

## Prisoner

The year had been hot. Donovan's visit to his sibling's over the summer had led to seeing nieces and nephews thought of, but never called throughout the year. Their arms were sticky in the blood of grass, knees freshly skinned, hands blistered climbing and crawling through summer, before they returned to their classrooms in the fall.

Donovan kept awkward conversation with family, before returning to silence, making frequent visits to the sink to refill his water, to the bathroom to still his nerves.

He shouldn't have come.

In an effort to make him less strange, young ones asked questions like their elder's, no less pleasant. "What do you do?"

His response was cultivated, no pride or shame trailing after. Just the bare minimum.

"Security."

Adults would have left it at that, but children endeavored to understand. He could sense them weighing and perceiving, feared even, that it might be a response tucked away for later. Again, he went for water.

This year was a scorcher.

Big plastic sunglasses settled on adult faces, parents applied and reapplied the strange smelling sunscreen that children wiped off when they thought no one was looking. The celebrations were long. He did not care to remember the occasion.

With twilight came the fireflies, which practiced older siblings caught with expertise that the younger failed to emulate, crushing them with shrieks as they wandered too far away from the designated palm onto shoulders and hair. Their regret was earnest, but not long, as they wiped away the bioluminescent goo that remained.

Back porch screen doors closed as parents and children waited to go home, as sober partners found keys in pockets before traveling back, their other halves staring out windows and thinking, rather than saying, as a nod to the children in the backseat, the music off, the night loud.

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The morning was full of the same burdens Donovan had expected. He hated flying, truth be told, since he had to manually pop his ears as the plane ascended and descended. No chewing gum meant that he had to swallow repeatedly until he heard the sound. He'd fallen asleep mid flight, waking with pain as the plane landed, which did not dissipate even as he arrived at his apartment and took ibuprofen, empty stomach be damned.

The pantry light was on, he noticed. It was more of an empty room anyways-more cobwebs and spiders than stores of food.-It would show on the electric all the same.

He made his way to his room, wiped the thin coating of dust from his fingers, avoiding the arachnid that ascended up its line of silk as he entered.

He wished for more time before work tomorrow. His uniform hung with wrinkles he did not remember, did not care to fix. If he did, it would be tomorrow morning, manipulating the steamer as if drawing the lines on a graph. He had the early alarms set for such a scenario, but he would not wake to them. He seldom did.

He continued to prepare for bed, and wondered if in another life he might have been something else. He would have been a lousy nurse, he mused, he barely ministered to his drink save when he reminded himself. He disliked alcohol, even now. It was unlikely he would find the secret which would make the liquid the draught of gold which devouts supplicated to, hair in hands, leaned over waste bins.

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Slang within the prison had long since been known to Donovan, but just because it had lost its secrets did not mean it had lost its bite. A different language greeted him within, more sinewy and twisting now with his age and fatigue.

The prisoners, codes-on account of the codes on their manufactured products- followed the same motions, day after day.

By virtue of seniority, he was responsible for a political prisoner brought in late last night. He dreaded to see their humanity stripped away, made naked in this new place at the whims of a machine. His fear was unfounded.

Apparently, he would later learn, they had been the epitome of calm, stating only, “I have been naked before.”

Well then, he would break later, all the same. Already the guards were receiving the orders to keep the man cordoned off, censoring his letters. They came, quickly at first, and then slowed to a trickle, decreasing in quantity but never in poignancy. Some were even directed toward the censors, asking, begging, the guards to do the right thing. Donovan laughed with the rest of the guards, but it did not reach his eyes.

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The prisoner liked to talk. All as well, the words were their own. They never seemed directed to anyone, and none of the guards seemed to listen. They’d sit, then begin to pace, and then shout the words from their cell down below, desperate to communicate meaning. They weren’t the best orator Donovan had ever heard, their voice had in it the wavering quality of someone hurt. There was a *rawness* to it, people listened. Solitary followed.

The prisoner was made haggard, they had pruned his voice.

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When the prisoner began to talk again it was in a whisper. He spoke to none save a spider in the corner of his cell. Donovan did not miss the words. They weren't for him, he knew, but they sustained him all the same. The prisoner's eyes read over him like a familiar yarn, and he speaks in a voice louder than the quiet that reins it, more volume than the cell can hold.

“All ideas start off as adversaries, absolutely.”

“Do all ideas serve the same functions? Do their offshoots and bastards? Most ideas are poised for conflict. How could they not be? They're alive. Whether or not an idea bends the knee eventually, is eradicated, or insidiously worms its way within, none of it matters. Ideas, no different than any other living thing, pervert all that falls in their realms of influence. It cascades, whether to some arbitrary point or a place called truth is individual concern.”

Donovan doesn't answer, fraternization with the man could ruin the steady years of work he has built up. His boredom has now become an affectation. It doesn't matter, another guard hears him and walks over.

The prisoner's eyes recognize the violence in the man even if his body doesn't. His arms curl toward his head, before they fall limply to the side, as if someone has been cooking spaghetti at joints along the segment. His blood is not much against the floor, sparse and economical. His eye is swollen shut as he regains consciousness and he gets up with some difficulty. Donovan, watching, never moving, begins to say that the guard has done this before, but a piteous look from the prisoner kills the words in his mouth. Save the energy, it seems to say, it is known.

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“Self is a cancer, it erodes function.”

A response in the negative. Donovan still has spent only the necessary words. Nothing beyond the minimum.

“The difference between myself and yourself is that your self seeks to persist. My self seeks truth.”

The lack of I in the prisoner’s speech was an aberration. Possessives were glossed over as if they didn’t matter. They might not have even been there, had the need to communicate the idea, been any less incendiary in the frame of the man.

“Why no I’s?” Donovan asked.

“They condemn me. Much as we have condemned each other.” The prisoner said.

Another negative. No words.

“Think, for a moment. The moment we recognized in each other the idea, singular or otherwise, which marked the other for destruction. It isn’t even active. Just that we recognize the patterns in each other as inversions of our selves, a portent of death. As we recognize, at least.”

And then, “Of course it’s recursive.” Softly, “Everything is.”

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The beatings grew worse with time. The prisoner struggled sometimes to stand. Donovan now and then caught himself stepping towards him, as if he would help, before remembering to root himself to his spot against the wall.

If it had not been for the protests and the attention Donovan thought the man would have been killed outright. It would be his fault. Not the beatings, but his failure to hold the other guards accountable. In his mind at least, men were beasts, they were not capable of it.

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During the end of his time-of the guards as well though they didn't yet know- the prisoner spoke again to his listener on the wall.

The spider was dead.

“Perhaps humanity could have been kinder.”

The prisoner was tired, he said nothing more.

The prisoner was to be moved soon. Inevitably, the man's condition had become public.

Outrage made feverish waves through people come in droves to call out against the prison.

Donovan had suffered more than some guards, less than others, as threats were mailed to his apartment. Leaving work, it was not uncommon for food to be thrown against his car. He got used to going to the car wash.

Whatever group the man had been a part of had gone silent. A bad sign.

Over the compound today, a plane not unlike crop dusters had made its way over, sprinkling a fine powder that settled like a lover, tired in the morning sun. The prisoner had foam from the mouth, their false tooth pressed against their cheek.

On the news, they called it some sort of poisonous agent and no longer could the public near the guards for fear of the mutual destruction the plane had wrought about them. They went into quarantine, lost partners and loved ones. The net of ways they communicated with the others fell by the wayside.

Donovan lost, not friends, but structures, as he drifted through months in a fog of apathy as all the best sought to find out what it was and failed. To his family he became something like the loch ness monster, more apparition than man. He ate less, he grew thin.

Eventually it was discovered that the poison had been nothing at all, a trick, but the damage had been done. The fear was not so easy to dispel, the guards had become pariahs. Even

those who had nothing to do with the prisoner. They were guilty by association. One after another those involved were taken into custody.

When it was his time, he could have sworn the spider in his room regarded him with the same piteous look, before it turned back to its creation, recasting its web.