

Practice

He opens his eyes. Irregularities in the smudges of grey offer no helpful details. His line of vision to the faint light is disrupted periodically.

Closing one eye, then opening it and closing the other he gains some angle of vision. Bars. There are bars between him and the streaks on the wall.

He tries to sit up, his movements slow as if underwater. Is his motion actually slow or is he only half awake? Shaky, head spinning from the effort of rising and the drain of blood, heart racing to catch up, he waits. The air is cool, humid, and soundless. Cloth hangs loosely from his arms. With his right hand, he feels the left arm. It is emaciated, thin, bone with little help from muscle to hold his body up. The surface that he sits on is hard and smooth. He pushes, struggles to come fully upright. His buttocks, also bony, have little padding to protect him from the unyielding surface.

The source of the light comes from the right. He lifts up his legs and strains to turn but becomes tangled in the cloth. Not a blanket, but some type of robe. Kicking his legs forward to free them, he drops them to the floor. He is on a bench of some sort, above hard packed dirt. He wriggles his toes. They sense bumps but don't disturb the smooth surface. The earth is well

worn, packed, with no loose sand or grit. Reaching behind, he finds a wall of uneven stone. It is unforgiving and rough.

His heart has caught up with the physical activity and his thinking now coagulated. A cricket chirps. He stands, or tries to stand, but his legs, like his arms, aren't up to the task and he nearly falls. He grabs the bench to steady himself and then slowly rises. His back is stiff, and then it stops and doesn't straighten. He is stooped, unable to rise to his full height.

Stretching his hand out front, he shuffles toward the sound of the cricket. Almost immediately he touches a wall, one made of rough stone like the one behind the bench. Using both hands, he inches up the wall, as if crawling vertically until he finds an opening. It is small, no wider than his head. The bottom is high enough that he cannot see out, and the top is out of reach. He feels the edges. The thickness of the wall is as wide as he can reach from thumb to middle finger, maybe four inches in total. The cricket continues its song. Chi-bit, chi-bit, it calls. It is close, but not right outside the window. Chi-bit, chi-bit. He listens, fingers clamped to the bottom edge of the window, head bowed from the stoop of his back. Chi-bit, chi-bit. A whiff of pleasure makes him smile.

When he turns, the sleeves of the robe tumble down his arms and he shuffles toward the bars. Even at this labored pace it doesn't take long to reach them. The bars are cold and hard. He presses his face between two and stretches an arm as far as it will go but reaches nothing. The wall with the light streaks is too far away. He twists his hand back and forth as if unscrewing his wrist to go further, but it doesn't help.

Rather than feeling frustrated or angry he feels ... nothing. No emotion. Returning to the seat, the bench, he finds his way easily without thinking, without seeing. As he lies down the cricket resumes its song. Chi-bit, chi-bit. He whistles through his teeth. Sss-sss, Sss-sss. Then shifts his whistle between the cricket. Chi-bit, Sss-sss. Chi-bit, Sss-sss. Settling in to the pattern, he repeats it like a mantra, clears his mind, and falls asleep.

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"It's not unusual. Mr. Cleland is a little on the young side for a heart attack, but with the extra weight he carries, well, the heart has a hard time compensating." Pause. "Is there a family history of heart issues?"

"His father passed a few months ago. But that was cancer, I think."

"And his mother?"

"She's still alive, but she's been in a home for a year or two."

"With health issues?"

"Dementia."

"Well, he's a 3 on the Glasgow Coma Scale. Now, all that means is that there is no eye, no verbal, and no motor response, which indicates a deep coma. But his breathing is regular and there has been no deterioration since he arrived at St. Paul's. All we can do is wait and see what happens." Pause. "You might try talking to him. That may help stimulate his brain. Provide him some comfort, let him know you're here and supporting him."

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When he wakes, the sun is up, though there is no direct light in his room. The cricket vanished with the night but now the rusty iron bars and stone walls and ceiling of the room are visible. Past the bars, the wall is the same stone as inside the cell. The floor inside and outside the bars is hard packed earth. His bench is a single sheet of metal, balanced on two stumps of wood. In the corner of the room is a dented metal bucket. He is dressed in a robe, tan in color, loosely fitted, worn and stiff. He looks at his hands. They are gnarled and dirty, joints obscenely swollen in comparison with the other areas where wrinkled skin clings to the bone. The wrists and forearms are similarly wrinkled and shriveled, and the base skin tone a golden brown. His feet and ankles are the same; wrinkled and worn with protruding veins. For some time he sits, trying to absorb his situation but is unable to make any sense of it. His thoughts begin to wander and his attention glazes.

Then he does something unexpected; he pulls up his legs, tucks his feet under his thighs, opens the palms of his hands on his legs, and begins to chant. He doesn't know the words and the sounds of the language are unfamiliar, and yet they come forth naturally. There is no repetition; it is not a mantra, but a never-ending flow of syllables, words, phrases. This continues for some time. Gradually, he feels himself spreading out, as if the boundaries between himself and the bench, the walls, the bars are dissipating, dissolving.

He senses a presence, but continues to chant. Someone is coming down the hall. He wants to stop and see this person, but at the same time he is aware of a momentum, a drive to chant, a need to persist. Rather than struggle with this inertia, he continues chanting while the person pauses, then continues past. The chanting goes on. His breathing changes, becoming

shorter and executed with effort, like a long distance runner in sight of the finish line. He is weak and this exertion is a challenge for his slight body. In his mind's eye he imagines a football player in slow motion, nearing the goal line, stretching and straining for the touchdown. Still he chants on and on. Finally, the end is near. He draws one last deep breath and stops.

He remains seated; physically spent, emotionally nonexistent, unable to think. After a time he draws himself up, unfolds his legs and drops his feet to the floor. He knows that he does not have the strength to stand, so he lowers himself to the floor and crawls. There, outside the bars, is a bowl of light brown boiled grains. His trembling hand reaches through the bars and tries to bring the bowl inside. It is too large to come through without tipping, and some precious material spills out on the horizontal bar and to the ground as he works the bowl through. He sets the bowl on the ground and scoops food to his mouth using his fingers. It is cold, overcooked, and the grains are mushy but it gives him life. He lifts the bowl to his face and licks the bottom, scrapes at the horizontal bar to get the spilled grains, and does the same with the ones on the ground. Finally, he sucks his fingers to get the very last of it. Some strength returns and his hand no longer shakes as he returns the bowl to the other side of the bars.

He returns to the bench. After the food he is a little nourished but hardly energetic. He goes to the window but it is too high to see out. Likewise, placing his head between the bars doesn't allow him to see any distance down the hall. Later in the day he uses the bucket to eliminate. The product is small and hard and dry.

There wasn't much else to do. His mind is still unclear, somewhat incoherent, as if he is on some type of medication. Holding on to any train of thought is difficult; ideas or thoughts crop up, but while he works with them they fall away again. His short-term memory isn't

missing though; he can still recall the cricket from the previous night. He is dazed, as if he has knocked his head hard and can't bring his thoughts together. A concussion? But he feels no pain in his head, and time is not making things clearer for him. He stares at the wall opposite the bench, noting the individual stones of various sizes. He thinks to count them to see how many there are, but when he picks a corner and starts counting he realizes that he already knows; one hundred and seventy nine. On this wall. He looks at the one with the window. One hundred and fifteen. The ceiling, ninety-seven; the ceiling ones are larger stones than those on the walls. The wall with the bars, forty-eight, because the bars replaced the need for some stones. Including the wall behind him, six hundred and twenty-six stones in all. He knows. He didn't know how he knows, but he does.

Later, he paces in circles for some exercise. When it becomes evening, he settles in for another long chant, and after that it is dark so he lays down and sleeps.

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“You bastard. Don’t think this is going to be your easy way out. You’ve got hell to pay, Raymond. I know about your little dalliance with that bitch, that skinny little shit-for-brains actress.

“Karma, that’s what this is. This is your karma for screwing around on me. You’d better get back here so I can give you the shit you deserve.” Pause. Crying.

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Next morning he is determined to make contact with the food person. He begins chanting as the previous morning, but when the food person nears he begins to focus his mind and gear himself up for the meeting. It isn't as easy as he expected; his body doesn't respond. It's as if he is merely an observer, even though he can feel himself chanting, can feel his lungs taking breaths, feel the vibrations in his body from his vocalizations. His body continues with the morning chant, ignoring the arrival of the food person. He tries to will his body to move, to stop chanting, but it doesn't respond. He cannot take control of his body, and he panics, or rather, he feels panic, but the panic balls up and has no way to express itself. It hits a wall. The wall senses the panic and the chanting stumbles for a few syllables. Then the wall seems to refocus itself and the chanting resumes its former momentum.

He doesn't know what to make of this. In his confusion, he forgets about the panic and it disappears, as does the food delivery person. He continues to chant, unable to understand what is going on. As before, he senses the end and feels himself straining for the goal and then reaching it. Exhausted, he refocuses himself on his surroundings, drops to the floor, crawls to the food and feeds himself. Once nourished, he returns to the bench. He tries to make some sense of the morning, but his focus is unable to shape itself around the events in any useful manner.

After staring at the wall for some time, he plays with his perception of it. One stone in the center looks like a Yin/Yang shape. The one next to it looks like a mouse, albeit one with no tail, its head lifted and sniffing the back of the Yin/Yang. One below could be the engine of a train, and the nondescript ones behind could be cars of the train being pulled behind. He spends much of the day seeing images in the stones and imagining connections between them. Then he tries to not see those images and instead group stones together to make larger images. This is a more

difficult challenge, having already labeled some of the individual stones. He spends the rest of the day working on it until it is time for the evening chant. Once done, he prepares to sleep, but it seems that the activity of the day activated a section of his brain and there are patterns and animated characters when he closes his eyes. He is still awake when the cricket decides it is time to start its day. Chi-bit, chi-bit. He starts his accompaniment. Sss-sss, sss-sss. First in time, then opposite. Then he pushes it forward. Chi-bit-Sss-sss pause, Chi-bit-Sss-sss pause. Then he tries anticipating with the first. SsChi-sss-bit. SsChi-sss-bit. Together, he and the cricket generate an outpouring of activity, like sixteenth notes followed by rests. Maybe it reminds him of the sound of a snoring sleeper. This pattern feels comfortable and he stays with it for a while and drifts off.

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"Hey, buddy, look at this! Martin Downey mentioned you in his column! 'Immediately following last week's column we learned that local theatre director and impresario Raymond Cleland is in the hospital following a fall from a set. Cleland was preparing the Red Wagon Theatre company for their upcoming production of the musical "Perestroika in New England" and reportedly suffered a heart attack which led to the tumble. We wish him the best and a speedy recovery.' Shit, that's the nicest thing he's written about you in years. About either of us, ever since you caught him out, reviewing plays he didn't even see." Hearty male laughter.

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Next day he tries again to halt the morning chant and to speak to the food person. He hears the food person coming, tries to stop chanting, but like the day before, is unable to stop. He senses the wall again. The wall is as immobile as the day before, and is even more prepared to refuse to

release control. And this time he doesn't panic, so there is less mental force to bring to battle and no chance for him to change what is happening. The food person comes, and leaves, and the chanting doesn't even stumble this time. He eats his food as he did the previous day, searching for every bit of nutrition.

He sits on the bench. Uninterested in playing with the patterns on the wall again, he looks for something else to work with. Fives sides worked with, what about the sixth? The ground has texture. Bumps and dips and mounds from countless footsteps. It is hard, but not impermeable. He looks around for something to dig or mark it. Finding nothing, he takes his fingernail and tries to mark the earth. It disturbs the surface but not perfectly, not as he has intended. Instead, some bits crumble free and other areas don't mark at all. He tries some more, using different angles, different fingers and nails. Bit of crumbly earth roll around free but there isn't any consistency between his objective and his results. He wonders whether he should accept this discontinuity between the objective and the result, when a thought comes. Scraping side to side, clawing the loosened material away, he exposes fresh earth. In the center, his work area, there is a less hard surface that hasn't has the direct force of footsteps or the glue of human skin cells and sweat. This surface is much more malleable and consistent in its reaction to his efforts. He tries to draw a line, and a line appears. Not entirely straight, but then he is using an unfamiliar tool and the tool itself is curved. He intersects the line with another line at 90 degrees. Not easy to do a vertical line since his drawing nail is curved. He starts at one point of the horizontal line and draws a curve to the end of the top of the vertical line, and continues around to the other side. To do the same on the bottom he moves to the other side of the work area and draws the other curve upside down. Now he has what looks like something like a bulls-eye.

He spends this day drawing, erasing, and eventually widening the drawing space. By evening, all his fingernails are worn and his finger tips stained. He has learned that narrow verticals are difficult unless he wants claw a wide line, and that because of his tool it is necessary to move around the drawing to get control over the lines that he wants to draw.

Too tired to stay awake for the cricket, he promptly falls asleep after the evening chant.

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"Alright, Mr. Cleland. Time for your bath. See, nice warm sponge. Make you nice and clean. I know who you are, Mr. Cleland. I never seen any of your plays, but I would have liked to. 'Grease' I would have liked to seen. Loved the movie. You know, with Olivia Newton John. Always thought I was more of a Rizzo, though. But my husband Don, he thinks anything you can only see once is a waste of time. Better off just downloading a movie, or watching Netflix. He figures you get more for your money that way. Know what I mean? He's kinda set in his ways that way, Mr. Cleland. Alright, just going to turn you a bit so we can do the back. Nice and careful so the tubes don't get caught. Yes, my Don. He's a good man, but he doesn't understand why people dance around in a movie. I don't know. I like it. I like watching them jump, like they have too much excitement to sit still or stand there."

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Next day, after morning chant, failure to stop the chant and his daily food, he continues with his earth drawing, refining his technique. The pattern repeats and over the next days he becomes adept with the work.

During his third day of drawing, something different happens. On this day, he is engrossed in a detailed sketch of a maple tree that he remembers from his parent's yard when he was a child. He is using an exaggerated perspective so that some leaves are close, large, and the shape can be seen clearly, while in the distance the entire rest of the tree can be seen standing proudly. The branches and leaves between the furthest and closest points shows the exaggerated shift in distance by rapidly growing smaller and smaller. The silence is broken by the sound of someone approaching. He has forgotten that this is the day for his walk outside. He doesn't know how, but he knows that once a week he is taken outside to walk around. His project has kept him so busy that he has forgotten that today is walking day. The guard is dressed in grimy camouflage wear and carries a rifle. He is Asian, no more than twenty, with jet black hair and a scowl on his face. The guard speaks to him with an impatient voice in a language that he doesn't recognize, but he understands the meaning without knowing the words. He rises. The guard unlocks the bars and waits until he walks past before following him down the corridor.

He doesn't remember the hall but knows where to go. At the end they turn left, then to the right. There he waits at the door until another guard sees him through the window and lets them in. This guard is older than the first but Asian as well. They enter the room where the guards often sit and play cards. Again, he didn't know how he knows this, but he is sure of it. The older guard opens the opposite door. Then he enters the yard.

The yard is the size of a basketball court and defined by bamboo poles with wire mesh strung in between. Like his cell, the ground here is packed earth. At first, the direct sunlight pains his eyes. The young guard pushes him from behind indicating that he should walk, so he does. He walks across to the opposite side, keeping his eyes fixed on the ground to minimize the

brightness of the sun, then turns and walks back again. He circles, knowing that this is expected of him; to walk and to get sun. Beyond the yard the earth is also flattened by use, though in the distance he can see lush green forests of bamboo and ferns. Further, past the mountain and after the river is a village. He knows this to be so, though he cannot see it. He knows this in the same manner he has known many other things. What he can see, though, are a few guards outside the yard, dressed in camouflage outfits and carrying rifles slung over their shoulders. They pay him no mind. Parked around the outside of the building are an army jeep and a convoy truck. The guard who brought him returns inside the building and closes the door.

His eyes adjust to the sunlight. He stops, turns his face toward the sun, closes his eyes, and smiles, enjoying the warmth of the rays. He hears the door open and the young guard yells at him angrily. Again he doesn't know the words but understands the meaning, so he brings his head down and resumes his trek. It still feels nice. He is very aware of the part of his body that faces the sun as he circles. It is a sun shower and his walking circles allows the sun to spray him on all sides as he rotates like a chicken in the grocery store. His head, the top of it, is always in the sun and is being warmed all the time. He puts his hand to the top and is surprised to touch his skull. What happens to his hair? No wonder the sun feels so warm on his head; he is bald. He ponders that for only a moment before continuing on his rounds. It doesn't seem an important detail right now.

He walks, enjoying the open space and the sun shower for a while before noticing something on the ground. Just a small stick, a splinter of bamboo. He bends down quickly and snatches it up before resuming his walk. Now he is nervous, as if he were smuggling drugs. He continues his walk until the young guard calls him back. Obediently he returns to the door and

re-enters the building, precious item held against the palm of his hand by his thumb. It is difficult to see at first in the dim-by-comparison light so he hesitates and the guard pushes him from behind. He blinks, as if that would help his eyes adjust faster, and stumbles forward. The older guard opens the door and he reverses the path back to the cell. The bar door is open and waiting for him and when he steps inside the guard slams the door shut and locks it.

While he was out, the chamber pot-bucket has been moved from the back to the front and has been emptied. His work area is scuffed a bit where someone has walked in. That is fine. He is excited; he has a new tool, something that would grant him the ability to produce much finer detail. He takes out the bamboo and looks at it. It is a little shorter than a business card and narrower on one end than on the other, though neither end is as sharp as a pen. He tries the narrowest point. It makes a fine looking line. He is ecstatic and bounces up and down in his squatting position, both fists pumping and eyes squinting closed with delight. The thought of being embarrassed crosses his mind, but who is to see?

He spends the day experimenting with different edges and tips of the stick. Fine lines, wider lines, much straighter lines when needed. He erases and starts again more times that day than any previous day as he experiments with possibilities.

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“There are no changes. No significant deterioration. But no signs of improvement either, or of brain activity in these past two months. Now, there are stories of miraculous recoveries, but in Mr. Cleland’s case he doesn’t seem to be coming back. He may be moving into a permanent or persistent vegetative state where his body will continue to function until old age or some physical

ailment claims him. For all practical purposes, however, it may be that the Raymond Cleland that you knew is gone. For that reason I am recommending he be transferred to St. Thomas' Hospital where they have a unit equipped to care for patients such as Mr. Cleland until such time as his body is ready to leave us as well."

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The following days progress in a similar manner. He starts to train himself to waken when the cricket begins its song and he joins it for a time each evening, playing with rhythmic patterns, improvising in and around the cricket's framework before drifting off to sleep.

By the time walking day comes again he has developed techniques to imply shading. Today he is working on a three dimensional sketch of what looks like some sort of dragon, although he can't recall ever seeing one quite like the one he is doing. It has a large chest and legs that don't look like they can support the weight of the body, and its wings look decorative rather than functional. He doesn't want to risk losing his tool so he wedges it between the slats of his bed and the base and is working on the drawing with his nails when he hears the sound of the guard. He retreats to the bench. The guard barks at him and he stands obediently, waiting for the door to open. They follow the routine; down the hall, through the guard room and outside. Another day in paradise. The sun baths him, the trees and ferns greet him, and even the air moves and is alive in comparison to the air in his cell. Today the convoy truck is not here but the jeep is parked in the same spot as last week. He walks and smiles until the guard calls him to return. In his mind he says goodbye to the sun and walks back to the building.

As before, the door of his cell is open and awaits his return. As always, the guard shuts the door behind him. His bucket has been emptied and deposited at the front. He looks at his floor. All his work on the floor has been destroyed. Every bit of it has been rubbed clean and there is a pile of loose dirt in one corner; the remains of his work. He hears a laugh, and turns to see the young guard sneer and snort before striding away. He guesses that the guard thought that he has destroyed something of value, that he has taken something away. He shakes his head. This work is for the living, work for those who live the act of creation.

He sits on the floor and reaches under the bench to retrieve the stick. There is nothing there. Quickly he rolls to his knees and looks under the bench. Nothing. He tries to lift the metal plate from its supports, and with his full effort he manages to do so, just far enough to see that there is nothing at all. He drops the bench, and collapses on the floor, his back against it. He sits, shocked. Then he laughs. And laughs harder, his laughing increasing in intensity until he is on the floor gasping for air.