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After Anne's death, at least I had Rob. Now, there's nothing. Styrofoam boxes of restaurant leftovers piled up in the fridge. No empty beer cans on the coffee table waiting to be picked up. No dirty socks and skivvies lay where they'd fallen behind the hamper. My life's as empty as a ballpark after the game.

As I cross the courtyard this morning, I see the cons standing around. That courtyard's their neighborhood. Gangs in prison, like men outside, band together for social interaction, to set boundaries, and regulate the flow of commerce. Leaders lead. Followers punish and reward. Others get them the things they want in spite of the watchful eyes of officers. Cops and Robbers, a game both inmates and officers play. Despite the deadly seriousness of the lives at stake, the purpose of the game is to fill the unending days in prison.

I think I know these men better than anyone else in the joint, better than their families and friends outside — because they've spilled their guts to me in intake interviews while they're still in shock from winding up here—and I know them better than the system that collected them like so many worms in a bait bucket. Today, a scavenger of human material, I intend to use that knowledge in a book to buy my way out of here.

I see them gathered in groups self-selected by the varieties of their perversions. Manny Gross, whose name ironically calls to mind his excesses, multiple assaults and rapes of student nurses in their dormitory. Gross holds forth before a gathering of his colleagues, all rapists. When he looks over, I give him a thumbs up. I remember him from a dozen years ago. In our intake session he was one of the most hardened men I'd ever met, a concrete wall between any feeling he might have had, with absolutely no remorse for those innocent women. The years have softened him some—as bizarre as it sounds, maybe from having buddies, even a clan of butchers, who are more family than the one he was born into. Not to worry though, he'll never get out of the joint so long as a single one of the nurses' parents is still alive. In the meantime, he'll make a great chapter in my book.

From a distance, all the cons in the yard look spacey. They walk with a zombie-like shuffle, but so would I if I was fed as many pills as they are in a typical day. Remember that our inmates are diagnosed with Selective Serotonin Stress Inhibition, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, and Panic Disorder, not to mention problems with anxiety and impulse control. We treat that shit with thorazine, haldol, elavil, lithium and whatever else is the drug du jour. Pills, tablets, capsules, and two ounce doses of thick and nasty tasting liquids keep them doped up and harmless most of the time. But not always.

When I finally reach my office, I sit quietly waiting for 1051 and our second session. Outwardly, my mind is clear, my body relaxed. Behind the professional mask, I am not so calm. Something about this one inspires me to *want* to help.

Maybe 1051s worth a try. As I think about him, I admit that I also think about myself. A symbiotic relationship exists among the inmates and those of us who work here. All at once, too, I realize that for the first time in a long time I have something to keep me focused: my book.

Last Thursday was my twenty-fourth wedding anniversary. My wife and I were young when I started work here; my son came a year later. Time has dribbled like rainwater through my fingers.

SESSION TWO

Date: September 9, 1975. Time: 10:00 a.m.

LaTour brings 1051 to me and leaves without more greeting than his usual perfunctory announcement of prisoner name and number.

Different somehow this week, quieter, he's shed some of that fearful, cat-checking-out-his-territory look. Like rushing water over pebbles in a river, the institution polishes all inmates to a sameness of look and behavior.

I smile. "Please be seated."

He takes the chair indicated last week. I note he has mastered some minimal efficiency with the leg irons.

I'm again taken aback by his apparent vulnerability. The large, upholstered chair swallows him. His pale eyes suggest ready tears. How young he seems. But, then, he *is* young.

Beginning interviews are halting and slow, the clumsy invention of questions to build rapport.

“How are you today, Charles?”

“I am well, sir.”

“How are you adjusting to Malatesta?”

“I think I’m handling it,” he says flatly.

“If you have any problems here,” I try to assure him, “let me know. There are some things that I can do to try and help.”

He nods.

I pick up my yellow pad from the makeshift desk and balance it on my knee. “Last time we were talking about things at home. Could you help me out, there? Exactly where did you live?”

“I’ve lived in the same house all my life. It’s on a street called Dorotea. Up north. Sonoma County. It’s my grandmother’s house in Rohnert Park. Other than the military, it’s the only place I’ve ever lived.”

“Tell me about your grandmother’s house.”

He winces, shrugs, then lets his shoulders sag and leans back, clammed up. He clasps his hands about his arms, a tight ball of defense.

I wait, letting the loud-ticking hands of the institutional wall clock sweat him. My mind shouts, *Tell me about it, Charles. Tell me what happened to you in that house. Nothing can happen here till you begin to let go of it. Say it out loud, boy. Only by dragging it out in the light can you own it.*

At long last, he whimpers, “I have a room and bathroom in what used to be the root cellar at the back of the basement. It’s damp and cold sometimes, but I have my privacy.” 1051 looks about furtively.

I write on my pad: *patient probably spent childhood alone in damp, substandard basement room.* I ask, “Were you comfortable there?”

“Well, sir, my room is nearly always dark. That’s good for sleeping. I have to go through the kitchen upstairs and then down the backstairs. Cobwebs on the outside make it look kind of creepy.” He falters, then continues, “I never thought about it until this minute, but I kind of like the duskieness of it. Somehow it seems kind of soothing, you know like a den or cave.”

I bob my head slowly in agreement. *It’s also like the tunnels of the VC in ‘Nam.* “Is there anything else it reminds you of?”

“Because it’s damp, it almost always smells of mildew, but what I like about my room is that the stuff is familiar. I like to imagine it was picked out by my mom . . .” He slurs the word like one unfamiliar on his tongue, repeats it in a whisper, “mom.”

Taking a chance on losing the focus, I interrupt. “Your mother? What do you remember about her?”

His eyes meet mine for the first time. His face contorts as if he’s going to cry, but he controls it. “She died giving birth to me. But I have a picture in my mind that she was very beautiful with long blond hair.” His voice turns dreamy, a

soft sound of yearning, then jerks back abruptly, “Grams gets real mad whenever I ask about Mom, so I don’t ask. No use upsetting her.”

My hand grips the tablet hard to keep from shaking in anger. “How does that make you feel?”

Charles shrinks back, startled by the question. “If you knew Grams – you don’t ever want to make Grams mad.”

“Thank you for telling me that. Now, let’s review for a second. Can you tell me anything more about what you like about your room?”

His eyes gentle a little, stop darting about the room, avoiding my glance.

I smile, affirming his sharing, once more amazed at the human mind’s ability to deny pain.

“I used to sleep on my Grams’s couch until I was in middle school. Then Grams gave me my own room in the basement.” His face flamed and he shuddered, then looked away.

I am aware that Charles has told me his grandmother had exiled him to a room formerly inhabited by his mother, a woman she had proclaimed to be the source of evil. I forced myself to ask, “How did you feel about that?”

Once more, the slight flinch, then passivity, and he’s gone again, hidden behind his emotional shield.

I offer, “You said she was pretty strict.”

“Yes she was, but it was good for me. She got me to accept Jesus Christ as my personal savior. That means a lot.” He beams, a practiced adult-pleasing Sunday School look.

“What else has been going on since you got back from Vietnam?”

“Well, I’m taking a full load of classes at Sonoma State. And I work for the Cotati Police Department. That doesn’t leave an awful lot of spare time. I work from three to eleven and take classes in the mornings. That and study takes up about all the time there is.”

Apparently in control of himself once more, his answers are calm and expressionless, phrases repeated many times. They reveal that he’s not entirely aware of where he is or what has happened, not even after his arrest and trial. Add to that the dramatic change he must make to adapt to prison life. I decide to shift the conversation, hoping to find something not so rehearsed. “Last time you said you were having problems with nightmares. What’s that all about?”

“Beg pardon, sir, but I don’t know what you want to know.” His defensive voice returns. “They’re just *that*. Nightmares. They started just after I got back from ‘Nam. I don’t *know*, as you put it, ‘*what that’s all about*.’”

I nod. “Let me see if I can rephrase the question. How often do these dreams . . .er, uh . . .nightmares occur?”

Charles looks down at his lap, clears his throat. “When I first got back, only about once a week, but then they started coming on even more. Now, it’s every night. I try not to go to sleep because I know when I do they’ll start.”

He raises his head, eyes fixed on the wall behind my shoulder. His gaze never meets mine.

“Let’s go back. Tell me about the bad dream and anything you can think of leading up to it.”

1051 leans back against the worn velveteen and closes his eyes as if he believes feigning sleep can evoke the memory of the nightmare that disturbs him.

“It’s always the same,” he mumbles. “A midnight-colored sky and sparkling yellow circles floating around like balloons in the air.”

As he talks, his voice takes on a dreamy cadence. “Inside one of the balloons is a hideous face.” His voice cracks. “You’ve got to believe me, Doc. I’m not making this up.”

It’s the first time Charles has referred to me as anything but “sir.” He stretches forward to close the distance between us.

“It’s an old man, but his face isn’t attached to anything. It’s like a human head on a puppet stick. His skin is dark like old fly paper. I don’t know how I know, but I know he’s blind and his mouth is twisted in a scum-eatin’ sneer. There’s gaping spaces between his teeth. His mouth looks about to talk, maybe to put a curse on the world!”

Charles rolls his head to the side to rest his cheek against the chair. The tic below his left eye returns and throbs. He goes on, “Then three more balloons come into the midnight sky. Three more ghostly faces. Women. They’ve got skin like the old man’s, but black with graveyard dirt.”

His cheek, back against the velveteen, contorts and he chews on his lower lip. A bead of perspiration blossoms on his temple. “They look like sisters, three ugly hags with strands of gray hair combed and held together in back by tortoise shell combs. And the bad part, Doc, is that I never want to look because I know it’s like looking the devil in the face. Still, some evil forcer draws me there. And I’m afraid I’ll find that *thing* I never want to see at all.”

His eyes are still closed. “In the last part of this nightmare, Doc, there’s a basket woven of river reeds. It’s like some alien holds the basket and insists I see what’s inside it. The basket tilts and I see three dead babies.

“The last thing I know—the thing that always wakes me up – is a scream that sounds as if it comes from far away, but when I wake up, I’m sitting up and it’s me who’s doing the screaming.”

1051s eyes open and he stares across at me. The wan and exhausted stare of a hospitalized patient resting after a long illness. No more than that. Disturbing dreams are a classic hallmark of Post-Traumatic Stress Syndrome. Then, incredulous even to me, I find myself silently cursing, *That War! That Goddamned War!*

1051 says nothing, but his eyes beg for help. Helplessness is the side of Charles that reporters saw at his trial.

Perhaps inadvisably, I break the spell. “Did you have the dream when you were in the Marines?”

“No,” he responds in a tone that closes a conversation.

“Can you tell me about being in the Corps?”

“No,” he says again, and looks away.