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Purgation 24

The Scene

Loud hammering. BOOM! BOOM! BOOM!

Blaring green clock light: 1:30 AM. Fear.

Shin on furniture. Ouch!

Darkness. Light under door.

Scents: wet towel, dust, faint alcohol.

Cold knob. Opens door. Blinding light. Louder hammering. BOOM! BOOM! BOOM!

A back, turned away and hunched over, ramming a door onto its tracks.

My hands rise, flailing in fury! Images of slapping him! Fuming. Knots in neck and lower back. STOP! STOP!

STOP!

The back turns. Paul. Hands tap him but he doesn't respond. Glassy-eyed. Lost. Blank stare. Scent of alcohol pouring out of him.

Turns back. Continues. BOOM! BOOM! BOOM!

Slamming door. Throbbing ears. Louder heartbeat.

I zone out. I zone back in. Sweat beading. Pulse racing.

Time: 2:00 AM. One more day before I get my flight.

Door slams behind me. Anger. Racing heart. Just make him stop! STOP! STOP!

At dining table. Why can't anyone understand? Why are they just smiling?

Shawn. Simpering. So intoxicated. Unaware.

How to get his attention to speak to him?

Bottle. Small, plastic, light. Yes. Striking Paul's thigh.

Attention. Finally! It stopped!

No. RAGE. Enraged! Rage replacing glassy-eyes. Where is this rage coming from? Strong scent of alcohol coming off of him.

Paul stands. Hurling towards me with rage. Fists up, fury, no recognition, no understanding. Large man hurtling forward with so much rage.

Fear. Heart pounding. Small. Fragile. Vulnerable. Desperate. Stumbling backwards. Footing bracing for impact. My hands appear in front of me. All or none.

Right fist, left eye. In control. He deserves it. Again.

Blood! Streaming; gushing. Eye! Victory. Feeling high. Panic. Regret. Hate. Anger. Contrition. Loss of control.

Pain. My face! Backward step. PANIC.

Four hands shoving. Losing footing. Tumbling back. Two punching.

Bewilderment. Regret. Flight. Anger. Punch, push.

Gnashing teeth, twisted mouths, furious eyes. Hate, pure hate. Where is this hate coming from?

Save myself. Behind table. Clothes iron coming towards my head. Fear. Fear.

Flight. Fear for life. Phone.

Screaming desperately.

Running. Running. Outside. Darkness and cold.

Mouths moving. Arms moving. Threats.

Inside again . Crouching. White walls. White door. Green carpet. Warm.

Fear. Cowering. Heart pounding. Menacing faces.

Glimpse outside - red, blue. Dark figures approaching.

Finally. Relief.

Many. Six. Eight. Dark Suits.

Paul and Shawn mocking and laughing at them, but being protected against me.

Rough. Strong. Steel on bony skin. Cold. Fear.

Resignation. Defeat. Brown skin. Brown hand. Silver cold steel.

Looking down. Large, stern faces. No pants. Pants, shoes.

A grasping hand. Outside. Cold. Quiet. Surreal.

Car.

Jail

I am a criminal. Angry at the world. Evil. This is what criminals deserve. This is what I deserve. I accept the roughness of the police as they handle me. I expect and embrace it. It seems fitting.

The car drives to the corner and turns into the redoubtable brown walls. It seems absurd, even wasteful, that I'm being taken by car just a few buildings away. Wheels alternating between a quiet hum of new, smooth asphalt and a crunch of loose stones. Dark, then blinding light as the compound lights come awake. My legs are splayed apart in the back seat; designed that way. My thin frame hardly inconvenienced by the lack of space. I feel calmer as self-soothing sets in and I speak to the police officers, "How would anyone be able to sit in here?" I ask as I'm taken out.

"It's not for comfort; not for sitting."

His voice is casual, disarming. The contrast between the quiet, dark of the night and the jarring, sanitary white light as I am taken into the building elicits some fear, but really I'm intimidated and insecure. A strong feeling of regret crosses my mind. The station is white-walled and impersonal. Tall counters covered in eye-squinting glare and few people populate it. It is so late and it is desolate. There is some comfort in that. Anonymity.

I am led down a corridor to the back of the building. I am ashamed at being here. I see curious faces. I see bars, black bars. Like I've seen in the movies. These are things I should never be seeing. Yet here I am. An officer is sitting to the right; chair tilted back. Boredom in his eyes. There is an empty cell in front of me. I look at my chamber of reflection.

“I’m taking him to the back; to the last one.” The officer says, with a look of understanding passing between the two of them.

I’m led away, past two more vacant cells, all the way to the very last one. I look at the bars. They’ve been repainted beige, repeatedly until now they are seemingly swollen and disfigured. The walls are the same, but they are bright cream. In the dull, dreary station, in the very back where I am, the walls seem to be tortured and screaming. The officer opens up the cell. I look into his placid eyes. My visceral pangs call for his lips. He turns me around. My lonely skin relishes his rough, gentle touch as he removes the cuffs. I walk in. He rolls the gate into place. The feeling of waiting comes up on me. In my disorientation I ask for reading or writing material. “No.”

I look around. I feel unsure, fastidious, and unsettled. I look inside myself for comfort, but find none. My gut says I don’t belong here, but I do belong here. This is and isn’t me. Do all criminals feel this way or should I feel at home? I feel culpable. The two don’t go together. I examine what I’m feeling further, and see squeamishness and social anxiety underlying my mixed emotions.

The bench is dirty. I can’t sit on it. Do I have my inhaler? The walls, how could I touch them? Everything appears putrid and unsanitary. The combined stainless steel toilet and water fountain seems to be a mockery of sanitation. The only reason they could be together was the need for a water supply - impractically practical. How could I be this analytical when this is where I am? I am still not in tune my environment. I’m still fighting it. It smells of rank mop water and mellowed urine grown old to take on a moldy plateau. I look into the toilet, with

a slightly turned head as if I'm afraid to see what's floating in it. Yes, there is something greenish-black in there. Maybe it's my real identity. I flinch as if I'm afraid it will attack.

The air is still and cool. Those screaming walls are the same color as something in my childhood, but there is no comfort in that, but mockery. Every inch is covered with scratched-in names, notes and grievances. The front bars are too. It goes all the way up to the ceiling. So is the sturdy wooden bench - tattooed with carvings. I feel disoriented trying to read them. My eyes can't focus and want to close. A few voices in the front of the station talk about files. They sound far away, impersonal and unaware of my presence. The contrast between the immediacy of my sense of guilt, injustice and isolation against their calm, routine drone shakes me. I try to transcend my cell, forcing thoughts of the outside, and of the things I would rather be doing. My mind is sluggish and snaps back to where I am. What did I read in that Buddhist meditation book? Embrace the discomfort. How? I hear Paul's voice entering the jail. I hate him.

A flurry of activity rises. Boots on the cold, concrete floor become louder as they approach. Keys are jangling furiously. A paramedic arrives. Stud. He's with my handsome policeman. I scan them both from head to toe, noticing saliva accumulating in my mouth.

"Any injuries?" The medic asked gruffly.

"Nah," says officer Murphy.

I counter defensively, "I have a bruise here and my lip is cut." My defensiveness, too obvious.

“That’s nothing.” The paramedic retorts dismissively. His eyes looking at me with disgust, as if I were some sort of dangerous, captured animal. What is he seeing looking at me? He came from Paul’s direction and what he is seeing is the animal that had blackened the eye of the delicate, soft, white man.

“Could I have an alcohol wipe to clean these then?” I gingerly ask, but the paramedic turns and walks away. I am left dumbfounded. Is he really seeing what I really am, and my self-image is a delusion or affectation? Officer Murphy looks at me. Does he see a human? What am I really? I don’t know, but he calls after the paramedic and comes back with a wipe. I take the wipe hoping our fingers touch, but they don’t and officer Murphy turns to leave. I read an apologetic note in his countenance, but I’m not sure. I could be imagining all this in trying to make sense of it all. I look at him, my pupils dilate, his soft spoken manner pries them wider. I say thanks as he walks away, keys jangling. I glimpse at his squat, slightly bowed legs, his hips swaying, and I feel safe. Then I open the wipe and clean the bench. I only get three-quarters way down towards the end, by the front bars, before the wipe is a uniformed brown-gray. I roll it and the wrapper into a ball, look around for a receptacle and finding none, and by conscientious habit, put it into my jeans pocket. I collapse onto the bench in exhaustion, facing the bars and anyone who might approach for safety. Quiet returns.

The full aroma of the toilet seeps into my nose and mouth. I feel my stomach quiver. It dawns on me that I’ve cleaned the wrong three quarters of the bench, and my head is too close to the toilet. Still feeling wary and disgusted, I endure it, needing to keep a watchful eye toward the aisle and definitely not wanting to put my head on the uncleaned end of the bench. I feel unsure and vulnerable. I imagined all the possible filthy things that my skin could touch were I to turn and put my head there - the semen, blood and viruses. My bony frame seems to

be repelled by the hard wood each time I try to settle into a comfortable position. Finally, goose-bumped, and shivering, I cross my arms on my chest, stretch out my legs and doze off. Behind the flimsy curtain of sleep I hear voices. One is officer Murphy's and another police officer. I hear Paul, or is it him? I am not sure. A cell opens and shuts. I feel isolated, cold and twisted in loneliness. Sleep overtakes the sounds. Time passes slowly.

Walking and jangling keys pass back and forth. A female officer speaks. The officer sitting at the front of the cell block laughs. The TV station is changed and I can hear interest build in a sports show. Chattering increases. I can tell a small group is forming. A play is made, cheers erupt, then the group disperses as feet plod away. Official-sounding things are said, and keys begin jangling towards me. I become excited. I need attention.

The burgeoning onus of solitary confinement is seeping into my skin. I hear an older man's voice, and I forget about the tightening noose of emotions that was welling just before. I can tell he's a middle-aged black man. He's comfortable, casual and polite. He talks about his arrest, expresses regret and apologizes. The officer escorting him asks politely for his belt, reassures him he'll be back soon and reminds him he has to enter the cell. He politely obliges. It feels good to hear a voice close by. I want to talk to him. I want to know him. I want him to be my best friend and comfort me.

In and out of sleep I hear officer Murphy's voice in the distance and I see his face behind my eyelids. I feel calm, slightly aroused and then, the talking abruptly ends as the officer leaves from the adjacent cell. I feel alone again. Then speaking begins in the adjacent cell with the new visitor. It's a conversation, but the voices are so similar. The cop returns to ask the detainee if he's doing well. The talking ends. One man responds. He's so polite -

southern maybe - there's an accent. The cop leaves and I hear a quieter conversation. It slowly increases in volume until it is loud. The cop shouts, "Keep it down, okay?!" I slip out of restfulness. Looking around I feel restive again. How could anyone be expected to stay sane in this confining space? I do a few crunches like I've seen on television. It keeps me busy for a few minutes, but I'm tired.

The stench of the toilet wells up into my awareness and forces me to turn away. I come in full view of the hieroglyphic scratches covering the walls, bars and the wood bench. The endless, uniformed patterns surround me. I begin to feel panic. I question my sanity. How could I be in here? What happened? I must be mad, it's why I am here. I feel desolate and desperate. I still don't believe that sentiment fully. I question my attraction to my captor. I hear Paul's voice chatting with an officer. Alone, I resent him more. Why am I in solitary? The pattern draws closer. Goosebumps rise. The writing on the walls seem to twist, surround and encroach on my sense of self. I feel confined and I withdraw inside. My sense of self begins to fragment. My head is aching, knots behind my neck and in my lower back tighten, and I am scratching flakes and scabs from my scalp. I want to scream and let the angst and pain out, but I can't. I recall the look in the paramedic's eyes and it infiltrates my unguarded mind. His accusation becomes my self-concept. I am less than a civilized human after all - I am an animal. No more question.

The discomfort of my joints against the hard wood, the rank toilet scent and the joyous cheers at the television all nip at me. Finally, I am no longer better than the cell, or the jail, or the bench. They are all part of my identity. Nothing is icky. I turn away from the toilet and rest my head on the unclean end of the bench where my feet

were. Then I brace myself against the wall. I take a deep breath in and fall asleep, listening to the Chatterer's mumbling conversation.

"Hey!" I was startled up by the talker's clear and voluble voice. "Could I have something to drink?"

"Give me a minute." Came a response from the guard. Before long I could hear the now familiar sound of boots and keys marching in my direction. My heart synchronizes with it. I want to hide, now feeling like the criminal I am. Each time the cops come, I pretend to sleep as they peer into my cage. Shivering with bone against wood.

"Your medication is here. Are you okay?"

"Yes sir. You guys are wonderful. Thank you!"

"Here's some juice. It will just be a while longer, okay?"

"That's fine sir. I'm good. I'm so sorry for causing all the trouble."

As the police officer leaves, as the Chatterer begins to self-talk again, as the stench rises and the cold inundates me, I cross my arms over my chest, close my eyes and numb my mind. I zone off into sleep again.

"You're out! Here's your belt."

The Chatterer is leaving. He is up on his feet. The cell gate opens and his voice fades as he chats with his releasing officer. The quiet hits like a rock. I've been fearing it. My breathing and heartbeat pound in my ears but fail to comfort me. My mind seeks out sounds to distract it from the darkness beneath. There is no trickling water to ease the harshness of the quiet. As before, in the quiet, while I feel unsettled, reality again sinks in and flakes away any remaining resistance to what and where I am. I feel alone. The loneliness crawls deeper and dislodges the numbness I had put in place. My joints ache as if I am experiencing the flu. The distant voices at

the television exacerbates the ferocity of the realization. The lifelong loneliness that I had packed away oozes out again. I shiver more even as I sweat. My heart races and the hieroglyphics move and form a cage. The cell bars become more noticeable and meaningful. Panic sets in.

“You okay?” Officer Murphy asks.

“Yeah.”

“You’re a citizen right?” I feel fear as I look him in the eye. I hope I don’t betray my fear at the same time I try to be likable.

“Why do you need that information?”

“I just have to fill out this paperwork.”

“Resident.” There is a lingering feeling that what he is making into an innocuous difference will return to poison my life later on.

“Stand there and let me see your injuries. You’ve got a small cut under your left eye. A bruise on your shoulder. Is that a cut on your lip?” I feel two cuts on my lip.

“Yes.”

“He didn’t want to press charges.” I couldn’t tell if the expression on his face was one of regret or caution that I would take advantage of Paul’s apparent magnanimity.

“Could I see what he wrote?” I say, suspiciously. I look at it carefully and see that there is nothing on the sheet.

“Here, fill this one out.” He hands me a form with my name, address, and other identifying information already filled in with surprisingly neat and delicate hand writing. A bit of affection for him rises and departs. He walks away. I look carefully at the form, still suspicious there is a plot against me. I am listed as victim on my form and

I relax. I carefully scan the already filled-in check boxes and lines. I see Paul's injuries - bruised eye, cut lip. I read mine - cut under eye, bruise on shoulder, cut lip. The charge, domestic violence. Yes, it is the charge that I saw the officers decide on when they realized that Paul and Shawn were drunk, aggressive and beating me. It must have been their way of keeping them out of trouble, while punishing me.

He comes back. I can't help but admire the form of his crotch, his skin and his deep, blue eyes. Darker than any other blue eyes I've seen. His soft, tanned skin and thin, pink lips are appealing. His dark wavy hair and almost invisible freckles coupled with a patient demeanor set my heart alight. I want to trust him. I want him to take care of me. His stocky build, slightly bowed legs and the way they make his hips move when he walks, I like. His neatly clipped nails and soft fingers feel calming. I would do anything he asks. I want him to like me and release me. I glance at his crotch again and his ass.

"How much longer will this take?"

"A couple of more hours."

"Then can I go?"

"No. You were arrested. You have to go to Central Booking."

Whatever remnant of aloof optimism I had decays instantly. Even so, I ask, "How long will that take?" Hoping for something like a conveyor belt that will be fast. The image of me kneeling down limply and screaming comes to mind, but I feel self-conscious and I'm thankful I'm impassive.

"I don't know."

I feel misled. Looking at the form I notice some key information blatantly missing. “You didn’t fill this in.” I say, pointing to the blank circles indicating my roommate was incredibly drunk and I was the one forced to call the cops, not him.

“He was drunk and out of control.”

“Yeah, but some people are angry even if they aren’t drunk.” He says accusingly.

“Can you fill this in?”

“Yeah, I must have forgotten. I’ll go back and take care of it.” He says casually. He pauses and looks deeply into my eyes as though deciphering the very thoughts I had no insight into, then turns and walks away. I debate why he would have forgotten to indicate such important points. Feelings of distrust quickly arise and set in. I sit back down and the dust tickles my nose and the air comes in cooler and faster from the vent. I feel vulnerable, naked and most of all, alone. It is the eviscerating anonymity that attacks the soul of the hapless immigrant to New York City. Where dark skin shrouds a person in the shadows of people’s awareness and appreciation.

I hear a voice chatting casually. There’s a laugh. It sounds like Paul. He sounds happy. The betrayal seems certain. I feel lonelier and voiceless. I feel the pain of a thousand brown skin men. Just the color of skin speaks volumes between people - it speaks of shared values, ancestry, an underlying trust and assumption of shared thoughts and good character. Even my handsome face and articulate tongue can’t overcome the camaraderie that is taking place between Paul and the police officer.

A few seconds later, doubt sets in. Is Paul really is up front or is it's just my imagination again? The voice is too far away. Even so, the doubt can't quench the rabid sense of betrayal. It is betrayal. Betrayal. It was betrayal when Shawn portrayed me as the enemy at the arrest and it was betrayal when he huddled with Paul protectively. It is betrayal as I hear a familiar giggle and I picture Paul laughing. Is it betrayal of myself when I smile at the officer hoping to find empathy? Have I betrayed them by not realizing earlier that I am evil; a wolf in sheep's clothing? I am confused and stressed. Hurt. Hurt. Hurt. I am hurt at what I am and what I feel they are doing to me. I shrug hopelessly and with a deep breath my mind clears as it is settled again: I am criminal. Why do I keep questioning it?

I need to sleep. There is no other way to relieve this throbbing pain that envelopes my mind and body. I fall asleep.

An hour later officer Murphy returns with the 'corrected' form. I look it over carefully, and with distrust pulling my hand away from the pen, I reluctantly sign it. I feel as if I have contributed to something terrible in my future in doing so. Why am I so obedient?

"What time is it?"

"Five."

"How much longer?"

"I don't know. I have to send this paperwork over to the court."

"How long does it typically take?"

"Not long, but the machine is giving problems. I'm waiting for someone to come and fix it."

I haven't heard Paul in a while now, and I suspect I am the only one still being held and he was allowed to go home.

Betrayal. It is in the toilet stench, and the color of the walls exude it. The hieroglyphics that covered everything in the cell encode it and they all persecute me. Officer Murphy leaves and I lay down. I awake sometime later, turn and go back to sleep. I awake again. A change of guard, and inspection of the detainees takes place. I become some sort of curiosity as another officer tags along to get a glimpse of me "That's him?" As if disappointed by the sight of me.

"What time is it?"

"I don't know, let me check."

"Seven."

I am sleepless. There is a teasing bolt of daylight filtering through a tiny window at the right of the cell just beyond the bars. I hear cars drive by, and children scampering on their way to the subway. These sounds awake a yearning for the outside. I imagine what I would be doing if I weren't in here. I feel regret again - why am I so evil and uncontrollably angry? A second wave of emotional pain floods into my mind. Tears well up. It's not my fault becomes it's my fault, and I could've reacted differently. I am criminal and I belong here. There is blood to prove it! These feelings waver back and forth as I go through the scenario and the ways I could have avoided being here.

No. I am here, and this place proves what I am. It was inevitable. Exhaustion, cabin fever, anxiety, betrayal, distrust all combine into a hollow feeling in my gut and a shredding at the corners of my mind. I feel the ache in

my bones surface briefly. I fight it with more abdominal crunches like in the movies. I try focusing on something else - my trip, my new job, but nothing seems relevant. The present is swallowing everything - present and past and certainly whatever semblance of future I will have.

Officer Murphy comes back to ask if I am okay. I don't believe he sees me, but I answer anyway. He walks away as if I didn't say a word. It makes me feel blank and malleable. Any inkling of resistance to where I am goes. I submit totally to the walls, the stench, the bars and the cold as I feel them coddle me. I am in jail and with that I take a deep breath and empty my distended bladder into the murky, oozing water of the toilet. Nothing here is too dirty or unfitting; I am at home.

Laying down with eyes agape, feeling resolved, I read the wall scratches. They are names, love professions, confessions, dates and the gamut of emotions that have passed through this cage. Outside I again hear traffic. More pattering footsteps of children pass by. I hear giggling and laughing and I yearn to share in their joy. The sunlight grows brighter on the wall. More voices filter into the station. A new day is beginning outside, but for me, I am stuck; trapped. I yearn for the feel of sunlight on my skin after months of winter. My entire winter-ridden body aches for warmth. My mind cries out for its soft caress instead of this harsh, impersonal enclosure barring me from freedom. Television shows and movies are my only reference to coping with this confinement. I do more abdominal crunches to clear away the increasing restlessness and stir-crazy. I begin pacing back and forth restlessly, but soon feel like a Hollywood cliché, and I sit down and listen to my breathing.

I can't take it anymore. "Guard! What time is it? He said he'd be back three hours ago!" I really have no idea how long it has been, but the path of the sunlight on the wall makes me feel sure of it. What machine is he fixing? Officer Murphy comes not long after. He isn't impatient, but as patient as ever. His eyes calm me. His sun-kissed, smooth face cause a warming in my chest. My heart slows and I become obedient. The image of a dog, tail wagging comes to mind.

"What time is it?"

"It's 11. I will be coming back to take your fingerprints. Both of you will be in the same room. You should stay away from him. My face remains stiff and hard, and although I try to soften it, I can't. I am still defensive and angry. He can see it.

"I told him the same thing."

Something inside of me wants to say thank you for no reason and I quash it. I hug myself, listen to the sounds outside the window and withdraw into my ambivalence. The beam of light crosses the room. More detainees are brought in, but I remain alone in the last cell. There is something familiar in this isolation, but I can't think about it.

Finally, Officer Murphy comes again. He gives me that look that, earlier, I thought had meant something else, but now see it as cautioning. I feel like a heel. I have no favor, really. My shoulders drop, my teeth unclench and I raise my wrists to be bound. As I am led down the hall, I look for, but find no embarrassment. I am placed into a small room with a kiosk. He removes my handcuffs, firmly grasps my hand and presses fingers and palms

onto the platen. It feels warm and degrading. His touch doesn't communicate anything to me. This is harsh reality and there is no Paul here in the room.

Back in my cage I continue to swat away dread and optimism until I again hear keys and foot steps and my cage is opened. Again, not seeing Paul, I am convinced I've been framed and he is free.

Transport

Goosebumps pepper my body. I feel so cold. As I am led out of the cage, and refitted with handcuffs, I feel every cell in my body aching for even the slightest brush of sunlight. My thin wrists weighed down by their burden, are pulled forward by the anticipation of warmth. Towards the front of the station, I briefly become aware that I will be in public. Embarrassment wells and wanes. I'm told to stand outside of the station building. Thankfully, the tall wall keeps me from public sight. They had always seemed intimidating, but now I feel protected. Another man is waiting there. Middle-aged, light skin, coarse black hair, mustache. Gay? No. He seems angst-ridden; changing position constantly and twitching around the edges. He's wearing an evening blue t-shirt, black jeans and shackles around his ankles. They sing like a chorus in pain while grazing along the concrete floor. I wonder whether I will be shackled too, to him even, like a chain gang.

The warm breeze and hot air comfort me, and as I focus on the sensation they make, I let go of my thoughts. I don't ever want to go back indoors until I warm up, but that could take all day. The clear blue sky, with vague hints of clouds makes me want to escape if only to bask. It's all I want. That ever-present image of an endless lawn, two trees with a hammock and bountiful tropical warmth comes to mind.

“Got a cigarette man?” He looks at me with one eye, the other squinting in the sunlight.

“No, sorry.” I answer.

“These darn cuffs are cutting into my wrists man, loosen them, will ya?” He agitatedly asks the police officer standing behind us. Without pause, “That fuckin’ liar! I asked him if he had a cigarette, and he’s there smoking.” He says seeing another police officer off to the side smoking. Bulging on the right side of his forehead is a wavy blood vessel, like an earthworm, and his throat is vibrating with an excited Adam’s apple.

“Hey, cool it. Show some respect you know? Take it easy. You know he can’t give you a smoke.” I’m surprised by the policeman’s restraint.

“Yeah, yeah. I understand. He struggles with the handcuffs and grimaces to show his pain. Turning to me without skipping a beat, “He didn’t need to lie, you know. He just needed to say he couldn’t give me. He coulda given me one though. No one hurt. Hi, what’s your name man?”

I tell him my name and we awkwardly try to shake hands while they’re cuffed behind our backs.

“Carlos.” He introduces himself, “I need a fuckin’ smoke bad! Shit! These things’re cutting into my skin. They gotta loosen ‘em more, shit!” His stepping, his shoulders readjusting constantly, and mustache twitching side to side make him seem comedic yet dangerous. I look off to the side where the police officer is. He’s portly, white and in his own nicotine-induced world. His neck craned upward, smoke pouring out of his throat and his gut released to full distention. His body, stretched backwards, absorbing the bright sunshine at the front of the station. His own posture brings me back to myself. I inch toward the sunlight and stand there. Carlos is still struggling and still taking umbrage that he wasn’t given a smoke. I get a good look at him from the bit of distance

I've moved and comment carelessly, "Oh, your arms are shorter than mine, they don't fit around your torso, that's why the cuffs are bothering you." Just as the two cops are coming to move us. One grins upon overhearing me, "That's real nice."

Carlos looks at me with momentary clarity and insult, but then he sinks back into his agitation. We're taken into the sunlight. A light breeze whips my t-shirt. The warm afternoon sun heats up my skin to the point of comfort. This is the feeling I've been awaiting for the past 8 months. Being locked away and teased by the beam of sunlight through the window over the past six hours was driving me to the point of insanity. I wonder how anyone could remain sane in solitary confinement. Would I have adjusted eventually, or would I have been driven to madness? What about that whistle-blower the government had locked away?

We walk through the black, asphalted yard, past the citadel-like brick walls and onto the sidewalk where my heart almost skips a beat. I'm anticipating recognition by a neighbor. Their faces flash in front of my eyes and I am grasped by a sudden urge to disappear. Approaching voices and the sound of feet make me cringe and then I relax - a skate board. Some kids I've never seen. Glancing at me with only passing interest as they carry on. I continue to enjoy the sunlight on my skin. The assaulting spread of police cars that claims the neighborhood sidewalks is less irritating today. One of the two accompanying police officers attempts to open the van door with the key he just retrieved from inside. He utters out an expletive as the key fails to open the door. He awkwardly jogs back into the station.

"That's just wrong, man, they tricked me - asked me to empty my pocket. That's not legal, right?" Carlos asked the remaining cop referring to his arrest the night before. "They're not suppose to tell me to empty my pockets

without reason, and I was almost in front of my house too. Darnit! It ain't right. You can't just tell a man to empty his pockets, right?" He says, turning to the officer.

"I don't know man, I wasn't there."

"They told me that I was stopped because I had a weapon in my hand. I had a pencil! That's not legal. I need a smoke real bad."

As he fidgets with the hand cuffs, the officer opens the side door and motions me up into the back seat. It is a challenge to balance without arms or leverage in climbing up into the van and navigating into the back seat. I take pride in my nimbleness and refuse help. The van smells of sun-heated plastic and fake leather, gasoline, smoke and grease. The black seats are sun-warmed and the interior is hot. A smile crosses my lips and my frown melts. Carlos, with some false starts and lots of assistance, is able to lumber into the back seat beside me. I sit with my hands to one side leaning with the opposite shoulder into the seat. I'm comfortable. Carlos sits down. His face is in pain as he tries to position his arms comfortably. When he relaxes I see his eyes. They are wide, full of worry, agitation and wildness. His eye lashes are long and sweeping, amplifying his agitation. So does his mustache around his thin, pink lips. His standing black hair, against his light skin emphasizes each expression and each movement. As we sit, awaiting the officer to get another key, I ask him.

"What were you arrested for?" The word arrest almost chokes me as I embarrassingly push it out of my mouth.

"Possession." He says matter-of-factly.

"Of what?"

"Cocaine." This time his expression seems almost apologetic. I got the same feeling when a friend had told me he is HIV positive. I am no longer above the fray or detached. Life is everywhere; I am part of it. There is no

shock; no feelings of superiority or fear. I am just accepting and open. My curiosity piqued, I want to know more. He is chatty with withdrawal.

“What are you in for? A fight?” He asks, his eyes piercing me with curiosity.

“My housemate was drunk and we got into a fight.”

“What did they charge you with? Assault?”

“Domestic Violence.”

“Oh, that’s a misdemeanor. It’s nothing. You’ll be fine.” His familiarity and confidence with this reality is comforting. The officers are chatting in the cab seats, one carelessly blowing smoke out his window, with it blowing back into the van to smother me. The other driving with urgency. I wonder if I have an asthma attack what will happen.

“How long have you been using cocaine?” I return to asking Carlos questions.

“Oh, almost my entire adult life. Since I was twenty. What am I now? So thirty years.”

“What got you into using it?”

“I’m bipolar. Shit, they tricked me, saying I had a weapon and all I had was a stupid pencil. I should have dropped it. They couldn’t find that at night. Fuckin’ cops. I was almost at my house too. That’s illegal, what they did. They had no real reason to ask me to empty my pockets. It was in my pocket. Shit, this is bad!”

“Why?” I ask trying to get more information. I don’t know why, but hearing him talk about his history both keeps me from living in my own head and makes me feel less evil. He’s hesitant, as though he suspects me of being a spy.

“I got arrested a couple of days before for possession of weed. I don’t want to go to Riker’s.”

“So cocaine is more effective for your bipolar than prescription drugs?” I surprise myself by ignoring him being distraught. My lack of concern bothers me a bit. I’m so detached and clinical.

“No. I have medication. I need my medication right now. I just use cocaine, a small amount. I know how to use it.”

“Does it help or make your bipolar worse.?”

“To tell you the truth, I don’t think it makes a difference.”

“Have you noticed differences in your brain over the years using cocaine? Like forgetfulness or trouble concentrating?”

“Nah. I don’t use that much. But when I come down it drives me crazy. I need a smoke real bad now. You, you’re fine. They could get me for a double offense. They could send me away for a year. Oh God!” It’s as if ants are crawling over him. He’s still struggling with the handcuffs.

“They’re cutting into my skin. Bastards put it on too tight.” He twists his torso and winces, while the van shoots past familiar sights on Queens Boulevard. The smoke continues to billow into the van and down my throat.

“What is court like? I don’t know anything about this.”

“Oh! You’ll see a judge. They’ll give you a lawyer and the judge will decide where you end up, but you don’t have to worry. This is your first time, right?”

“Yes.”

“Yeah. Then you’ll probably pay a fine or do community service. You got no problem. I have to worry. A second offense in a couple of days. I hope I get a good judge.”

The van turns into a backyard off the main road. It seems odd, with dirt instead of lawn and wood planks lining a walkway. There're signs of construction. The weather is gloriously warm and bright, but as we're taken closer to the building there is a feeling of descent and darkness, but the ground looks leveled and I shake it off as tiredness. I had felt similarly when I was being taken into the back of the jail. My feet feel heavier than usual as we're escorted to a back door where one of the officers presses a buzzer and the door is unlocked. He pulls open the old, heavy door and I walk into a dimly lit, cold room. It smells like dust and dankness. I begin shivering. Recessed lighting hides faces and walls behind gloom. It now smells of cigarettes, old paper, distant toilets and someone's microwaved lunch. Each one hits me like a series of curtains.

A large, dark cell is right before us and there is someone pacing in the shadows. "Could I get a t-shirt or anything. I'm freezing cold." I get no response, as the giant gate is pulled aside and we're entered into it. Then before I get my bearings, it is slammed shut, giving intimate meaning to the term, 'the slammer'. The cold is penetrating and inescapable. Am I still iron-deficient? Is it why I am so temperature sensitive? I hug myself tightly for warmth. Above me the vent is spewing arctic hatred, as I move to a corner where it's blast is weakest. Carlos sits down across the room, next to a Black, scruffy man with handcuffs and shackles. Carlos' shackles have been removed. He seems intrigued by the stranger.

"What's your name?"

"Devon."

"What they got you for? Assault?"

"Yeah."

“Repeat offense?”

“Yeah.”

“What do you think the judge’ll give you? A year?”

Without looking at Carlos, and having only glanced at me once he answers with the coolness of total resignation,

“Riker’s for five or so ...” He says, looking down at the ground.

“Oh Gosh! I don’t want to go to back to prison. I hope I get a good judge.” Carlos goes up to the bars and calls out an officer. “What time does the judge come? Who is the judge?”

Devon is quiet, pacing back and forth; shackles dragging on the dirty cement floor disturbing dust into the air. It looks and sounds threatening.

“How long will this take?” I ask Carlos, distracting him from his futile attempt to get answers out of the police.

They pretend we’re unseen and unheard, and go about their business and conversations.

“I go directly to the judge because I have an open case. You have to wait. I don’t know, it depends on how many people there are and the time the judge comes.” I feel reassured, in a schadenfreude kind of way, that in context, my case seems trivial, but I’m suspicious of such complacency. I despise Paul for causing this and a shot of anger lodges above my heart. I hadn’t thought of him in a while, but now, I definitely hate him. It is smoldering, red hate - the type of hate that bleeds red, throbs and leads to violence. It is hate because I didn’t know who he was, under his jolly exterior. The hate that came out was too intense. Who knows where he is. Certainly not here. It seems more likely that I am the only one jailed and now in this purgatory.

A few minutes later Devon is removed to be taken before the judge. It elicits a feeling I had as a child when seeing a cow taken to be slaughtered. Carlos wishes him luck. He barely glances at the well wisher, his mind somewhere else. I turn to Carlos, "Is Riker's scary?" Why did I ask that? I have no idea. Why does it even matter to me?

"No, Upstate, that's real prison. Riker's is like a live-in facility. You get to do outside. Prison upstate, you're in lock down. That's bad."

Just then the cage once again opens and swallows two more detainees. One is a tall, husky Latino man with cuts and bruises. His silence is intimidating, his appearance is attractive. The other is a South Asian man of my height but sturdier built, with long hair and a bloody scalp. It's difficult to see his injuries because of the dim lighting and his long, black hair. I wait for him to walk across a beam of light. Both men are covered in red. The South Asian man has his left hand bandaged, blood seeping out, and I can now see shiny staples in his scalp, between the tangles of hair and clotted blood. He is handsome. Carlos is intrigued.

"What you in for, man?" He asks the Hispanic man.

The two men who arrived together, separate to opposite sides of the room and nod to each other. Then the Latino man, without looking at Carlos sits on the opposite side of the room, "Dog fighting." As he tucks his head to his chest to close his eyes.

"What do you think you'll get?"

"Five years." There was no inflection or emotion in his voice, just flat and matter-of-factly. Even his voice itself is not deep or high-pitched, but ... flat. The blood and the nonchalance get under my skin. The cold air aid them

and I begin to feel afraid again. This talk of being locked away doesn't help. I push back the emotion and go to the bars. "Could I get a t-shirt or shirt or anything? It's so cold." I ask a passing police woman.

"I'll look but I doubt it." That's the last time I see her.

The officer that chaperoned Carlos grabs the key from a room directly across from the cell, with a large sign in large, bright red handwriting, "No firearms allowed in room. NO EXCEPTIONS!" He retrieves the key, calls Carlos over and they disappear into the shadowy back of the larger room. Carlos is still saying out loudly that he hopes he gets a good judge. I sit alone, eyes cast down. Intimidation growing now that the distraction of Carlos is gone. The cold renews its assault. My mind buckles a bit and doubts about my identity appear. Who am I? Lightheadedness, dim lighting and shallow breathing add to the question. I pull my legs up to my chest. Feelings of anger seep in. I look over towards the men. Their calm, butchered appearance speak of guilt, anger, fighting, clotted blood, death, vulgar animals and unsaid emotions. I may be criminal but I am still afraid of them. I pull away, afraid that association itself will change me.

After a while, my gut reasserts itself. Light-head, knotted gut, tight skin and tenuous rejection of my presence among these men start throbbing. I close my eyes, but it becomes worse. In a last ditch effort to prove that I am different, I ask again for a t-shirt taking pride in my grammar and diction, but I am ignored. I hear an officer comment on someone else's lunch, and I realize again that all my sphincters were locked tightly. I had not used the toilet in all this time and no need to. My body itself was in some type of limbo.

Entering

It is familiar now - the jangling of keys and the sound of boots. I notice shades of color in the gray, dimly lit dungeon. I am summoned as Carlos was and my handcuffs reapplied. I am taken to a counter, passed through a metal detector and patted down. I've never been patted down so thoroughly. I hoped to feel joy from it, but there is nothing. My body is as limp as my spirit.

“Stand right there! No, closer to the counter. Closer! Good. Stay right there!”

Rough hands position me. The gloom is thick against the blinding glare of the columns of light dropping from the ceiling.

“Where is your ID?”

I signal to my right pocket where the arresting officer had placed it almost a day before. A brusque hand retrieves the card and the officer confirms my identity, slipping it back without notice. A silhouette way behind the counter instructs me to look up at a piece of paper hanging high above his head. I look, as a blinding light comes on. I squint, as an even brighter flash inundates the room for a moment, leaving me startled. I'm then instructed to turn to the side and again the light sequence follows.

I am numb. There is no physiologic reaction to this. A mug shot never comes to mind and I feel as though I've been bleached of something, but I can't put my finger on it. It might be that core belief that I am inherently a good person washing away completely. I am placed to stand in front of a sheet of paper on the counter for me to sign. I consider signing with a fake signature, but I am afraid. The police officer behind the counter verifies the signature, then takes a copy of the photo he's taken and staples it to the form.

The photo pulls me into it and I am mesmerized. It's the only thing in the room that seems to be lit at that moment. It's upside down, "Is that me?" I ask absentmindedly. I don't think it is. He's handsome, attractive but cold and hard. I see a criminal. No feeling in those harsh eyes. I just can't be me, but I could be with him. He's a criminal though, how could I feel attracted to him? What am I saying?! This is crazy! My body feels drawn towards the man in the photo, eyes bulging. Then the photo is turned right-side up but I still don't recognize the face.

Definitely handsome, but pale, featureless and mean. A chiseled face with each wrinkle, each imperfection looking like cracks and pits. The hair, black and short. Shadowy facial hair is both attractive but typical of such characters - rough, mean and inhuman. His thick and dark eyebrows, the small cut under his eye and bruise on his full lips add to the the confusing appeal. Confused, pleased and slightly aroused. I want a copy of it. I wish I could keep it to admire. I'm proud. Is this the only thing I have to hold onto?

"This way!" The gruff voice commands and I walk towards the back into the gloom. Each step continues to feel heavier, and the floor, tilts downward.

The Holding Pen

Bored. Hostile. Agitated and languishing. There is a stench of old urine in the air. I sigh relief as we turn away from the holding pen and land in front of the medic desk.

“Any injuries?”

“Just this.” I say, pointing to under my eye. My asthma. I think of using it as an excuse to help me. Would it be an excuse? I have no inhaler. Intimidation silences me.

“None.” Came the assessment. I turned to the cop beside me, “Do I go in there?” With an incredulity that he must have enjoyed crushing.

“Yess.” Came his response, with an emphasis on the ‘s’.

“Is there any other place for me to go? How long will it be?”

“That’s all I know.”

With that I am taken to the cell, my handcuffs removed and the gate opened as I walk into the snake pit feeling dread. All eyes turn to profile me. I look around, trying not to betray my fear, as I search for a place to sit. There is none. I timidly walk over to a clearing next to the toilet and stand. Each glance I make is to seek comfort; a friendly stare or even familiarity. I am shivering again from cold and from fear, but I quash each tremor. Not eating for so many hours has left me weak, even if not hungry.

Directly in front of me, to the right of the cell is a native South American-looking man in a black suit with well-combed, slick, straight hair. I imagine he was at a wedding or a waiter in an upscale restaurant. I remember many years before walking by a Mexican wedding when a fight broke out on the sidewalk with broken bottles and spilt liquor. I wonder if he was in a fight at a wedding.

To his left is a middle-aged, Korean man. I congratulated myself for recognizing his ethnicity. I had a Korean friend who taught me how to do so. A blank, humiliated look plastered on his reddened face is highlighted by

his neatly shaped eyebrows, the pink t-shirt, stylized eyeglass frames and metrosexual jeans. Eyes down, he observes his square-toed shoes. Next to him are three younger black men, ordered large to small, with hoodies covering their sleeping faces; left to right. Feet sprawled out in front of them.

On the next bench, against the back wall to my right there is a husky, Puerto Rican man. Baseball-capped, pastel-colored t-shirt and eyes that seem to meet mine whenever I look in his direction. He's ruggedly handsome. The t-shirt, his soft, pink skin and my inclination to see him as an ally all paint him in a rosy, attractive hue. I hope he's gay. That must be what his eyes are telling me. I hope he knows that I am too. It gives me a bit of comfort to have another gay man in here. If this were prison I'd be his for protection, like I've seen in TV shows.

The gate opens and the Dog Fighter and the South Asian from the previous cell arrive. One of two young ladies was chatting with the supervising female police officer comes over to the side of the pen. She steps next to the well dressed Latino man and calls a name. One of the men from the end of the bench goes over to the bars where she is. I hesitate to take the spot, too concerned about courtesy, dominance, and without missing a beat the South Asian man with the bloody hair goes and plops into the spot. He adjusts himself and lowers his head to rest. His boldness confuses me. It doesn't match my expectation of a South Asian. There is a feeling of disappointment because I wanted him to be more like me. I can smell the clotted blood on his scalp and clothes as he passes by. He's cradling his bound hand.

The dialog between the woman and her interviewee is quiet, but I strain to listen. I hear a name and employment. The Dogfight Man gives into tiredness and sinks down into a stooping position. A few minutes later he sinks down to sit on the dusty concrete floor, arms folded across his chest and cap pulled down over his face. I admire his courage as I look at the toilet wall he's backing against with disgust - covered in runny, brown-yellow splotches, even as my legs waiver, my back aches and my eyes and mouth become dry standing in place. Another name is called and another space is vacated and filled. The police woman behind the desk scans the cage with bright, entertained eyes. A smirk firmly planted on her glossed, pink lips, framed with black wavy hair below her hat. Those dark eyes, set against pale skin, expressed the pleasure of the Black Widow - entertained and aroused by the sight of young, rough, virile men trapped and restless. Jungle fever? The beams of light from the recessed ceiling lamps above her desk create a sense of aloofness and superiority as she looks across the passage way to us. Our eyes meet and as before, I hope she can see the difference in my demeanor. If there is any hope of telepathy, now is when I want it to work. My sphincters clamp, as the stress in my back grows and as my legs grow weary. I hope she can see the plea in my eyes - that I am in need of help - a gay, delicate man could be damaged in this cell. Again, I close my eyes and picture myself in that green and warm place. As before, my imagination flickers and falls apart like a broken television. The scents and temperature hook into my mind and drag it back. I give up trying to escape.

I imagine pleading with her silently at the corner of the cell where the young woman is interviewing the men. No, they would hear. I can't risk it. I grow more petrified. A thin and short, brown-skinned man comes into the cell and stands to my right. I give him a glance over and feel a sense of familiarity about him. I want to talk

to him, but I stay silent. Old fears flood back - of betraying my sexuality and the danger if I did. Memories penetrate my mind and body of taunts and news of killed gay men conveyed in cruel humor. The curiosity and need for comfort grows. Something like curiosity gets the better of me and I ask him, "Where are you from?" He whispers, with much effort and seemingly far more afraid than I am, that he is from the same country as me. He hadn't the will or want for camaraderie. In that second I once again feel isolated. The surroundings are filthy, but here, I was more afraid of the silent growls and the smell of volatility in the air. Just as that thought of just letting go crosses my mind, as my eyes are on the brink of watering, my name is called by one of the young women.

Stiffly and self-consciously, I cross the cell to her impatient eyes. Immediately they dart into her digital device, onto which she's typing the prisoner information. She's uncomfortable, attracted, distracted and intimidated by the men she's interviewing. Her eyes lowered and fixed on the screen, the same way I look away when I am afraid of betraying my lust. Any sign of affection feels like ambrosia to me, even if imagined. The policewoman stands, smirk in place. Once in a while, between interviews, she chats with one of the two interviewers who are registering the detainees. Her eyes glow in taking stock of her charges. Intermittently, police officers pass back and forth from one side of the aisle to the other, chatting, laughing or stone-faced. A black police woman, bursts through the door immediately to the right of the pen, gutturally laughing, looking back into the still open door, "Fuck you mutha fuckers! You got a fuckin' small dick, that's why!" She does a 180-degree turn and heads back into the door, oblivious to the onlookers because they are below her.

The cage is filling up fast. There's hardly room to stand. Even in the cold, sweat is coating my skin.

“I’m hungry! When’s the food coming?!” Shouts one of the detainees.

“Hold on!” Responds a male officer who has just brought in another prisoner.

With that, he fetches a milk crate full of mini cereal boxes and mini milk cartons, opens the cage and thrusts the tiny boxes into outstretched hands. Desperately, feet tripping over feet as the men grab for food, I see the look of masochistic pleasure in the eyes of the Black Widow, as the male officer continues to throw food into the den. I stand away, unable to eat the rations. Cereal then milk are poured sequentially into sky-raised mouths. Their already honed technique catches me off guard and I am both impressed and taken aback. Slurps, grunts and tongue slaps patter the air, mixed with scents of sugar. Curses of gratification ring out, “Fuck yeah! I was starvin’. How long they tryin’ to keep us without food?”

I finally sink down to a squat with only my lower back gingerly touching the fetid toilet side wall. My head is craned forward and down as the inmates become relaxed, now satiated. The friendliness becomes chatter. I remain quietly observant and withdrawn. As the minutes pass - coming on to an hour, eyes again begin to close or zone out. I see attractive-looking men go behind me and unzip. Then I hear horse-like showers pouring into the toilet. Even behind the stark reality, I feel aroused. I combat it with furtive eyes, even while by habit, my body crawls with excitement. The scent of concentrated urine mixes with the sugary scent of cereal, cologne, and body odor and it feels comforting. I inhale the musk, feeling it embrace me, and close my eyes until an uncontrolled fart shatters my romanticism of peeing. I turn my head and my eyes meet with those of the Latino man in the baseball cap. If he smiles; if he does anything to show me he’s interested, I’d go and sit next to him. I’m confused by this. Would he dare smile at me in here?

More detainees come in. Out of the dying chatter comes one voice that seems most excited. He gets my rapt attention, almost mesmerizing me: thin, young, handsome with large, almond-shaped eyes and full, pink lips. He's the one I'd heard saying his boss accused him of stealing in retaliation for something or the other while he worked at a grocery. His eyes are wide, his teeth, beautiful and his light-olive skin smooth and his kinky hair black form an attractive man. He stretches and raises his white oversized t-shirt in the process, I turn away to the Black Widow. The smirk is firm, but the gleam in her fixated eyes turns it into hard, ravenous lust. He goes over to the bars and drags something across it, shouting for more cereal, reminiscent of so many prison scenes. The male officer shouts back that feeding time is a long way off. Hearing the grating sound he's making causes a mischievous smile to cross his beautiful mouth. There's no way to hide my admiration and I follow his face like a charmed snake. He reaches down to the hem of his sagging pants, all eyes are peeled on the performance, and he deftly removes something from it. His smile is anticipatory and brighter.

"I can't take this shit yo! A nigga got to eat. What the fuck?!" I cringe at the words. His beauty had lulled me into expecting poetry or eloquent, refined speech? He looks around, "This is how you do it. I need a smoke, but luckily, I got something better." He carefully places the unseen object at the back of his tongue, tilting his head back. Seeing his open mouth and outstretched tongue makes me imagine him plundering me with a deep kiss. It gives me as much pleasure as what he places on his tongue gives to him, even as I sink into a desolate, dry sense of astonishment and fear unable to look away. As the drug takes its effect, he lifts his t-shirt to his shoulders and passes his hand across his torso. My eyes, despite my will, cling to the sight of his happy trail, his abdominal

muscles and all that is manly about him. I know what the black widow is feeling. My eyes gaze from eyebrows, to nose, to lips, to Adam's apple, to chest hair and nipples, to navel and then to the narrowing path of hair just before his red, checkered boxers push my eyes back into my head. I can't stand up without displaying my arousal. Images of what lie below the belt-line comes to mind. Sensations of sex erodes all other thoughts and I lose track of my surroundings. Only a few seconds pass before those long-rooted fears pull my eyes away to keep me safe. My tongue relaxes away from my teeth. My emotions are in a knot. My sphincters are locked. Crawling sensations attack my hands and feet. I feel the pressure of tears behind my eyes. I breathe deeply. I am feeling panicked. My eyes grow moist. I breathe deeply again and rest my head to hide any tears. I can't show weakness. What if anyone saw the look in my eyes, even for a second? I breathe deeply again and turn away from my feelings, back to the oratory that he is giving. On second thought everyone in the vicinity is absorbed into his demagoguery and it's unlikely anyone has seen me.

His speech grows louder by the minute, until he is delivering an emphatic sermon. All eyes are on him.

"I am from the Middle East! You know what they do to criminals? They cut off their limbs or heads. There is no crime there. Why would you lock up someone. It just says that they can do it again. That's why there is crime in America and none in the Middle East. If a man and woman are not married and they fuck, they get lashes or death. There is no crime because everyone knows the consequences and there is no escape if you get caught. Why you think there are no faggots? Faggots get hung like they should! None of that bullshit!" As he says those words, our eyes meet and even if by accident, I am convinced he is directing this part of his sermon at me. My head grows lighter. I crouch more tightly to where I can smell my crotch and the dankness of the floor. The fear

I am feeling is very familiar, almost like a lover. It's perplexing that this man with a Bronx accent and thuggish demeanor is preaching Middle East morals. He exudes so many perceived contradictions. Then I realize I am also full of socio-economic contradictions.

He becomes wilder and more animated. Then his eyes catch hold of the young woman finishing up her interview at the outside corner of the cell, then a woman exiting the door to the right of the cell redirects his attention. A cat call rings out to the woman. She looks back, smiles and continues on. The Black Widow seems piqued by his commanding and chaotic presence, as though hoping his attention will turn to her. His attention goes back to the interviewer.

"Mmmm ... look at you. You're so beautiful. Gorgeous. You look so nice today sweetheart."

She ignores him, so he increases the intensity of his attention-seeking. As he continues, it's as though his words are applying a force onto her. Her shoulders round forward, her head lowers and she is pushed to the other side of the aisle.

"I got a nice cock for you!"

"That's enough! How can you say those things to her? Don't you have any respect? Be quiet!" The Black Widow barks. It seems as though she was enthralled by the display of his carnal lust, ignoring the harassment until it became too much. There is a slight look of regret in her face as she barks.

He jerks out of his high, his eyes reverting to awareness as he assumes a humbled posture and quickly apologizes, then settles onto the ground. Shoes off under a bench, hat over his face and in the middle of the cell floor he stretches out and falls asleep. All other eyes seem to close with the passing of the show.

I see faces that remind me of my own. Skin the complexion of mine, a nose of my father, eyes of my mother and hair like my sister's. My multiracial background makes it difficult not to see resemblances in everyone. They resemble family. There is one man who looks well off, another who looks like a father, another, a young student and so many who I find attractive. They could be my family or friends. I had listened to them as they spoke and I heard educated, articulate voices, and foreign accents. Each of them reminds me of myself, as though I were represented in each one. With that realization they are monsters no longer, and neither am I. The thought of family takes my mind back to my relative who I am suppose to visit. The feeling of familial warmth and all the nuanced emotions of belonging surface. It has been such a long time since I thought of myself as part of a family, and I hope to see her to reconnect. It would be a new beginning and one I need after this experience. I need to know who I am.

I see no white faces among the thirty or so men. In a borough of over two million, how is this? The feeling of living through a great realization sinks in. I am one of the underclass by virtue of being brown and immigrant. We are presumed guilty and treated as such until we become it. I see it so clearly across the sleeping faces. I doze off with it in my mind. I think of how, after segregation in this country, there was no systematic cultural shift to eradicate prejudiced social habits from becoming tacit. So now I live in a society in which television projects stereotypes and people act out legacy cultural norms they have no awareness of them. Shawn and Paul are gentrifiers, and I am what they are gentrifying. They moved to the City to fight their symbolic wars with people like me, that their media convey, and their government fight in my country overseas. Now I see the difference between niceness and equity.

I feel the need to urinate, but I'm not going anywhere. I'm shy. I'll be out of here soon enough and then I can use the toilet.

"What time is it?" Someone asks. I try viewing the clock on the wall perpendicular to the cell.

"Six."

At the announcement there is a flurry of activity. Personnel begin to leave and others arrive. With that, the interviewers and the Black Widow withdraw into the shadows of a back area. Minutes later she reappears out of uniform to clean the desk, glance at us all in the cage without a smirk and leaves chatting with another female cop. Her hair is now down and her face relieved of superiority. She's wearing jeans and a t-shirt that transforms her into a homely working class woman - plain and unremarkable. How important that uniform was. Staff continue to leave and arrive. Again hunger bears down on the men around me. One goes to the bars and calls out, "I'm hungry! When does the food come?!" He holds onto the bars and shakes the gate, looking at it like a child looks at a toy.

"Hold on! No one is here as yet." Someone unseen says.

The hungry man settles down as a tall, white policeman arrives at the desk. His face is in a grimace as he examines it. He rolls his eyes and leaves. The detainees begin waking. I rise to my feet and stretch. He returns to the desk with cleaner and paper towels. In exaggerated sprays, swipes, and breathy swears, he furiously cleans it.

"Fucking pigs. How could they sit here and not clean it?"

The medic nurse greets him, but he seems awkward transitioning from contempt to camaraderie. He sits down and opens a newspaper, vigorously shaking it to straighten the pages. Another officer comes from the door to the

right and places a stack of folders at the far right of the desk. The newspaper-reading officer, annoyed by the placement of the stack, takes them up and taps them on the desk to neaten the bundle. Unexpectedly the papers in the folders slip out and scatter onto the floor.

They whip up his rage as if it were the dust on the floor. His eyes are filled with embarrassment and fury. “This is all your fault you fucking fuck-ups!” His sleek hair stands on end like porcupine quills, his eyebrows follow and his mustache screams, “Who gives a fuck if the files aren’t in the correct order! I don’t! I’d leave you fucking asses to rot. You should all die and do us all a favor!” His outburst seems to calm him and puzzle most of us. We look at each other bewildered, but most of us seem desensitized to such things. I am more amused now than intimidated.

Separation

At seven o’clock an officer comes and calls out five names. He opens the gate and takes them down the corridor. One is missing, and he calls the name again. It’s the sleeping Preacher. The men around try to wake him, but he’s too deep in slumber. A couple of men take up urgency and shake him awake, but the officer has written him off and slams the gate shut just as he wakes up.

“Fuck!” He shouts as he scrambles for his sneakers.

“Yeah, you fuckin’ retard. I got no sympathy for you. Stay there! As a matter of fact, I’ll put your file last! Shit!”

Says the distempered officer as he dramatically puts the folder at the back of the stack.

I strain eyes, ears and neck to learn where they are being taken, but all my senses fail me. Nevertheless I feel relief as things appear to be moving along. About fifteen minutes later the angry officer takes another set of folders, calls the names, including mine, and another officer leads us down the hallway. Expecting a judge, I feel a sense of desperation as I'm placed into another pen. This one seems calmer. I survey the scene and see men strewn around like pieces of paper. Some are sleeping on benches. The Korean man is in a corner standing. He is eternally red-faced worried. I overhear him talk about his wife and I debate if he really is straight or if he is just avoiding controversy. In the end I decide he really does have a wife.

There is an attractive Middle Eastern man - dark features, thick, black hair, long hairy limbs and hunk all over. His baritone voice complements his dark features. Over to the side, a younger Latino man is sitting. He's open and friendly - native Mexican maybe. At the back of the room I see an elderly man sleeping. Resealable bags filled with sandwiches are scattered around the floor. There's a mini milk carton lying carelessly in the middle of the cell.

Excitement takes hold of me at the sight of a phone. I'm last in line so I stand around observing the others. The line grows longer behind me as men who have just used the phone line up again. I find it charming that we are being polite by limiting the length of our conversations. As my distance to the phone grows shorter, I realize that I don't know who I will call. I'm panicked, even sweating. Why am I so emotional and indecisive?! I focus. I breathe. I lower my head and close my eyes tight and hope a face pops into my mind.

Uncle? No. I am ashamed and I couldn't, but I need to speak to someone. I just need contact with the outside world; with someone familiar. I just need to hear a familiar voice and feel that person's strength. Who could I find to give me some form of comfort while keeping this dirty secret? I breathe in and out slowly and a face comes to mind. No. I won't. I can't. I start to feel warm, sweat is beading on my forehead and under my arms.

There is time to think this through, I tell myself even as I feel my heart and mind racing. I turn and look into the cell across the aisle - crowded, busy, chaotic and noisy. I observe the one I'm in. I hear silence. I feel calm. There is less danger. I feel my sphincters relax.

"Yes. You have to call the number and ask if my case is in the court." I overhear the last caller say as he hangs up the phone. He is a stocky black man with a shaven head, neatly dressed with a beige short-sleeve shirt, black slacks and neatly polished black shoes. I see some long ago military training. I recognize the remnants of his accent, and his demeanor. He is from my country too. His head is lowered, much like the Korean man's, in shame and worry. He walks to the front of the cell and truculently leans on the wall opposite to the phone.

There is only one person I can call. Hollowness takes hold and I feel like a rat completing a maze only to find a trap in the center. He is to blame. I shouldn't lose face and reach out to him. He cultivated this! In the same thought, as I rebel against what I'm about to do, my hand reaches for the phone. I will call Shawn. Don't I always? Am I empowering his act of aloof innocence by reaching out? Am I letting myself enter into his placement of

occurrences whereby he will be my savior, and his culpability will be forgotten by history? I lose a little more of who I am.

As my hand reaches for the receiver, all I can do is focus on it, willing it not to compete the deed. The phone is the same as those found in dorm rooms and elicits a mix of dark nostalgia. It is reminiscent of homophobic events, and uncertainty followed by joy and relief. This isn't any call, it is one made in a moment of desperation. My mind is formative and dependent and I give myself to him. Relief swats away caution.

It rings out. I leave a voice message and breath relief at avoiding hearing his voice. Without delay I hang up the phone as though he'll pick up and speak on the other end of the line, and I shuffle over to the other side of the room towards the benches. Exhaustion and hunger are setting in. The Mexican has already taken the open bench where I wanted to lie down. So I go over to the small congregation of inmates at the front of the cell.

"Where are you from?" The attractive Middle Eastern man asks, looking up to me from where he's sitting. His bushy eyebrows, deep-set eyes and tanned skin calling my attention. There is something soothing in this distraction. I misinterpret it as interest, losing track of my environment. I furtively look at his thick stubble, long legs, crotch, hands, and well shape lips. The sensation of a man's stubble grazing my neck and jawline floods my senses. I stare deeply into his eyes, without realizing that years of social anxiety and hiding in the closet betrays my need to communicate this potential shared interest.

He's disappointed that I am not from his country, obviously looking for comfort in shared culture and language.

Feeling disappointed, I turn to the stocky, black man to inquire about his background. He hesitantly admits, almost under his breath, that we are countrymen. He moves away to talk to the other DUI inmate - the Korean man. I feel out of place for a moment as I realize I am more comfortable here than he is. How is that?

“How long until the judge?” I ask, looking at no one in particular. Just getting out of here will make me so happy.

“Who knows? I’ve been here since Thursday and that guy there? He’s been here since before me.” My countryman says, pointing to a older gentleman sleeping in the far corner of the cell. My heart sinks.

“But I don’t know because people have come in after me and gone already.” I feel relieved.

“Maybe it has something to do with whether they have private lawyers or court-appointed lawyers. Connections.”

He looks at me suspiciously and moves away to the Korean man. I’ve seen this behavior before in other people from my country, but I’m unsure whether it is due to shame that the two of us together here bring shame our country, or that he, personally, is ashamed to reveal his origin.

“Feeding time!!!” A deep voice rings out as a crew of black men in striped orange and white jump suits come into view. They walk with easy knees, almost bobbing along in a relaxed manner. It seems so out of place - me with my serious, panicked outlook and these men almost dancing in step. One is rolling a large, gray trash can, another busy with a broom and dustpan. A third is carrying a milk crate filled with plastic-bagged sandwiches. The fourth is holding a insulated container of hot beverage.

“Cheese or peanut butter?” Asks the one with the sandwiches. He’s good humored. My acquaintances go over with earnestness and outstretched hands, and grasp at the rations. I have flashbacks of feedings at the zoo and newscasts of Black Friday rampages and cringe a little. My cellmates are bright with expectant satiety. My legs

feel weak as I realize I won't share in their enjoyment. I look down at my shoes where I see my toe poking through the side. I have no socks. I feel thinner. Already the third man is quickly handing out the milk cartons as the first one comes into the cell, removes the filled trash bag tied to the bars and lazily sticks another between the bars and leaves it to sag out onto the floor. Number four and three bring canisters of coffee and tea, serving them in miniature styrofoam cups. I lurch at the hot beverages, then recoil at the sight of Styrofoam filled with steaming liquid. Am I still out of touch with reality? Why am I still concerned with food contamination and environmental responsibility above warmth?

At the corner of my eyes I see my cell mates withdraw from the bars, transforming into squirrels with treats - heads tilted, mouths and hands grasping at food, backs turned away. My stomach growls as I look on, unable to eat bread or milk. I feel a bit faint as the sight and scent of food enter my senses. The bread and its sweet, starchy scent and the salty, milky cheese permeate the air and pull at old feelings from childhood and neighborhood bakeries. Scenes of childhood contrasted with my present environment make me melancholic. Darn these emotions. I see a small packet of mayonnaise desperately torn open with teeth and squeezed onto a cheese sandwich, with trembling anticipation. I walk over to the sagging trash bag and tie it to the bars and hold it open for another detainee to discard his waste. Another man drops his half-eaten sandwich onto the floor, a look of surfeit disgust across his face.

Across the way, there is a surge in rowdiness as the food arrives, and then quiet as they eat. I look on to see all of the other men from the previous cell, save me and the black countryman and the Korean man. I feel safe. I

comfort myself with the thought that there is some saving grace in being in the calmer of the two. The rowdiness and excitement grow again in the other cell. Looking across the way into that cell seems like penetration through social pretenses and awkwardness. The men are boisterous and unruly, but there is no aggression. The familiar faces I see are less subdued. The pastel-shirted Latino man from the previous cell has taken off his cap and it has transformed him into something different. He is no longer attractive, and seems boorish.

There is a loud guffaw and the preacher is again excited. I zoom out and see a cage full of wild testosterone, reminding me of the constant motion of mice in a colony cage. There are dynamics of territorialism, hierarchialism and other forms of mid-brain social organization. Just then I remember the phone, and it is free. I pick it up and call.

Shawn answers. Relief again washes over me. My hands feel clammy.

“I don’t know if I’ll make my flight.” I say with detached calmness.

“How long will you be there?”

“I don’t know. There are men who’ve been in this one cell for two days. Who knows! What time do the judges stop seeing people? Did you call the number I left on the message?”

“No, I couldn’t hear anything in the message. There was so much noise in the background. No, I don’t know. This is all so overwhelming. I was crying all night. Chris and Brian came back last night. Paul is still at the police station!”

“I don’t even know if I even want to make the flight anymore. Have you spoken to Paul, what about another lawyer?” I feel defeated and hopeless.

“He says you and Paul both have to decline pressing charges and get the record expunged. So neither of you have anything on your record.”

“Okay. I’ll call you back when I know more. Here’s the number to call just in case you get through faster.” I give him the number to the court and hang up disappointed and still clueless. It was as though we weren’t on the same page. I turn around and ask the group around the phone, “do you know how long this takes?”

“A long time, it depends. Some people come and go quickly.”

“How many cells?”

“I don’t know. You have to see the judge.”

“It’s the weekend, do they work?”

“Yeah, up to nine tonight.” My countryman says. Another chimes in, “I heard eleven.”

There is time. I just might make my flight. Good. Then doubt sinks in. This could be a long and torturous weekend and fear begins to once again mount. The Egyptian, who had said he was accused of assault because a female employee had stolen from him and the door hit her as he was forcing her to exit his premises, has begun speaking in Arabic to his newfound friend across the way - the Preacher. They shout in glee above the din. The loudness excites everyone.

I withdraw onto a bench - the only one not inebriated with the thrill of shared uncertainty. Tears well up in my eyes, so I look up to hide and dry them. Where, out of the blue, invading my vision is years of scratches into the

walls, as had been in the jail cell. I take a deep breath in as my eyes rise further. I feel what culminates into an overwhelming sense of delirium. I wonder how many of these episodes I will encounter. Each one passes and I feel something lost inside or at least changed. What will I become? The corner of my right eye twitches stronger than I've ever felt it. There, on the ceiling are slices of cheese and bread with peanut butter flapping in the air calling me to madness. The scene is disorienting and I feel unhinged. I am on the brink of a meltdown. At the precipice of insanity, with my skin crawling, my scalp itching and shocks in my marrow, I suddenly relax. I feel I have given up something inside me, but I don't know what it is.

Amidst the loud, chaotic and mocking atmosphere, a gaping yawn takes hold of me and instills a sense of clarity. All along I could not take blame for why I am here. I wrestled with it blaming Shawn and Paul. Suddenly I feel it is okay that I lashed out at them, and it is fine that I am not above reproach. I will accept that I hit someone in fear for my safety. My exhale let it sink in. I think of the men around me and my reaction to them - attraction and fear. I gave myself permission to be flawed, unsure, even angry. I could feel my neck relax and the tears dry up. My thoughts rest on how this experience is making me know myself better and how afraid I am of what that means.

"You okay?" The Mexican asked, sitting down and facing me. His spiky black hair, sparse mustache give him a friendly appearance. His crooked smile, leaning to one side and his squinted, happy eyes make him seem well-adjusted.

“Yeah.” I say, stone faced, uncertain. “I just need to know how long I will be here. How many cells are there and will I get to see the judge today?”

“Yeah. You should call that number over there. On the wall. You see it? Call it and ask the woman if your case is in.”

“Oh? Which number? This one?”

“No, the other one. The one with the four, eight, eight.”

“Okay. I’ll call when he’s done.” I say indicating the man using the phone. “Why are you here? I’m worried about my case. I have no idea what to expect.”

“We don’t have anything to worry about.” He says, looking directly into my eyes. “Those guys over there? You see? They’re in a difference cell, and if you look up you’ll see ‘felony’ on the sign. They need to worry.” He stood up, stretched his back and seemed at home; a veteran, even if not hardened. For a second, the way he explains it to me makes feel like a child; fuzzy and comfortable. There was something paternal about the way he spoke.

“Why are you here?” I asked again.

“Oh, stupid cops arrested me because of weed.”

“I thought weed was pretty much hands off these days. I see kids smoking weed all the time on the sidewalk in Chelsea and the East Village. As a matter of fact, I think the block where I worked is the weediest block in the City. I smell it so much, and the school kids smoke it all the time out in the open.”

“Yeah, but I ain’t from Chelsea or the East Village. Look at me.” I noticed his very tanned color, his green cargo shorts and black t-shirt. So casual. Would I take him as some sort of drug user? What am I saying? I haven’t

seen marijuana as a drug in years. I was late to the party, but I finally began to view it as no more than a stinky cigarette. I am thankful he's here, talking to me.

"Oh. So how did it happen?" I ask feeling pretty stupid after he said the obvious with no emotion.

"I was playing ball in the park and then I was getting ready to head home when my friend wanted me to smoke weed with him. I said no, because I wanted to head home. So he threw it on the ground and left. I didn't even see that it was by my foot. I think he got pissed that I said no. I was there, getting my shit together, and the cops come over and ask me what's that and said I dropped it when I saw them coming."

"But they didn't see it in your possession."

"Yeah, well I want to kick my friend's ass when I get out of here. He must have done that on purpose."

"So what will you get for possession?" I, myself, feel my questions are getting tired.

"A fine. It's not serious. It's like harassment, because you come in and you spend time in here. I've been here lots of times. It's nothing." Those last words awake a thought in my head: What if I become like him, or am I already like him? What if this no longer scares me? What could I become? I had somehow learnt over the years that I should fear things I do not want influencing me. I am in uncertain territory. There is nothing to fear in this place, but so much to fear at the same time.

"Don't you hate coming in here? Doesn't the threat of this place make you not want to smoke?" I ask trying to distract myself from these thoughts.

"No. Shit! When I smoke I'm able to deal with life. This? This is nothing. A few hours lost. I work and I want to relax. I don't get arrested. When I was young I was bad. Now? I smoke inside my house. They can't do anything once you're inside."

“Let me make a call.” I say, remembering that I need to get out of here. That fear of becoming what I’m uncomfortable with is coming back. I need a break from these thoughts, this place, and make contact with the outside world. I lowered my barriers and this is making me comfortable with these people. There is nothing keeping me from becoming them.

I walk over to the phone to call Shawn. He answers in his soft, innocent phone voice - low to the point of cracking. It’s a speech pattern that I found endearing. I had read something in the news not too long ago about teenage girls adopting a similar speech pattern called vocal fry. I realize I’m over thinking this.

“Hello?”

"Have you heard anything? Did you call the number? How long will I be here? I may need you to cancel my flight. I don't think I should go anyway, after this, that isn't important anymore. Nothing seems important."

"I called, but your file wasn't in as yet, and Chris said you both have to go before the judge together to get the arrest off your records. Paul's never had anything like that on his record. You have to get it off."

I barely hear him, distracted by the noise emanating from the cell across the passage way. I hang up and return to the reality around me. The Mexican urges me, silently, to call the number scribbled on the wall tiles. I fight against the pressure of the men waiting behind me and call the court information number, refusing to turn around and see the stares of displeasure and annoyance. My papers have arrived in the court! Now, how long? I just might see my dying relative. At that moment an officer comes to the cell with paper slips in his hand. He rolls off a few names and mine is among them. I hope the judge is next. Now, with each step my feet are feeling

noticeably heavier as if I'm descending downward to the Earth's core, gravity being stronger. Burdened by the experience of the cell I am leaving and the apprehension of what I am about to encounter.

"What time is it?"

"Eight-thirty."

Interregnum

As I exit the cell, it occurs to me that out of all the names called, there are only two of us walking. A sense of excitement comes to my step. It moves from heel to ball, and I even take a step or two on my toes. I feel ahead of the line - Schadenfreude. We walk down the aisle, turn a corner. I hope to see a wood-paneled room, but we stop. My heart cries for this to be a small pause or even a short wait.

I look into the cell and see no familiar faces. The dirty, unpainted cement floor seems to amplify everything unpleasant. I want to feel special, to say something like, "Yay! I'm ahead of the line!" but I miss the feeling of safety in those faces. My Mexican acquaintance and his sense of normalcy in what seems like pandemonium, my the countryman and his embarrassment and anxiety at being arrested with a DUI, the Korean guy and his sense of red-faced shame when speaking to his wife admitting to a DUI the first time driving with his US Driver's license. There was the sleeping older man waiting over 48 hours for the police from Miami, exhausted. Finally, the Egyptian and his seeking of comfort in shared culture and language. I realize they had embodied the gamut of emotions and thoughts I ran through in that cell, then lost. I wish I were like them, feeling a sense of innocence, but I am not, and I don't.

As I step into this cell I feel less fear and panic. This lasts seconds, and quickly replaced by loss of self-trust. The thought comes to mind that with the lowering of my guard against this environment, with its acceptance, I will have condemned myself to accepting it as a possible way of life for me. It feels heavier now than when I had thought about it before. It isn't abstract. Now it is palpable, heavy and cemented into place by panic.

The room is littered with empty milk cartons and resealable bags. One of the benches is drizzled with bits of bread. Another, with spilled cereal. Everyone appears slow and lethargic. Time has congealed into slow, silent screams. We have all been here a long time - them, even longer. The air smells like uncleaned toilet and body odor. Soon after I arrive, the men in the striped jumpsuits come by with more sandwiches, milk, tea and coffee. They are still walking with their springy knees and pleasant demeanor, almost as if I'm watching a show on a stage, or they are in a different reality, until they pierce the fourth wall. As they hand the sandwiches out, the hands that reach back are slow and few. Tea and coffee are popular now as shivering arms attached to half-closed eyes reach out for the hot Styrofoam cups.

"Oh God! Don't you have anything else to eat? I've had the same nasty sandwiches and cereal for two days! I can't take it anymore!" One man cries out with nods and 'uh huh's' in the background.

One of the jumpsuit men apologizes. "Sorry man. We ain't the ones you know? We just passing it out."

The feeding crew moves on and the gate is locked. The phone is now free. I eagerly pick it up and call Shawn. No answer. I leave a message, "Hi. I think I'm almost to the court. Is Paul here? My case has arrived. Could Chris call someone to help with this? Maybe I can pay a lawyer to speed this up? I'll call back in an hour."

I turn to the next man in line waiting for the phone, "What time is it?"

"Nine."

My heart sinks. I won't make the flight at this rate. Why don't I just decide to go or not to go and relieve myself of this seesaw? Nothing matters. I don't have reason to want to go anywhere. This is my reality - the oppressed, criminal underclass. Why do I still seem to have the assumption that this is anything else? Thinking of travel, of a flight seems unrealistic, distant and absurd. My slide into another emotional quagmire is interrupted by a guard unlocking the cell gate.

"This cell is filthy." He says.

Another guard comes up behind him. He looks back and forth at the other cell across from us. There are sleeping men in there. I read the top of it and it says Felony. I'm concerned. He nods to the other guard to open up the cell and transfer us out to the other. The jumpsuit crew come and as we're herded out as the men move into cleaning overdrive.

Depurgation

"Yo! What time you got?" A deep voice rings out to the herding officer. I search for the source but it is lost in the jostling crowd squeezing into the cell.

"Ten."

"Hey, till what time does the judge see people?!" Another questions. This time I see it is a large, Latino man with brown skin and long, wavy hair. He looks Hawaiian somehow. In a trench coat, black boots with a gaming nerd demeanor, he appears eccentric but friendly.

"One."

That answer from the officer seems more trustworthy, and answers the two questions recurring in my head every few minutes. I feel a bit at ease. I have time for Paul to get here, but will I make my flight? Can I see a dying relative one last time? I should be strong enough to contain these emotions and be strong for my relative. I will try.

The cell is large. It smells of toilet rankness, farts, body odor and dirt. Air is flowing though the vents like ice fangs. On each side there is a toilet and toward the back are three interview rooms. Two on the left and one to the right. One long bench lines the back wall, with one functional and one broken phone hanging just over the bench. We gravitate toward the phone like zombies. Men seem to overflow into the line from every angle - a colorful menagerie of clothes, accents, skin colors and vivacity. This is it. There is a sense of anticipated relief as we realize where we are. I line up with them.

As the phone is used, men drop out of the line. The line progresses and discussions begin and people mingle around the cell even as others drift off into sleep. Someone urinates. Another opens an interview door to see a group of men having a private conversation inside, waiting for lawyers. The other two rooms are open

with itinerant men sitting idly on the desk tops. There is excitement building - anticipation of freedom, apprehension of sentencing and most notably, of reunions between former prison mates, cell mates and friends.

Shoes against sandy floors, high fives and laughter blanch any trepidation as both of my ears and eyes are captivated. Still, there's tension behind my neck and in my gut. More men come in. The bench is full. I scan the area. Either I am tired or the air is colder. Definitely there is more air coming through the vents. I once again wonder why there are so many others with sweaters, with shoe laces and caps. Why was I not allowed warm clothing? Why were my shoe laces taken? Was this all orchestrated to punish me? That mild-mannered cop who was my comfort is now revealed to be my ruin. The shivering is becoming more noticeable, but the hope that this ordeal will be ending soon sustains me.

Another group of men arrive. It is so crowded. The stench is growing. Within the group is a very handsome younger man. Dark hair against pale skin with a fresh scent of appealing cologne pique my interest. I realize that what I'm now doing is cruising, not looking for a savior. His hair is gelled into place. I feel the sensation of his breath on my neck and my fingers running through his hair. His arms strong and sturdy. His contours exude vigor. Glancing at him periodically, I take him in and let him know I am interested. No thought crosses my mind of the inappropriateness of this. Already, I had released myself from those constraints. I am only behaving as millions of years of evolution have set in place and many animal species seek to do - use sexual gratification as a means of self-soothing.

It is my turn to use the phone. Over a brief second I gawk at the unsanitary receiver. It's seen a lot of action over the past few minutes, but I dismiss my absurdity and make the call.

"Hello?" Shawn answers.

"So? Did you find out if my case is in?"

"Yes. The woman on the phone said it wasn't in. I called a couple of times and she is mean."

"Oh gosh! I'm going to go crazy in here. I need to know if I'll get out. Do they process cases on Sunday? I don't know if I can stay here until Monday. It is freezing cold and they only serve things I can't eat." I speak low, with one hand cupping the microphone for privacy.

"I'm trying! I can't come in because the court isn't open and they won't let me in otherwise. I'm at a McDonald's across the street from the court. Paul is still at the police station."

"Still?!"

"You'll have to wait on him so you can both have the charges dropped. I went to the police station and saw him earlier."

"How is his eye?" I tense with guilt.

"It looks bad, but he's alright. He's made friends with the police officer. He was laughing, you know Paul. Making jokes."

My butt clenches and I feel my heart beating heavier. "Well, how long? I'm in the last cell awaiting a lawyer. I've been in the building since three! It's been seven hours. Can't Chris call someone and have Paul brought here so we can speed this up?"

“I don’t know. Chris is at a wedding. He’s not answering his phone.”

“Okay, but does he know another lawyer you can speak to?”

“I don’t know and he’s busy. He’s doing us a favor.”

I hang up and sit in an open seat. There is new excitement in the room as the men sitting in the booths file out the doors, the last one calling out the name of the first client to be interviewed by a lawyer.

Another group of men is brought into the cell. It is crowded and I seem to be the only one still feeling guarded. I relax with the sight of my Mexican friend, but I avoid eye contact still struggling with flailing emotions. Light-headedness resurfaces and I feel that tingly sensation in my right heel that bothered me over the winter. My body language transitions back and forth as those emotions cycle, and I’m made aware of the knots of tension in my lower and upper back as they release.

The men continue to be hopeful and chatty. They are like children. Laughing, and in joyful antics. I smile. The bench is filled, so I find myself a seat on the floor by the bars.

“Do you know what the lawyers ask or what I should say?” I ask the handsome young man, his dress speaking of an evening out with friends and his eyes tell me he is more terrified than I am. His lack of interest in responding humbles me. Still, I can’t not look and admire. Our eyes continue to connect each time I try to admire him.

Phone calls are being made with increasing urgency as the mysterious lawyers, hidden behind the booth doors, and curtains of anxiously helpful name-callers review cases. The men ask family to meet them in court, tell them about why they are in court, and coordinate stories with others.

Another group of men arrive.

“What time is it?” I ask the young man.

“Eleven.”

My interest in him wanes. I wonder why I don't feel the need for someone else's comfort anymore. Right on cue, an officer comes down the hall, keys jangling, and he calls a few names off a piece of paper. The men eagerly exit the cell as it is opened, and disappear. The crackling of sand under shoes and swish of pants fade away until only the lively chatter of my cell mates remain. I feel a pang of nostalgia for those who have just left, as if we were lifelong friends.

The frequency of the name callers going into the interview rooms and coming back out to call names increases. The officers coming and taking men to court is also occurring at a quicker pace. The cell continues to empty. The excitement at the taste of assured freedom has most of the men relaxed and jovial. My awareness of the quality of voices, activity and scents all around change. They seem warmer. I'm no longer braced against the wall, but amidst it all.

The handsome young man has left. I wonder why I am still here. What determines how fast someone passes through here? Men who came after me have gone. The sight of men melting into boys and their antics growing livelier bring another smile to my face.

The phone. I need to make another call and so I rejoin the queue. The Mexican comes over. I see the Egyptian. So many faces, new and familiar.

“So we’re finally here, huh?”

“Yeah, but my name still isn’t in the court.”

“If they brought you here, they have it. A lawyer will see you.”

“Oh Whew! But will I get to see the judge if I’m here?”

“Yeah, relax man. You’re going to get out of here. So who did you fight with, your girl?”

“Roommate.” He gives me a curious look, almost takes a step back, then comes back in relaxed.

“What happened?”

“He was really drunk and we got into a fight. He was so drunk that I thought he would kill me, so I punched him and called the police.”

“Damn! *You* called the police?! Bad move!” I twist my mouth in regretful agreement.

“Is that your blood?” He asks with curiosity.

“No.”

“A smile of pride comes across his face, “So you got him good, huh?”

Then I realize there is a large blood stain on my tattered t-shirt, like an emblem of my danger level. Had the police refused me better clothes to paint me as a hardened criminal or as a way to keep me safe through the hardened cells of purgatory?

“Give me a minute let me make a call.” I excused myself.

“Alright.”

As I dial Shawn, an image comes to mind - of me among these men. This gay, thin man shivering, wearing a face of fear hidden behind blankness and the only thing separating me from the perceived horde is the gruesome stain covering my chest, the ripped right sleeve of my white t-shirt and minor scratches on my shoulder and face. I appear quiet but dangerous. My slim-legged blue jeans, closely cut hair and misleadingly calm demeanor has to be the reason I'm chatting as equals with the Mexican and why there's space around me. Respect. Is it that or are these people - the Mexican, the Egyptian - genuinely friendly, likable people so that I feel comfortable around them? I'm perplexed. Desperation is the undertone of my emotions, but I don't really know for what I'm desperate. Why am I desperate? To escape? I need to let this experience sink in so far, be so punishing, that I will never be in this situation again. Has there, or is there anything in this circumstance that has been truly horrific to prevent me from repeating this? These men don't seem hardened and frightening enough anymore. I've crossed boundaries today, become jaded and adapted, and I can't depend on being on autopilot anymore. Vigilance will have to be effortful.

“Hello?”

“Hi! Are you still here?” I take note of the excitement in my tone and I feel annoyed with myself.

“Yes. I’m right outside the courthouse.”

“Any news about my case?”

“Yes, they have it. Paul just arrived in the court house. Gosh. He must be so exhausted.”

“Does he know he has to drop charges against me too? What if he doesn’t?”

“He hasn’t called me. I don’t know why. I know he’s here.”

“Well, I’m not agreeing to do that until I know we’re on the same page. Can you speak to someone here and ask if he can come directly here or ask to speak to him? People are going to the court room now. I’ll call you back in an hour. Try to find out soon! Wait, what time is it?”

“It’s 10:30.”

“Okay.”

I hang up and a large group of men arrive, just as a few are called to court. It feels warmer with the increased population and I welcome it. The face of the group has changed. Familiarity has gone out the window. The recognizable, the friendly, the joy have been replaced by those arrested later in the day or from different precincts. They seem unfriendlier and my ease is replaced by a tingling in my right foot and an awareness and need to scratch flakes off the back of my scalp. There are younger, harder faces. Groups form along racial lines. I am without a group. Side glances and head nods show alliances and recognitions. I wonder if this cell is combined and not just full of misdemeanors. Is that even relevant?

A small crowd of thoughts, contradictory, mind-clogging and emotional flood into my head and body. Exhaustion is setting in quickly. No food, no water and no warmth for so long. My skin is goose-bumped, dry and paper thin. My feet are tired. My lower back aches.

I sit adjacent to the phone and drop my head. The lawyer interviews have stalled. The hold up is stressful. My skin seems to be itching everywhere and I feel like picking at it. To my right a group of men has filled one interview room awaiting the lawyer's return. In all honesty, they've forgotten about the lawyers for the moment and are whistling, howling and guffawing. I've only seen such behavior in cartoons as a child. I never thought men actually howled like that. It's one of those situations where I don't know if television reflects life or shapes it. At the corner of my eye I see a man in grand pantomime mouthing and finger-flashing his phone number to someone behind the glass or the interview room. I smile at their excitement. Boys. The mood is light again as everyone is entertained.

"What are they looking at?" One man asks another.

"It's the women getting shipped off to Riker's. They are probably going to see them later. One of them got his girl there."

The lawyers return to behind the blue doors an hour later. The men disperse from the rooms like chaff in the wind. I gather that the same lawyer interviews and represents his assigned group of detainees in small batches at a time. I am just next to the room when I hear my name called. I deflate his enjoyment by interrupting, "Yeah."

Gingerly, I approach the blue door. The name-caller is holding it open. He looks at me with uncertainty as I pass by him into the room, and as he hands the door to me, he peers deeply into my face and leaves. Its one of those situations where I think I am showing emotions, but really my face is blank, even angry. All he wanted was appreciation and camaraderie.

Behind the protective glass there is a middle-aged, Caucasian man in a blue shirt and red tie looking down and flipping through papers. His starkly white hair is unkempt, falling forward through which I can see some of his pale scalp. He's focused on the paper before him and begins speaking without ever looking up at me. His meaty chin and jowls shaking. I can't look away.

"What is your name? What?! Speak up!" He says, gruffly, still not looking.

I utter my name more loudly.

"It says here, you attacked your roommate and he had to call the cops."

"What?! That's a lie!" I say, defensively, lifting out of the chair. "He attacked me and I am the one who called 911!"

"Okay." He writes it down.

"Do you have a place to move to? There is a restraining order against you. You cannot return to the residence if he is there. I'm assuming he will return to the residence after he gets out?"

"Can't we both drop the charges and go home?" I ask.

“Where is he?”

“He’s here in this building.”

“Where?”

“He just came in.”

“For both of your restraining orders to be removed, you have to appear before the judge jointly.”

“Could you have him brought here?”

“No. I advise you to appear before the judge.”

“I don’t want to go if that will mean he can’t return to the apartment. What options are there?” I plead.

“Wait, until he gets here. Next!”

“Could you not ...”

“Next! That’s it! Next! Could you leave the room sir?”

I am forced out as I try to make sense of it all. Was the restraining order automatic or is this another of the Paul’s and the police officer’s ploys against me? How come it is on record that it was Paul who called the police and not me? Should I stay and hope he arrives or go before the judge and get out of here?

The phone is busy. I need to to call Shawn urgently. Another group arrives. A young black man goes to one side of the room, patting his lip swollen with a bloody napkin. He looks around and backs up against the wall, his eyes cast down. His thin, handsome face hidden by the paper towel and the distended upper lip.

The room is more segregated, not only by language but by ethnicity and complexion. There are two groups of Latino men chatting in Spanish. There is a group of Chinese young men with dragon tattoos, casually dressed in shorts and t-shirts - all name brand. They're alpha males, marking territory and the other men are keeping their distance. Even the Jamaicans to the right and African Americans by the toilet on sitting on the top of it, are showing respect. One goes on the phone and takes half an hour call. He doesn't care. It flusters some men, but everyone keeps in check. They know something I don't.

"What time is it?" I ask a man with a watch.

"Twelve."

I've given up on my flight once again and feel brief respite on my ever-wavering mind. To connect with a relative after a decade, and comforting her in a time of need may be too much. There is no way I can make a flight in a few hours, and after this, I would be insane to think about leaving at this time when I have possibly hit rock bottom. This is a crisis! It can't be ignored. Anyways, I didn't get to do laundry or prepare for travel. No answer. I leave a message. I put down the phone feeling melancholic and lost. Uncertainty wells up and I find myself inching closer to the walls, needing their protection again. How would I know if I've hit rock bottom? Wouldn't that be when I drop to my knees sobbing and begging instead of over-thinking? The phone becomes available.

So many new faces, so few familiar ones. A familiar feeling starts taking hold - I feel though I'm on the precipice of at once letting go of fears and of who I am. I want to embrace this and be fully comfortable, but that lingering fear of becoming what I fear surfaces. My hand reaches behind me and I press my open palms to the wall as

though seeking strength from it. I breathe again, slowly, imagining as I've been taught in so many meditation and yoga classes, of breathing out the stress and tension and breathing in relaxing energy. My mental breakdown is interrupted.

One aggressive-looking young, Black man of mid to late 20's breaks away from his group and walks over to the the silent man with the swollen lip.

"Why you watchin' me? You know me?"

"Yeah." He says cautiously, his head tilted down in some form of submission.

"You know me!" He asks again as he steps toward the swollen-faced man.

"No, I don't know you. I heard about you." He corrects himself, seeing the tension rise as the room becomes quieter and more eyes turn toward the activity. Faces freeze, then mouths close as everything is suddenly in slow-motion. I lose track of the discolored white walls, the black bars and anything outside the cell. I'm happy I'm against the bench and wall. The entire cell becomes quieter as more men are pulled into the flight or attempt to fight against the hypnotic tension beginning at the area around the activity and diffusing outward.

"Who tell you so! You don't know me! You never heard of me yuh hear?"

"I know you through someone. Junker. I know he know you. He tell me about you." At that point, the energy in the air is crackling with volatility.

"Yeah? What you know about me?" His tone seems softer. I hope this means familiarity. I'm sure the swollen-faced man feels it too.

“Just that my friend knows you had a drop off tonight.” He said, easing his own stance. The bloody tissue taken away from his swollen lip as if opening himself to show trust and friendship.

“What you know about anything?” The aggressor seems to relax further. The room relaxes.

Before we know it, the swollen-lipped man realizes he’s being circled! A fist hits him on the side of his head and he staggers back. “You know me? You don’t know me!” He’s silent, confused and scared stiff as many of us seem to be. The aggressor has a smile on his face and a bounce in his step. This is what sadistic cruelty looks like. Is this aggression a mark of trauma itself? I check in with myself. My heart is almost still, my thin body is tense to the point of rigidity. All my sphincters are painfully tight. It feels as if all the water in my body is right behind my eyes pushing through my tear ducts. I do all in my power to hold it back.

Another punch hits him in his swollen eye. He stands there, almost limp, and takes it. Each punch causing his body to bob back and forth. Then another rips open his already bleeding lip. Droplets of blood fling onto his cheek and the wall. The group of men from which the aggressor had broken free, after looking calmly and proudly, intervene, putting themselves between the two men. The attacker allows himself to be calmed, with a look of orgasmic relief in his eye. He has asserted his dominance, rearranged the hierarchy putting himself on top. He looks around reinforcing his message, “Nobody don’t know me. People got big mouth. Fuck. Trying to make a livin’ and got big mouth people fuckin’ with me. I gon take care of Junker. You wait.” His friends take their positions at his side. The group withdraws to their previous spot, glancing with warning to the victim who falls back against the wall behind him, sulking with a look of defiance and hurt. The emotional display, the aggressor’s

joy in beating the victim and the victim's lack of fear and expression of hurt and disappointment after being brutalized confuse me. I don't know how or what I should be feeling. I want to be so scared so that I never repeat what brought me here.

Tension is still thick in the air. It can be smelled, felt and tasted like humidity. Silence reigns. I am terrified and then I'm not. I am worried and distraught for Paul. What have I done to him? I want to cry again. What is happening to me? How could I be concerned for him over myself? Is this how it feels to be criminal? No. This is different, this isn't regret. It feels like empathy. It is very different from the detachment and cruelty the aggressor just exhibited. Is it empathy or something more devious?

Paul is a soft, heavy-set, gay man with anxiety and hypertension. He was stressed to the point of heart palpitations by looking for a new apartment. I had to take the role of coach and reassure both him and Shawn that it would be fine. I had to be the strong one. I am feeling responsible for this and protective of him. I think I am losing sanity for these feelings. Then I strike a balance of ownership for this situation without becoming mired in guilt or regret - I am sorry for contributing to him being here. I still blame him for his contribution to this mess, but I can't have him here. It's so late, he'll be here until Monday. What can I do? Whatever I do, I can't allow him to encounter this cell. I'm afraid what will happen. What is happening to me?

A trickle of assertion pushes back against the flood of insecurity. I feel thankful, otherwise I would be on the ground sobbing. I have to stay for his sake. Nothing seems clearer and the flood is held at bay. I am on my feet again, in the middle of the cell.

The gang leader pushes to the front of the line and takes the phone off the hook as someone else's hand is about to grasp it, and he sits down on the bench just under the phone. The line of anxious callers look on in helpless frustration. Where are the guards? Where is anyone? Suddenly, no one seems to be around to do anything. I also want to make a call but can't, and I feel angry for the first time since last night. It makes me feel whole again.

Then as if on cue, the guard arrives and calls names for the court. Mine is called. I start towards the cage, but pull back and stay. I need to talk to Shawn, but The Aggressor is relaxed and talkative on the phone with a girlfriend. He's there in full defiance talking about what he wants to do with this woman while feeling a high from his new sense of alpha. He talks and laughs and tells her sweet nothings with a gleaming smile, lost in his own world, and the minutes peel away.

His friend finally sees the growing anger at his flouting of everyone's patience. With a look of understanding towards us, he signals to The Aggressor that he wants to call his girl too. More than an hour after he began his call, The Aggressor hands the phone to his friend. Another 15 minutes pass before the phone is available again.

I chat with The Mexican again who tells me about the Chinese gang with the dragon tattoos. How well known and feared they are. He goes on to tell me about the gang in which his brother-in-law is a big-wig in, and again tells me he's going to kick the ass of his friend who might have framed him. He tells me I should go to the judge, but I explain that I've known Paul for a decade and I can't just abandon him like this. That I need to try to wait for him. He again tells me he just wants to go home, take a shower and smoke weed with his friends.

The phone becomes available as The Aggressor seems interested in making another call. Right now I'm in a state of desperation. I need to get out of here and it's taking everything I have to maintain composure. I take the phone and pretend I don't see him. It's not bravery. Fear is being overshadowed by a drive to get out of confinement that is so strong and far more basic. I look at him with my signature blank stare and he looks back at me expecting me to give way. My silence, blood-shot eyes and blood-stained shirt causes him to disengage. He turns in a sulk and complains to his friends that I have made so many calls already. I feel relieved and frantically call Shawn.

"Hello."

"Hi, it's me. Have you heard from Paul?" I speak quietly, covering the mouthpiece of the phone with a cupped hand. Nothing seems out of the ordinary about this as many a man has called family and co-conspirators to give instructions and discuss details that would be implicating.

"No."

“I saw a lawyer. He said we both need to be here to get the restraining orders dropped so we can return to the apartment. I don’t know if I can stay here until Monday though. I can’t even eat what they have here. I’m freezing cold and there was a fight between cocaine dealers.” I lean into the phone whispering. Then after saying it, I wonder if I had spoken quietly enough.

“You have to stay. Paul has to come back to the apartment. He has nowhere else to go! It’s his home.” I think, straining against the background noise and my mental block to realize Paul has a home one state over he could stay for a few days. I have none.

“That’s fine. If I leave now, I will still be able to make my flight. I will go to the apartment, take my stuff and leave. I will find a place to live before I come back.”

“But if you don’t find a place, he’ll have to move. Anyway, you have to go to the judge together. That’s what Chris said too. If you don’t do that he can’t come back, plus you have to drop charges against him. He’s innocent; he’s never had anything on his record.”

“I’ll try, but what you’re asking is for me to stay here, without clothes, without food, possibly until Monday. I’ll try. Have you spoken to him?”

“No, he hasn’t called me.”

I hang up confused and emotionally twisted. I want to help Paul. I feel so sorry that things have come to this. Would he be traumatized? At least I came from a different country and I have had life experience. He’s afraid of people darker than himself and he cringes when accosted by difference. I’m taken back to the first few times I

met him, that awkward look, tripping over himself as though censoring something, and a forced manner to his friendliness.

The phone is already being inundated with aggressive line-cutting and intimidation. I realize I can no longer identify with all these men. Clearly many of them are far more deeply traumatized than me, and calling myself criminal seems contrived. Did these men decide to be like this or is this all survival tactics learned living in a harsh reality? What are my survival tactics?

I sit down next to the phone as a seat opens up, perplexed by the dilemma of self-sacrifice. I am ready to do it, but I can't accept that there is no way to reasonably speed up the process by having Paul come and meet me. It would prevent him from experiencing the slow, painful hell of central booking, cell by cell and the increasingly violent men. It would also get us both out sooner. Right then, the guard comes to collect another group of men. I eagerly step up to him.

"I have a question." I say, "I need to go to the judge with the person I was arrested with. How can I get him here so we can go together?"

"You have to wait."

"Can't you bring him here to meet me? We're dropping the charges against each other."

"No. He has to go through the system too." What other reason could there be for him to pass through each cell other than to frustrate and scare? "Is he here?"

“Yes.”

“How do you know?”

“He spoke to a mutual friend ... I know.”

“You have to wait.”

“But I have to have him drop his restraining order against me so we can return home.”

“Even if you drop charges the restraining order won't go away. You have to wait for it to expire. I ain't got time for this. You coming to see the judge?”

“Not as yet. I have another question?”

“No. This way!” He led the group of men away. Seeing another group leave fills me with a stronger sense of longing. My stomach feels twisted and my mind races. I can't decide on a plan of action - should I leave and avoid going mad? How much longer could I endure staying here for someone else's benefit when I could more easily walk out? Knowing that this is the last cell before freedom both calms me and stokes my agitation.

The Mexican sees me and sits. “You saw a lawyer already, right? So didn't they call your name?”

“Yes, but I can't go. The roommate I fought with is here and I have to appear with him before the judge so we can both drop the charges against each other.”

“Why?”

“So he can come back to the apartment. If I go to the judge, since I called 911 he will have a restraining order up, I think. I'm not sure, no one here seems to be giving me correct information.”

“You should just go. You don’t know how long he’ll be in those cells. You don’t owe him nothing. Remember those guys who’ve been there for days?”

“Oh, yes. I don’t know ... I have to wait for him. I can’t leave him in here alone.”

“You just have a few minutes. Then you’ll be in here until Monday. Judges aren’t here Sunday.”

“Oh? I have to think some more about it. What will you do when you get out?” I ask trying to distract and calm myself already knowing the answer.

“Kick my friend’s ass.”

“Well, aren’t you afraid it gets you back in here?”

“Eh. He did this on purpose because I didn’t want to smoke with him in the park. He knew what he was doing. Then I’ll take a long shower - remember I was playing ball in the park. Then I’ll go and meet my friends and smoke weed all day to relax. I was suppose to be at a barbecue right now.”

I smile uncomfortably and rest my forehead on my knees as he pats me on the shoulder and goes to chat with someone else. He turns back, I look up, “You should go and get your flight.”

One man is becoming volubly agitated. He was so happy not so long ago, laughing and hopping with joy with the other men, but as the lawyers came again and again and man after man went in and out, and moved closer to freedom, his joy faded. He’s cussing badly; the change happened so quickly. With dreadlocks, variegated black and white, flailing, feet stomping and everyone withdrawing he takes center stage. Two days already he’s been in this cell. I cringe at the thought that I would be in here for that long. They’ve lost his paperwork, but who knows

why he's been in here. My experience is that every person you speak to about why you're here tells you anything but the truth.

I can't relax. I don't think I can tolerate another night. I reach up to use the phone again. I call Shawn. No answer. I leave a message. I sit back. My eyes feel dry and I squeeze them close for a few seconds, so I don't see when someone approaches.

"You already saw a lawyer, right?" A thin black guy from the Caribbean asks.

"Yes." I say, anticipating the same conversation I had earlier with the Mexican.

"So why are you still here?"

"I need to wait for the guy I had the fight with so we can drop the charges together so we can both go back home."

"You live together?"

"Yeah. Roommates." The men beginning to look less lively now that the Rasta has calmed down, mumbling his frustration quietly. More men are on the floor than there are standing.

"How long you been here?"

"Since two, but I need to have him in court with me to drop restraining order so he can come back to the apartment. What are you here for?" I asked trying to get the conversation away from me.

"I violated my restraining order." He says it nonchalantly.

"Against who?"

“My girl.” He doesn’t realize that violating a restraining order isn’t a sign of love, but one of being unhinged and dangerous. It might be a cultural difference.

“Did you hit her?”

“Yeah.”

More men arrive, take cue from the veterans in the cell and are settling down. The air is colder. The walls seem grayer and one in the morning is approaching. I grab the phone again to the objection of someone that I had made so many calls. I ignore him knowing, no one, no matter how big, wanted to fight with me, wearing another man’s blood on my clothes.

“Hello?”

“It’s me. I have to go. I can’t stay here.”

“But what about Paul?”

“What about me?! Both of you were drunk and attacked me! You got off because I chose not to say anything! I won’t be a martyr!”

“I didn’t do anything!” His calm, detached tone is gone. Replaced by the familiar stridency.

“You did, and you saved yourself as usual. And Paul? He attacks me, tries to bash my head in with the iron so that I had to call the police. On top of that he tries to screw me by telling the police that he was the one to call them!”

“Who told you that?”

“The lawyer.”

“I don’t know. All I know is he’s alone and doesn’t deserve this. I’m out here so stressed. I don’t know what to do. Just do what you want. I can’t take this anymore. I haven’t slept all night.”

“I can’t do this. I feel like my mind’s falling apart.”

“So imagine what it is for him.”

“I know. I will see what I can do.”

“Okay.”

I feel used, but I am cowed and obedient to a fault. How could I be doing this to myself? I think I might actually believe that I am to blame, despite my assertions. I feel the full, blunt impact of mourning. I am not sure what I’m mourning for, but I feel body aches, pressure in my heart and exhaustion in my mind. I become acutely aware that there are two images of myself vying for control - of being altruistic, kind, and giving the benefit of the doubt, against self-preservation and self-trust. Are the sensations of twisting in my gut and the shaking in my knees enough proof that I cannot survive this without martyring myself? I care for Paul, but more than for myself? He is someone who when speaking to the police was entirely turning the tide against me. All I am is ambivalent and I hate it. I look around desperately for better answers. I go over to the bars and look down the hall. I spot a police woman sitting at her post. I call out to her, but she ignores me. I call again too loudly for her to ignore and she looks, albeit reluctantly, wishing she were behind a curtain and not in plain sight.

“Could I ask you a question?”

“About?” She said cautiously.

“About restraining orders and getting ...”

“I can’t answer that.”

“Okay.”

It’s time to begin stalking the lawyer. I haven’t seen him in the rooms since he interviewed me. I need to speak to him again, but I don’t know his name. Shouldn’t that have been the first thing I asked? Things are slowing down further and the lawyers aren’t returning to the interview rooms as quickly. Someone had said the judges were changing shifts. I see a blue shirt and peer into one of the rooms, but it isn’t him. Any lawyer would suffice. Waiting is tedious and excruciating. Time speeding up and leaving me behind. Then I see my opportunity. A client has just left a booth and I slip myself into the room.

“Could you answer a question?”

“Am I your lawyer?”

“No.”

“Who is she or he?”

“I don’t know his name. White hair, blue shirt and red tie.”

“You have to speak to him.”

“But he hasn’t come back. I don’t even know if he’s still here.”

“You have to speak to him.”

She walks away into the larger room behind the reinforced window. Looking at my ashy arms and scratching my legs and torso from dry itch, goose pimples lining them, I gauge my endurance, reflect on circumstances around the fight, and those leading up to it. I make a decision. Then it changes.

The Mexican passes by, “You still here? What are you still waiting for?”

“They didn’t call my name again. I’m still deciding if to stay for my friend.”

“You’re crazy. Didn’t you say that he almost bashed in your head, and was aggressive with the police when they got there? Didn’t you say you heard him laughing with the police at the station? You here isn’t an accident. You think he would wait on you?” He said with an easy smile. “The lawyer said I can go. That I’ll get a ticket. They shouldn’t have arrested me. See? I told you. I got arrested for no reason. I’m outta here. Take care man. You should go and get your flight and enjoy yourself. Your roommate started the fight. You don’t owe him anything.”

“But the guard called me and I didn’t go.”

“He’ll come back and call you until you go.”

“Oh. Ok.”

We shake hands and he goes over to chat with another Latino man in Spanish as he waits for his name to be called. He seems more at ease when speaking in his native tongue. The floor is covered in sleeping men and the lights seem dimmer. I don’t recall them being turned down, but the room does seem sleepier. The lucky ones are curled up on their sides on the bench. The unlucky ones have taken up space on the floor. I’m not the only

one shivering now. I feel the immediacy of the impending shut-down for the night. I bolt for the phone which is surprisingly vacant.

“It’s me. I’m leaving when the guard comes again. I’m going to get my flight. I may never see my relative again. I have to say goodbye before she dies. I will ask questions and work things out in the court so Paul can be hurried out tonight. No one is giving correct information here. Where are you?”

“In the building. In the court.”

“Look for me.”

“Okay, I’ll see you soon.” He sounds excited. I am not sure if it is because I am getting out or just because that there is something to look forward to. I resent it but I am also happy to make a decision. The Korean man comes by looking disconsolate. How long has he been here? I try to feel empathy, but all I can think about is freedom. Still, I try.

“Did you get to see a lawyer?”

“Yes.”

“And?”

“The say they need more documents. Nothing is happening.”

“I’m sorry.”

I walk away, my mind still in flux over the day's events and about what I will say to the judge. My eyes catch a new face. The only white man I've seen behind the bars. He seems strange, zombie-like, inhuman. His eyes are dark and sunken in. Some teeth are missing. He is pacing and flinching in pain, and it has become faster in the past few minutes. Looking at him more closely, I see a darkened and collapsed vein in his left arm. I see needle tracts that look reused. He sees me looking and his eyes become threatening. I look away. The fight had made it clear I have no control over my environment. Any perception of control is I my mind trying to make sense of this experience - a tenuous lie. Physically, the realization feels like slamming into a brick wall. Emotionally, everything is spiraling out of control, as when I take cold medicine and seem unbalanced. I need to leave right now. The blood on my chest is no longer deterrent but a target. This is night and the monsters are coming out.

Lack of sleep is taking a weightier toll on me now. I feel haggard as I imagine I now look. I feel certain that I need to leave, there is no room to question it. The lack of questioning feels reassuring. I'm not as sure about my identity though. I've opened up my mind to this experience and in so doing I risk becoming hardened. I go through another mini panic and I think about how I could become like the Zombie, addicted to drugs to still the questioning, the loneliness and the awareness of discrimination. Who am I? Does this mean I can't trust myself? Will I be reliant on others to guide my decisions? What in me is there to cope with the reality of having been arrested and this new identity I am taking on? These thoughts are a slippery slope and all the emotions and doubts I experienced in the past 24 hours come flooding back. I am in crisis again. I squat down to the ground to avoid fainting. I am not going to be a martyr and I won't rely on others to provide direction. Where is the sense of mutualism in this society? All I feel most of the time is hegemony and distrust. Self-reliance is a must

and it can't be that elusive. I can adapt. As I stand up, I see myself standing before all the day's tribulations and know that I am capable of forgiving myself and being self-trusting. I hear my name being called by the guard and I step past the open cell gate into the hallway.

The mens' eyes follow me out and I hear the gate slam shut. I walk down the hallway to a desk where I am asked to validate my identity and then I am told to stand back against the wall. It is only then that I begin to feel my bladder filled to capacity which adds urgency to winding down this entire day.

The Court

I summon my courage and put my thoughts in order as I brace against the wall just outside the courtroom door. As policemen walk back and forth between the courtroom and detention area, between limbo and judgment, I get glimpses of the warm ambiance on the other side of the door. Against the harsh white walls and light of where I am, it seems as if I am exiting a colorless dimension back into life. Childhood anticipation and joy resurface as I recall the same feelings looking at the classroom clock approaching 3 PM the last day before summer break. I was always an outdoors person, feeling comfort in the warm, tropical sunlight, and anxiety inside. This imprisonment has been hell.

The police officer preparing my documents for the judge looks at me with disapproval. I recognized his bone structure, skin color and then, his accent. Minutes later I enter into the courtroom. Anxiety and adrenaline try to take over but I push them back.

I am in a wood paneled room, with an audience of about 100 multi-colored faces, gaping-eyed as though astonished by my presence. A thin, brown man with a ripped t-shirt and a circular bloody emblem on his chest. A sight to behold. In their eyes I see fear of a murderer, and I am reminded of all the silent stares throughout the day. Is this what the police officers saw when they encountered me? Should a police officer not have the insight and training to look past these superficialities? Yet, for the first time I feel no shame, no need for approval and their stares mean nothing.

Approaching the podium, I look up at the judge. Her appearance fails to impress me. Dark brown hair, pale skin suited in a black robe, and hidden behind a large wooden desk. She appears sequestered, tiny and distant. Looking over to my lawyer, I sense an understanding of equality between them. The lawyer instantly recognizes me and conveys everything I had said earlier to the judge. She quickly reviews the paperwork before her.

Walking back and forth are blue-eyed police officers, weighing in on the palpable hierarchy in the courtroom. Then there are the onlookers and finally, me. I cast off the onus of the hierarchy and address the judge answering questions posed to me to clarify my wishes. My lawyer asks for Paul to be released as we are both dropping charges against each other and the judge, agrees, delivering her decree to the court that the arrest records will be sealed. I stand there expecting something else, underwhelmed, looking at both her and the lawyer, as they look back at me. Where is the strong arm smashing the gavel into the desk and the strong guttural proclamation of judgment I've seen so many times on film? There is no satisfying climax and the judge indicates I am done. I

thank her and my lawyer, and leave the podium, all eyes again following me for a few seconds until another specimen is brought out to draw their attention away. I get the feeling I have not lived up to their expectations. For a few minutes, I was the epitome of their fears - who they are, and who they risk becoming and so despise. I take a look at the courtroom from my mind's eye and I see what has transpired for centuries. The brown man, assumed to be inherently bad, being defended and judged by the enlightened whites because they alone are capable of doing so. The onlookers staring with resentment because they know I am them and they would cast me as a scapegoat to save themselves. I almost hear the refrain, "Crucify him! Crucify him!" fade into the back of my mind.

My thoughts go back to Paul. He only recently arrived here after spending the day with officers who were laughing with him, and he's about to exit the court within just a couple of hours of being here. I have been in here all day wilting away. Would there have been a way for me to exit this without him or was this outcome calculated by the officers? I'm about to leave the country to visit a dying relative, how would all this affect me? The image of a rat finishing a maze only to be caught in a trap comes back to me. Something distracts me and I turn around to face the courtroom from the back.

I search the room for Shawn, but I don't see him and exit. I take note of my feelings - calm. I check my body - calm. I like myself. My lack of emotion could also be due to exhaustion. Outside the courtroom I find him and as he embraces me I feel solid and self-reliant. I feel assured that I will not become the environment I am now leaving. Tears are in his eyes. Joy is in his voice. I stolidly relate to him that Paul would be out soon; that he will

be brought out so he could leave tonight. His excitement turns away from me to Paul's release and my feelings feel justified. All these experiences, these feelings I've cycled through today are familiar. Why? We walk together up the stairs leading out to street level and I vaguely feel less weighed down, and the fresh air catches me by surprise as I inhale deeply.

I thank him for bringing my wallet, keys and some snacks and hail a taxi. I have little time left to catch my flight. Little time is left to reflect on this episode before it becomes the past.

"What time is it?" I ask the taxi driver.

"One thirty."

After giving directions I review my life and what circumstances led to this day. I want it to disappear into the past even as it compels me to become someone else.

Who am I?

The cool night air feels good. Freedom feels right. Even the sound of traffic and honking along the backed-up Grand Central Parkway is comforting. Scents of leather polish, old cigarette smoke and dusty upholstery embrace me. My mind wanders for a few minutes to my behavior with Shawn at the court. Why was I so detached and how did I get here? Loneliness. After my experience today, I see myself and where I fit in this society differently. I have gained new perspective on how people interacted with me and what I mean to them.

I met Shawn to soothe loneliness after living a solitary life. I had left my country to escape homophobia and I had come out of the closet against the threat of family abandonment and shame, and endured it to satiate my need. The fear I wrestled with all day, that intense fear was part of my life and identity before coming here. Unlike me, he could live two lives without the moral perplexity I felt doing so. Shawn had moved away from his family and his native rural town to New York City to separate those two lives. He felt his life had been made by moving to the big city, working at a 9 to 5 job and accumulating possessions and distracting himself from the difficulties of life. I wanted academic success, a career helping others and to know myself. The difference seemed exhilarating.

I found his slovenly life riotous, his penchant for drinking ridiculous and his prejudices curious. He was the direct opposite to my introspective and thoughtful nature. Poetry of love sprouted from my pen. I found supporting him, teaching him and exploring my sexuality with him invigorating. Oh, the joy it elicited. The sensations it provided were ambrosial. His sea-blue, saucer eyes were shy, uncertain but emboldened in my presence, and that pulled me in.

But his unemployment led to drinking. My emotional attachment and concern became weighty. I coddled him, even as he pulled away to drink in secrecy - the only way he seemed capable of working through his worries. Advice for him to see a therapist was met by the prejudices of a rural, working class upbringing.

Then he bounced back with employment. His internal strife was complicated. Still living a secret life away from his family, distracting himself by drinking, going out, constantly needing activity against my need to be calm and succeed took a toll. Why did I not move on? Oh, the loneliness - to have fled from a homophobic country and be ostracized by family. The one attachment and semblance of family I had was both a lifeline and a noose.

So it continued. I could feel the string cutting through my skin, even as I thanked it for being there. At the cusp of making my career, when I needed support to study through a challenging program, his low regard for academic pursuit was at its highest. He was more interested in showcasing the trappings that my academic life brought, than supporting it. He felt bored and confined. He drank to the point of slurred speech and my embarrassment.

So I began to crumble. His cheating added to the stressors. I fell from ivory towers into a dark chasm. When I fell, I became what he wanted, with no more accusations of being entitled because of my pursuit of an academic career. I saw it in his eyes. They were no longer shy, loving and wanting, but coy and guile. I became his dependent and it empowered him. My success, I understood threatened his values and preferences; poked at his insecurities.

Now that it was resolved. No longer able to study, I was an undocumented immigrant, and he, my keeper. After almost a decade together, and having been born in a former colony I recognized the look in his eyes. From that look, behaviors and words flooded through. My benefactor kept tabs on the living expenses I shared.

Disagreements ended in reminders that I was under his care, threats to move out, and accusations of ungratefulness and abuse. The hurt I felt in jail is familiar.

I believed it all as my identity faded into depression. I was now useless, dependent on, and indebted to my savior. I became a human colony and he, my colonial master. Once he gave me a gift of a t-shirt with a cute monkey and my name on it. Racist commentary abounded. The message slipped pass my fractured identity.

Shawn grew closer to Paul, his college roommate, and our housemate. They shared similar backgrounds and their symbiotic relationship grew increasingly strong. I became aware of my differences from them. The betrayal I felt earlier in the day is familiar.

I ruminated on this train of thought for a while, then as the car drove past the John F. Kennedy Airport, it took a turn. I recall the fight in more detail. How is it that I go from a man who has shunned violence to one that has now been arrested for fighting? What could have driven me here?

A series of events that forced me to defend my identity and moral standing was the reason. It was that night. It was a harrowing day. I came in the door to laughter on the back porch. Shawn and Paul had company over. I tried to avoid them. I was in no mood to laugh, much less with a set of drunk men.

The water feels astonishingly crisp, warm and mellowing. My mind races about the day's happenings - from resigning from my job, to my trip to reconnect with relatives, to arguing with my father on the phone about not having family

I wanted to cool water to wash all the tension away. Just one more day and I would go away for a while. Why couldn't they have given me a head's up that they'd be entertaining? Same reason I'd been complaining about the cat crying and waking me before sunrise for so many months with neither of them - friends for a decade - doing anything. Only when I became angry, then of course, my anger was out of order. Love, this type of love is so alien to me. A love that bores with familiarity, even becomes contemptuous.

I allow myself to recall the prior night's events.

1:30 AM

A loud banging sound.

I'd had it! It's always as if I get no regard. I got out of bed and flew to the door. The aggravating red glow of a light caught my attention. The banging continued and the white noise in the room sounded urgent. My heart was racing. I opened the door to see Paul directly across from me wrestling with the derailed closet door trying to reset it on the track. I was enraged. Why was it necessary to fix it at that time?! Why couldn't Shawn assist him?

“If you two don’t keep it down, I’ll return the favor in the morning when you want to sleep!” I shouted to get my point across over the sound. The bright hallway light shattering any sleep. There was a pause, and I returned to my bed. I slipped into the welcoming trance of sleep where my mind and body lost all tension.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

Bang! Bang! Bang!

“I said to stop it! It’s almost two in the morning!”

The blur of sleep cleared and blinders of anger went onto my eyes. I see Paul’s evening blue shirt. His overweight torso hunched over facing away from me, clumsily and hopelessly attempting to fix the closet door. Totally drunk. I feel pressure at the nape of my neck. Heartbeats become palpable and my anger flares again. I close the door loudly behind me to get his attention without success. I shout something. Paul turns toward me, his face is immersed under alcohol. Expressionless and zombie-like with glassy eyes, he stares at me without comprehension.

He turns back to the closet door and continues. I rush to the dining table and shout at Shawn, but he looks at me with a simpering expression, unable to understand what I was exclaiming about. I know they don’t hear or see me. Shawn is removing something from his backpack. A small white bottle is sitting on the table next to him.

My anger rose with the continued noise. I saw my hand reach for the bottle. It was almost empty, soft plastic. I threw it at him, hitting him on his right thigh. It got his attention. He turned towards me. I looked at him. The glassiness was replaced by ferocity. Then he rushed at me with his fists raised and ready to hit me. This Paul I had never seen and never expected. It frightened me.

I grabbed the phone and threatened to call the police. They were surrounding me again. I ran behind the dining table. Paul shouts, "I'll make you pay!"

Paul picked up the clothes iron from the table and tried to throw it at my head, but I managed to scramble it out of his hands. I was terrified then. I desperately called 911 and shouted the address into the phone and ran out of the apartment. They ran after me. I dropped the iron into an orange shopping cart chained to a no parking sign on the sidewalk.

At that point they were calling me back into the apartment in a menacing way, shouting accusations. I remember hearing words like *deport*. I became aware of the public nuisance we're making and I obey them. They cornered me inside the entrance of the building, shoving and pushing. I again heard *deport, illegal, make sure, never come back* and *die*. I tried to exit again, but the door was braced shut. I saw the black eye and felt guilty and proud. I crouched. I felt shoves and punches from them both. I crouched tighter, trembling from rage and fear. Hoping something would save me.

The car pulls up to the house and I gather my money and keys.

“What time is it?” I ask, worrying about my flight.

“Two.”

I step out of the car and stand on the same spot I was exactly 24 hours earlier. Part of me wants to dismiss the day as an imaginary thing - as though I had slipped into and now escaped from another dimension - no time having passed. But no, I can't ignore it. So much had occurred, grown, changed and appeared. My mind feels as though new beams and columns have been erected in a renovation. Walking into the apartment it feels familiar but vague and unattached - a place I've visited but never belonged. It is similar to the emotions and feelings I experienced today. The fear, shame, betrayal. They were familiar because I had been in Purgatory before. Within minutes I am showered, packed and I've arranged for a pick up. When I look into the mirror to comb my hair, I barely recognize the face looking back. I can see it is me, but there is no emotional connection to it, almost like a stranger. I dismiss it, feeling it is due to stress and condensation on the glass.

I call Shawn and Paul to make sure they're okay. They're outside. Everything is fine with him. I go to let them in, unsure what I will feel; only knowing that I hope he is well. The door opens.

I see him and I feel the need to console him and be consoled. His face is pale, haggard and there is the black eye.

“I am so sorry! I will never drink that much again!” He cries as he embraces me. I check myself. I don't believe it. I have moved on. I have changed. He thinks he's hugging the man I was a day ago. I feel the seismic shift in me and I know I am no longer here. I have lost a sense of complacency that the world is essentially good and

now I feel oppression and cynicism rising. The burdens of who I was have been lost, but so too, I have lost my identity. What will this society make me now?