

Paper Towels

Every morning we wake up, roll out of bed, and trudge through our morning ritual – never expecting that any particular day will be the one that changes everything. For me, that day came one fall morning when I went for a run. There was a fiendish glee that coaxed me off the tidy sidewalks of suburbia and down a small, wooded trail that led past the local penitentiary. I guess it was sort of like my own cheap thrill to jog the 300 yards down a dirt road that ran parallel to the fence with razor wire for a few steps before veering back into the woods. The first time I made my way near the fence, my heart pounded as if I were smuggling drugs through an airport. I felt the irrational rush of trying to get away with something – wondering if I had crossed an invisible guard line. I always hoped to see or hear something exciting from inside, and mentally rehearsed how I would feign innocence if asked why I was running in such a restricted area. Nothing interesting happened the first several times I ran there – each trip becoming less exotic and thrilling. I have wished a thousand times that I had quit while I was ahead.

One day as the path took me toward the fence, I saw a crusty section of paper towel which had blown against the chain links. I thought I saw something written on the wrinkled tan sheet. Maybe it was a note pertaining to a drug deal! I scolded myself silently for having such a childish imagination but decided to make a second lap on my run. After the initial lap, I went into my garage and got one of those metal-and-plastic grabbing tools. The black, plastic trigger makes a claw open and close. At this point, I still imagined that the fence might be electrified, so I grabbed latex gloves – laughing under my breath as I visualized a glowing skeleton of myself with frizzy hair like countless cartoon depictions of electric shocks. I *did* reason that the act of picking up trash would be a calming sight to any guard who had been silently watching me. Returning to the piece of paper, I carefully gripped and pulled with my tool – remembering the old toy *Operation*. I was able to get the sheet through in one piece. I looked at it and pictured the metal dispenser from whence it had surely come – one like a million others with a crooked silver crank handle. It contained industrial sized rolls loaded into a clamp-down metal container with a miniature lock-and-key system. I laughed at the

thought of having this coarse, stiff paper protected by a lock. I stuffed the paper in my pants as I resumed my jogging.

Back at home, I noticed that there was “invisible” writing on the paper, as if someone had written with an inkless pen. I found a pencil and began making long, light side-to-side strokes with the side of the point. I had not watched all those cheesy mystery shows for nothing! Sure enough, the strokes covered the paper with gray lead except for the places where the writer had pressed down with his pen. The words began to appear. “*Help me! Nobody knows I am here.*” A morbid fascination began to invade my thoughts. I mentally sorted through several explanations. Could it be a prank? But what kind of prank would *that* be? Was the writer insane? But the thought that opened one truly nasty Pandora’s Box in my mind was the incredibly slim chance that it really could be true.

I have never been a particularly obsessive person, but I had never contemplated a thought as upsetting and persistent as this. Countless times in the coming weeks I tried to distract myself or rationalize how foolish and illogical the whole situation was. I argued with myself that I could help lots of people in *tangible* ways rather than start this hopeless quest to save this faceless man hidden behind those tall, defiant walls. (My very own male Rapunzel. Geez!) I threw myself into activities that had captured my attention in the past, but my efforts at distraction amounted to the futility of hiding in a closet to escape the smoke of a house fire. Questions kept sneaking and swirling, peeking and curling back into my troubled mind.

Everyone has felt pangs of sympathy for other living creatures. We are seized by the predicament of a scraggly stray, or moved by the loneliness of quirky people who never catch a break. But we wriggle free from any long-term effort through token deeds that soothe the conscience, but do no lasting good. We quickly identify reasons why we are *not* going to be able to rectify a sad or unjust situation, and go on our merry way – congratulating ourselves for being so darned compassionate! Why was this situation so different? The harder I tried to harden my heart, the more the power of suggestion intensified my distress. When told *not* to look at something, we feel *compelled* to look, and who *hasn’t* touched a

wall with a “wet paint” sign? I was overwhelmed with the poignant plight of someone attempting a one-in-a-million cry for help. How feeble a hope, that pushing pieces of paper through that narrow slot would have any result. If I could have found the right strategy to forget the whole matter, I would have never looked back. My sporadic forays past the fence became daily walks. I skipped work in order to sit for hours in an old lawn chair behind a tree – focusing binoculars on that miserable slot.

Finally, one day I froze mid-breath when I saw a tightly rolled paper the size of a long cigar emerging from slot #2 of what looked to be the 4th floor. An unseen palm forced it out into the breeze. A small squeaky sound escaped my throat as I watched it flutter silently to the ground. I was stunned to see several other sheets near the one that had just landed. How had I missed *them*?! In the coming days I frantically considered how best to get my hands on those papers. I was surely losing my mind, but not yet crazy enough to think a fishing rod and reel would work. By now I had found that no electrical charge was surging through the links, and I weighed the value of using wire cutters. I believe I would have done so in the middle of the night except for the problem of someone seeing the damage *after* the fact – ruining my chances of finding future notes. I thought of training a small dog to do the fetching, but lots of obstacles became obvious to even *my* fevered brain. Finally, I remembered my golf ball retriever. With its extendable pole, I felt it could work. Taping an old rake handle to the end gave me 4 more feet. I rolled duct tape around the end of my device – sticky side out and headed back to the fence. (Style points: zero.) Before long I was face-down in the grass, jabbing with my contraption.

“*What’s up, asshole?!*” I let out the quick abbreviated yell of one who almost steps on a snake – high pitched and unmanly. I dropped my homemade gadget, and stood up straight. I felt my face blush with embarrassment, and instantly I was a 4th grader in the principal’s office all over again. The guard was a sloppy man with a thick, graying moustache. Crusty traces of chewing tobacco were visible at the corners of his mouth, and his belly unashamedly pushed against the buttons of his brown shirt – with one having popped free to reveal an inch or so of hairy white tummy. The uniform included a tarnished badge and other aging

accessories once worn with pride. The pistol in his hand, however, looked new enough to me.

I began a rambling explanation that was either incoherent or brilliant. I peppered my speech with words obscure enough to impress this man I deemed to have a low IQ. I had an out-of-body experience as I heard myself jabber nervously. I included the fact that I was fascinated with the America Penal System, and thought I saw him grin as if to say, "*Ha ha. What a funny word!*" I told him I had adopted this prison the way a person adopts a stretch of highway and becomes responsible for its cleanliness. My discourse had one redeeming quality: It conveyed the idea that I was willing to continue talking indefinitely. When "Bellystache" raised his hand to interrupt, I pictured a Snickers bar in his locker that had gone uneaten long enough. "*How can I make you go away?*" he asked. I decided to go for broke – asking him if he would hand me those pieces of paper over there. "*I could pay you for your trouble,*" I said, and laughed heartily enough to show I was joking unless he did not *want* me to be joking. I guess Snickers are expensive these days, because he glanced over his shoulder and held out his hand. I had two twenties and five ones in my wallet, and watched incredulously as his chubby fingers curled around the cash.

I sprinted home praying my wife would be away. When I saw that she *wasn't*, I thought of how much time and energy was being wasted trying to hide the obsession. I decided she would just have to understand as I hurriedly cleared a place on the dining room table – stacking and throwing things to the carpet. Seeing her dumbfounded stare, I told her I would explain later. I tried to give her a reassuring smile as I walked her out of the room, but *her* expression showed me my fake smile looked more like a frozen snarl. After first using a pencil to reveal the words weeks ago, I had experimented with chalk and crayons before settling on oil pastels. I had been delighted to see that the colors went onto the paper smoothly, and were soft enough to be evened out with my fingers. They afforded almost perfect readability to the cryptic messages.

I experienced a rush of energy known only to those attack an activity with complete abandon. The story is told that golfer Ben Hogan once had a playing

partner who scored a hole-in-one. Such was his focus on his *own* game that it became apparent after the round he was unaware of the other man's feat. In some ways, this sense of total surrender may be the purest form of joy and release. I had arrived home with my treasures at dusk, and felt a surreal sensation when I looked at my watch to see that it was after midnight. (I would have guessed 9 pm!) My efforts yielded a puzzling, dark tale. I was still tormented by missing information, but the main plot was clear.

Behind that 2nd slot was an expert in electronics and wiring. He had been asked to consult on the feasibility of technology that would allow psychologists to anonymously study those in solitary confinement. He was in the cell taking notes on how to set up the system to provide clear audio and video. As he worked, he wondered about the legality of such a system but reasoned that those who hired him knew their stuff. He was a loner in his personal life and had not told anyone where he was going that day. There was no family to wonder where he was, and only the warden and one guard had known he was coming. When he heard the door slam behind him, he had been irritated by the weak practical joke. He had continued to design the surveillance system. But as minutes oozed into an hour, he realized with a sickening feeling that nobody would carry such a joke this far. He eventually lapsed into a fitful sleep, but when he awoke his sense of panic was undeniable.

I started calling this man "Cooper" in my mind – a sick nod to the fact that he was "cooped up". At this point Cooper estimated that he had been there for over a month, and was insane with the desire to be released. He was manic with thoughts of how and why this had happened - wondering if the guard had been an old enemy from his past that he had failed to recognize. Could the guard have slammed the door after the warden left? Maybe this section of the prison was empty, as plans for its new function were discussed. What if the guard had told the warden that Cooper departed saying "no" to the work? The warden would have had no reason to doubt what he was told. It would be assumed that Cooper was gone. Of course, he yelled for hours at a time, and screamed for help when the tin food tray with one tan paper towel slid into the room at mealtimes. Naturally, the person(s) bringing the food ignored his rants. He gave a small, bitter

laugh – realizing how much he probably sounded like every other person there. Maybe a *prisoner* had found a way to push the door! Was it the old “misery loves company” idea taken to a fiendish extreme? The idea that he could remain unidentified seemed implausible, but *no* explanation made sense.

As I studied the writing, I thought that this was the loneliest story ever. I could not sleep. For weeks I struggled to let it go. My wife overheard me talking to myself, and gently asked what was wrong. I screamed “**SHUT UP!**” with such force that she recoiled as if she had been slapped. Even in my hysterical state, I could see my own faulty logic. The damage I was doing was not worth this – even if Cooper’s situation was exactly as I imagined it to be. I consoled myself that I was not yet totally crazy, because I *did* want my old life back. I am told that mountain climbers reach a point of no return where climbing *down* becomes so dangerous, the only way *off* the mountain is up. I had reached that point, and it was actually a relief to give myself over to the project so fully that I was free of all encumbrances. With my wife now staying with her parents, I settled into a steady rhythm – like a distance runner. I was “all in” as the poker phrase describes, and I tried to remember which football team had adopted that slogan. I thought sadly of how much better I would have done in other aspects of life with such single-mindedness. But I had also seen fanaticism *ruin* lives, so I pondered how a person could find the right balance, and how one could channel such fervor in wise directions.

I chose the plan I felt would give me the greatest chance for success. I had to become part of the prison’s inner circle. I shudder to look back and think of how I weighed the value of being a guard versus that of being an inmate. For one nightmarish night I wrestled with the idea of getting myself arrested. The part of me that wasn’t totally bonkers argued that I couldn’t dictate *which* prison would become my home, and argued that as a prisoner I would not be able to help Cooper anyway. I applied for the job of guard twice over the next four weeks before finally getting a call. Getting advice from an old buddy who had once been a cop, I navigated the screening/hiring process with a daring combo of patience, lies, and a risky act of forgery. I tried to grow a Fu Manchu moustache when I found I would be starting my new job the following week, but the peach fuzz

results did not speak of intimidation, so I shaved it off. My first three weeks on duty were spent getting to know my way around the facility, and trying to learn all the unwritten rules of interaction. My duties never took me above the 2nd floor, and I restrained myself from asking too many questions. In my wild obsession, there was a curious aptitude for patience.

As months passed, I developed a rapport with many key figures, and learned more about procedures. I worried that coming from the inside of the building I would not be able to identify which cell represented Slot #2 from the *outside*, but I worked through several anticipated problems. I became exhilarated to think that the ordeal could soon be over, and wondered ruefully what could be salvaged from the ruins of my life. I went to my boss and asked about the possibility of taking on duties in the solitary confinement section – having learned that this really *was* how the 4th floor was being used. I remembered as a kid wondering why solitary was considered such a punishment – to be isolated from all the brutality meted out by the other inmates. Based on prison movies I had seen, being alone seemed like a pretty good deal to me. My supervisor ignored my request for so long that I thought he had forgotten. Finally, one day I casually asked “*Have you given any more thought toyou know....*” and silently pointed up – portraying a casual grin. “*Sure!*” he said casually.

After a sketchy description of the schedule and procedures, I was given a jangling key ring to the top floor, undoubtedly called “The Penthouse” by those hoping to be ironic. How original! Within an hour, I was walking down the hall, trying to look like a man putting in a boring night’s work. As I peeked into the cell, I had to remind myself to breathe. And there he was! He was hunched over a small, metal table. He was white, and seemed to be dangerously thin and frail – with a sense of deformity I could not identify. An infuriating odor seeped through the slot used for the food tray. His hair was long and twisted in a half-hearted attempt at dread locks. Rapunzel indeed!

He wrote furiously with an ink pen on white notebook paper. A flush of understanding widened my eyes as I realized that he was bearing down on a *paper towel* to cushion the hardness of the tabletop. But why a different sheet for

every page? OCD? Superstition? Then he sensed that I was there, asking “*Who is it?*”

I turned the key and entered.

“What the frick?! You caint come in here! I ain’t getting time added cause a stinkin guard don’t know the rules!!!!”

“Wait...Just wait...I need to talk to you. I can help you. You aren’t *supposed* to be in here, are you?”

“Crap no, I ain’t! I’m sposed to be on a date with Cayree Frickin Undawood, you mowron!”

“Why are you here?”

“I beat an old sucker to death with a lug wrench. Give me one and I’ll give a demonstration!”

“Do you install electronics?”

“What the ...Why are you here?! Oh my Lord! Where did you read that? You caint go through my trash!”

“Why were you pushing paper towels through that slot?”

“I’m a neat freak, dude. It’s a quirk. You gonna get me for litterin? Put me in jail?!”

“I came to help you.”

There was a moment of shocked, pure silence as I waited. Slowly the understanding of the situation formed in Cooper’s brain.

“I don’t believe it. You thought that crap was true! I was tryin to write a book, you re-tard! OH HAHHAHA! I’m choking! I caint breathe!”

He was still howling and pointing as I locked the door and walked down the hall. A little laugh sounded like a cough in the back of my throat. Suddenly, I pivoted and fired a vicious punch at a brick wall. I heard and *felt* my wrist snap and twist

grotesquely – small splinters of bone jutting through the skin. I reached underneath with my left hand to support it as I unsteadily jogged through the maze of halls. I heard startled remarks like “Dude, what happened?!” as guards turned to see me. I fumbled for the ID badge that allowed me to walk through the metal detector and out the front door to the parking lot. I slumped into my car and exhaled slowly before gingerly pulling my cell phone from the cluttered console. I dreaded the next few hours – knowing that the wrist which was mercifully numb now would be hurting in Living Technicolor soon. I wondered about permanent damage, and thought absently of some of the tasks facing me in the coming weeks as I found out how much could be salvaged from the mess I had made of my life. But for now, my goals were simple, and I snorted at the realization that I felt inexplicably calm. For now, all I had to do was dial a nine and two ones. The thought of professionals coming to take care of me felt comforting beyond words. I was halfway into a dozing dream when I heard the ambulance in the distance.

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