

Letter to Harrison

Harrison McGrath

Leavenworth Federal Penitentiary

1300 Metropolitan Avenue

Leavenworth, KS 66048

November 18, 1977

Dear Harrison,

The lawyer will have given you this letter after I'm gone, the first and final I'll write you. My last cowardly act, for even now as I burn with anger, I can't bear to see your face when you find out what I've hidden for so long.

I find I haven't been able to sleep much these days, so I pace the living room floor or try to write, leaving behind a trail of blank pages. Your mother sleeps in the other room now, an IV hooked to her hand slowly supplying medicine to keep the pain at bay. Her hands are no longer slender but wrinkled and blue, the knuckles large and knotted, yet they are still the most beautiful hands to me. They taught piano and knitted sweaters for you and your younger brothers. I think we still have a few collecting moths in the attic. The doctors say she hasn't much time left, and I think I will go shortly thereafter – although I don't think we'll meet in the afterlife. All of the recent happenings have hastened her journey to the grave, but I cannot put all the blame on you.

I'll never forget the first time I saw your mother after my return from the war. There was a glow about her; an angel in a red polka dotted dress, eagerly awaiting my arrival. I had never been more nervous in my life, but she gently touched the fresh burn scars and bravely said, *you've barely changed*. No one had ever touched me with such tenderness, and I swore I would become a man worthy of her love. So, I became what

she thought I was – a kind and fair man, one who was hardworking and honest in his dealings, one who did the right thing even when the wrong thing was easier. I'd like to think I did the best any father could in raising you and your brothers. I've done a lot of good over the years. I was a faithful and loving husband, paid my taxes, went to church, and gave back to the community. I gave you a good home.

Son, as you sit in prison for the heinous crimes that you've committed, I am reminded that the good your mother and I tried to instill in you could not compete against the nature inside of you. I've pondered on the verse from Deuteronomy 5:9 often: *For I, the Lord the God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me.* After all, it is my blood that runs through your veins and that of generations before me. Perhaps the pruning process is not yet complete.

Remember the first time I picked you up from the county jail for vandalizing Mr. Thornton's hardware store? I still had the '58 Studebaker back then. You used to love driving with me when you were little, I can still feel the weight of your little head on my shoulder when you'd grow tired and fall asleep. That night we rode in silence far away from each other. Who was I to tell you that what you did was wrong? I thought back to the night of my first robbery. The way the shadows of my brothers and me loomed larger and larger until they overwhelmed the old man slumped over, sleeping in his old aluminum chair. He put up a surprisingly good fight against four men half his age who were thirsty for blood. We didn't get much money that night, but I still shudder remembering the high my brothers got from it, as if they had won a football match. He stared right at me before he died, angry eyes in a face that looked like crushed tomatoes. I've never been able to eat them since, no tomato soup, no red sauce in my pasta. I sometimes marvel that we were both fifteen when we committed our first crimes.

That night I tried telling you that you could change, but you spat on the ground. *What, so I can be like the high and mighty war hero?* you said as you slammed the car door shut. I had forgotten to turn the heat on

that February night and remained sitting in the driver's seat long after you'd gone inside the house – until silvery veins of frost formed on the windshield. Your mother was beside herself with grief. *Kids rebel sometimes*, I told her. *Look at how Joe and Fanny's kid turned out. Harrison will turn around*, I said, though deep inside I knew.

Let me tell you a story about two men. There was a man named Tony Monopoli and another named Scotty McGrath. Both were born to Irish Italian immigrants and raised in small American towns where the land is flat, the winters harsh and the summer air is as thick as molasses. When they were nineteen, they were both drafted to join the war and sent to Hawaii where the land was exotic. Lush green mountains stood firmly behind them while the most colorful fish they'd ever seen swam in the clearest blue water at their feet. One joined out of patriotic duty and a sense of honor, and the other because he was used to fighting, and he was starting to lose the war at home.

One left behind proud parents, a sweetheart, and a promising future, while the other left behind a trail of bad decisions and unpaid debts. They would have never been friends had it not been for the fact that they bore an uncanny resemblance to one another. Lost twins, they were called. The first flush of war is like the first flush of love, you are temporarily changed, caught up in the excitement and belief that you are in fact the person you hoped to be, and that your passion could change the course of history. For a while they became one – thick as thieves, brothers, no secrets remained between them. The one that was troubled had a gift of singing and acting. With a few changes to his stride and tremor of his voice, he could easily be mistaken for the other. They would laugh about it at first, confusing their drill sergeants and the girls when they went out dancing, but then it was no longer funny when the good one started to receive demands for strange gambling debts and rumors started to spread that the naval nurses were complaining about unwanted attention. After a night out of drinking, the good one cornered the troubled one and pushed him up against the set of metal bars in the ship's dispensary and told him he better cut it, he was done being friends with the likes of him. The troubled one laughed it off, patted him on the back, and told him to stop being silly.

*It's all just a game - come let's have another drink, it's not even 2 am.* The other shouted, *It's not a game.* It can't be said who threw the first punch, but the troubled one didn't stop until the good one stopped breathing. *I'll deal with it tomorrow,* was his last conscious thought before he was awoken a few hours later, just before 8:00 am as the first Japanese bombs hit the ship on December 5th, 1941. It took a few moments to orient himself and remember the events from the previous night as he looked at the body slumped on the other side of the room. To this day, he doesn't know how he thought of it so quickly but he crawled over and switched his name tags with the other, changed into the jacket that didn't bear his name, and tumbled out of the room and out into the chaos as the ship rocked back and forth. He didn't get very far before a bomb hit again, igniting flames that burned the left side of his face and body. By some miracle he woke up in a hospital, screaming in pain, but bandaged and alive. *You'll be out on a plane home soon, love,* a nurse told him later that week once things had calmed down a little. *I hate to say it, but I'm glad it wasn't you,* a fellow officer, Walter Burns, told him when he came by with a pack of cigarettes. *Burned, almost beyond recognition,* he shook his head. *They only recognized him by his tags. It's a miracle you survived at all.*

It was a new beginning. Instead of a purple heart, he had returned a son to loving parents. In the end, the troubled one had set things right.

Years later I saw Burns at The Field House jazz club in Wichita, Kansas. Remember I used to leave on Sunday afternoons so I could get there before my early morning meetings on Mondays? *100 miles is too far to drive the morning of,* I used to tell your mother. Sunday was, and I believe still is, open mic night and the only opportunity I got to sing. For those fifteen to twenty minutes, because I always got called back up to do just one more, I was the old me. Singing was the only part of me that was good. A man with a weathered face, wearing yellowed jeans and a threadbare blue shirt stopped me as I made my way off the stage and introduced himself, *Walter Burns,* his voice cracked. Time had not been kind. *You look so much like this fella I used to know, he said, a quizzical look on his face, but he couldn't sing for the life of him.*

## Letter to Harrison

*Say, what's your name again?* Luck was on my side again as we were interrupted by the bar owner and I was pulled away. I never went back. Before your mother got sick, I used to go to the woods and sing softly, those beloved songs of the 40's; the Sinatra's, the Nat King Coles, the Armstrong's, but after a while I was starting to forget the words, in the same way I was starting to forget the other me.

I really had died in Pearl Harbor. I saw it in the paper myself, *The Heroes We Lost*, it was titled in the Bland Courier.

It'll start to grow light soon, and I want to be next to your mother when she wakes up. Right now, I'm sitting at the old desk. The wooden trains that you, Mikey, and Thomas made are still right where they've always been next to your pictures. You were all such sweet kids. Remember when you used to run over here while I was working and sing on the top of your lungs and I'd yell at you to be quiet because I was on the telephone? I was so proud when you won those singing competitions at school. No one could figure out where you got that voice. I've always had a soft spot for you and always hoped that somehow, you'd be the best of both of me. I'm reminded of another verse, one I've held close for so long from Galatians 6:9, *And let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up.* Harrison, I am so weary.

It's the annual bonfire at the Watson's tomorrow and I've promised I'll take all the grandkids. Maybe it would be a greater kindness to burn this letter. There are your brothers and their children and even your daughter to think about as they all seem to be more your mother than me.

Forgive me and I wish you well.

Love,

Dad

Letter to Harrison

P.S. Today Dorothy and I went for a walk down Adams Street, and with what delight she laughed as her glasses fogged up when she breathed into her scarf, *look Pop-Pop, it's the London fog*. She has your eyes and it saddens me that you are both robbed of each other during these precious years.