

## Compassionate Release

She was escorted to her father's room by a well-dressed young woman. A social worker, she guessed. The sort she had become familiar with long ago as a newly orphaned eleven-year-old. Kind, but a touch officious. Always in a hurry. The social worker, whose name she had already forgotten, marched at a brisk pace down the hall. She tried to keep up but was distracted by the slideshow of open doorways. Glimpses into the lives of people whose final exit from the nursing home would be unheralded by siren. Waxen figures, in varying states of undress. Slack-skinned and piebald. Some still tucked in bed, arms folded and hands laced. As if rehearsing for their last big day above ground.

“We can accommodate ninety altogether, forty on this wing alone,” the social worker said.

While this statistic seemed to further enliven the social worker, increasing the length of her youthful stride, it saddened the older woman to imagine all those people crammed together in

such a dismal place. But then it saddened her to imagine most things. “Oh,” was all she could muster.

“Here we are. Go on in and make yourself comfortable. We’ll bring him by as soon as he’s done with lunch, okay?” The social worker flashed a smile before she left, a checkmark next to the completed task. On to the next item on her list.

She fought the urge to run after the social worker, doubting the decision to visit her father for the umpteenth time. Even the word *father* flitted about in her head like a bird that has managed to get inside a house and is now desperately looking for a way out.

She knocked and entered an accommodation (she couldn’t really call it a room) that was equal parts cheap motel and county hospital. In the living space closest to the door lay a man on a bed. His milky grey cataracts matched his stubble, except for the yellow on his chin, which could have been remnants of breakfast.

“Is it time?” he said. “It’s been a very long time.” His unseeing eyes trained uncannily on her.

“Um, I’m not...I don’t...” she started and then she gave up and walked all the way in and sat in a chair on the far side of her father’s bed. A dull grey curtain cut the living area in half. *A person could suffocate in such a small space*, she thought. She hyperventilated while she looked around the room. A cheap plastic wall clock kept the time. Or tried to. It had stopped a few minutes after noon, the battery supplying just enough juice to cause the secondhand to flop listlessly against the same hash mark. Over and over. A tick without a tock.

A small window looked onto an empty field, already greening with the weeds that will make her spring a sinus hell. Not much to look at, but probably better than the view her father had had for the last forty years. She wondered how she might feel about his life in prison if she

were someone else. If she *hadn't* been the little girl waiting for her daddy to pick her up. If it hadn't been *her* daddy with the gun. *Her* mother who'd slumped to the scuffed kitchen floor. She often thought in those dichotomous terms, as if her life had split when she was eleven into two lives: the life she lived and the life her other self lived. The one who went to college, found a good job, got married, had kids. The one without the secret roadmap of scars on her inner thighs. The one not filled with sawdust, but with something alive and hopeful. The one with a fucking clue.

She got up and opened the narrow closet door. She pressed her face into one of his flannel shirts and smelled him for the first time in forty years. He would tuck her in at night, offer her his cheek. She would kiss his reprovng stubble and then he would fluff her pillow for her. Every night. And as he was bent over her, she would breathe him in. The smell of unbaked bread. What she smelled now was more like clabbered milk.

“Is it time, yet?” the blind man whined. “It’s been so long.”

“No!” she yelled, and she felt bad immediately. “I don’t know,” she added in a kinder tone. She was wondering just what he thought it was time for when an aide wheeled her father in. The aide was a small dark man, Dominican or Haitian, but he lifted her father easily from the wheelchair into his bed. As easily as her father had lifted her when she was young and not yet weighed down with his sins. Could anyone lift her like that now? Even as skinny as she was? She doubted it.

The aide hovered around her father, elevating the bed so he could sit upright, covering his legs with a blanket, gently fastening an oxygen cannula under his nose and regulating the flow on the tank. Finally he adjusted his pillow and turned to her.

“He don’t talk,” the aide said. He pointed to his throat. “The cancer, it take his voice.”

Her father clutched a small whiteboard and a dry-erase pen in his lap. He held them up for her.

She smiled at the aide and nodded. She knew about the cancer, of course. The man who called her from the prison had told her as much. Told her it had spread. Everywhere. Explained about compassionate release in a tone that assumed she might care. She didn't. It was all just information to her. About an old man who used to be her father, dying of cancer in prison. Being released because the state felt sorry for him.

But his voice. She hadn't known about that, and for some reason it jarred her. Much more than the news of his illness had. And then she remembered how his deep plush voice would wrap his words like a present. But what gift had she been expecting from him today? An explanation? As if he would he would talk and then she would say, *Oh, that's why you killed mom. It all makes sense now.* She knew better than that.

The aide hesitated and threw a somewhat proprietary glance at her father that managed, beyond all reason, to make her jealous. Then he left. And not a peep from the blind man, whose complaints about timeliness apparently had nothing to do with what the aide could offer.

Her father wrote on the whiteboard. *Glad you came*, it said, in faltering red letters.

"I'm not sure why I did." She stared at the frail man who lay before her. His eyes were the same luminous spheres around which she once orbited as a young girl. Two bolts of blue that now anchored the rest of his decrepit form to the world of the living. His hands were the same, too. Big. Meant for cradling faces. Kneading dough. Holding a gun.

*You never came to see me.* He erased this and wrote, *Can't blame you.*

She looked down at her lap. She began squeezing her thighs near her knees as hard as she could. The pressure calmed her. "I was too scared...dad." The word fell out of her mouth

with the weight of something dead. “Then I was too angry. And after that I was just too messed up.” She thought of all the years of therapy trying to gently coax the eleven-year-old girl inside her to move on. And when that didn’t work, there were all the years of trying to push her out with the chemicals, prescribed and otherwise, she put into her body. Every day, she pushed. One way or another.

She forced herself to look up, to meet his gaze. “For a long time I just wanted you dead. But that just made me feel worse. So then I thought maybe I should die. At least that way I could be with mom.”

He nodded and smiled sadly. *I wanted to die, too.* He erased that and wrote, *Still do.*

It made her feel better, closer to her him. To know that he wanted to die.

*And you? Now?* he wrote.

She shrugged.

*It wasn’t your fault,* he wrote. *You know that, right?*

She stared at the words. People had said those words to her before, but she never knew the truth of anything, beyond what she felt in the moment. When she was angry, she thought of the reasons her father should die. When she felt guilty, she thought of ways to kill herself. She smiled and said, “And you look like death warmed over. You know that, right?”

He nodded. *The fact is, I don’t have long to live,* he wrote.

She remembered the way he used to preface all his declarations with those words. *The fact is, the bakery’ll survive a day without me. The fact is, honey, you can’t have ice cream for breakfast. The fact is, sweetheart, your mom and I are splitting up.*

“If you’re looking for sympathy...” She shook her head.

*No, not sympathy. That’s not it.*

“Then what?”

He hesitated and then erased the whiteboard. *I want to know you're OK*, he wrote.

She stared at what he wrote. “Are you for real?” she said. She ticked off on her fingers. “No family to take me in. Foster homes until I was eighteen. The beatings. The molestations. The times I tried to...” She got up and turned her back to him. She didn't like thinking about her life without something sharp in her hand. So she bit down on the inside of her cheek until she tasted blood. Until she felt better.

She sat back down and hugged her knees. “Sure. I'm OK, dad,” she said into her lap. “Just peachy.”

She heard the squeaky sliding of the marker and she looked up to see what he wrote.

*I'm sorry. For everything.*

“You're sorry.” She nodded her head. “Well, that makes it OK then,” she said, her voice flat. “We're all squared away here. You kill my mother, abandon me, ruin my life... But as long as you're sorry. And then I guess I'm supposed to...” She leaned back in her chair. “That's it, isn't it? You want me to forgive you.”

He nodded. *It's what we both need.*

She laughed. “How would you know what I need? What, you had a few sessions with a prison shrink and you think you know me?” she said, reaching over and grabbing the whiteboard. She stood and threw it across the room. It bounced off his closet and clattered to the floor. “You don't know anything!” She looked around the room, as if she was lost. Something swelled inside her chest, threatening to burst. She sat down again and put her head in her hands. Hot tears spilled through her fingers. “I should go before I...”

“Is it time, yet?” the blind man asked again. “Is it?”

“Will you shut the... Will you please just be quiet?”

And just like that, it was. Quiet. Not just on the outside, where the only sound she could hear was the distant murmur of old people gathering somewhere to have fun while they were waiting to die. Bingo, she guessed. But quiet inside her as well. The quiet of being finished. Done.

She got up and retrieved the white board and gave it back to her father. “Why should I?” she asked as she sat down.

He stared at the whiteboard for a moment and then wrote, *I want to be at peace with myself*. He erased this and added, *And with you. Before I die*.

“Great. Wonderful. You get peace. Well, what do I get, Dad? After forty years of feeling dead inside. What do I get?”

It was his turn to shrug now. After a moment, he wrote, *A second chance*.

She wanted to hit him. To take the little board and beat him with it. A second chance? Even if she could forgive him, what would she do with a second chance? Fuck it up, probably. Besides, her life had a momentum to it now she was not sure she could stop. And deep down she knew it would soon be over. Her life. Just a few more pushes. Why stop now?

But forgive him? He might as well be asking her to rip out her liver. But then the way she'd treated her liver, it would not be of much more use to her anyway. She chuckled at that, causing her father to frown at her. She recognized that furrowed brow. It had authority over her once. Over her mother...

“Why'd you do it, dad?” she said. “Because she left you? So what. You *still* could've been my father. I needed you.”

He looked down, his marker poised over the board. His hand and sleeve stained with marker ink. He stayed like that for a while and then he shook his head. A slight movement, but the small gesture said it all. You will not get an answer. Because there *is* no answer.

The quiet washed over her again. She sat very still and listened. She could hear the soft flow of the oxygen through the cannula. She wasn't sure how long she sat like that, just listening. Finally, she stood up and took his hand. She let it cradle her face for a moment and then she bent down and kissed his reproving stubble one last time.

"I forgive you," she said, but as the words formed and left her lips she wondered what they meant. As if they were foreign words that needed interpretation. Or an act to define them.

He smiled. His eyes welled up. He tried to adjust his pillow, which had slipped down to his shoulders.

"Here, let me get that for you," she said. She slid the pillow out and fluffed it up. She held it in front of her with both hands and looked down at her father.

"Is it time now?" the blind man asked.

Her father looked at her with eyes whose fire can burn only so brightly before they blink out.

She glanced at the wall clock. The secondhand had started moving again. "Yes," she said. "It's time."

Her father nodded his head and then closed his eyes.