

The Prisoner

Saturdays should be reserved for ballgames, shopping sprees and park picnics— things like that. Saturdays are special, that's why I haven't been out of the house on a Saturday in exactly two years, six months and three days. To be honest, I've haven't been out of the house at all in such a time— that's if you don't count the psych visits, therapy sessions and the weekly trips to the drug-store to pick up my meds and a bottle of cherry juice. I'm here today because this Saturday was the day that they told me I could come in. It's not that today is special. In fact, I know for sure that it will be the second worst day of my life.

The seats are harder than expected— they can be described as nothing shy of elevated concrete, but the citrusy-minty-leathery smell that envelops the room is better than I thought. Not that I really thought of how the place might smell, but had I, this would be a pleasant deviation.

The guards walk back-and-forth, their chests poked out with overt confidence, speaking tersely to one another as if weakness is measured by words.

I guess so much is to be expected in a prison.

One of the guards seems much too old for his post. His massive browline glasses cover half his face, and where those end, the liver spots that look like splattered peach paint

begin. He doesn't have much hair, twenty-seven silver strands to be exact. I counted them—I had to count them to keep myself busy. He notices me noticing him and flashes a well-practiced sympathy smile. But of course I don't believe it. People have been smiling at me with that same exact smile for a couple years. I can't believe them all, so I do what's sensible and believe no one.

He speaks to another guard and nods his head in my direction. He's not summoning me, he's speaking about me. If only I could hear his words, I can appropriately channel my anger. But I begin to grow angry anyway because I know what he's saying:

“She's a strange type of strange.” “She doesn't speak.” “She dresses like a woman twice her age.” “She's here to meet the man that murdered her child.”

“Ma'am,” he says. I jump startled, I didn't realize he was next to me. My therapist says that I need to be more “alert.” Live more in the “now.” I must agree—I daydream far too often. “The young lady here is gonna give you a pat down, mind steppin' aside?” says the grizzled guard. The female guard carefully grabs me by the waist and shifts me toward the corner. I'm grateful, I seem to be running low on energy these days. And by these days, I mean everyday.

She gives me one of those airport pat-downs, but her hands are stronger than most and I swear she's putting dints in my marrow. Maybe my therapist was right, maybe coming

here is a “bad” idea. But what the hell does she know? I pay her \$150 an hour and she still can’t manage to remove the chipped red polish off her nails.

“Excuse me, ma’am?” the female guard says in a tone that let’s me know that I hadn’t heard her the first two or three times she said it. “I’m all done, you can go in now,” she adds. The elderly guard looks at me, then looks to the door and leads the way.

I don’t want to go in, I really don’t. But, I have to.

The citrusy-minty-leathery smell of the room fades as I enter the narrow walkway into the meeting room. It suddenly smells spicy, then simply smells of nothing at all—not even air. Perhaps my time spent away from the world has made my senses overly-discerning. The lights are a little dimmer and the tiny room is frigid. I didn’t at all recognize the temperature in the other room, but it’s the dead of winter in here. Plus the walls are ugly. They’re supposed to be white, but have turned buff. I have no problems with buff, I like buff. But not when it’s suppose to be white.

Dozens of searching souls pack the pint-sized room, squeezing their bodies in the tiny mixed-matched plastic chairs that circle the cheap well-worn tables. They wear desperate faces—the visitors more than the convicts. Whatever they’re in need of, it doesn’t seem to be at a ballgame or shopping center.

One inmate wears a bright grin and looks surprisingly jovial in his freshly pressed denim-colored jumpsuit. He rests his hands comfortably on the table, like they make you do when you take your school pictures. It's all so deliberate. It's his way of saying, "I'm not like these other monsters. I don't belong here, I'm innocent!" And the woman snuggled by his side must believe him, because she kisses him something sweet and cups his maybe-innocent-probably-guilty face in her hands. And they have a child together. And the maybe-innocent-probably-guilty inmate smiles at the child who hugs him tightly. I stare fixated. The guard stares. Everyone stares at a place like this. I feel that I could stare at them forever—never becoming overwhelmed by their overdose of affection. But then I see something that steals my gaze. From the edge of my eye, I see:

The prisoner.

The guard turns up his nose and sniffs the air like my anxiety is palpable. Maybe it is.

"You havin' second thoughts about this, ma'am?" he asks. With all the energy I have, all the energy I've been saving up these last couple years, I put one foot in front of the other. Like a baby taking her first steps, the three feet from all that's comfortable to all that's unknown, I walk. I can feel the guard's concerned gaze impress itself on my back. He's thinking, "Will she fall? Pass out? Run away?" Maybe those are just my thoughts. Then suddenly, my thoughts stop. Suddenly—

I'm right in front of the prisoner.

I recognize him from his picture in the newspaper. Seeing him makes these two years, six months and three days seem like yesterday. I hate his face. His callous, rugged facial hair, not enough to comb but too much to ignore, those thin grisly eyes that are more like slits—simply cold and indifferent, that foreboding tattoo on his forearm, the one of a jaguar prowling in some sort of jungle. Then he speaks, his baritone voice sounds like the brute bass of a beating drum.

“I didn’t think you would come,” he says as he looks up to me. “Even when I asked you in those letters, I never thought you would.” He smiles his sideways smile at me. Why would he do that? As if sensing my bewilderment, he pulls himself together, adjusts himself in his seat and wipes his face of emotion.

I never read a single letter he wrote me, and the fact that he thinks I would read them makes me hate him more. I burned his letters—all of them. I burned them along with the clothes, the sympathy cards, the “get well soon” flowers, the “I’m worried about you” casseroles. I burned it all.

He doesn’t know why I’m really here. He doesn’t know that I’ve prepared to end it all. I plan to keep it simple, actually. A box of pills, no note, no will. I don’t need anything really, except to see him. I have to tell the prisoner that on that Saturday—two years, six months and three days ago, he killed two people— one just took a little longer to die than the other. Monsters like him don’t really care one way or another, but he has to know.

I take a seat across from him. He searches my face to know what to say next, to plot his next move, to make sense out of this—well— non-sense. He stares at me like he feels sorry for me.

“You look different from what I imagined” he says plaintively, as if I disappointed him.

Truth is, I look different from how I once did. Every six months has been five years to my face. I had nice clothes once, really nice clothes—but after that really rough morning, the one that I refused to take my meds, my nice clothes saw the end of my closet and the beginning of the fire-place. And very well they should, what good are they to me now? My frail frame would only wallow in them, I reason. I didn’t keep any of my combs or brushes so my hair doesn’t look anything distant from an untamed willow shrub. My nails are brittle, my skin is pallid and I twitch just a little. But it’s not my fault, it’s the medication.

“You kinda look like you wanna say something,” he tells me.

I do. But words are like those “I’m here for you” phone calls and those “thinking of you” fruit baskets— they don’t mean anything. And trust me, they don’t change anything.

With a strange sense of urgency, he tells me, “I think about him everyday, you know? Sometimes 7 or 8 times a day.”

I laugh to myself. Does he know I think about him more than 7 to 8 times a second? It’s not impossible you know. I do it everyday.

“Have you ever played somethin’ over and over in your head, tellin’ yourself that if you do it enough, you can change stuff around—like a butterfly effect or somethin’,” he says.

I nod. It’s not for him, but for me.

I’ve etched the events of that day in my mind using a small pencil with a huge eraser, wanting desperately to rewrite the day with a different ending. If God could just give me a chance, just a chance to try MY version:

In my version, I follow my “no work on Saturday” rule and never schedule that design meeting. In my version, my son asks me to go to his basketball game and I say, “Yes dear, I would love to go. In my version, my son doesn’t walk home because we go grab a slice of pizza to celebrate his victory. In my version, my son is not savagely attacked, not a hair on his head harmed, because he’s safely by my side. In my version, my son lives.

“I didn’t think I would hurt him, you know. Let—Let alone, kill him” he says, interrupting my reverie.

He whispers “kill him” as if he’s telling me a secret. It’s almost an oxymoron you know— to whisper a word like kill.

He continues, his words accelerate until the stammers and stumbles begin to form. “I-I-It wasn’t ‘spose to happen that way. I didn’t mean to kill Jeremiah.”

He says it. He says MY son’s name. And it sounds like blasphemy pouring from his mouth. To snatch the life away from such a beautiful soul and to utter his name outright has got to be a sin. And not just the, “Oh God, this is my last time doing this,” type of sin, but the “had we lived in more punitive times, you would be stoned and killed,” type of sin.

“Please—” I gasp, desperately thirsting for air. “Please don’t say his name.”

“I’m sorry, I wasn’t tryna upset you. It’s just—”

A wind of anger lifts me out of my chair, that’s the only thing I have ample of to spare anyway, and I reach over and grab him by his shirt, clawing and digging at his chest like a mutt trying to unearth a treasure of bones. “You took him, you took him from me! Why’d you take him from me?” I roar.

I wanna scratch him, I wanna bite him, I wanna stab him, I wanna kill him.

Suddenly, a harness clutches my waist and suspends me in the air. I wave my arms and legs madly, thrusting my body in an attempt to break lose of this invisible force. Only when I see the thick, browline glasses fall to the floor do I realize that the elderly guard's arms are wrapped around my waist, restraining me from destroying the prisoner.

Most of the room gawks at me with as much disdain as concern while a few others pretend they can't hear me— as one would do a beggar on the street or an unruly child throwing a tantrum.

But that doesn't stop me. It can't stop my wails and screams, "You took my child. You took my baby!"

The guard releases me. As if knowing this was all very inevitable, he coolly states "Alright now, it's time to go!"

"No. She can't," says the prisoner in a manner so calm it haunts me.

"We got rules here!" responds the guard tersely. "Rules!" he emphasizes with a growl.

My therapist was right. I wasn't ready for this, I wasn't ready to see him. I relax my fingers and feel a fist-full of fabric from the prisoner's shirt fall to the floor. I never knew it was in my hand.

“Please,” says the prisoner, completely unconcerned about his mangled uniform. He appeals to the guard but keeps his eyes fixed on me.

The guard picks his glasses from off the floor and wipes his lens across his shirt-pocket. He puffs his chest out and puts his hands on his waist like a super-hero and gazes intensely at us—just to let us know he means business.

“Visiting hours end in 15 minutes” he says. He lingers with us for a moment in the awkwardness then retreats back to his space in the corner.

I want to desperately leave but I’m unable to move. As much as I’m relieved that it all comes to an end today, I must tell him first. Before the prisoner returns to the confinement of his 6 by 8 box for which he will spend his eternity, he has to understand what he’s done to me.

But I won’t sit back down! My tempers can’t begin to cool so quickly. So I do the only thing I can think to do, I stand there.

The prisoner rises, walks over to me and stands by my side. Of all the thoughts I could think right now, the only one that comes to mind is that he’s 6’2. I know it, I know it for sure because Jeremiah was 6’2, and the top of my head sits below his heart just like it did my son’s.

“Why did you choose my son?” I ask. It was almost a plea, almost a, ‘let’s go back two years, six months, three days and chose someone else’s son.’ Yes, I know it’s selfish, barbaric even. But I don’t care.

He hangs his head to the side as if he’s searching for the reason. Maybe he’s just searching for the words.

“He had a gold chain on—a gold chain with a J on it,” says the prisoner. As if on queue, our arms brush against one another, and the hairs on them stand tall and dance with each other like a well rehearsed tango. I quickly rub my palms over that tainted area, wiping any remnants of the prisoner off of me.

Of course it was the gold chain. I bought him the gold chain. I gave my son life and I bought my son death.

“He wanted that chain so badly”, the words slip out my mouth before I can catch them and they don’t seem to stop. “I got it for him a few months before and told him it was because of his good report card. But that wasn’t the reason. It was because I loved him and I didn’t know how to say it. I should’ve said it...’I love you, I love you, I-LOVE-YOU’.... It’s all so simple now.”

“I should’ve said that when you come home late from practice, I only nag you because I want to spend time with you but I don’t know how to tell you. I should’ve said that you’re the most amazing teenager in the world and I admire you. I should’ve said a lot of things. Why didn’t I say those things?”

I look to the prisoner as if he has the answer for me. He gives me that same pitiful look that everyone has given me for the last two years, six months and three days. But for the first time, I believe it.

“I was just gonna take the chain and run-off, I wasn’t tryna hurt him,” he pleads to me.

“I’ve done it a lot of times. I’ve taken and taken from people but this time—” he pauses and wipes a stray tear from his right eye. “Th-this time—.”

“Yes,” I think to myself. “This time was different.”

“He held on that chain for dear life. He fought for it, I mean he really fought for it,” says the prisoner.

“And he lost.” I don’t know if I said that aloud, but I must’ve, because I swear I feel the prisoner’s body shutter as if some electrical current has jolted through him.

He regains his sense of self and continues. “He pushed me off and I punched him and he hit the ground. And I punched him again and again and again” he says.

Then the levees break and the prisoner’s tears pour fourth. And he cups his face in his hand like a child getting lost for his first time, hoping desperately to be found by his mommy. And his shoulders shudder up and down like he could fully seizure at any moment.

I can’t cry. After crying everyday for the first four months or so, I’ve trained my body to do it only once every morning, to “let it out” for the day and since I did it on the ride up here, I have nothing more left.

He continues, barely. With the sniffing and shaking, I struggle to make out his words. “E-Ev-Even when I ss-ss-stopped, the blood didn’t.”

Blood. My child’s outsides covered in his insides! The image arrests me. But of course there was blood, I know it had to be blood, but the telling of it is all too overwhelming. It’s like someone telling you, “One day you’re gonna die.” Of course you will, and you know it, but you can’t be told it. You can’t think of it because that’s more than you can handle.

The prisoner inhales a mouth full of air. “I placed the chain in his hand,” he says. “I knew it was too late to mean anything, but I had to do it. Then I got home and waited for

the police, but they didn't come. I was happy at first, then I thought about how there's probably somebody waitin' for him to come home. Waitin' for him to walk through the door not knowin' he was never gonna show up. Then I got tired of waitin' for the police. So I went to them." He finally exhales.

I nod. Not because I understand any of this madness, but because I don't know what else to do. He pleaded guilty so there was never a trial, never any closure. But is there ever closure? After someone kills your child, your baby, doesn't the doorway of grief and malaise remain forever open?

I turn to him. I get a good look at him and I see him clearly. I don't see that rugged facial hair, just a young baby face— infantile almost. Those cold, grisly eyes are just— well— eyes now. I look at the tattoo on his arm closer and realize that it's not a jaguar in the jungle, it's a kitten, a kitten hiding in a house plant.

"I'm sorry," he says, then pauses, looking at me as I look away from him. "I am—I'm so so sorry," he pleads penitently.

I can't look at him. I can't respond to that. I'm emptied of everything and my hollowness is transparent, even to him.

He wipes his tears and says, "Thank you for comin' anyway. Never in a million years would I've thought you be the first person to come see me," he adds.

What? This can't be. What 17 year old doesn't have family or friends? A mother?

"Your parents haven't come?" I ask.

"I never knew my dad. I call and write my mom, but, well—"

He pauses, as if attempting to make sense of his own abandonment. "She was never around to begin with, so it don't matter much to me anyway."

But it does.

"You're a mother-less son," I say to him. I don't know why I said it, but I did.

"I guess I am," he says.

I wonder if my son ever felt like a mother-less son. Then I wonder, does a mother-less-son feel anything like a son-less-mother? I wonder if the prisoner at all can understand the depths of my misery, how my guilt wakes me out of even my deepest sleep wailing, sweating and sobbing. That on the really bad days, the walls talk to me and I, unfortunately, talk back. I wonder if he knows how my unbearable loneliness has pushed me to end it all. I stop wondering and I realize that I know. I know that I am the only one who can understand him and he's the only one who can understand me.

For the first time in two years, six months and three days, I'm able to feel someone else's pain. And it hurts just as much as my own, if not more. I don't know what comes over me, but something does. And I open my arms, spreading them as if I'm preparing to take flight, and he collapses in them, baptizing me in his tears. His body hangs over me like a teddy-bear with all the stuff and fluff that makes it a real teddy-bear ripped out of it. Maybe my frailness is not as I understood, because I can hold his weight. Or maybe it's my weight he's holding. I really don't know. All I know is that his hearty 6'2 frame is so pleasantly familiar. For just a moment, all is pleasantly familiar.

"Ma'am" says a voice from behind me. "Visiting hours have ended."

I look at the guard, his over-sized browline glasses being the perfect cover for the mist that gathers in the corner of his eyes.

I realize that it's just the three of us, all those other staring eyeballs have gone and left. Them back to their cells, us back to our homes—which for most of us, are our cells anyway.

The prisoner and I disentangle ourselves from each other as another guard enters to take the prisoner away. As the guard shackles him up in his silver bracelets, my cheek begins to tickle. Then I feel the heat of my tears creating friction as they race toward my chin. I thought I did this earlier. I thought I was done for the day. But there's more left.

As I stand here, I think about tomorrow. I don't know what I'll do or where I'll go, but I look forward to it, and I look forward to the next day and even the day after that. For the first time in two years, six months and three days— I look forward.

The misty-eyed guard dabs the corner of his eyes with his knuckles, thrusts his shoulders back and looks at me and then to the door, "This way, ma'am," he says.

I follow the guard, then I stop, but I don't turn around. With my back to the prisoner and his back to me—we say nothing— just a silent goodbye, from one prisoner to another.