of the two women (OW) is writing in a journal. The younger woman (YW) sits on her bed facing the older woman.)

OLD WOMAN

Where were you when I got back here from work...Classification?

YOUNG WOMAN

Yeah. I wanted to find out what my out date is. They told me they had to add up my pretrial days and subtract that from the sentence. I told them I had sixty four days so far but they said they couldn't take my word for it.

OLD WOMAN

How do you spell especially?

YOUNG WOMAN

(Quickly)

E-S-P-E-C-

OW

Slow down Speed Racer. Slower; you know I can't write fast.

YW

Eeeee—Ssssssssss—Peeeeeeee

OW

Very funny girl...very funny.

YW

What are you working on now? You're always writing something.

OW

I'm practicing the five paragraph essay for the GED. This'll be my third time taking this part and I'm gonna make it happen so I can get classed to pre-release. I've got six months left and I need to try to get a job hooked up before I leave here. You better get signed up for yours like you told me you would so you can get classed to minimum—you won't be able to get out to work, but you could take classes and writing groups..at least it's gonna keep you from going crazy

with boredom.



Montreal, Canada: Carla Mavaddat

YW

Yeah, that sounds good...Hey mama, do you know if I'll be able to earn good time with my sentence? Cuz, I was talking to this girl Tanya at the mess hall and she told me this sentence won't let me earn time off, which would suck because that means I do every day of five years. The way I figured it, I'd earn enough good time to be out in just over four years.

OW

Four years of being good in here ain't easy, grasshopper.

(Pause)

Don't listen to those girls in the lunch room; they don't know shit from shinola, just like your young ass. Go ask your counselor. Now how do you spell especially?

YW

(Slowly)

E-S-P-E-C-I-A-L-L-Y.

OW

Anyway, I thought that Marcus fool was gonna take the heat for you and tell

them the crack belonged to him and not you.

(Pause)

Men sure know how to get by don't they?

YW

Whaddya mean? Marcus tried to take the heat for me; they wouldn't let him do it.

OW

And how much time did Marcus get in court last week?

(Pause)

I heard they gave him a year. Word's out up state that he gave up his dealer. If they catch him sleeping up there he's gonna suffer.

(Pause)

You know how many women I know in here doing mandatory bids for men who LOVED them? I know about twenty of 'em right here in this section. Fellas hook 'em in with a hundred or two a day to sell hard out of their places and when the

shit hits the fan...and the shit always hits the fan—the women get it the worst. Those men have something to trade—women don't.

(Pause)

Who gives a shit about a woman who lets a guy sell drugs around her kids... right?

(Pause)

You're in good company around here kiddo.

YW

What are you talking about?—it wasn't like that with Marcus...he really cared about me and the kids. He told me to ask the lawyer to file an appeal and ask for a sentence reduction.

OW

File an appeal with your court-appointed attorney? Oh, my dear, you really are a tender morsel for a crocodile.

YW

Yeah... I trusted him. Now I'm screwed.

(Throws herself into her pillow face-first groaning)

How did this happen to me?

OW

Is that foster family bringing your kids in to see you this weekend?

YW

Yeah, they're bringing 'em. They seem nice enough...at least they agreed to bring them twice a month instead of once...

(Pause)

My kids will be ten and eight when I get out. I'll miss so much of their lives. What's really crazy is I never did drugs or sold them in my life! Now I'm fuck-
ing stuck in here for five years and he gets out in one!

OW

Eight months with good time.

YW

What? He can earn good time?

OW

Sure, why not? He's not the dangerous criminal...YOU are!

(Pause)

Tragic fucking bullshit.

(Pause)

Now... how do you spell certainly?

YW

C-E-R-T-A-I-N-L-Y.

(Lights fade. Scene ends.)

SCENE THREE
“SHACKLED AT THE SHATTUCK”

SET: Hospital room & bed, minimal set. CO escorts woman in labor and handcuffed in front into the room—her ALTER EGO dressed and similarly restrained follows her and assumes a position behind the hospital bed—the CO assists the WOMAN IN LABOR (WIL) onto the bed, removes one hand from its cuff and attaches it to the handrail. The CO then moves to the side of the room, arms folded, watching. A NURSE enters the room with a chart and sits at a desk with back to audience.

WOMAN IN LABOR

(to CO as he moves away from her)

Is this a sick joke or something? You're really going to keep my handcuffs on while I'm in LABOR? Really?

(to entering NURSE)

Um, excuse me, miss? Would you tell this guy to take these handcuffs off me? I'm in labor for Christ's sakes!

NURSE

How far apart are your labor pains now, Hon?

WIL

Did you hear me? Do I have to have handcuffs on now?

(Labor pain)

NURSE

(to the WIL during the labor pain)

That's the way they do things around here. Nothing I can do about it. Now, did you hear my question?

(Pause)

WIL

Jesus...I think about three minutes; it's hard for me to tell because I don't have a watch or anything.

NURSE

Really? No clocks in the jail over there?

WIL
(to CO)

Why the hell would I go anywhere? My out date is in three months—you know that!

CO

Everyone who comes to this hospital from the MCI's gets handcuffed to the hospital bed. It's procedure.

NURSE

That's how the corrections department does things, hon. Now, just as you're ready to push, they'll probably free your arm. And, if you need to use the bathroom or take a walk around the room, you just let us know, but keep in mind we have to limit these excursions because some women take advantage of them.

WIL

Jesus Christ, you all sound so robotic around here.

(to NURSE)

Have **you** given birth?

(Pause)

Can you **imagine** doing it chained to a goddamn bed?

NURSE

The doctor will be in to check on you shortly.

(NURSE exits room with chart.)

WIL
(to the CO)

Please take these handcuffs off me.

CO

This is how things are done around here and my advice to you is to go with it. If you give us a hard time, it'll cost you when it comes time to push that baby out. You want your arms free to push, right?

(Pause)

Am I right?

WIL

Sweet God in heaven, what the hell have I done to deserve this shit?

(Labor pain)

(NURSE enters room with chart and sits at desk, back to audience)

WIL

Listen, these pains are getting pretty bad. Can I have something to help with the pain?

NURSE

The doctor is about to come in and check you; you can ask him.

(Labor pain)

WIL

Oh, my God...Sonovabitch! Someone help me! Take this fucking thing off me—now!

NURSE

It's a little late for regrets now, isn't it? You just calm down here and pull yourself together. There's nothing either of us can do about the handcuffs. Just try to deal with it. You're not the first woman to give birth in handcuffs.

WIL

(crying)

Please see if the doctor can give me something for pain. Oh, my God, this is getting intense.

(Labor pain)

WIL

(to CO)

Listen, I need to be able to sit up and move around a little bit on this bed. Can you at least hook the handcuff to the rail where I can slide it around a little?

CO

The handcuffs are applied according to protocol.

WIL

Yeah, protocol. Jesus Christ, you people are friggin' nuts.

(Labor pain)

(NURSE is seated at desk, back to the WIL — DOCTOR enters room)

DOCTOR

Okay, let's see how we're doing here. I'm going to check to see how far you've dilated.

(Placing gloves on his hands he approaches WIL)

Ok, she's about five centimeters now.

(Removing gloves, disposing. Speaks to no one in particular)

How are the vital signs?

(Lifting the chart from the desk he addresses the NURSE)

So, this is surrender, right?

NURSE

Child Services has been notified and will be sending a worker out to pick him up tomorrow when pediatrics clears him for discharge.

DOCTOR

OK, call me when she's about eight centimeters; check on her every hour or so. I'll be down in my office if you need to reach me.

(To WIL)

So, if you need anything, you let the nurse know.

WIL

I need something for the pain and I'd like to be able to give birth without having to be handcuffed to the damn bed.

DOCTOR

(Backing away as he speaks to WIL)

I'll be checking on you to see how much progress you've made. I can't control the fact that you're in handcuffs. That's between you and the guard, OK? Now, it seems like everything is running smoothly, the baby is tolerating labor well, so we'll check again soon.

(DOCTOR leaves room, NURSE picks up chart and leaves behind him)

(Labor pain)

WIL

I'm in here for cashing bad checks at Wal-Mart for Christ's sakes!

(Lights down on frozen hospital scene. ALTER EGO steps out from behind WIL to address audience.)

“WE WOULD LIKE YOU TO KNOW”

ALTER EGO

Not everything is black and white.
Not everything goes in perfect harmony.
Not everyone can sing in a choir.
Not all of us can be good mothers.
Or had good childhoods ourselves...
Not all of us got good grades and
Lived our childhoods protected from evil.
We would like you to know
Not all of us are drug addicts or drug pushers.
Not all of us are thieves.
We would like you to know
That we need help—a second chance—a third...
Forgiveness...

(Pause)

Redemption.

(Lights fade. Scene ends.)

SCENE FOUR
"SEGREGATION SONG"

SET: Stage darkened to focus on the door of a cell. Cell door is high enough and wide enough to block actress from audience view. Window of door measures 5" wide by 20" long. Face of WOMAN IN CELL should be visible to audience.

WOMAN IN CELL

(Standing in window, addressing an unseen inmate housed beside her)

What'd you say? Commissary order?

(Laughing)

Girl you better know you ain't getting your commissary order in here. First time in the hole?

(Pause)

Me? Nah, I been here before...five or six times I think. For what? This time some crazy bee-otch put her hands in my blue box and stole some shit from me. She's two cells over there, but she came from the ER, know what I mean?...

Didn't ya Jackie?...Didn't ya get here after getting sewed up in the ER!?!?

(Pause)

I guess she's sleeping, they've got her on pain meds...I did her a favor for Christ's sakes! I'm awake all day and she sleeps like a baby...there's no damn justice in this world. How about you, how'd you find your way into D Block?

(Pause)

Ha! Yeah, if I'd a seen you when you got in here I coulda told you that when you tell 'em you're feeling like killing yourself they put you in here with a paper Johnnie. Are you in a paper Johnnie?

(Pause)

Well, here's how this shit works, girl. If you really want to off yourself, you don't tell anyone, you just do it, see? If you want to survive this shit you have

to figure out a way to let off steam. You have to find a way to do it without getting in trouble, though.

(Pause)

Who me? Well, I sing songs. Sometimes I make songs up. I flirt with the CO's when they come in. Mostly, I read when I'm in here. Hey—you wanna hear today's rendition of the Star Spangled Banner?

(Pause)

Ok...you asked for it!

(Singing loudly to the tune of the Star Spangled Banner)

**Oh say can you see, by this tiny window's light?
There's a woman in here who knows how to fight.
And I'm here all alone, 'cuz I broke Jackie's bone
And she sleeps down the line with cotton in her nose.
When the CO's radios blare; blue deputies ran everywhere,
Gave proof through the night that the hole was still there.
Oh say does that Star Spangled Banner yet roll,
Ore the land of the locked up,
And the home of the hole.
Play Ball!!!!**

(Lights fade. Scene ends.)

SCENE FIVE
"WHERE I'M FROM"

SET: Five women onstage –staggered three in front, two just behind and between them. They are all dressed in black, making only their heads as primary focus of the scene. Number's are sequentially lined up from left to right. Actors remain in line.

#3 I am from the rage of my momma and the fear of my father...a breath of passionate bliss...

From where the blood and veins reside, because of all the struggles between me and I

#1 I am from angels evicting dead women living on earth.

From existing...not living. And, controlling...not parenting.

#4 I am from a little, old dirty apartment filled with little friends that only come out at night.

From a sink full of dishes, floor piled with dirt, fridge full of nothing but alcohol and cigarettes.

#2 I am from changing diapers, warming bottles, taking care of all of us...including our mother.

From the DSS worker that always comes over and tells us, "things will get better."

ALL WHEN??

#5 I am from a love to die for and a love that died.

From thinking I am strong to being stronger than I ever thought.

#3 *(Stepping forward to deliver monologue to audience)*

"ME"

By DEDE

I am always student and sometimes teacher.

I am here to scatter pieces of me around your conscience, an offering from my singed soul to all of humankind.

Learn, learn, grow, and know me.

I am the one for whom you lacked compassion.

I am the one you turned from in disgust.
Now something draws you to me.
You can't look away.
I am strength. I am example.
I am fragmented but no longer "broken."
I serve as reminder that we, you...are divine and noble.
I live to acknowledge depravity and lack and to name these things.
I don't turn away. I accept. I offer hope.
I provide the lesson from having lived and survived.
I found power through my experience.
I was fear, now I am courage.
Find me. Gain understanding.
Find me. Educate your heart.
Find me. Seek change.

*(#3 returns to previous position).
(Lights fade. Scene ends.)*



Paris, France: Carla Mavaddat

SCENE SIX
"VOICES FROM INSIDE"

(This scene is devoted to the reading of poems written by incarcerated and formerly incarcerated women in writing workshops. Poetry as written will remain in the scene; however order of performance and stage presentation will be left to the directors' discretion.)

"MY COMPANION"
By MOANA RAWLINS

Hey there newborn boy,
I see my father in your eyes,
And I pray you grow to be as certain
As he of your footing in this life.
I wanted to be like him—certain.
I have been your home for these past months
You—growing inside me, blissfully unaware
Of the path your mother was walking
Along the day you were born.
I surrender you to the care of my brother
Who is like my father—certain
And I'll return to the bed of my making
To the closet of my youth and mourn
The little girl who sat on shoe boxes...
Waiting for that door to open.

"LOOK AT ME NOW"
By LISA

They, as in everyone, who has crossed my path,
Look at me as the same old me.
They're just waiting for me to strike again.
Me, the crack-head whore.
Me, the robber, car-jumping street walker.
Look at me now!
I have four years clean and sober.
Me! The un-trusted one....(watch your belongings...)
Look at me now!
Four years out of jail, no probation, no parole...can you believe it?

Look at me now—I'm in school and living life to the best of my ability.
Helping other women stay sober and be mothers, sister, wives, daughters,
Lovers, and friends to their families.
Look at me now!

"ORCHID"
By MOANA

Not for the inattentive,
I bloom in my own time
With leaves wide and thick;
Stem sturdy and long.
Granting audience to the world,
I open lavender and cream,
shaped like no other.
Iris mimics me
with loud color;
A brash imitation,
though easier to possess.
I am unrivaled,
singularly Divine.
A manifestation
of all tenderly,
beautifully present
among the ordinary.

THE END

TIME

By Iris Irwin

"[He] was holding a clock with no hands."

(Dwayne Betts, Author, *A Question of Freedom*)

Time is simultaneously a rigid concept and a fluid one. A minute is always sixty seconds, a day 24 hours, a year 365 days. It seems so set, rigid, and unchanging for everyone. Yet how you fill those minutes, days, and years is what really determines the speed of the hands of the clock, or if your clock has hands at all. We define time by the actions and events that fill them; an hour in class is long but an hour with your best friends is never long enough. Four years of college, partying, studying, freedom, and happiness go by before you can even grasp the gift you have in your hands. Four years of prison go by push-up by push-up, lockdown by lockdown, sometimes tragedy by tragedy, time slowing down to a standstill. You just want your time to be over and done, to hit the fast forward button and not stop the tape of your life again until you reach the chapter called Freedom. But how can someone with a long sentence, especially a life sentence, even measure their time? They don't really have time in the sense we use to define a prison sentence, something one can count in numbers. Doing your time implies that has meaningful benchmarks and an end in sight, but at some point doing time in prison just becomes living your life—one long, seemingly endless stream of events that run on and run together. To pass two or maybe three years you can disconnect, simply survive those years and return back to the free world, or what prisoners call "real life." When you have a life sentence, you can't space out and then snap back in when you go back to the rest of the world because for you, prison is the real world, your only world. The outside no longer exists for you in the sense that it is a real and attainable goal. The world—real life—becomes a dream, a distant memory. For the lifer, the only way to escape from prison is in dreams or in death. We may sentence people to life, but prison is no life at all.

Liberty and its Deprivation By Austin Short

Liberty.

So simple, yet so elegant and beautiful. On the surface, on this sheet of paper, we see merely black ink splashed across to form seven letters, three syllables, and one word standing ordinarily in line with the rest. Our eyes dance along each line of text and devour every word, but the significance seems to float away, hand in hand with the other nouns, adjectives, and verbs.

A single word, easily found between libertine and library in the dictionary, but rarely in the hearts of those who live it. A single word over which countless wars have been fought, whether they be with brigades of men and gun fire on a bloodied field or with cunning words and rhetoric in a county court room. No one really seems to notice. A single word that means everything, and at the same time, nothing. As I write this now, I struggle to even begin to describe Liberty, yet alone define it, yet alone convey all of the power and beauty and privilege woven into one simple word. Too often it fades from our memories until once again our eyes run across a line of text containing its seven letters and three syllables, and we think back as if to an old friend we never truly got the to thank for being there for us, but only for a moment, and we carry on. We assume it will always be there, even though we can't see it and we can't touch it, we can still feel it, we can thank it later. There is nothing to worry about.



Istanbul, Turkey: Carla Mavaddat

Deprivation.

What happens if we cage Liberty? If we lock it up and throw away the key. Replace libertine and library with iron bars and white cinder block walls. When we can no longer call Liberty ours, that is when we will know what Liberty truly is. Our entire lives we go on without truly appreciating what we have, but the instant the cold barred door slams shut on us, that is the instant we know Liberty. When we lose it, we lose ourselves. No one is human through the harsh eyes on the other side of the bars...no one. It doesn't matter if it was your fault or not, you will pay and you will lose. Seven letters and three syllables that use to mean nothing more than ink on a piece of paper now represent everything you've lost. A single word for which you would give everything for, the payment. A single word, Liberty, smudged by the strokes of a life size eraser...you should have written in pen. Whether you lost it rightfully or you had it wrongfully taken, you never know what you've got 'till its gone. You should have thanked it when you had the chance. Now you know Liberty.

Deprivation of Liberty.

Authors and Artists

Michael E. Ballard is a prisoner on death row in Pennsylvania.

Claire Callahan is a Consulting Editor for BleakHouse Publishing and an award-winning undergraduate scholar majoring in Law and Society at American University. Callahan is committed to legal and social science research on the death penalty, analysis of feminist theory, and the comparative assessment of systems punishment around the world.

Rachel C. Cupelo is the Marketing Director for BleakHouse Publishing. Originally from Upstate New York, she is an alumnus of American University, where she majored in Justice and Public Policy studies. Currently, Rachel is a legal assistant with a small international law firm. 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, where her work has been featured since 2008. Her work can also be seen in *Lethal Rejection: Stories on Crime and Punishment*, and *BleakHouse Review*, issues 2010 and 2011. In the future, Rachel plans to attend law school.

Allison Goddard Gruber is an American University alumnus.

Charles Huckelbury is the author of a book of poetry, *Tales from the Purple Penguin* and *Distant Thunder* published by Bleakhouse Publishing. He is the recipient of several PEN awards for fiction and nonfiction.

Iris Irwin is a junior at American University, majoring in Justice and minoring in Economics. She presently is studying abroad at Victoria University of Wellington in New Zealand, and hopes to build her career around the intersection of law and economics.

Zoé Orfanos is a Consulting Editor for BleakHouse Publishing as well as an Honors undergraduate student at American University in the School of Public Affairs. She graduated High School with both an International Baccalaureate and Honors diploma, and is currently working toward a Bachelors degree in Law and Society with minors in Literature and Creative Writing. Orfanos is the 2012 Editor-in-Chief of *Tacenda Literary Magazine*.

Susan Nagelsen is the editor and author of *Exiled Voices: Portals of Discovery* (2008). She is the Writing Program Director at New England College and

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Moana Rawlins is from Northampton, Massachusetts and is an Ada Comstock Scholar in her junior year at Smith College. Moana is majoring in Sociology with a concentration in Community Engagement and Social Justice. She intends to use theatre as a means to bridge the distance between prison and community, creating space to give voice to the lived experience of the criminal justice system and the struggle to rejoin community.

Austin Short is a student at American University's School of Public Affairs, where he majors in Justice, Law, and Society and is a member of the Academic Honors Program. After graduation from AU, he plans to attend law school to pursue a career in international law.

Monica Sok is an undergraduate senior at the American University in the School of International Service. As a David L. Boren Scholar, Sok has studied abroad in Vietnam and Cambodia, an experience that influenced much of her latest poetry. In the future, she hopes to pursue an international career that will allow her to continue her travels and inspire her creative writing.

Rachel Ternes is a Consulting Editor for BleakHouse Publishing and a freshman at American University. She is a Psychology major with a passion for art. The issues she was exposed to in one of Professor Johnson's JLS classes served as inspirations for her art.

Jada Wittow is a sophomore in the honors program at American University majoring in Justice and Law. She is interested in juvenile justice sentencing and policy, and hopes to work in that field upon graduation. She recently started writing poetry and short stories relating to justice themes, and hopes to continue to do so.

Editors

Robert Johnson is a Professor of Justice, Law and Society at American University and Editor of BleakHouse Publishing. Johnson is a widely published author of fiction and non-fiction on crime and punishment. His short story, "The Practice of Killing," won a national fiction contest sponsored by *Wild Violet* magazine. His poetry has appeared in several venues, including *Crime Media Culture* and *Adore Noir*. Johnson's best known work of social science—*Death Work: A Study of the Modern Execution Process*—won the Outstanding Book Award of the Academy of Criminal Justice Sciences.

Carla Mavaddat is the Assistant Art Director for BleakHouse Publishing and an undergraduate majoring in political science at McGill University. Mavaddat has a passion for photography and design, along with a longstanding interest in human rights and social justice. Her creative work has appeared in several venues, include *Adore Noir*. Mavaddat served as Guest Editor and Designer for the 2011 issue of the online literary magazine, *BleakHouse Review*, and is presently at work on the 2012 issue of the magazine.

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