

**Who are we when we go inside?:
48 hours in the New York City justice system**

LONGFORM MANUSCRIPT

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“We tell ourselves stories in order to live.”

-Joan Didion

“The prison itself was a living thing, sweating and suffocating in its own immurement.”

-Herman Charles Bosman

“God gave you two ears and one mouth for a reason.”

-My Grandmother, quoting an elderly Jesuit priest she once knew.

I. Fugitive from Justice

The thing about worst-case scenarios? They're always worse than what you ever conceived of 'the worst' to be. And you never see them coming.

I thought I knew about worst-case scenarios. I also thought I knew about things like my inalienable rights as an American citizen, what arraignments are for, and how to dial a call collect. But life has a way of blind-siding you sometimes, of knocking you off your feet and telling you that you can't stand up by yourself. Often, in the worst of cases, you end up teaching yourself how to walk again.

* * *

I was escorted through the international arrivals hall at JFK International Airport in handcuffs, an armed officer gripping me under each arm. Groups of travelers gawked at our parade as I was escorted down the length of terminal five. It was 1 PM on a Sunday in October of 2016. Little old ladies with rolling carry-on bags, groups of Asian tourists all wearing matching baseball caps, my cheeks flushed with shame as I passed by them, wondering who they thought I was, and what I had done. We ducked out a rear door marked 'Access Prohibited,' and then we were outside on the sidewalk heading toward the two police cruisers parked in front of us.

The older captain went to the first cruiser as the younger male officer went to unlock the doors to the second car. The third officer, a female, held me tightly under my left arm, her eyes scanning for potential threats as we stood waiting on the curb.

"You don't have to worry. I'm not planning on making a run for it or anything." I stage-whispered, tilting my head closer to hers as if sharing a secret. I noticed just how petite she was, how she only came up to my shoulder. She looked up at me bashfully, almost embarrassed, "Protocol." The officer loosened her grip a bit until I was loaded into the backseat. My handcuffs were tighter than I expected, and by this point, I could feel steel slicing into my skin every time I breathed. I wondered if I should say something. I didn't.

Driving the two kilometers from terminal five to the Port Authority precinct, we were a bizarre two car parade driving past rows of Boeings and Airbuses, all docked and secured neatly at their

assigned gates like sleeping dragons. Other planes of various sizes and airline affiliation were being unloaded and serviced away from the airport terminal buildings, in the no man's land of gray tarmac and painted white lines that looked hieroglyphic from a distance. Our caravan traversed runway after runway, stopping for a few slow-moving jetliners to pass before us. I felt even more shame as I saw the miniature faces of passengers peering from one plane's windows as it passed before us. My face flushed as I imagined hundreds of people having nothing else to do upon landing except look out their windows and try to make out who was in the back of the cop car.

The only other moving vehicles on the tarmac were the caterpillar-like trucks with trailers full of luggage, swift-moving staircase-trucks, and box-trucks full of cargo with logos of large transnational shipping companies and the US Postal Service. The sky was foreboding; it looked like rain was coming. Even though it was autumn, the air was thick and muggy with a strong prophetic breeze. It felt like I was the main character at the start of a movie in which only horrible things transpired. My stomach continued to churn. I had never felt such a sense of impending doom.

The radio was playing in the front of the cruiser. I could hear a sports program about that afternoon's game between the New York Jets and the Denver Broncos. I wondered if the Philadelphia Eagles were playing that evening, and if I'd manage to make it home in time to watch the game with my family after my welcome home dinner. I would not.

* * *

The Port Authority cops are here. There are three of them. They just walked in and they're standing at the elevated counter in the front, turning to look at me like Dobermans sniffing for my scent. There is an older pudgy officer in a police hat, clearly the captain. On both sides of him stand two younger officers, a White male and Latina female, both roughly my age. They appear clean cut and obedient, with guns on their hips and Dunkin' Donuts to-go cups hovering below their mouths. Although their postures are erect and their sheer presence alarming, they all seem rather ambivalent, their mannerisms conversational and casual.

I study them from the last row of chairs in the back of the communal holding room of US Customs and Border Patrol, scribbling my observations frantically in my journal, now soggy with tear-stained pages.

Before they put the handcuffs on, I ask the captain, whose likeness resembles an overfed bulldog, if I can bring my journal. I am not dignified with a response, which I take to mean, “*No, young lady, you may not bring your journal to jail.*”

I have abandoned trying to be discreet about my feelings. I am blubbering so loud now that when I look away from the Port Authority trio I see the heads of every other detainee in the room, all twelve of them, turned in my direction, salivating with curiosity, wondering what the hell I must have done to end up there.

* * *

I was led through the Port Authority precinct at the other end of the airport ground before being formally booked. This meant a lengthy ordeal involving an extensive verbal questionnaire of my biographical history before being fingerprinted and photographed for my mug shot. I did my best to stifle my tears as the Captain lined me up against a height chart on the wall behind me before snapping my photo with an obsolete digital camera. I wondered how many photos of other terrified individuals were on that camera, imagining all of the stories its photos could tell. Aside from a college football game on the television in the corner and a huge pot of soup simmering on the stove in the kitchen, my arrest was the biggest source of attention to the ten or so cops that were on duty. After being booked, I was led to the back of the station, through a locked door to a row of three holding cells behind a glass wall.

Of the three cells only the first was occupied by a man in a wrinkled black suit. He lay on his side atop the thin wooden bench nailed to the wall, but he was so obese that it looked as if the plank might snap beneath his weight. The enormous jacket he'd worn in was now being used as a makeshift blanket. Unphased by my arrival, the man didn't even look up when I was escorted past his cell.

I was given the chance to call my Mom from the phone mounted to the wall outside my cell. Officer Male Doberman said he could dial it and pass the corded receiver through the bars of my cell for me to use. I hadn't spoken to her since about an hour before I'd been arrested, texting her frantically from the single bathroom attached to the holding room. At that point there was still a chance I could have been released, a possibility to which I had desperately clung until the very minute my warrant came through. Mom had been in frantic denial, assuring me that I'd be released, wagering that nobody

from Bucks County would bother faxing a warrant for some petty charge on a Sunday morning.

I cringed at the thought of telling her where I was, so I ask Officer Male Doberman to please inform her of my circumstances, before passing me the corded phone receiver through the bars. I didn't even try to conceal my panic from her like I usually do, given that her habitual reaction to emergency situations is to freeze like a baby deer in the midst of oncoming traffic. I heard myself babbling a shameful diatribe of apologies into the receiver between sobs until she was able to calm me down enough to take a proper breath. She musters as calm a tone as possible, assuaging me with instructions to relax, to stop crying, that everything will be *okay*. I continued with silent, rhythmic heaves, desperate for her to espouse some maternal wisdom.

"Grandma is with you," she murmurs into the phone, slightly hyperventilating herself. Grandma would've known exactly what to say. She curtailed emergency situations like they were grenades being hurled by enemy combatants. That is to say, she handled them with aplomb. But her heart had stopped beating one anonymous Wednesday afternoon in June, seventeen months prior. And since then we had all been left to comfort ourselves.

Mom had promised my Grandma's famous spaghetti and meatballs for dinner that evening, as a celebration of my return. Remembering this, I could almost conjure the ambrosial smell of her homemade spaghetti sauce at will. The tears fell harder.

"Remember, this too shall pass. Okay?"

Yeah, great Mom. What's that going to look like? 'How exactly shall 'this' pass this time?'

* * *

Officer Female Doberman called me baby girl and brought me maxi pads when I told her that I had gotten my period on the plane. We were practically the same age and her warmth shined through a bit more when she was separated from the rest of her pack. I used the stack of maxi pads as a pillow and curled up in the fetal position on the wooden bench in my cell. Officer Male Doberman brought me a sandwich after asking if I'd had anything to eat all day.

"Food's gonna be better here than wherever you're going."

"Where *am* I going? I have no idea what's supposed to happen next!"

When he saw that I was crying, he actually tried to comfort me, which struck me as particularly kind, given that his appearance and demeanor until that point had conveyed only procedural

detachment. His humane gesture of empathy, the kind that most officers seem trained against indulging, sparked within me a desperately sought sense of connection. I clung to his expression of sympathy, just as I did with the words ‘*stay strong*’ that were carved into the wooden bench next to my leg. I repeatedly traced the letters with my fingers as my tears landed on the bench. I imagined the person who first scrawled them, wondering where they were now and how long they’d sat on this bench before moving on. As cliché as those words were in the jail cell, they kept me buoyed to the surface of my despair with their simple comfort.

* * *

It is 7 AM on Sunday morning. I deboard my 14-hour red-eye flight from Johannesburg and weave, bleary-eyed and bothered, through the snaking maze of black-corded stanchions at the International Arrivals Terminal of JFK Airport in Queens, New York. I am back on American soil for the first time in five months.

I am returning home from for two weeks from South Africa where I have been living for the past year. It will be a nice respite, I tell myself. I’m back to renew my travel visa and spend time with my friends and family, whom I haven’t seen in months. It is to be a welcomed two weeks of autumnal Americana and familiar faces, before I return back to Johannesburg where I’ve been consulting at a news company all year.

The immigration officer – let’s call her Lady Liberty– reaches for my passport from behind her elevated desk, studying it and then me. She asks me the routine questions, “What do you do for work?”, “What were you doing in South Africa?” “How long have you been away?” A few minutes pass as Lady Liberty continues typing, exceeding the polite interval that this exchange usually takes. My concerns begin to mount as I see Lady Liberty raise an eyebrow at the screen in front of her and cock her head to the side, before typing away furiously.

“Wait here just one moment, please.”

She walks with my passport across the arrivals terminal to an elevated desk with two more immigration officers. After a few minutes, she returns to inform me that my passport has been flagged, and that it is her responsibility to confiscate it until Border Patrol can determine the reason why.

“This should only take a few minutes,” Lady Liberty reassures me when my face scrunches with confusion. “It’s just standard procedure. Really. Now please follow me.”

She escorts me into a large room in the corner of the terminal. It is a fluorescent, white-walled purgatory with an aesthetic not far from that of a state motor vehicles department waiting room. The decal on the room's glass doors reads 'US Border Patrol and Homeland Security Detentions and Holding.' For an early Sunday morning, there are only a handful of other travelers sitting there. They are all men, all of varying ethnicities and all look as bewildered as I feel. I sit obediently as Lady Liberty hunches before a computer screen alongside a more intimidating Border Patrol agent. They both keep squinting from my passport to the screen, conferring with one another in hushed tones. Things are beginning to feel rather grave.

Twenty minutes later the other Border Patrol Agent—let's call him Yankee Doodle— calls me to the front where he is seated behind an elevated desk that spans the width of the room. Multiple agents sit behind the desk as they summon travelers from their seats to deliver their fates and inform them if or when they will be free to go.

“Are you aware that there's a warrant for your arrest in the State of Pennsylvania?” Yankee Doodle inquires, looking down at me from his elevated seat, itself a pedestal of authority.

“What?!” I burst into nervous laughter, a familiar coping mechanism that is poorly received. Yankee Doodle raises an eyebrow, as if to say, ‘*Cut the shit.*’

“I'm sorry, Officer. I'm a bit...flabbergasted by this news.”

The whole scenario feels like an elaborately constructed 'welcome home' prank, complete with hidden cameras and a smooth-talking presenter who will soon pop out and yell, 'Gotcha!' I keep looking around frantically, waiting for someone, anybody, to set this whole thing straight and send me on my way. But no one ever does.

* * *

Officer Male Doberman came to my cell a while later, pulling up a chair on the other side of its bars, before asking me if I needed anything.

“The only thing I need,” I said with a forced chuckle through my tears, “is a ride back to Pennsylvania.”

He didn't reply. I looked up and noticed that he was looking at me in a rather peculiar fashion.

“You know something? You actually look really pretty when you cry.”

“...Thank you. Officer.” I am deeply reticent, and it shows.

“Y'know, we don't get a lot'a girls in here like *you*.” He pauses. “You know what I mean, right? Like, *good* girls. You're a good girl, *aren't* you?”

“Sorry? I'm not sure I know... where you're going with this. Officer.”

“I'm just bein' *nice*, is all. I'm just comin' to keep you *company*, see if you need anything, you know. You let me *know*, okay beautiful?”

“Don't—don't worry, Officer,” I stammered. “I don't expect to be here for very long.”

He lingered and leered for a moment longer. Only after he walked away did I realize I could hear my heart pounding frantically in my chest. I could feel an unmistakable surge of adrenaline seep through every limb of my body, every hair on my arms was standing at attention, like a wild animal reacting to an adjacent predator.

For the next few hours I lay on my bench, counting in the tiles in the ceiling and thinking about the line between displays of genuine human empathy and displays of compassion as a means of manipulation. I thought about gender roles and power dynamics, disenfranchisement and what I wanted to eat for dinner. But my thoughts kept coming back to just how differently this situation would have unfolded if I looked differently. I wondered how the male Doberman would be treating me if my skin wasn't the same color as his, if I couldn't speak fluent English, if I wasn't wearing yoga pants and V-neck T-shirt, if I wasn't categorized in his mind as a familiar thing, safe, a *good* girl.

In that cell, my various tokens of privilege were my only companions. I was faced with the blunt reality that my age, my complexion, my name, my background, all of these characteristics afforded me a comfier wooden bench, so to speak. What would the situation have looked like without those privileges? How much worse would it have been? I stewed in an indignant disgust that was tinged with a quiet, shameful gratitude. I let that dissonance sit with me for a long time before eventually drifting off to sleep.

* * *

“What is this outstanding warrant for?”

“I don't know!” I was ugly-crying by then. “Aren't you supposed to be able to tell me that, Officer?”

Yankee Doodle typed feverishly.

“Failure to appear,” he read from the screen.

“Appear? ...For what?”

“I don’t know. Court? A hearing? Some court-ordered appearance, usually.”

“What? How is that possible? I’ve been in South Africa more or less for the past 11 months.

When was the warrant issued?”

“Nine months ago ... Have you ever been arrested in the state of Pennsylvania?”

I paused, stunned.

“...Yes I have.”

“Yeah, probably has something to do with that. There was probably a hearing or something nine months ago. And when people don’t show up for court, bench warrants are immediately issued for their arrest. That’s probably all this is.”

I babbled incoherently at him for a moment.

“Go sit down, ma’am. I’ll update you if the holding pattern progresses.”

Allow me to pause for just a moment further to insert another story, a necessary one that needs to be explained before we get any further.

It is October 2, 2014, two years prior, almost to the day. I am twenty-four, virtually unemployed, severely depressed and incredibly inebriated. Needless to say, I am not thriving. But I *am* driving a car. It is 2:30 in the morning on the winding, back roads of Solebury, Pennsylvania and I am heading vaguely in the direction of home. I'll skip the unsavory details (mostly because I can't remember most of them before the accident), and jump to the part where I wake up behind the wheel of my car. Except everything around me is upside-down because the car has rolled down an embankment and landed on its roof in a ditch. None of the doors will open so I unbuckle my seat belt and climb out of the driver's side window without turning off the engine. I'm unscathed, save for a bloody right hand, a gash on my widow's peak, and a horrible headache. I smell gasoline and see the exhaust pipe is leaking. My judgment is gone, but I see no good in staying there. So I run.

I'm only (what seems like a mere) six miles down a series of dark country roads from my home, and I'm convinced that if I just keep running I can make it all the way there and just go to sleep and deal with everything in the morning. I am bleeding from the head and my ballet flats are not conducive to sprinting, so I go barefoot. I make it maybe a mile before a police cruiser passes me booking it like hell in through middle of nowhere and obviously decides to pull over and inquire. After failing the Breathalyzer test so remarkably that he didn't even bother with a field sobriety exam, I was handcuffed

and arrested by Officer Steve. I had met this man at age 11, when he taught my sixth grade class to “*DARE* to resist drugs and alcohol.” The last time I’d seen him, he was holding the limbo pole at the dance after my elementary school graduation ceremony. Even three sheets to the wind and with minor head trauma, the grim irony surrounding my arresting officer is too much to bear. I think about how this is the worst thing I’ve ever done.

My overnight sequestration in the small-town police station was rather banal— an experience belonging wholly to the upper-middle class nook of countryside, under whose jurisdiction I had just totaled my car and attempted to outrun the consequences. Officer Steve dropped me off at a friend's house at dawn, leaving me with a few blanket statements of encouragement, a court summons for the following week, and four cigarettes. ‘*Hmm, how generous,*’ I remember thinking, sincerely.

I checked every box on my “how to get your life together” list from that point forward— quitting the recent nanny job I'd picked up a few days a week for a higher paying one, in order to pay off every court fee, attending the mandatory highway safety course on Saturday mornings, seeing a counselor and abstaining from driving, and also drinking.

One year later, in October of 2015, I was living in New York City, working as a waitress until I was offered a job consulting at a newspaper in Johannesburg. South Africa seemed like an upgrade from my current situation, and I was ripe for a life-altering change of scenery. I checked with the court to see what still has to be done for my probation, and if I was permitted to leave the country. I didn’t hear back until the day of the flight, when an Assistant District Attorney called back and told me that my six months of non-reporting probation would be ending a few months from then. I was able to leave the country as long as could provide proof of a return ticket, upon questioning. *Cool. Done and done.*

Except, what I didn’t know upon hearing that confirmation, and what I wouldn’t find out until this entire situation was over, was that come March of the following year, once my probation ended, a court summons was sent to the apartment I had most-recently occupied in Astoria, Queens. The summons was for a group hearing of first-time DUI offenders like myself, who had completed their mandatory probation sentences and records were to be reviewed and then most likely expunged, thereby declaring us with a ‘clean bill of criminal health’ as far as the Bucks County District Attorney's Office was concerned. However, (and this is the kicker) I never received the summons. Because I had moved out of the apartment (and the country) five months prior to it being issued.

If I had known of the summons, I would have also known of the direct consequences of missing a court date or dodging one, namely the immediate issuing of a bench warrant for my arrest. I would have known that a bench warrant was certainly the type of thing that was likely to show up when attempting to enter or exit the country, the exact type of red flag that I wouldn't want to wave upon approaching an immigration officer, bleary-eyed and passport in hand.

* * *

I stayed at the Port Authority precinct until dusk, until the enormous man in the tuxedo and I were loaded into the back of a squad car bound for Queens Central Booking. He barely fit in the back seat alongside me. The officers had to force the door closed behind him. My wrists were starting to bleed at this point, the steel handcuffs were slicing into them every time I moved. I never realized how difficult it was to sit in the back seat of a car with your hands cuffed behind you. I had to turn my body to face the window, and given that there were no seat belts in the back, I couldn't help but roll like a sack of potatoes whenever the cruiser turned a corner. Along with seat belts, there were no door handles in the back of any of the cars. *"Well, of course, there wouldn't be door handles,"* I remarked to myself. *"Everybody who sits back here is handcuffed."*

As the police cruiser drove down the Brooklyn Queens Expressway, we passed the exit for my old neighborhood in Queens where I resided a mere 11 months earlier. The Jets-Broncos game was playing on the radio and a steady mist had the windshield wipers undulating rhythmically. I asked what time it was, and the officer riding shotgun shot a smug grin to his partner before he answered me.

"Why? You got somewhere to be?"

In that moment I disdained the officer with the rage of a thousand fiery Irish women scorned. Somehow, perhaps through divine intervention, I remained quiet, only giving him a nod with a sarcastic half-smile as if to say, *'Oh, very clever.'*

I spent the rest of the ride peering out the rear window and thinking about injustice.

* * *

Yankee Doodle saunters past you with your passport and a single sheet of white paper, returning to his perch behind the elevated desk of the Border Patrol officers. He calls your last name

and beckons you up from your seat before confirming that there is indeed an outstanding warrant for your arrest in the great Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. He also confirms that they are planning on extraditing you from New York back to Pennsylvania. *Whoever 'they' are remains unclear.*

“What happens now, sir?”

“We are entering a new holding pattern.”

First, he explains, the District Attorney's office in Bucks County has to call and summon the Sheriff. He has to get out of bed, drive over to the courthouse, and sign a hard copy of the warrant before it can be faxed over for Border Patrol to proceed with my extradition.

Mention to Yankee Doodle that the Sheriff is actually your neighbor, Duke Donnelly. Remember fondly, but do not volunteer to share, the cumulative amount of hours you spent in the community gazebo of the townhouse development where you grew up, committing harmless adolescent offenses—kissing boys after curfew, getting stoned for the first time, trying to look cool while smoking cigarettes—all a mere 500 feet from the Sheriff's house halfway down the block.

You and your friends would catch glimpses of the neon-decaled, custom police cruiser in his driveway, shining in the headlights of any car that would drive around the adjacent corner after dark. The visual reminder of the police cruiser and the sheriff's proximity would induce your teenage paranoia ten-fold, but only until the car had passed and it was dark again. Then you would promptly abandon your concerns of getting caught, in favor of topics far more juvenile and giggle inducing. You'd never actually seen how he looked, Duke Donnelly, but picturing him driving from your neighborhood to the courthouse in his familiar squad car, the same one you'd seen in his driveway for years on end, made the sheriff feel like the only familiar piece of home in your current equation. Yankee Doodle does not care much that Sheriff Duke Donnelly is your neighbor. *Quelle grande surprise!*

“If we don't hear back from him, we're not into holding people all day for doing something wrong somewhere else,” he tells you, resignedly. This is the best news you've heard all morning, something to cling to.

About an hour later Yankee Doodle summons you to his perch of purgatory again. You walk back up to the elevated counter and decide that it must have been intentional, the decision to situate the stools and the long desk on such a high platform. It imposes dominance, rendering anyone standing before it as immediately smaller, as 'less than.' You think to yourself about how indicative this

furniture arrangement is of the American superiority complex as a whole.

Yankee Doodle tells you that he's just hung up from a call with the Bucks County District Attorney's office and that Duke Donnelly is currently heading over to the courthouse to sign your warrant. He tells you, with a mixture of pity and righteousness, that if the warrant doesn't come through by 10 he will see to it that you are released from custody and free to go. It is 8:47.

You begin to do some frantic mental calculations. You live about a 15 minutes drive from the courthouse in the center of town. Sheriff DD lives down the street, approximately two minutes closer, a 13-minute trip. The odds do not seem wonderfully favorable for you right now. You have a dooming suspicion that the warrant will be signed, faxed and received before 10 am. But you have been wrong before.

It is 9:55 now. The pages of your journal have become wet and the ink blotted; your only pen has run out of ink. You are scrawling frantically with a crayon nib found in the bottom of your purse, recording every single thing that is happening, mostly to abate your panic and keep your nervous hands busy. You hear Yankee Doodle laughing from the back of the room. He has gone to make himself a cup of coffee and check the fax machine for your warrant. *What is funny?* You silently yell to the heavens.

How could anything be funny right now? I don't think this is very funny at ALL! Your outrage is so resonant that if it were audible, it would break glass.

You see Yankee Doodle emerge from the back room with a thermos in one hand and a folded paper in the other. He is whistling. Five minutes until you learn if the rest of your immediate future is to be drastically derailed, and this guy is fucking whistling.

Is that my warrant? Do I get to leave now or wait three more hours until the police come to take me back home?

The most frustrating part of this whole 'being detained' situation (perhaps intentionally so), is the lack of transparency. He walks right past you, with word of your deliverance in his very hands, withholding it from you just because he can.

“ No, for Pennsylvania ... For uh...Bucks County?” you hear Officer Chapman respond to another officer as he walks toward the front of the room.

The warrant comes in via fax at 9:56. He tells you this with the same righteous yet pitying tone from before. *Fucking 9:56!*

“This is what I was hoping *wouldn’t* happen,” he told me. “You don’t seem like the type’a person worth spending this much time on. Honestly, if it were up to me I’d just let you go.”

Decide that he must mean this. You’ve noticed in the past three hours that Yankee Doodle is not the type of man to waste time or energy in an effort to make others feel better. The fact that he offers even the slightest hint of discord between himself and his code of bureaucratic decorum makes you want to bestow him with gratitude for the glimmer of validation he has given you, for the slightest hint that yours might be a situation that is rare, rather preposterous, and unfortunately timed.

“So listen,” he sighs, getting back to business once again. “The next step in the holding pattern involves your transfer to the Port Authority Police. You’ll become their responsibility now, until Pennsylvania determines how you’ll be extradited back home.”

You look at him with a look of absolute doom while you mentally resign yourself to a dramatic death right there in terminal five. The only sounds you hear are the plunging, catastrophic tones from horror-thriller movie trailers.

“But look, the Port Authority officers could say *no*, that they’re too *busy*,” he explains, sensing your dismay, “which would be another chance for you to walk.”

It is 11 AM on a Sunday. How busy could they really be?

He instructs you to go have a seat (for at least the sixth time) while he phones the Port Authority precinct across the airport grounds.

You feel the sickest you have all morning, and tell him wearily, “I know it doesn’t matter to you, but this is probably the worst thing that’s ever happened to me.” Your voice breaks. You are crying again.

“It’s not that I don’t care.” The tone of his voice is different when he says this. He sustains eye contact with you for the first time all morning. “It’s just that there’s genuinely nothing I can do.”

“Wait a second, does it say *when* the warrant was issued?”

“March 16th of this year.”

“But that doesn’t make any sense... I came home in June. I flew into *this* airport. And I flew *out* of it too, on July 3rd. I went to India for a work trip and I left with absolutely no trouble. How come my passport wasn’t flagged either of those times?”

He cocks his head to the side with slight intrigue, like he's just stumbled onto a piece of office gossip.

“Honestly, I'd chalk that up to just being really lucky. I wouldn't ask any more questions about it if I were you.”

II. A Procedural Courtroom Drama in One Act

Queens Central Booking in Kew Gardens was bigger and significantly bleaker than the Port Authority precinct. Inside, there were no windows or natural light of any kind. The fluorescent light panels in the high ceilings, dim and only partially working, cast a green shadow on everything and everyone. The interior of the space looked and felt like the set of a gritty, urban, early-'90s crime drama.

I was booked, fingerprinted, and photographed again. The officer behind the camera told me to open my eyes, swollen from crying, wider as she zoomed in on my face. I used the sleeve of my mother's army-green jacket to wipe the tears from my nose before the shutter clicked. Five or six officers and admin staff stood behind the bright photo lights that shined in my face. I saw a few of them shake their heads and shoot knowing glances at one another. I wondered what they knew that I didn't, and I wondered when I'd find out.

My new holding cell looked identical to the last one except it was double the length, with skinny steel benches instead of the wooden ones— and blankets! *Alleluia!* My teeth had been chattering with cold since I got out of the police cruiser. I weighed the risk of bedbugs or fleas and decided that given my circumstances, those were chances I was willing to take.

What sweet relief! Under the blanket I found privacy again. I could cry as much as I wanted, I could sing quietly to myself, I could maintain sovereignty over my own personal domain. I could be invisible, just like I wanted to be. I woke an hour or two later to the cell door opening, announcing the arrival of my cellmate. The woman was very beautiful, with long eyelashes, dark purple lips, and box braids that hung down the length of her back. She wore leggings and a purple fleece pullover. Let's call her Tonya Sunshine.

Tonya introduced herself to me once the doors had locked, and apologized for waking me.

"It's no problem. I was only half sleeping anyway. I'm happy to have some company."

Gratefully, she launched into her own story before probing me about mine. Tonya explained to me how she had been picked up for violating a restraining order. She had a pot of chili simmering on the stove and was watching the Jets-Broncos game with her three young kids when the cops came to her door. The restraining order had been issued a few months prior by one of her downstairs neighbors in the five story apartment building in Corona where she lived. While Tonya didn't divulge exactly why

there was a restraining order in the first place, she did emphasize, at length, how futile it was to have a restraining order against someone who has to walk past their front door every day to get to and from their own home.

The neighbor had called the cops earlier that day after he bumped into Tonya at the front of their building as she and her children returned from the grocery store. Words were exchanged, although Tonya, again, didn't go into great detail. A few hours later two NYPD officers showed up at her door. She was taken out of her apartment in handcuffs, the pot of chili simmering on the stove, and her three young children left alone in an empty apartment until she could return home.

"Who's gonna get them up for school in the morning if I have to spend the night here?" Tonya asked. "I gotta get my baby to *daycare*. Nobody in my family is answering their *phones*. What am I s'posed t'do?"

While the details of Tonya's story remained a bit fuzzy, it was obvious that she didn't seem to be a *bad* person. At the very least, she was no criminal. She was one of the first people I would encounter who would exemplify this lesson—that good people can be guilty of breaking laws without being criminals, that there were plenty of people in jail who weren't 'the bad guys.'

We spent the next few hours napping on our benches, chatting and sharing pieces of an unripe orange from the brown-bagged meals that had been slid through the bars of our cell for us.

"Let's split mine," she suggested. "You save yours. We might get hungry again later before the next food cart comes around."

"Tonya, what happens next for you?" I inquired. "What are you waiting for now?"

"Well, I'm *waiting* to talk to my lawyer. And I'm *waiting* to find out how fast my family can post my bail. I don't know how much it is yet, so I guess I'm waiting find that out too ... I hope I get to see the judge before the court closes tonight. I ain't stayin' *in* here until *t'marrah*."

"Tomorrow? I hadn't realized that was an option."

I fell asleep again soon after. When I woke, it was to the sound of a male CO calling my name. He escorted me down a series of hallways, into a small, timeworn room with a large piece of Plexiglas dividing it in two, each half with its own door. There was a steel counter, a steel chair, and a phone receiver on each side of the glass.

"Your public defender should be here in a few minutes," the CO informed me as he unlocked the door to my side of the room.

“A public defender? That's weird. Nobody asked if I had an attorney that I wanted to call?”

The CO looked down at me as if I intended to cause trouble.

“*Did* you? Have an attorney to call?”

“Well actually, no. But I mean...But I know it's my right to at least be asked, right?”

“Well *I* just asked. And you just *told* me you ain't got counsel. So your public defender will be here soon.”

I sat there half asleep, with my arms crossed under my head. My cheek rested on the cold steel counter and I watched my breath fog up its metallic shine with every exhale. I wasn't sure why I needed representation if I was just waiting to be shipped back to Pennsylvania. But I was at least eager to have a legal professional on my side to really break down for me what was going on and to answer all of my questions.

I waited thirty minutes before my public defender made his debut, bursting into his side of the meeting room with a red Jansport backpack slung limply over one shoulder. He was a young black man in a navy suit jacket and khakis. He looked to be in his mid-twenties like me, and hardly contained the gravitas and expertise that I had hoped for. His thick glasses sank on the bridge of his nose as he took a swig of coffee from a paper cup as he reviewed my file. Each of his movements seemed detached and annoyingly formulaic. I felt like nothing more than paperwork that needed to be dealt with, instead of a real human being. Through a slot in the Plexiglas he passed me a business card that felt to have been printed on Xerox paper. Let's call him Lyle Jones, Esquire.

Mr. Jones informed me that my arraignment was scheduled to begin in 15 minutes. An arraignment, he explained, is a hearing where I go before the judge and have my formal charge of 'fugitive from justice' declared, before entering a plea of guilty or not guilty. He promised to do most of the talking and instructed me to plead guilty in order to get the ball rolling on my extradition. If I were to plead not guilty, he explained, a messy inter-state criminal case would ensue, and I would definitely end up “in the system” for even longer.

There was no sense in trying to fight the charges because, in short, I was guilty. Aware of it or not, I had an outstanding warrant for failure to appear in court in Pennsylvania. Even with my acute legal knowledge, I knew that even the best high-powered defense attorney wouldn't be able to change the fundamental fact that I had indeed done what I was being accused of doing.

“I've never felt more uninformed than I do right now,” I said. “I don't even know why I'm going before the judge.”

“For the arraignment,” he said expressionless.

“No, I know, you just said that. But I mean-- I just don't see why I'm being tried in New York

State.”

“It's not a trial. It's an arraignment.”

“Right, sorry...” I replied, feeling misunderstood. “Have you ever heard of a situation like this happening before? Like, have you had other clients in this situation?”

“No. This is the first time I have encountered a situation of this nature.”

I slowly nodded my head and pursed my lips as an awkward silence ensued.

“You know, I was supposed to go to law school. I was supposed to be a lawyer when I grew up.” I bemoaned through the double-pane of Plexiglas.

I decided I would spare Lyle Jones the story if *why* I never ended up going—the existential crisis that I endured while taking a practice LSAT exam, in which I convinced myself that, at least judging from the entrance exam, law school would certainly 'fail to bring me joy.' I didn't tell Lyle how I decided to try my hand at being a television news anchor instead. And how I told myself back then, that if broadcast journalism didn't work out, I could always work in politics, or magazines, or I could just be a full-time blogger and travel for a few years, until my life's true purpose was ultimately revealed to me and I could pursue my intended path to ultimate professional fulfillment. I had so many options back then, spoiled into complacency like so many of my contemporaries by the expectation that 'career' and 'passion' are words meant to be synonymous. Maybe I had been too picky. Maybe if I had gone to law school, I would have been on the right side of the glass.

* * *

I stood in a single-file line of handcuffed inmates outside of a steel door for a prolonged amount of time. I couldn't see what was behind the door, but it was a source of much commotion and heavy foot traffic, so I knew it must be important. I thought perhaps we were waiting to be taken outside, and loaded into a van headed for the courthouse. Eventually, the door opened and the line began to advance one by one. It was then that I realized that this *was* the courtroom; the arraignment was happening right then and there.

It felt just like entering a film set, as I emerged from the dark, steel corridor into the warm and well-lit miniature courtroom. I felt utterly unprepared, again feeling like I had no idea what was going on. Maybe the business card that Lyle Jones had passed to me *was* printed on computer paper. Maybe I *was* totally fucked.

After two or three people had their charges read before the judge, I heard my name being called. A female bailiff led me by the arm to meet Lyle Jones at the front of the courtroom where we stood together before the judge—a weary looking, middle aged woman with cropped gray-blond hair and a thick Long Island accent. I grew quite concerned when she did not make eye contact with me for the duration of my arraignment. Once again I felt more like the physical embodiment of a stack of paperwork, instead of a woman desperately seeking to regain her freedom.

I fixed my eyes on the stenographer seated to the left of the judge throughout the hearing. Beside me Lyle Jones did the talking, as promised, yet I felt as if he were performing a role for which he had not yet gone off book. He fumbled his words and mispronounced both my first and last names. I wondered if maybe I would've just fared better going before the judge without him.

When the time came I pleaded 'guilty' as I had been told, and waited to hear when I would be extradited to Pennsylvania. After a few minutes, I heard the judge say my name, before declaring that she would revisit my case in two weeks, “at which time a representative from the Pennsylvania State Police will be there to collect and extradite” me back to Bucks County. “In the meantime,” she went on, “you are to be remanded without bail for the next fourteen days. If no officers from Pennsylvania are present during your next hearing, scheduled for...” she looked down at her desk, scanning her notes. “The sixteenth of this month, you will be free to go. Do you understand what I have just told you?”

I reached a new level of panic, feeling it erupt from my stomach to my tear-ducts, causing me to quietly hyperventilate as I tried to make eye contact with Lyle Jones. He wouldn't look at me and so frenzied with terror, I called out, “What?! Are you sure? Please don't--”

The female bailiff, who'd still been holding my arm throughout the proceedings, gave a hard squeeze and pulled me to her.

“Don't do that,” she hissed under her breath. “If you give her shit, she'll only make it worse for you.”

I imagined the only thing worse than a sentence of two weeks would be a longer one. So I heeded the bailiff's advice and continued to stand there riddled with panic, my eyebrows raised to my hairline. I didn't know what the judge's sentence meant. *Remanded where?* Did I have to sit in Queens Central Booking for two weeks until this little courtroom scene unfolded once again? And if nobody from Bucks County showed up, what then? I could just leave?

I glanced back at the stenographer. Her fingers never stopped typing as she evaluated me with a look that was the opposite of comforting. It was pity, mixed with a sterile and detached concern. It was

a look that conveyed to me that at least one of us knew what was about to happen to me, that I had no idea what I was in for.

The judge pounded her gavel, announcing the next case, and I was escorted by the bailiff out of the courtroom and back into the same hallway we'd entered from. I remember I couldn't see very clearly during this walk. My glasses had fogged up because I was crying, again. And I was unable to wipe the tears from my face because my hands were handcuffed behind my back, again.

Lyle Jones was a few paces ahead, walking at a fast clip with his red Jansport slouched over one shoulder.

"Excuse me? Mr. Jones? What does remanded without bail mean for me, exactly? Where are they taking me? Am I just going to have to stay *here* for two weeks?"

Lyle Jones looked me up and down. It was the first time we had stood face to face, and I noticed I was a few inches taller than him. His expression was grim as he looked down shook his head. He half-heartedly assured me we would be in touch, and asked if I'd like him to call anyone on my behalf, to share the results of my arraignment. I asked if he could call out-of-state and he nodded yes. I recited my mother's mobile number to him and once he had written it on the back of my case file, he walked away without saying goodbye.

Tonya Sunshine recognized the panic in my eyes even before my handcuffs were removed and the cell door had been locked behind me. She asked with genuine concern about what had transpired in the courtroom. I told her everything about my public defender, the miniature courtroom lady bailiff, the judge, and the stenographer. I told her that I had no idea what was going on, that I hadn't even known there was a courtroom in this jail.

"Okay, but what'd the judge *decide*, though?"

"I'm remanded for two weeks without bail..." She stopped me right there.

"Oh shit... You're *remanded*?" Her eyes were wide; she began to pace. "Now *that's* some fucked up shit... You goin' to *city* jail."

"Where's that?"

"They're sending you to Rikers."

"Rikers *Island*, Rikers? What?! Rikers as in 'Where they send all the worst criminals on *Law and Order*,' Rikers? Like, Rikers *Island*, Rikers?" Tonya nodded gravely. "Wait...Are you kidding?! Aren't there any *other* jails that I can go to?"

I began to frantically pace the length of the cell.

“No, that’s the *problem*, sis. There’s only the one outside’a Manhattan. ‘The Rock.’”

“Christ, they call it 'The Rock?' That's terrifying ...Tonya, am I going to be okay? I mean...” I gestured to myself. “Am I going to be... *okay* in there?”

“Honestly baby girl, I can't say. I've never been there. So I don't wanna go n'*misinform* you, you know?”

“Well, I appreciate your honesty... Tonya, I haven't said this to anybody here yet, but... I'm *really* scared.”

“I know, baby girl.” Her voice oozed with compassion. I felt seen. “This is all *kinds'a* fucked up ... like they're makin' an *example* out of you.”

Behind the bars of our cell, Tonya took my hands in hers and asked if I wanted to pray with her.

“That would be really lovely.” I told her. “Please.” My voice didn’t sound like my own, and I could feel my chin quaking. My tears fell on the concrete floor as I bowed my head to receive Tonya's blessing of protection.

III. “*I Got a Feelin’...*”

Hours later, a CO came to rouse me from a half-sleep. Tonya had been taken to her own arraignment some time earlier. I never had the chance to say goodbye. I was ushered upstairs to an office for some additional administrative procedures, the purposes of which were never disclosed to me. Afterwards, they put me in large cell off to one side, with a full view of the office. The cell had a payphone. I didn't have much faith in Lyle Jones' promise to follow up with my Mom, and I wanted to make sure that Mom was aware of the news that I was to be sent to Rikers Island. The thought of how she would react was the most stinging pain of my ordeal thus far.

I asked the female CO in the office on the other side of the bars if I could use the pay phone.

“Phone's yours to use, but you can only dial collect...Oh, and local calls only.”

This presented me with a new challenge to negotiate. None of my family lived in the state. A lot of my friends lived in New York City, but very few of them hailed from New York and as such, the area codes of their cell phones were out-of-state. I shuffled through the mental list of the friends I had that were raised in West Chester and Long Island with local area codes. *Ding ding!* Three close friends whom I wouldn't mind calling from jail came to mind: Kelly, Amelia, and Danny.

Of the three, the only friend whose phone number I had memorized was Danny.

Danny was notorious for being a night owl. It was close to midnight on Sunday and I knew the chances of him answering a collect call from an unknown number were at least better than my other two friends. But he was also notorious for not answering his phone, or for his mailbox being full, or for his phone just being off for days at a time. The reason I had his number memorized in the first place was because of the automated voicemail message that would repeat his phone number to me every time he didn't pick up, before informing me that he was once again “unavailable at this time.”

I figured out how to successfully dial collect and then call his number. It rang, which meant it was on, but no answer. I decided, in an act of desperation and a deliberate attempt at mental-telephonic telepathy, to just keep calling and calling until he answered, or until I had to leave. The CO didn't seem the least bit concerned and I was in there all by myself. I didn't know the next time I'd have privacy like this. On my ninth consecutive attempt Danny picked up, bewildered and half-asleep.

I don't remember what I first said to him exactly, just the dire tone in which I spoke. It was measured and collected as if my tone of voice could convey the severity of the situation. Absurdity and disbelief had become the day's existing norms. I was fumbling with a trickling hosepipe of

communication, from which I was desperately sought to quench my thirst. After relaying the events of the day, I asked him to call my Mom and merge our calls on his phone so that I could speak to her.

The worst part was when my Mom asked me, “Yeah, but are you safe?” I didn’t know what the answer would be. Since I couldn’t in good conscience say yes, I just remember telling her, in the same dire but collected tone, “That remains to be seen. I’ll let you know, Mom.”

I didn’t know what my next step was going to look like, or if I *would* be safe. But at least, on that phone call, I was understood; I was validated, prayed for, and loved. And to be reminded of those things, to hear the voices of people I loved who were on the outside, and who could lament with me about how absurd this whole thing was, kept alight whatever embers of self and identity I still had inside of me until I was able to contact the outside again.

* * *

Fourteen hours after getting off the plane, I was put in a NYPD paddy wagon with six male juvenile inmates who were all chained together at the ankles. Two officers sat in front. I sat behind the cops, separated by a thick pane of bulletproof Plexiglas. Behind me was a steel, grated partition with holes just large enough to peer through with one eye. Behind that, in the ‘hold’ of the paddy wagon, my six companions sat on parallel steel benches facing one another. Since it was night, and the front of the van was lit from the highway traffic, they could all see me far better than I could them. But we had all gotten good looks at each other when I was escorted in front of their modern-day chain gang before being loaded into the van. As a result, they were all quite eager to find out what on earth I was doing there along with them.

“Yo ma! *Whad’joo do?*” one of them asked with a tone that sounded like his eyes were wide with curiosity.

“Yeah blanca, what are you *in* for?” asked another, salaciously.

Miguel, a 19-year-old Brazilian-American, and self-proclaimed ‘gang banger,’ introduced himself through the metal gate and proceeded to share his entire life story. He told me that he was a frequent guest at Rikers and I quickly sensed that he was the ‘leader of the band,’ (or at least he seemed to see himself that way.)

Of the group, Miguel told me, five had already been to Rikers. Two were Brazilian, two Puerto Rican, and the last, a chubby kid with a buzz cut, was a Guatemalan named Saül who didn’t say a

word. The boys took turns free-style rapping and spitting beats for a few minutes before Miguel asked me, “What the fuck *happened* to you, ma?”

I cried a little bit before I could begin to respond.

“Yo, listen,” Miguel said with a tone that meant this was 'real talk.' “You gotta stay *strong*, ma. You *hear* me? You gotta be *strong* right now. You're not gonna *be* here for very long, baby girl. You're gonna be outta here *real* soon. *Aigh 't?*”

He gave me an expression with a jutting chin and a stiff upper lip, a real tough guy look. “Just give ‘em this face, Ma. Nobody'll fuck with you with *this* face.” I noticed a tattoo snaking down the side of his neck that declared ‘*fuerte!*’ in formal block script.

After about 20 minutes on the BQE, the van took an exit for East Elmhurst and we began snaking through residential blocks dotted with laundromats, liquor stores, churches and bodegas. The rain was falling steadily by then, and the windows became foggy with precipitation so that everything felt even more detached, being viewed through a dim haze of detainment. Eventually, we turned right, past big bright lights. I could just make out a daunting white sign, the size of a billboard, announcing our arrival at Rikers Island. The van made its way through the main entrance gates and idled before a security checkpoint. I could see through the windshield that we were about to cross a bridge. I felt my heart palpitate under my green jacket.

This was really happening.

“Yo, Ma! You think I could follow you on Instagram?” Miguel asked once we had crossed the onto the island. His earnest inquiry had broken me from my panic. Through my tears, I started to chuckle a little bit. That seemed like the most preposterous question one person could ask another person in a situation like ours.

“No, Miguel,” I broke it to him politely, hoping I didn't illicit a sour reaction. “No, I don't think you can.”

He seemed relatively unphased and went back to freestyling with his other companions, only this time he was free styling about my predicament instead of his.

The paddy wagon pulled up to the juvenile detention center first. I only realized this because the rear door promptly opened and the gang of legal minors was unloaded from the van like a herd of passive cattle. They all bid me *adieu* in their own ways and told me to be strong. They were all particularly sweeter than I expected. Upon their departure, I was locked in the van for a long interval and left to wait for the officers to return before being taken to the female detention center.

This was the first time I had been completely alone and unmonitored since I'd landed back in America. It was during this time, left to indulge in my fleeting, protective solitude that I began to think about other individuals who had endured situations of unusual detainment before me. I remembered a journalistic series I had read during my sophomore year at university, for an 8am journalism history course that I had loathed. It was an old investigative feature series written for the *New York World* sometime in the late 1800s that had been taught as a seminal example of 'muckraking journalism.' The story was penned by a young female reporter, Nellie Bly who, at the age of 23, feigned insanity with the intention of being admitted to a notoriously inhumane, city-run asylum on New York's Blackwell's Island.

Bly achieved her goal of detention alarmingly quickly and spent ten terrifying in the sanatorium on BlackMwell's Island undercover, secretly recording every detail of the experience for her eventual exposé. But as I reviewed her story in my memory, I couldn't recall the correct ending of her story. For whatever reason, I'd come to believe that, rather than being released after ten days, Bly had remained indefinitely trapped on Blackwell's Island, after all of her examiners deemed her an absolute loon when she told them she was a reporter on an undercover assignment. In reality, Bly's exit from Blackwell's Island was neat and expedient; I seemed to have been projecting my own dire consequences onto Bly's story in an attempt to draw even more likeness between her situation and my own.

Bly did publish her experience in a series of highly acclaimed articles in *New York World*, which brought a wave of governmental funding and reform, not to mention increased public attention, to conditions of insane asylums throughout New York City as a result. The Blackwell's Island of Bly's era seemed as taboo and notorious as the Rikers Island of that day. I found myself wondering how Nellie Bly would handle my particular situation—what pressing details she would choose to write down in her hypothetical journal, had journals been permitted in jail cells. It wasn't necessarily a deliberate decision what I chose to do next, coping mechanisms rarely are, but my thoughts of Bly gave way to the only good idea I'd had all day, the idea of treating my current predicament like an assignment. I pictured the tabloid-y front page of the New York Post in my head: *Revealed: The underbelly of NYC's toughest jail.*

I was aware that, by drawing such a direct parallel between Bly and myself, that it wasn't a truly comparable situation. Bly was on assignment, she was detained of her own volition; I most certainly was not. But that didn't stop me from clinging to her story with the utmost of emulation. At that moment, I had control over very little and possession over even less. Rather than swapping

respective sob stories with every other woman I would soon encounter, I decided to instead treat my conversations as informal interviews, tucking away as many details as I could store in my brain about my surrounding environment and fellow inmates. This gave me a role to play, an identity to hide behind, an agenda that allowed me to view my given situation as slightly less horrid than it actually was. I began recounting the day's experience in a declarative third person tone, heavy with absurdism and dark humor. I imagined how it would all sound on paper, being read aloud to someone who had never even heard of Rikers Island.

Was this idea self-indulgent? Perhaps. Normally I'd tell myself that this was a wholly narcissistic exercise. But at that moment, my self was all I had control over. If I treated the whole experience as if it were one big investigative assignment to which I had just been unknowingly conscripted, I could at least try to serve a purpose that was greater than the amount of my own suffering. And since that's all I had, that's precisely what I did.

* * *

When the officers returned and turned the key in the van's ignition, the song playing on the radio reached into the back seat and slapped me across the face.

I got a feelin' (Woo-ooh)

That tonight's gonna be a good night

That tonight's gonna be a good night

That tonight's gonna be a good, good night!

I grinned in disbelief. This Black Eyed Peas party anthem my college days was the most horribly ironic song I could imagine hearing. From an outside perspective, I saw how this scenario was actually quite amusing. It was the worst possible song to act as the overture for my Rikers experience. *Is this some kind of sick joke? Can anyone see me right now? ...Am I being punk'd?* In the unlikely event that this was an act of God, then it confirmed my belief that God certainly had a dark sense of humor.

At the women's jail I was taken out of the police van in handcuffs. Before entering, the NYPD officer who had been holding me under the elbow slowed his pace and pulled me back a few steps. He stared me in the eyes for a long moment, as if I were a riddle that confused and therefore frustrated him. He seemed at once disappointed and concerned.

“Okay now *listen*,” he instructed. “When you get in there you are gonna keep your *mouth shut*,” he instructed me sternly, maintaining direct eye contact. “No going around telling your story to anybody that’s askin’, *okay*? None’a that *cryin’*. You wanna be okay in there? You keep to *yourself*. It’s *not* gonna be just those *boys* that want to *fuck* you. Just—” He shook his head in pity, like I had no idea what I was in for. “Just, keep your head *down* and your *mouth shut*. You don’t wanna stick out anymore than you *already* do. You *hear* me?”

“Yes, Officer. I understand. Thank you, sir.”

I was in over my head, deeper than I could’ve ever possibly imagined. Why did that officer think this alarming advice would be necessary? Was this the preamble he gave everyone? Or was I such an obvious deviation from the other women he brought there, such a visible red herring, that he actually felt compelled to preface this experience for me?

I immediately decided to ignore his advice on principle. I knew it would never work. I’ve never been any good at keeping my mouth shut. I talk too much when I’m nervous. I had learned well enough that if I tried to suppress that tendency, my resultant over-sharing would probably just make things worse. But I worried that the more I attempted to stay quiet, the more curiosity I would pique.

And with that, I was escorted through two consecutive sets of steel, double-lock doors into the Rose M. Singer Female Correction Center at Rikers Island.

IV: Intake

The concrete cinder-block walls of the intake unit were painted in pastel shades, like a baby's nursery, making the whole aesthetic very dissonant with the purpose the space served. There were five or six rectangular holding cells on three sides of the room, each painted in a different color. Behind the bars of each cell there were three steel benches, a steel toilet/sink combo, and not much else. The cells all faced the center of the room, surrounding an elevated group of desks that acted as the central hub for the intake officers.

I had no official welcoming committee, but if I did, it would have been Officer Mercy. I swear to this day she was part angel. I watched her from my lavender-colored cell before my next box-checking ritual began. Officer Mercy seemed to be at least fifteen years older than the rest of the intake officers, and seemed to be the only one with any hint of decorum. I was relieved when, after an hour or so, she came over and unlocked my cell, escorting me behind a fabric partition in the corner of the room.

Once concealed from everyone else, I had a particularly brutal crying spell. It was finally sinking in that I'd been sentenced to stay here for two weeks. She sat with me quietly as I wept, handing me a box of tissues once my tears finally started to subside. Mercy then completed her full evaluation of my biographical, medical, educational and sexual histories. She took every item that I still had on me (two rings, both from my Grandma; a watch that I'd purchased from a street vendor in Cape Town that miraculously still ticked; one black hair band; \$60 in cash from a South African friend who asked me to bring her back a pair of Reeboks; my Pennsylvania driver's license, in the event that I would be abducted or murdered, and my body would need to be identified weeks later), placed all of it in a large plastic, seal-top envelope and went off to log it somewhere. Upon returning, Mercy informed me that it was time for my strip search. My blood ran cold.

"This is something I have to do, huh? I can't say 'no thank you?'"

"No, sweetheart, I'm sorry. It's mandatory."

"I haven't had a chance to shower in a few days, and I got my period on the plane yesterday..."

"That's okay. I've seen the worst of it."

"...Alright then."

And with that, I stripped off my jacket and T-shirt, then my yoga pants before pausing, and wincing at her with dread. I swallowed deeply before removing everything else until I was only

cloaked in shame. Then I stood there in all of my glory before Officer Mercy. I remember how quickly I started to freeze, my teeth chattering as I stood barefoot on the concrete floor. Officer Mercy examined my scalp, and had me turn around in a circle with my arms raised above my head, to show I wasn't concealing anything. She checked inside my ears with a medical instrument, then my nostrils and mouth. I stuck out my tongue and reflexively said, 'ahhh.'

I thought we were just about finished until she asked me to bend over, put my hands on the floor, and cough.

"Wow. You really *do* ask that? Even for women? I honestly thought that was just in the movies."

"I have to. To make sure nobody's bringing nothin' in."

"Well, I promise you I'm bringing nothin' in. I mean, you even took my hair band. But I guess I have to do it anyway, right?" She nodded at me with a sympathetic look on her face.

So I complied, adhering to a command that was so dehumanizing it felt as if I was watching it all happen through a screen, observing the most humiliating moment of some poor stranger's life from the comfort of my own safety. Disassociation was one of my most powerful allies.

I knew that any verbal questioning or protest would lead nowhere, that Mercy was just doing her job, checking the boxes on my intake evaluation form. I already felt as vulnerable and unprotected as I thought possible. Tears streamed down my face onto the concrete below me as I doubled over and obeyed my humiliating command.

When it was over, I turned around to retrieve my clothes, only to find a small puddle of blood on the floor that had trickled down my leg. Officer Mercy offered me the opportunity to shower, quickly adding that there was no hot water this time of night. I politely declined, asking her instead for a wet washcloth, and to tell me what would happen next.

"How did you end up here?" was her answer to my question. And genuine as it was, it was an inquiry I was growing tired of addressing. I launch into my whole story while I still had a seemingly sympathetic ear and the privacy of a partitioned exam area. Once I had finished she just shook her head before telling me, "You won't be in here for very long. Don't worry, okay? You'll get yourself outta here *real* soon."

"Should I be scared?" I asked her. "Because I am. I have absolutely *no* idea what to expect."

I told her of the warning I had received from the Officer who had brought me in from the paddy wagon earlier.

"*Who* said that to you? That *man* who just brought you in here?... That's Jerry. He's an *ass*."

Don't listen to a *word* he says, you're gonna be *fine*, sweetheart.”

“I just feel like I’m not supposed to be here...” My tears had returned, spewing hot shame down my cheeks.

“If I had a nickel for every time I heard *that* line... You'll be *fine*. You're not a criminal.”

“*No!* I'm not!”

And just like that, I had the courage to continue. I had once again been seen! Seen, as a fellow human, as another soul instead of a stack of paperwork. I had something, a tether of humanity, to cling to. As she escorted me back to the lavender cell, I wondered how long Officer Mercy had been working there. How many years had she put on that uniform and crossed the bridge to Rikers for the graveyard intake shift? Why wasn't she more jaded? I wondered if I should tell her that I thought she deserved a better job. But as she locked me in my cell again, I just said thank you with as much sincerity as I could muster.

* * *

I stayed in intake for ten hours, from sometime around midnight until mid-morning. I didn't know how much time had passed until later; there were no clocks anywhere in view of the holding cells. During my hours in holding, I felt myself begin to understand some of the sensory-deprivation tactics that I'd seen included in torture montages in movies and TV: no windows, bright fluorescent lights on all day and night, disruptive yelling and loud noise at every moment that rendered any restful sleep impossible, and of course, the real kicker— no way of tracking time.

The first thing that anyone knows about Rikers is its infamy for just about everything except excellence. Its name carries a dirty connotation, known to many from its presence in rap lyrics and *Law and Order* episodes. Rikers maintains the superlative of being the second largest jail in the United States, and just like any jail or prison, time simply does not matter there. I remembered the remark the smug Port Authority cop made when I asked him for the time. “*Why?* You got somewhere to be?”

Here, time didn't matter and neither did I. Control over how I spent my time was a liberty I was no longer afforded. It had been revoked along with my journal and the rest of my belongings before I even left JFK.

It was quite easy to see how this ignorance of time, and how much of it inmates spent there, made the COs gluttonous for power. In front of my cell, the night shift COs had boisterous and defiant

conversations about real life things. They gossiped about their coworkers and browsed online shopping websites, criticizing all of the merchandise as they gingerly took sips from their extra-large Dunkin' Donuts iced coffees.

With the exception of Officer Mercy, each CO had a well-maintained weave or wig and had false eyelashes, drawn-on eyebrows, and long bedazzled acrylic nails that clacked like tap shoes on the keyboard every time one of them typed. I thought about how futile this seemed—to work these long, overnight shifts for what I imagined was a pretty modest, civil-servant's salary, just to go and spend such a large chunk of it on hair, makeup, and nails, before coming back here to work some more. It's not like they had anybody to impress, at least not in here. Except of course, for one another.

They spoke only of things happening outside of the walls of Rikers, back over the bridge in the outside world. Never did they acknowledge their surroundings or the eight or so other women staring at them like I was, through the bars of our respective cells. I felt like I was truly nothing. There they were, not even batting an eyelash at the fact that this was the worst day of my life. To them it was just another Sunday overnight shift spent talking smack and counting down the hours until they could go home again.

* * *

Every few hours, some food was delivered through the bars on flimsy pink Styrofoam trays that always looked ready to snap in half. It was the same offering every time: a carton of milk, a peanut butter sandwich, a box of bran flakes and a green-hued orange. I have a tendency to lose any and all appetite when I'm upset, but I kept instructing myself to eat something, that my body needed fuel to stay alert in my new surroundings. But every time I accepted a pink Styrofoam tray from the food cart, unwrapped the foil of the sandwich, and took a bite, I found that I couldn't bring myself to swallow. I just chewed and chewed and chewed. I vividly recall that even though the stale Wonder-bread of the peanut butter sandwich wasn't toasted, somehow the crusts always tasted burned.

I spent a lot of my hours in the lavender cell wondering how this was possible. After my second sandwich, every time another food cart came around, pushed by an apathetic inmate on work duty, I asked for just the sandwich, just to see if the crust still tasted burnt. They always did.

This felt like a metaphor, poetically paralleling my situation in some, 'feeling sorry for myself' kind of way. My mind wasn't sharp enough to untangle the symbolism so I filed it away with everything else from the previous day, to be reviewed and interpreted at a later date.

I tried my best to sleep on the stadium bleacher-style steel bench in my cell. I could only fit if I

lay on my side with an arm under my head. It was a rather provocative pose to hold, given my circumstances. It was the kind of pose that comes to mind when you picture an angelic nude model posing before a Renaissance painter. I used a roll of nearby toilet paper as a pillow and had to switch which side I lay on every few minutes. If I stayed turned over on one side for too long, my hipbone would begin to ache from pressing against the steel plank of bench. Anytime I managed to doze off, the concentrated pain in my side would cause me to stir until I was involuntarily awake again, like a narcoleptic glamour girl striking a coquettish pose on a balance beam in hell.

* * *

Mona arrived a few hours in. While my new cellmate was hardly discrete during her initial entrance, her presence quickly became dreadful, mainly because she was in the midst of a terrible case of diarrhea. While this was an unpleasant thing to learn (especially the hard way) about someone I had just met, Mona's violent stomach made it even harder for me to sleep, considering the toilet was an arm's length from my face.

My cellmate looked like the sort of person that, if I saw her walking down the sidewalk toward me, I'd realize I was on the wrong street. It was hard for me to pinpoint what it was that terrified me about Mona, other than her haggard and pallid appearance. Suffice to say, she gave me a gut feeling of being a volatile loose cannon. I assumed she was in her late-50s, but she could've been a lot younger. She was built squat and low to the ground like a mini-fridge and her face had the sallow, leather-like wear of someone who had, for lack of a better term, seen a lot of shit. When she spoke, which she did a lot more than me, her voice stuttered and slurred through sentences, causing me to wonder if she had somehow sustained brain damage.

Much to my chagrin, Mona took a keen interest in me. She kept peppering me with questions, breaking our silence by asking me about my charges, my hometown, my parent's names, if I had any siblings. I kept my answers polite, yet as short as possible. Mona didn't seem to mind.

Since I wasn't really up for talking, particularly with Mona, I found myself turning the conversation back to her. All I needed to do was ask her about herself. More often than not, a person's favorite topic of conversation is oneself. Even when it isn't, everyone likes being asked questions they can answer. And the thing everyone has an answer to when spending a night in a holding cell is, "What are you in for?"

Mona told me the story of how she had been hauled into Rikers for dodging six outstanding arrest warrants in three of New York City's five boroughs. She never got around to telling me what

those warrants were for, only that she had been dodging them for a few years by keeping a low profile in Jackson Heights. (She said this as if it were common knowledge that Jackson Heights was obviously *the* best place to maintain a low profile.) That evening she'd gotten into a screaming match with her boyfriend and he'd held her fugitive status over her head, threatening to call the police if she didn't do what he said.

"Go ahead! Call the cops!" she allegedly told him, getting into the shower to curtail their fighting. She hadn't even turned off the water before the cops were knocking on her bathroom door. She told me how two arresting officers had handcuffed her and led her out onto her street in Jackson Heights stark naked, without, she claimed, offering her the opportunity to put on a robe. I wondered if she was making this up, but I wondered if it was completely out of the realm of possibility for the NYPD.

"The worst part," she told me, was the humiliation of seeing her grown son standing at the top of the stairs, watching as she was escorted out her front door to the police cruiser. "He looked real fuckin' ashamed'a his Ma. And I felt real fuckin' ashamed'a me too."

My companion took an even greater shine to me when she learned, after a few more reflexive questions, that we were in for the same charge—I cringed at the idea of having any camaraderie with Mona. She terrified me so much that I was afraid to even look at her. I moved to the farthest bench from her and the toilet, turning away and pretending to sleep so she couldn't ask me anything else. With my eyes closed, I wished for a blanket and thought about Tonya Sunshine. I wondered if she was out on bail by then. I pictured her back in the third-floor walk-up in Corona, putting her leftover chilli in the fridge and laying her babies down for bed.

Mona had mentioned to me early on that it wasn't her first time visiting 'the rock.' So after a few more hours futilely attempting sleep while trying to abate her questioning, I asked her what was about to happen next for the two of us. She walked me through the upcoming agenda: First, a medical evaluation in the infirmary. Then we would probably wait in intake a few hours longer before being assigned to a temporary block for new inmates. After a few days in the communal block, both of us would be assigned to a two or four person cell, in a 'house,' for the rest of our respective times there.

"I've been in A and B blocks before," she divulged. "C block's where they put the most violent of the new inmates. The real *murderers* and shit."

I felt my stomach plunge, realizing that of course there were murderers there. *Why hadn't I thought of that?*

"Mona, What if I can't—what should I do if I'm not safe? What if I can't do it? Is there any way I

can be kept by myself? Like a voluntary solitary confinement or something? Do they even allow that?"

She put her fingers to her chin, picking at one of the scraggly hairs as she contemplated my options.

"Honestly, there's always the MO."

"What's the MO?"

"The Mental Observation Unit. For the crazies...You know, the *loony bin*! Just say y'wanna kill yourself, or that you're a threat to yourself and others and they'll put you in there and it's at least better than it is in gen-pop."

"Those are the magic words, huh? 'That you're a threat to yourself and others?'"

"It's all y'gotta say. You'll get a real hospital bed, some better food, and your own room, usually. And no bars, no cells. You can actually get some rest in this fucking *rat's* nest. That's what I call this place. I call it the *rat's* nest. Watch out, they start comin' inside this time'a year when it gets cold. They're all *over* this island, you know."

"No.. I didn't know...will I be okay in gen-pop?"

"Yeah, probably. I can't see you causin' any trouble ...But it's always an option," she remarked, as if she was suggesting some new, alternative method of baking a cake.

V. The Infirmary

I was taken out of the cell again a few hours later. After being handcuffed, I was ushered into a corridor, where the first clock I'd seen in hours informed me that it was 4:30 AM. We walked through a set of double doors into a waiting room, and then through another set into what looked like a hospital ward. A nurse rolled up my sleeve and proceeded to draw blood before even speaking to me.

"Excuse me, sorry? Can I maybe sit down somewhere? I have a history of fainting."

The nurse didn't answer. She drew five vials of blood before handing me a small plastic container and saying, "Bathroom's over there. I'll be standing outside."

Inside, the lights wouldn't turn on and my hands were still cuffed in front of me. I politely yelled to her from the toilet seat, asking if the cuffs could be removed, to which the nurse indignantly snapped,

"I ain't got a key!"

The doctor on duty joined me a long while later as I sat on an elevated examination bed awaiting my results. She was an older black woman, dressed in standard issue blue scrubs with a chunky indigo knit cardigan, and gold Diamonique costume jewelry— glamorous bangles and flashy rings, like the kind my Grandma used to order from the Home Shopping Network.

It was clear, even in my first observations, that she had been doing this job for a long time. I wondered how many years she had spent sitting in that little medical cubicle from the hours of 7pm-7am, night after night speaking to different women all handcuffed to the wall, as she asked for their abridged medical histories, pre-existing conditions, and the substances in their systems at that given point in time.

I could tell she was calcified, but still I hoped she would see me as another person, as someone from the outside who didn't belong, like Officer Mercy had done. I had this shameful desire to be exceptionalized by every person in a position of authority at Rikers. I'd broken the law. I'd done a bad thing. But I just kept thinking that the level of punishment didn't fit my level of law-breaking, and all I wanted, aside from my freedom, was validation that I was correct. This is not the most glorifying realization to have about oneself, but it is the truth.

The doctor gave me none of it. She seemed as if, perhaps because of her tenure on the island, she had somehow lost the capacity to view each inmate as an individual. Her behavior toward me suggested once again, that I was nothing more than the corresponding body to one of the medical files that she held stacked against her chest. One of many that she would shuffle through before daybreak,

on another overnight shift, in a long line of Octobers, each another year closer to her retirement and her pension benefits.

I can't even recall if she looked me in the eyes.

With my urine sample and medical chart in hand, she asked me if I was taking any prescription drugs. I gave her the names and dosages of the two prescriptions I was taking.

"What are the intended purpose of these drugs?" She asked in a scripted, official tone.

"One is for anxiety. And one is an antidepressant."

"Do you currently feel that you are a potential threat to yourself and/or others?"

"...No. Not right now...But um, maybe later..."

She looked up from my chart and raised an eyebrow incredulously, as if to gauge the validity of my claim, before looking back down and flipping through more pages.

"Well your blood tested positive for methadone," she bluntly declared.

"For *what*?"

"Methadone."

"*Methadone*? Like *meth*?"

My eyes widened with confusion at yet another blind-siding and inexplicable piece of news. The doctor squinted behind the thin, purple reading glasses she wore on a beaded cord around her neck, rife with irritation.

"No. *Not* like meth. *Meth-a-done*. For detox patients. " I continued to stare with confusion. "It's the drug they use to treat people withdrawing from opiates like heroin," she explained in a demonstrative tone, as if she were speaking to a fool.

"Yeah ... I don't see how that could be possible...I've *never done* heroin before."

It felt like a weird badge to try and wear in that moment, as if to say, *Yeah, I ended up here, but at least I've never tried dope, lady!* "I've actually never even *seen* heroin in real life. And... I honestly wouldn't know what to do with it if you put it in front of me, so I don't see how I could possibly test positive for methadone, considering..."

"Do you have any other drugs in your system?" she asked, holding my complete toxicology record in her hands.

"I mean... I *did* smoke a joint, what was it, two days ago? Before going to the airport on Friday... But only because flying really stresses me out, and it was an overnight flight. It was like 14 hours, so..."

"And where were you flying from?" she asked impatiently, as if this was information I should have obviously disclosed to her prior to then.

“South Africa.”

“*Mhmm...*” she hummed through pursed lips. “Sometimes that stuff can be laced. And especially if you were in *Africa*? Who knows *what* they could'a put in it. That's probably *why* you tested *positive!*” she scolded in the tone of an elementary school librarian, as if suggesting that I should have reached this seemingly far-fetched conclusion on my own.

I chuckled to myself, imagining a South Africa where methadone was a drug so prevalent, that someone, somewhere in Johannesburg had thought to infuse it within the very joint that I would smoke before heading to the airport. *That's the most bullshit excuse for a false positive I've ever heard*, I silently declared. The doctor stared down the bridge of her nose at my face with her hands on her hips, apparently waiting for an explanation.

“I'm sorry but—I don't really see how that's possible. And I've been there for the past couple of months straight ...Are you sure that's the right—”

“*Yes!*”

“Okay. So is this something that often has false positives?”

“*No!*”

“Okay so then...we don't know? Why...the methadone, then?”

I gave up. She took another one of the urine samples from a tray on the silver exam table that held tiny portions of my blood and pee, before walking out of the room.

* * *

Whitney Houston's “And I Will Always Love You” was playing from an old-sounding stereo somewhere in the infirmary that made her voice sound tinny and warped. Another song that couldn't be worse suited for the moment.

The doctor came back into the cubicle in an indignant huff some time later, holding a new set of test results. She bent over to get right in my face and began to scold me once more.

“Now *why* didn't you *tell* the intake officer when she *asked* you about your medical history, that you were HIV *posi-tive*?”

“Because I'm *not* HIV positive,” I said emphatically.

“Well...your blood test says you *are*.”

Any decorum that I had been grasping onto immediately vanished.

“*What the fuck?*” I protested. The doctor shot back from me, tensing up. “Are you *sure*? I mean,

are those definitely my results?"

"What's'ya date'a birth?"

"6th of May, 1990."

"*Hmmm...*" she hummed again, pursing her lips and raising an eyebrow at the chart in her hands. "Hold on." She walked out of the cubicle as Whitney's voice cooed the last of her "will always love you's" through the sound of the boom box.

I spent the next lonely minutes reviewing the complete roster of every individual I'd ever copulated with, ruthlessly scrutinizing which member of that illustrious list could have potentially been HIV positive. This was an unpleasant exercise in reflection, particularly given the circumstances. Once I'd gotten to the end of the list, the answer was a resounding, '*Honestly? None of them!*' and so I started again from the top, this time chronologically and with more ruthlessness.

I was halfway through my college years before the doctor returned, chart in hand, and said plainly, with perhaps a hint of spite, "Wrong chart."

That was all. No "*So sorry about that!*" No "*Congratulations, you don't have HIV!*" Just two words—*wrong chart*—before she took a seat at the desk opposite me and buried her head in more paperwork.

VI. B Block

Once back in intake, I was given a jumbo plastic storage container and escorted to the rear corner of the unit. On a table before me were piles of the various textiles of incarceration: bed sheets, blankets, shoes, and clothing all made from the same durable tan canvas material. The intake officer behind me watched apathetically as I picked through each pile, placing one of each item into my storage box like I was shopping in a Communist regime. The officer handed me some toiletries in a green plastic cup.

“Hold onto that cup,” she added slyly.

It struck me as a strange thing to say, this singular token of advice that she left me with before sending me into gen-pop. Unless that cup concealed the key to an elaborate *Shawshank Redemption*-style escape from the island, one already in motion and orchestrated by a group of mercenaries hired by loved-ones and mutually financed by all of my ex-boyfriends, I really didn't see how it could be any more important than any of the other featureless items I'd just collected. The contents of my storage bin then consisted of:

- 1 pair drawstring pants, khaki tan canvas
- 1 short-sleeved pullover shirt, khaki tan canvas
- 1 long-sleeved pullover shirt, khaki tan canvas
- 1 pair slip-on Velcro shoes, black
- 2 cotton bras, white
- 2 pair cotton underwear, white
- 1 wool blanket, dark gray
- 2 sheets, 1 fitted, both white
- 2 mini sized bars of soap
- 1 plastic cup, green

I changed in the corner, handing the clothes I'd been wearing for over two straight days, to the officer who bagged and logged them with my other possessions. I was relieved to be a bit warmer, and I hoped that my anonymous uniform would help me stick out a bit less.

I waited in the lavender holding cell for a few more hours, until all of the other arrivals who had been brought in that night had filled their boxes. Around ten of us were eventually called out of our cells and lined up and examined by the officer who had taken charge when Officer Mercy's shift had ended.

Our plastic storage bins were inspected, and each of us was given a pat down. Mona was still

sleeping in our cell, but would join me again in a few hours.

A young, blonde inmate with work orders had come down to retrieve us. She led us out of intake under the watchful eye of a CO who followed us at the rear. We walked single-file through the halls of the greater jail. It reminded me of a public elementary school. Its dimly-lit hallways, with a high-buffed linoleum floor and cinder-block walls painted beige, seemed just as likely to be occupied by running school kids as female prisoners. Aside from the hand-painted murals made that lined the corridors, there were bold signs declaring words of encouragement in vivid colors, and state-mandated signs declaring rules and prohibited items in red and black bolded text.

The only glaring difference between these corridors and those of my school days were the metal detectors. At each intersection, our line passed through large, doorway-like metal detectors, like the ones found in airport security lines. Every time our line passed through one, my desperate plan to blend in with everyone else was foiled over and over.

Screwed into my navel was the belly-button ring I'd gotten eight years prior, at age 18 when I was meant to be studying for final exams as a high school senior. Throughout the last several hours and various intakes, it had somehow refused to come unscrewed, despite my desperate attempts to free it from my stomach. The captain at the Port Authority precinct had offered, loudly in front of the other officers, to grab a pair of pliers and try his luck. The booking officer at Queens Central had stared at my bare stomach quizzically at it before deciding it would be more trouble than it was worth to do anything about it. Officer Mercy had obviously noticed it during the strip search, where she told me any and all body jewelry was prohibited. I told her I'd been trying to unscrew it for hours, and offered her the chance to give it try. To my surprise, she told me to stand and knelt before my stomach, fiddling with the cheap platinum stud, to no avail.

"I promise it won't be an issue," I had said to her.

Officer Mercy just shrugged. "Well, it's not *going* anywhere. It's pretty well stuck in there."

It would have been helpful to have learned from her in that moment that it would, in fact, be an issue.

At the first metal detector, when the alarm went off, the CO escorting us halted the line. I lifted up my shirt to explain and she sent me back through the metal detector twice more before giving me a thorough pat down. It was only when she continued to stop the line after every metal detector, patting me down again, that I realized just what a significant problem it was. The women in line behind me groaned and muttered with growing irritation.

"Do you have to do this every time?"

"Protocol," she muttered.

* * *

The first thing I noticed in B block was that every single inmate there was holding their green plastic cup, carrying it with them everywhere they went. My second observation was that there were no cells. No steel bars, no nucleus of COs in the middle of the room pretending that I didn't exist. Unlike the traditional 'jail' look that intake had, this space looked like a makeshift evacuation center that had been set up in a high school gymnasium to wait out a hurricane: rows of metal cots, low to the gray linoleum, extended in a grid from one end of the room to the other, roughly 70 total. For a mattress, each cot was outfitted with a dark blue pad, like the kind you might see on the floor of a wrestling gym. Everything else in sight was steel grey and khaki.

The CO on duty, who we'll call Officer Longlegs, checked me in. In as few words as possible, she directed me to pick a bed, make myself comfortable, and abstain from causing any trouble. At the front of the room, the CO's desk sat adjacent to the exit and the communal bathroom. Behind the desk was a large window into the TV room next door. The same wall had three payphones mounted to it, between each of the windows.

I took an empty cot a few rows back, at least two beds away from everyone on all sides. I had been noticed by the twenty or so women milling around or laying on their cots. None approached me, but rather, sniffed me out from a distance, letting me know I was seen, but that my presence was not an issue that required immediate action. I was grateful for the opportunity to fluff my sheet over the mattress pad, bundle my clothes into a pillow, and curl up under my wool blanket. This was the first time I'd seen a bed since arriving in the United States and in my dark, private cocoon I curled up and fell into my first deep sleep in days.

* * *

I woke up to the call for lunch. Some women remained sleeping, but most congregated at the doorway from the dormitory into the TV room, rambunctious and impatient. Officer Longlegs frisked each one before they were permitted to enter the TV room, where an inmate was passing trays of food through a window from the small adjoining kitchen where we weren't allowed. Officer Longlegs was friendlier than the other COs I'd encountered. She spoke to some of the inmates as if she'd known them

for a while. I wondered, for the first time, how many of the women around me had been there before.

I was given a tray with a scoop of canned green beans, a scoop of scalloped potatoes, and a small patty of unidentified meat. I filled my cup with a dark, mysterious liquid from a big yellow cooler that ended up being Grape Kool-Aid.

The far side of the TV room was sparsely populated, save for three large windows that looked out to the grounds. I took a seat at an empty table there and tried to convince myself to eat. Each spoonful of food that I put in my mouth triggered my gag reflex, making it difficult to swallow—partly because I was upset, and partly because the taste of the food served on Rikers Island was a punishment unto itself. Using my plastic fork, I tried to mash the wafers of scalloped potatoes into something that went down easier, but they still tasted just like cardboard. I passed on the meat after my three attempts to swallow it had all resulted in dry heaving.

I sipped my grape Kool-Aid and looked out the window. Below were razor wire fences. beyond them, the East River and a view of Astoria, where I used to live. In the background, I could hear the conversations of my fellow inmates and, in the distance, a rerun of *Maury* played on the television. No one spoke to me directly, but I felt as if everyone was looking at me the whole time. In reality, they probably weren't. Still, all I could feel was the heat of unwanted scrutiny burning the back of my neck, making every hair on my scalp stand at attention.

* * *

When I caught glimpses of my reflection that day, in the windows or one of the steel mirrors in the bathroom, I was surprised at how wide my eyes looked. I hadn't known they could get that wide, or that my eyebrows could remain raised in an expression of such alarm for so long. They levitated halfway up my forehead, its skin retracted in horizontal lines, a map of discomfort that only ever appeared during yawns or screams. Maintaining such an active expression became increasingly taxing. My head throbbed, the muscles of my face strained. Each time I made eye contact with my own distorted reflection, I said a prayer and found it nearly impossible to not cry. Eventually I just stopped looking at myself, to avoid the shame and despair that came with it.

After lunch, many of the other women became boisterous and chatty. The TV in the next room was turned up to be heard in the dormitory. From my bed, it was so loud that whether they were across the room or on the next cot, women had to yell to one another. There were no casual conversations. The majority of things I heard fell into the following categories: expletive-laden complaints about the system, horror stories of how they ended up there, or war stories of their time on the outside.

The language alarmed me, seizing my gut as I hid under my blanket and tried again to sleep in my cocoon of solitude.

The only shows that played on the TV were *Maury*, *Jerry Springer*, and *The People's Court*. This last program, hosted by the pandering Judge Joe Brown, evoked a wave of interest from the majority of the inmates. The group of women on the cots by the front put down the two-week old newspapers that they'd been reading aloud to one another, and filed in to the TV room to yell things at the screen, as if they were refereeing a sports game from their couch at home. Like every detainee or inmate I had met, they considered themselves fluent in a special, arcane brand of 'jailhouse law' specific to the incarcerated. They cracked jokes about the defendants on the screen and gave their two cents about the plaintiffs, too. Each time Judge Joe Brown announced each verdict, women would yell, "*Acquittal!*" while others yelled things like, "Naw, that bitch is guilty as *hell!*"

* * *

During this time, while the dormitory was less preoccupied, I decided to relocate from the front of the room to one of the isolated rear corners by the windows that faced Astoria. The noise was only getting louder and I was finding it harder to maintain my solitude. I delicately gathered my linens and clothes, piling them in my storage bin and securing the lid. Afraid of offending those near me, I told a few of the women nearby that I needed to move to the back corner, not because of anything they had done, but because I was very tired.

The group of four women looked over at me, unconcerned.

"You do you, Ma."

"Yeah, we loud as hell up in here. If you wanna sleep, you go sleep."

"Thanks."

"Yeah... Ma, what'chu *doin'* here?"

"Yeah, where you from, ma?"

It felt like they could all tell I'd never been there before. Apparently that was clear by looking at me, even in a DOC uniform. I wondered what it was that gave me away so quickly. The terrified look on my face that I was desperately trying to conceal?

I realized that nobody but me actually knew my story, and so it became the only thing over which I still maintained control, beside my own behavior. Very quickly, I began to notice myself trying

desperately to acquiesce. I wanted to blend in thoroughly enough to be quickly forgotten by everyone around me. One of the quickest ways I attempted to do that was by acting just like everybody else, even if I was not. While I didn't know it at first, I began to mutate to adapt to my surroundings.

Think about going to Texas on vacation and suddenly finding yourself speaking with a native drawl, without realizing that you're actually doing it, and then doing it consciously because it makes you feel like a Texan. It was kind of like that except my lexicon and my vocabulary, in fact, my entire manner of speaking changed. I had a drastic increase in my use of profanity as punctuation; I adopted a certain attitude of indigence, and spouted off glib short sentences when I really had to speak.

“What's your name?”

“Mia.”

“Yeah? And where you from, Mia?”

“...Philly.”

And just like that, I became known to everyone in B block as 'Mia from Philly,' despite the facts that nobody has ever called me Mia, nor am I actually from Philly. Mia is the default pseudonym that I usually give when I'm ordering a coffee and the barista asks for my name, or when a once-off stranger asks my name and I don't feel like walking them through 'Me-kay-lee' monosyllabically until they get it right. It began as a name I gave to people whom I was keen to never see again, and it stuck.

It's not a lie, so much as it is a composite of my entire self; Mia does, after all, contain three of the seven letters of my actual name. I've never considered it to be an alias, but rather a cherry-picked highlight reel of my entire self, a small watered-down cup of tea, served from a very large kettle, the likes of which the tea drinker will never lay eyes upon. At Rikers, Mia from Philly was a whole new cup of tea, a heavily diluted brew, with a lot of the cup left empty for my fellow inmates to fill with whatever they wished.

The next thing everyone asked after one's name or their charges was where they came from. I said I was from Philly because I didn't expect anyone to light up with recognition when I said 'Doylestown, Pennsylvania a-thank you!' With 'Philly,' the assumptions could be broader than those of the bucolic, upper-middle class suburb from which I actually hailed. People could take whatever they knew of Philadelphia, that scrappy, working-class city two hours south of New York, and fill their cup with that instead, thereby projecting it onto me.

“I've got a cousin in Philly. Jenny.” A woman from the Bronx told me as we waited in line for one of the metal detectors in the hallway. She had made me nervous when she started talking to me,

and I was wary of where I stood with her.

“Yeah? Is Jenny cool?”

“*Hell* yeah—she's a down ass bitch.”

And with that, transference occurred. Suddenly, to Gina from the Bronx, I was a down-ass bitch, too. I got the '*yeah, you a'ight*' nod, and knew that I was in her good graces, as simple as that. I was happy to be anyone except myself to the women I met, especially to those that made me feel threatened. I wanted to remain as unremarkable, as bland a cup of tea as possible.

As I began to meet more women and answer more questions, I found myself getting deeper into character, exploring parts of this self that had never before had the attention to be developed, let alone honed. My posture hunched forward and I walked very slowly, as if I was in no hurry to go anywhere at all. I looked directly forward and glazed over my gaze so that I wouldn't make eye contact with anyone else.

One of the strangest elements of my whole 'portrayal of alternative self' was the keen self-awareness I had when I was speaking and acting like Mia from Philly. Real Micaeli was completely present within me, and kept inquiring with lines like, “*What is going on with this voice? Who are you even trying to be right now?*” and “*This isn't us! What is happening?!*”

I remember, when I was portraying this alternate self, it felt very shameful, very pandering and blatantly fake (A fact that seemed to be glaringly obvious somehow only to me). That is to say, despite the moral qualms I maintained with this radically different representation of myself, this act of spontaneous self-preservation served its intended purpose rather well.

There was a lot of Micaeli in Mia from Philly. But I don't know if real Micaeli could have endured the whole ordeal without being wrapped in the safe cloak of an anonymous, adaptable persona. Real Micaeli was, and remains, far too sensitive for jail. I didn't want to have to endure this experience as *myself*, because then it meant that this was really happening to me, Micaeli from Doylestown. Like I said, disassociation rendered itself one of my most powerful allies.

The more that I portrayed Mia from Philly, the more I turned this convenient pseudonym into an entire alter-ego-- One tough enough to endure the trauma of a two-week remandation, all the while drafting constant status reports for the real Micaeli. She was hiding out, nestled safely in a subterranean bunker deep in the depths of my consciousness, one decorated like a grand mahogany reading room, where she was drinking expensive coffee and finally rereading the entire Harry Potter series from start to finish, or until this whole ordeal inevitably blew over.

VII. Acclimatization

I spent some time surveying the foot traffic at the front of the room and the behavior around the pay phones before I decided to bite the bullet and call my mother. Equipped with my 13-digit ID code and a folded up slip of white paper explaining the dialing procedure, I made a beeline for the only working phone when it was vacant, trying to maintain a sense of nonchalance.

I fumbled with the automated, voice-activated instructions, having to hang up and start over several times before I finally managed to get a collect call out to my mother. When I finally heard her meek hello on the other end of the line, I felt so relieved that my voice caught in my throat and the faucets of my tear ducts were opened once more. All calls were cut off after six minutes, so after hurriedly telling her I was okay, I asked Mom to fill me in on what was happening with my extradition.

She put my stepdad on the line, who explained, at some length, that the Assistant District Attorney was being a “bit of a prick.” After much proverbial ring-kissing, they had somehow cajoled him to send for my immediate release under the following conditions: first, that I attend a court hearing the following week there in Bucks County, or face the consequences of another bench warrant; second, that I undergo an evaluation with a court-appointed therapist, to see if I required addiction treatment or behavioral courses; third, that I complete 10 hours of community service prior to the court hearing in eight days.

I furrowed my brow. I was guilty of breaking the law, as much as that stung. I'd made a big mistake. And I was prepared (and determined) to rectify that mistake in order to continue living my life. But this felt like bureaucratic spite.

“Doesn't this guy realize I've already been in jail in New York City for over 24 hours? Isn't that kind've punishment enough? I mean, 10 hours of community service? I'll do it but honestly, what's the point? Doesn't that punishment pale in comparison to what I'm already facing here? Does the DA not *see* that?”

“Like I said, this guy's tough,” my step-dad, John, said. “He got argumentative with *me*, like *I* had done something wrong. I reminded him that *I* was a taxpayer! That *I* paid his salary! But the woman who *actually* helped us, the secretary at the DA's office—her name is Beverley. She's been pretty great.”

“Oh my God, she's been wonderful!” Mom piped up in the background. I pictured the two of them huddled around the wireless receiver in the kitchen. “Beverley told us her son just got back from

South Africa! And his honeymoon! He and his bride went for three weeks, on safari and to Cape Town and—”

“Mom, that's a crazy coincidence but can we talk about that later? When can I expect to get out of here?”

“Good news,” John said, taking the reigns again. “Since you'd already taken care of mostly everything for your DUI before you left the country, and you just missed the final hearing expunging the charge from your record, we were able to convince the DA to allow your record to be expunged once again, at the hearing next week, if you do all of the things he's asked of you before then.”

“Okay... Easy. *Done*. I'd do 100 hours of community service before next week if it means I can get out of here. But when can I leave? Did they say when they are sending my release?”

“Beverley says she's personally taking care of it and has put it on top of the DA's admin list so that she can *hopefully* fax it over to Rikers before close of business today.”

“So you're saying I get to go home *today*?!”

“I don't know, sweetheart. But she's definitely going to make it happen sooner than it would have without her help.”

Just then an automated voice cut in informing us that we had 60 seconds left on the call. A panic set in, like it always does when you have too much to say and an imminent countdown to zero.

“Micaeli, are you safe?” my Mom asked again, this time almost whispering.

“Honestly, I don't know, Mom. I'm sorry. I'm keeping to myself, I promise! Nobody's bothering me.

The doctor who did my medical exam said I tested positive for HIV even though I'm very much *not* positive for HIV. So don't worry. I guess she mixed up the charts? She never said. And she didn't even apologize for making the mistake! I mean, what the *fuck*, Mom?”

“*What!?*”

“I know! And methadone! My blood test said I had methadone in my system. Honestly, I don't even know if they *have* methadone in South Africa. So...I mean, aside from that...”

“Maybe it's your medicine? Did you tell them about your prescriptions?”

“Yes, of course I did. And I still haven't taken either of them since I got off the plane. My hands are shaky and I feel like I'm going to pass out.”

The cordial robot returned: “You have thirty seconds to complete your call.”

“Stay strong, sweetheart,” my mother said. “Remember that Grandma is with you, looking oh—”

Then the call cut out.

I stood with the phone to my ear for a few more moments, tears sliding down my cheeks and onto the plastic receiver, before I realized that the woman standing behind me waiting to use it next. I hung up, stepped to the side, took a big deep breath, and turned to face the room. As I tried to return to my corner, two women who had spoken to me earlier called me over in hushed tones.

“Whatchu think you're *doin*, Ma?”

“You can't *do* that shit in *here*!”

“Yeah, girl you gotta keep your shit *together*. Ain't *nobody* goin' around *cryin'* unless you want trouble.”

“I *don't* want trouble!” I whispered, with great difficulty. “I'm trying to stop crying. But the more I try to stop, the harder I cry. I'm just...really scared.”

Their outraged faces softened.

“What the fuck did you even *do*, Ma?”

“Yeah, girl. Come have a seat.”

* * *

“Yo, that's fucked *up*,” the smaller woman muttered once I'd finished.

I realized that I was no longer crying. I could speak again without that painful lump of lamentation welling in my throat. “*Isn't it?* I mean, I'm glad that *you* think so too. I haven't really been able to grasp if this happens a lot.”

“I thought you were a *head*,” said the larger woman.

“A what?”

“Like a dope head... A junkie?”

“Yeah girl, your eyes are all wide,” the smaller woman added. “And your pupils is dilated.”

“No. I'm not a junkie. I'm just scared shitless.”

I felt another sob heave up through my throat like lava from a vent in the earth. My nostrils flared and my eyes were tearing up as I struggled to suppress it; not because I didn't want to cry, but because I was more worried about disobeying.

I turned the conversation to them, hoping to find solace through my investigation

Gloria Espinosa was the larger of the two women. She lived in Ozone Park, Queens with her four children and looked to be in her early 30s, only a few years older than me. Her oldest kid was 13. In addition to the twins, six, she had a baby girl as well, still too young to walk.

On Saturday Espinosa had been out at a club on Steinway Street in Astoria, celebrating her sister's birthday (and recent divorce) with their girlfriends, when her sister had gotten in a fight with another woman in the bathroom of the club. In the fray, Gloria was accused of stealing the other woman's cell phone— when security came into the bathroom to break up the fight. Like in all ‘what are you in for?’ stories, the details of this were murky. But I wasn’t about to start asking clarifying follow-up questions like an actual interview. I figured I’d let some of my due diligence lapse to avoid derailing the story being told. Anything to avoid compromising myself as the receptive, non-critical third-party I sought to be.

All three women were arrested when the cops showed up. Her sister's bail had been posted before she could be sent to Rikers. Gloria’s had yet to come through. Like me, she was hoping to go home before the day was over.

“Have you been here before?”

“This place?” she balked, “*Hell* nah. This is some *shit!* I ain't *ever* been in it this deep before. I'm *straight*, you know?”

“Have you spoken to your kids? Do they know what's going on?”

“They're over at my Ma's. The oldest one knows something's up but Ma just told 'em I had to go away for a few days and I'll be home soon.”

I asked about the scratches on both of her cheeks. “Are those from the fight?”

“That ratchet ass bitch attacked both of us.” Gloria said. “I was bleedin' all over. I think the cop felt bad for me. He gave me a men’s jacket he had in his trunk ‘cuz I was standin’ outside the club, handcuffed and fuckin’ shivering with cold. He brought me to Burger King before he brought me in ‘cuz I told him I hadn't eaten all night.”

“*Yo*, did he make you pay?” the smaller woman chimed in.

“I can't remember. But they took my purse before they arrested me. So I couldn't have paid.”

“Now *that's* what’s up!” her companion quipped.

“Damn right, Tiny.”

Tara “Tiny” Dawkins was a head and shoulders shorter than both of us. Of the three of us, she had been there the longest, pushing two weeks. I remember joining her and Gloria on their cots, only to see Tiny writing on real paper with a real pencil. It was a letter to her young son. She was a mother too, she told me. And her stationary, a purchase from the commissary. I longed to ask her for a sheet of

paper, but I knew that commissary purchases were coveted objects, and ones that weren't easily shared without a worthy trade. Since I had no apparent bargaining chips, or funds in my commissary account, I kept quiet, envying her stationary from the adjacent cot on which I sat.

I can't remember what Tara had done to get herself into Rikers. But I do recall that she'd been there a few times prior.

"I took the rap for my man," she said about her arrest two weeks earlier. He'd had something he shouldn't have— drugs, a firearm, I can't remember— but knowing that his rap sheet was longer than hers, he begged her to cover for him, to spare him a mandatory sentence of at least a few years in a penitentiary upstate.

"My baby's still young! I don't want him to have ta grow up without no daddy. Little boys can't be growin' up without no *daddies*! They grow up to be hoodrats and fuckin' thugs. I ain't lettin that happen to *my* baby."

"But what about you? I mean, how long are you going to be punished for what happened?"

"*Me*? My lawyer says if I go to trial I'll *probably* only end up on probation. Probably won't go to prison like my *man* would. But that's *if* I go to trial. My lawyer's try'na get me t'take a *plea bargain* but I *keep tellin' him* ain't havin' it."

"When's your court date again?" Gloria asked.

"Three weeks."

"Were you remanded, too?" I said.

"*Hell* nah. The fuckin' *judge* set my fuckin' bail at *ten* thousan' dollars and ain't nobody *I* know got that kinda cash, you know whad'I'm sayin'?"

"You mean... If you had ten thousand dollars you'd be able to leave and wait for your trial date on the outside? At home with your boy?"

Both women gave me a strange look, like they thought I was joking.

"Yeah, Mia. That's what bail means!" Gloria deadpanned, as if this was obvious.

"That's why you ain't see no other fuckin' white people up in here waitin' for their trials." Tara jumped in, pointing at me. "They all got sprung long before any of'em ended up in this hell hole."

* * *

As the conversation progressed, I learned from my Gloria and Tara that, at that time of the morning, the block was empty because some inmates were out at court hearings for the day, and some had work assignments around the jail. They told me about the methadone clinic, and the pilgrimage that

some women took twice a day to it. These were the women who looked more like cadavers than humans. I noticed a few of them sleeping throughout the block and did my best not to look at them for too long.

I was then told of 'script walks,' where inmates on prescription medication were taken down single-file from each block to receive their pills in a white paper cup from the infirmary. This really piqued my interest and I asked them to tell me more. By this point, I was going through some heavy withdrawal from the SSRI medications I took for my depression. It felt like the synapses of my brain were beginning to misfire, then seizing up all at once. My hands were noticeably shaking and I was really hoping I wouldn't faint. I knew the sooner I had my medicine in my system, the easier it would be for me to endure the rest of my time here until my release.

Gloria and Tara gossiped a lot, particularly about the woman in for the most violent crime. They spoke about her in low tones, even though she was out at court for her arraignment. Her charges weren't fixed yet. The woman, described as quiet and mild, had beaten her boyfriend within an inch of his life with an aluminum baseball bat.

"Why would she do *that*?" I asked, like a naive girl at a sleepover party. Gloria and Tara exchanged a smug look.

The woman had twins, 11 year-old girls, and she worked the graveyard shift as a train conductor for the subway. When she came home from work one morning earlier than expected, she walked into her daughters bedroom to find her live-in boyfriend molesting her daughters. When the woman ran at him to stop him, he threw her across the room. She grabbed one of her daughter's softball bats and, as Tara said, "She did what *any* mother would'a fuckin' done."

"I don't blame her for a *second*." Gloria added, shaking her head defiantly. "I would'a made sure that motha'fucka was *dead* dead before the cops even got there."

"So they're waiting to see if he dies," Tara continued, making a long story painfully short. "He's in ICU or whatever. And if he *does* die, that bitch is up for 2nd degree murder."

"Shit's fucked *up*!" Gloria echoed, looking at her feet as she shook her head.

VIII. The Lionesses

Mona arrived in B block a few hours later.

“Mia!” She called in her garbled voice, waving to me as Officer Longlegs logged her in.

Tara snapped her head from Mona back to me, looking incredulous.

“You *know* that bitch?”

“Not really— We spent the night in intake together.”

Gloria and Tara nodded, *enough said*, before returning their glares to Mona’s sad state of affairs. Even outside of intake, she was just as off-putting.

I wondered if I was now expected to hang out with her because we were both white, or if it was okay for me to continue hanging out with Gloria and Tara, who weren’t. Of the few other Caucasian women in the room, most of them were asleep and appeared highly strung out.

Of the very limited things I thought I knew about jail, I thought that social cliques were largely a racial thing. In every prison show I’d seen, inmates were in cliques according to race, sub-dividing themselves according to skin color in a strange, socially constructed and self-imposed fragmentation. But looking around, that didn’t seem to be the case here. The women mingled with one another regardless of what they looked like, forming social alliances largely according to the boroughs and neighborhoods that they came from. Tara and Gloria, from the Bronx and Queens respectively, were a bit of an anomaly in that sense. Of those here who weren’t awaiting trial, some had been picked up on outstanding warrants, like Mona and myself and were now awaiting extradition. Of that group, I was the only one not hailing from, and currently residing in, New York.

* * *

Eventually our chatting morphed into a group conversation with the rest of the women in earshot. This was how most conversations organically developed in the space. Given the open-plan confines in which we all found ourselves, a conversation with one or two people quickly augmented itself to include everyone else in earshot who had their two cents to contribute. The social restraint of ‘minding one’s own business’ was a concept that would have obviously been thrown right out the window, if the windows hadn’t been barred and three inches thick.

The other women made interjections frequently-- asking skeptical questions, contributing with their own tangential experiences, and reminding me, with silent scowls, that they could hear every single thing that I was saying. I hadn't realized this when I initially delved into my story with Tara and Gloria, but when it dawned on me that every conversation here was an open one, I realized that everyone around us had heard my whole sob story. I guess they had all just chosen to stay quiet. Once I had inadvertently explained my circumstances to the whole room, and my presence was silently negotiated within the social ecosystem of B block, I was accepted enough by the other women to at least be acknowledged during group conversation.

Returning from filling my green plastic cup with water, I noticed the tableau before me seemed eerily familiar. It was like I was seeing the human manifestation of a restless pride of lionesses, like the pride I had once seen on safari, all languishing in the shade of an acacia tree, attempting to escape the mid-day African sun. Both the women and the lionesses seemed cantankerous, disenfranchised, and impatient for food. Unable to hunt for themselves, they were instead subjected to the whim of their keepers. The lionesses sat in a circle, waiting to be fed.

* * *

During a lull in conversation, one of the tough-looking women from Staten Island glared at me and yelled, “Yo *white* girl, where you go to *college*?” Not ‘*did*’ I go to college, but ‘*where*.’ I thought about what this question implied. The preface ‘*white girl*’ helped me understand exactly what she was saying: *I see that you're different. Let's find out how different you are.*

“Boston.” I said, flatly.

“Yeah, but where?”

“Harvard.”

The group hushed. Sitting in the passenger seat beside Mia, Micaeli panicked as all attention turned to us. *Oh, so we're cracking jokes right now, self? What the hell are we doing?*

But Mia from Philly held strong, listening to the chorus of reactions from all the women who hadn't yet acknowledged me directly. Suddenly I felt myself doing something I hadn't done since landing on American soil: I began to smile. A genuine, bashful grin emerged between the dimples in my cheeks. Before I could realize what was happening, I began to laugh, and I actually sounded like

me, irreverent and mischievous. All the aspects of myself that I was trying so to deliberately to conceal were still nestled inside of me, and that laugh was proof.

“Okay, no. No! I didn't go to *Harvard!*” I said after a long pause. A cacophony of laughter, groans, and “fuck you’s” reverberated off of the cement walls and steel bed frames. “You think I would've ended up *here* if I went to fucking Harvard?”

This line scored me big points. I knew it would. The joke possessed the self-awareness to imply, *Yes, I see that I'm more privileged than you. But for all that privilege, clearly, I am worth no more than you.*

Of course, I didn't realize any of this at the time. I was just doing the best I could to remain disarming and clever in any way I knew how.

As I listened, I looked around wondered how each woman had ended up sitting there with me. Like Tara, many were awaiting their trial. Most of the women talked about being sent 'downstate.' This confused me; what little I knew about the New York state justice system was that hard time was served in the hinterlands of upstate New York.

“When you say 'downstate,' do you mean like, *upstate*? Like state prison?” I interjected.

“*Yeah, bitch! Downstate* is where you go *before* you go upstate!” Tara barked at me, as if this was obviously something I should've known already.

If found guilty, after Rikers women were sent to Downstate Correctional Facility, a massive processing-center located in Fishkill, in the Hudson Valley about an hour north of the city. After a few days there, inmates were 'farmed out' to one of five state prisons for female inmates. It sounded like each woman there held very strong and vocal opinions about which one was the best and why.

One of the women in the pride had a pregnant belly swelling underneath her prison shirt. At lunch, I'd seen her allotted extra portions of food. She'd been gingerly snacking throughout the afternoon. I wondered what would happen to the baby if she had to deliver it in jail. I asked Tara and Gloria about her after she had gone to the bathroom.

“Hey, what's that pregnant lady gonna do if she has the baby in prison?”

“You mean if she has it here?”

“Yeah, I guess so.”

“This ain't prison. This is jail.” Tara condescends. “Don't get that shit mixed up.”

I heard another woman yell from the other side of the block. “This ain't jail. This is fuckin' Rikers Island, n----a!”

“Okay... Well, what happens if she has the baby in either place?” I ask Gloria instead.

“Well if she has it in *state*, she's shit outta luck. But if she manages to stay *here* long enough, she can have the kid inside. It can even stay here *with* her. Now ain't *that* fucked up?”

“*Whaaat?* They allow babies to *live* here?” I ask her, wondering if she's taking me for a ride.

“Hell *yeah* they do. They got a fuckin' *nursery* wing down there n'e'erythin'. The ma's go into labor here, they have their kid in the infirmary, and then they fuckin' *live* down there with their babies, in that fuckin' *nursery*. For as *long* as they can fuckin' get away with!”

“Yeah, some'a those bitches milk that shit for a whole *year*! They get real *beds* and shit.” Tara added.

“What happens after a year?” I asked.

“The babies gotta go. Before they start realizin' they livin' in a jail n'shit...Either go to a family member who's down t'watch 'em 'til Ma gets out, or they go to CPS.”

“CPS?”

“Child Protective Services...The fuckin' *system*.” Gloria clarifies.

“I knew this *one* bitch, right?” Tara's raised her voice for the rest of the pride to hear. “...Came in knocked up, had her kid inside, did the whole bit. Somehow, this bitch went and mouthed off real bad to one'a the CO's down there in the nursery, right? Like, *real* bad, y'know? An' he goes and takes away her fuckin' *com-missary* privileges!”

A murmur of resigned protests and shaking heads emanates from the group.

“What does that mean?” I whispered to Gloria.

“The commissary? It's where we go on Wednesdays to--”

“No, I know what the commissary is. But why is that so *bad*? The guard taking away her privileges--”

“It means that bitch ain't get t'feed her fuckin' *kid*! That's what it means.”

“What?” I was aghast. Surely this couldn't be right.

“The mothers have to buy formula for their babies from the commissary,” Gloria explained.

“And shit's *expen-sive*!” Tara added.

“So if they can't go and buy it, what—do their babies just go hungry? Isn't that a human rights violation?” I asked with a healthy dose of skepticism.

“It means they gotta go around makin' trouble and askin' all the other Ma's for some'a their stash,” Tara continued. “And ain't nobody like *sharin'* in here if they ain't getting nothin' in return. *Know'ud'I'm sayin'?*”

“Wait, but can't they just breastfeed their babies?” I asked.

“Yeah, I guess they can...”

New mothers in the jail, I learned, were in a particularly vulnerable position. A newborn was quite a bargaining chip for others to play on their behalf. All the CO's, allegedly, knew which inmates were in the nursery wing. It was obvious, I suppose, since mostly all of them had been recently pregnant and now were not. If the nursery inmates did anything even slightly out of line, their commissary privileges could be revoked. Compared to the most severe alternative of revoking an inmate's nursery privileges all together, and placing her back in Gen. Pop. while nurses took care of her baby, it was lighter.

The vast majority of the women with me were mothers. They spoke of their children, and of the prospect of ever caring for them in there. The women in the nursery wing seemed to be the most pitied among all of the inmates.

“Nobody plans on comin' to *Rikers* when they go'n *get* knocked up, I'll tell you *that*.” The woman from Staten Island yelled from across the group.

“*Shoot...You know what 'I'd do if I was in that fuckin' nursery wing?*” Tara continued. “*I'd lose my gad'damned mind. You know'ad'I'm sayin'?* I couldn't even stand the sound'a my *own* baby cryin', let alone livin' in a whole *room* full of 'em. All *snot*-faced and screamin' all *day* n'shit. And they *still* locked up! It ain't like havin' a baby up and *changes* that!”

* * *

It had been over 36 hours since I'd last taken my pills, and I had to brace myself, clenching the steel frame of the cot to keep the room from spinning. I excused myself from the pride of lionesses and made my way to my cocoon in the rear-corner of the room. I leaned against the windowsill in front of one of the large plate-glass windows above my bed, looking out to the prison grounds beneath me, and the residential buildings of Queens, peering in judgment from the other side of the East River. Even in the middle of the afternoon, the grounds of the island were so eerily quiet. It was probably the largest open, outdoor space in the whole city where there were no people.

In lieu of people watching, I took to counting all of the living things I could see. Patches of dandelions dotted the otherwise empty acre of dying grass that extended from the jail to the perimeter of the island. A smattering of Canadian geese grazed on our side of the electrified razor-wire fence, pecking at the un-tread turf. I tried to imagine what it would feel like to be one of them, to be able to escape the secret map of the prison-industrial complex by flight, leaving behind the windowless

corridors with only a lingering concern of the descending planes coming in at La Guardia Airport on the other side of the East River.

After taking inventory of every living thing in sight, I took to counting the planes. I imagined all of the travelers on them waking from in-flight naps and fastening their seat belts, with their neck pillows and their sleeping pills, ignorant to the island of captivity (and me, on it), barely a hundred yards away.

I hated each and every one of them just a little bit, even the children, because they didn't even know what jail was. They all still had what I had lost on Sunday morning: freedom.

I longed to go outside and just run. Not 'make a break for it,' but run as in 'frolic.' *Was I the only prisoner on this island who would rather frolic than escape?* I fantasized about being on the enormous and vacant prison lawn before me, just taking up as much space as I possibly could—sprinting, skipping, cartwheeling, blowing the white wisps from dandelions while making a series of silent wishes—I just wanted to have the freedom to walk outside with asking anyone's permission.

As I stood there taking in the view before me, I imagined how I might hypothetically define 'freedom' to a group of people who were unfamiliar with the concept. *'The ability to maintain agency over one's own life and how one chooses to spend it?' 'It's a right we have because we're American, and we've won wars over it, and that's just the way it is?'* Every explanation seemed rather verbose, and missed the mark. Freedom, in essence, is a very simple thing. The hardest part about it is articulating it (or in my case, re-obtaining it.)

I made a pact with myself in that moment, that once I got out of Rikers I would thank God for my freedom every single day. I practiced the prayer I would recite, trying to craft my own little gratitudinal mantra. After a few minutes I received an answer to my previous question, how I would define freedom.

“Freedom, the ability to maintain complete control and dominion over your own self, both physically and mentally.”

Or, for simplicity's sake, “Freedom, the sweet and simple ability to walk outside without having to ask permission. “

IX. A Dark Comedy of the Absurd, with Multiple Acts

The bell rang, announcing the beginning of the recreation hour.

The women roused themselves and lined up, single-file, in front of Officer Longlegs' desk. In spite of my fantasy at the window, I did not join them. Instead, I made a beeline for the bathroom so that Gloria or Tara couldn't call me over in front of everyone else. I didn't want my uneasiness to be seen in the crowd of hundreds of women outside. In reality, I was too frightened to go out in the rec. yard, to see how many more women there were, each with their own mistakes, heartbreaks, and injustices. I didn't want to be heard making excuses. If that meant sacrificing the only hour of fresh air extended to me, then I would live with it. I stayed in the bathroom until the sound of the women being marched out had faded and the steel door had closed behind them.

The dormitory looked like a wasteland when I got out. A dozen women in various states of immobility, wringing their hands, staring at the clock and gritting their teeth until, at 4:15 on the dot, Longlegs called out "Methadone Clinic!" It was time for these women to receive their much sought-after state-administered fix. Their group was lined up, frisked, and out the door faster than I ever thought possible.

Left behind were Mona and myself, and a handful of women who'd slept through everything. We all kept to ourselves for the next hour. Even Officer Longlegs seemed to forget we were there, and took her lunchbox to the adjoining TV room. This was the most alone and unsupervised I had been since my time in the paddy wagon the previous night. Realizing this, as I drank in the relative silence, I decided to call Mom again.

"I haven't heard from Beverley!" she yelled into the phone before saying hello. "She told us she'd call when the release had been faxed to Rikers, but she hasn't *called!*"

"Okay. Well...I guess the release hasn't been sent yet?...I don't know, Mom... I don't know if I can do this for another day. I've been clinging to the thought I'd be out of here by tonight!"

"I'm going to call her before she leaves for the day. Can you call me back in an hour? The DA's office closes at 5."

"Actually, I don't know if I'll be able to. Everyone will be back from the recreation period—they're all outside now—I'm mostly alone here, but when everyone gets back there might be a line for the phone. This is the only one that works. I don't want people to think I'm hogging it. I don't want to make anybody mad."

“Oh *God* no! Please don't make anybody mad! *Do not engage*, Micaeli! Just call me back whenever you can, okay?”

“Maybe after dinner if there's a lull. I'll try as soon as I possibly can. I want to find out if I'm getting out of here tonight.”

“You know, Beverley says *everyone* in the DA's office is talking about this. And what's happening to you. And how you're in *Rikers Island*. Everyone is *shocked*—Beverley is just *hor-rified*. I mean, my *God*. This is like the plot of some *Lifetime* movie, Micaeli. This is not something that *happens* to people like us.”

I cringed when she said *people like us*. The privilege she unknowingly implied. Still, despite how entitled it sounded, she was completely right. This didn't happen to people like us. That's why I stuck out so much. Because, by virtue of class, or ethnicity, or probably both, people like us didn't end up in Rikers. And when they did, they raised eyebrows. I thought about how fucked up that was. And how I wanted to analyze all of this sub-text over the phone with her.

“I know, Mom,” was all I could say before the polite automated voice informed us that we had sixty seconds left on the call. The imminent countdown incited panic again. I began to cry.

“It's alright, sweetheart,” her voice cooed. “You're going to get out of there before the night is over.”

“Where am I supposed to sleep?”

“Call Danny. Later, when you can. You'll be safe there when you get out.”

“Okay...” I took a stifled breath. “What are you doing?”

“Oh, I've been so upset, I'm sick! This whole day...and last night, since we found out.” She sighed. “I'm just sick over this, Micaeli. So I'm making Grandma's meatballs, just like I was going to on Sunday. Until, you know-- until everything happened.”

“Does the spaghetti sauce smell good?” I asked in a voice not my own, the voice of a sniffing child.

“Yeah, babe...” She was crying too. “It smells just like Grandma's here... But you go, okay sweetheart? You go, and call me back as soon as you-” The line went dead.

* * *

I figured I'd take full advantage of my hour of quasi-solitude by finally taking a shower, something I hadn't done since leaving South Africa three days prior. I packed up my storage bin and brought the entire thing from my cot to Officer Longlegs' desk.

"Excuse me? I'm going to take a shower..." She glared down the bridge of her nose at me with an eyebrow raised.

"Are there any towels that we're supposed to use? Or shampoo? Or...toothpaste?"

She looked back down at the game of Candy Crush she was playing on her phone. "No towels. You got soap in intake. Toothpaste is in the box by the bathroom door with the maxi-pads."

"And a toothbrush?"

"Come see me after your shower."

At the far end of the enormous communal bathroom were four large shower stalls, each capable of fitting about five women in a neat row. Every shower had metal doors painted white that covered the mid-section of any woman behind them. Because of my height, the low swinging doors left my entire upper body exposed. *Of course they did.* I tested the water pressure in a few stalls before realizing they were all equally weak. When I took off my shoes and began to undress, I noticed just how damp and freezing it was, and how dirty the shower's floor was. I stood on the lid of my plastic storage bin in lieu flip-flops.

I quickly learned that scrubbing my hair with a mini bar of soap was a surprisingly inefficient method of cleaning it. I rubbed it around my scalp, pressing the button on the shower's faucet every fifteen seconds for the tepid water to continue running. This required precariously-timed choreography, a routine that involved both skill and concentration. The plastic lid grew slippery on the tile floor of the shower stall. Every time I shifted my weight the whole lid would slide around beneath my feet.

The shower had been built for someone much smaller than myself; the faucet sat by my chin and using it meant having to crane my neck and invert my head beneath the tap until all of the suds were washed out. I scrubbed myself for as long as I could stand it in the drafty, unforgiving room. Since there were no towels, I used the spare shirt I had been given to dry my body, and then wrapped it around my head. I ran my fingers through my sopping hair a few times until the futility overwhelmed any desire to preen. I tried to dry my hair a bit more with the spare shirt so I wouldn't get too cold out in the block. That, too, ended up being a futile effort.

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I awoke to the sound of the other women streaming back in, abuzz with the latest gossip they'd heard in the yard from other inmates in their neighborhoods. At the same time, the women who'd been at court were returning and suddenly the whole block was filled with shrill hoots and profanity bouncing from wall to wall. I pretended to be asleep and stayed in my cocoon until Longlegs announced "Meal Time!" at 6:00 pm sharp.

After a pat down by Officer Longlegs, I made my way into the TV room and noticed the door to the kitchen was wide open. Inside stood an inmate in an apron and hairnet stirring a huge pot of unknown sludge with great pride and self-congratulation. As she scooped a different color of sludge into each compartment of my plastic tray, she noticed me staring at her through the slot where our trays were passed.

"You fuckin' want *more*? What'tha *fuck* you want?" she sneered at me.

I waited at the Kool-Aid stand at the end of the counter until Gloria caught up to me, so that I could follow her lead on where to sit. I would have been happy to sit alone like I had at lunch, but I didn't want Gloria and Tara to think I was being rude. With the rest of B block's inmates back for the night, all of the tables were filled with a sprinkling of at least one or two people. Gloria guided us to two open seats at a table full of women, some I had met and some I had not. Since I was new to most of them, I was received with apprehension and furrowed brows.

"Nah nah nah, she *good*. Girl's a *fish*!" That was all Gloria needed to say to for the rest of the women to ease up and move over, making room for the both of us among them. The other woman dug in and the conversation lulled as everyone shoveled food into their mouths around me.

"Gloria, what's a fish?" I asked her quietly, hoping no one else around the table would hear me.

"It's somebody like *you* who ain't got no idea which th'fuck way is *up*," one of the women from the morning's pride of lionesses barked across the table for a few laughs.

"So it's *that* obvious, huh? That I have absolutely *no* idea what I'm doing?"

Tara let out a squawk from the other side of Gloria. "*Hah!* Uh...*Yeah bitch!* You the biggest fish here!"

Despite a few attempts, I still couldn't swallow the food without gagging. Tara glanced over at me, amidst bites of her hamburger patty and scoffed.

"What's the *matter*, ma? Ain't you *hun-gry*?"

"No, actually...I know I *should* be hungry. I just haven't been able to eat."

"When's the last time you ate?"

"I don't know ... A few sandwiches in intake last night?"

"Girl, you're gonna get sick. Yes you *are*...you gonna get *sick* and you gonna fuckin' *pass* out and then they gonna put you in the infirmary and give you a fuckin' *feedin'* tube or some shit, and you gonna *wish* you ate those fuckin' peas and carrots on your plate, *you know what I'm sayin'?*"

"No, I know you're right. I mean I *have* to eat. But I still just can't manage to swallow any of it."

Gloria looked up from her tray. "I know Mia, but you really *do* have to eat. Just like, hold your nose and chew without takin' a breath. And swallow it all *real* fast-like."

"*Shiiit*, we had to tell Gloria to do the *same* thing when she got here yesterday." Tina remarked to the rest of the group

"Yeah, and now she's actin' like she invented the game of try'na keep prison food down on your first time in," one of the women from Brooklyn joked.

"How could food possibly taste *this* bad when I haven't eaten in so long? It's not that I'm too upset to eat. I mean...I'm fucking hungry, don't get me wrong. But I don't think I've ever eaten anything this awful before."

"*Duh bitch!* This right here is *prison* food!" Tara declared so that everyone around us could hear her. "Ain't got no *Sriracha* sauce for *this* shit, *know what I'm sayin'?*"

A few other women echoed her sentiments.

"Ain't got no fuckin' *gluten-free* fuckin'...*vegan* fuckin' options up in here, *know what I'm sayin'?*" she continued, only louder. "You fuckin' *learn* to eat what you *get!*" she yelled playfully, reaching a crescendo before slamming her plastic spoon down onto her tray for dramatic effect.

The pregnant woman from earlier rolled her eyes while spooning something out of the single-sized carton of milk we had each been given. The top cardboard flaps were ripped off, turning the carton into a makeshift bowl from which she ate.

"Baby *girl*," she said. "you gotta mix that shit *up!*" She had the whole table's attention. This was the first time I'd heard her speak all day. "You gotta *mix* it like this. See?"

She tilted the carton in her hands so that I could see the creamy goulash that it contained. "Here. Gimme your tray. *I'll* hook it up for ya."

She had an endearing, soft voice that sounded like it came from a little girl instead of a woman. She had block-lettered tattoos across her neck and the tops of her hands, and Like Gloria, her hair was braided into pigtails. She opened another carton of milk before passing it to me across the table.

"Here – Drink this, most'uv it."

I obliged, handing the carton back to her, one quarter full, before wiping the milk mustache from my face. She took a sampling of the assorted sludge heaps from my tray: a few spoonfuls of

potato wafers, some creamed carrots and spinach, and dumped one after the next into the milk carton.

Once it was nearly full, she mashed it up quickly with her plastic fork before closing the carton's flaps and shaking it. She opened it up, gave it a whiff, and smiled before tearing off the flaps and handing it back to me.

"Thank you," I said to her, but once the focus of the conversation had moved on, I found that I still couldn't bring myself to swallow it. It just looked and felt like pre-masticated food. I pictured the slop stewing in my stomach, which put me off my appetite even further. I put the carton on my lap between my legs so that nobody around me, including the pregnant woman, would notice that I hadn't eaten it. I spent the rest of dinner filling my stomach with as much Kool-Aid as I could.

As I sat back down at the table with another full cup, Tara was finishing explaining my story to another friend of hers from the Bronx, who had been at court all day.

"You know...*This* bitch made it to the fuckin' *motherland* before *we* did."

"Yo what'zit *like* in *Af-rica*?" Gloria asked next to me with a hint of wonder in her voice. "I mean, what'zit *like*? Is it pretty?"

My mind wandered to the opening pages of Hemingway's "Green Hills of Africa," and I thought about all the sweeping descriptions and particular language I could use to answer her question properly. Then I thought about how – I mean, if I was really going to get into it – I should clarify the different types of beauty between a city like Johannesburg, where I lived, and the rest of South Africa. And if I was going *that* far, I'd might as well explain the differences in both the terrain *and* quality of life between South Africa and the rest of sub-Saharan Africa itself, not to mention the rest of the continent, most of which I hadn't even set *foot* on. I shook my head, at a true loss for words.

"It's fucking beautiful," was all I was able to articulate.

Another woman cut in from the adjacent table. "Yo, are there like, *lions* and shit where you live?"

"Not in Johannesburg, not at all," I answered, trying to keep my voice down as to not attract much more attention. "There are only really wild animals out in certain parts of the bush—the *wilderness*—and they're usually in like, big game reserves...which are like national parks. You really have to go looking to find them on safari...*And shit*..." I added, a bit too deliberately.

"That shit's wild down there—people get *eaten* and shit? That's what you hear about it on fuckin' *Discovery* Channel." Tara said to one of her neighborhood friends.

"Yeah but, it's a really big country. You know?" I said with hesitation.

"I hear they have the worst fuckin' shark attacks in the world there too," Tara's friend chimed in.

"Yeah but... Johannesburg is completely landlocked so...I don't have to really worry about shark attacks there either." I decided to try another strategy, making my explanation a bit more location-specific. "It's like this... America has bears, right? But you don't have bears wandering around in Brooklyn, or the Bronx, or some shit. It's a lot like that. All the wild animals are far away, so..."

"*Yo! But I saw a fuckin' huge ass rac-coon waiting for the fuckin' A-train at Rockaway last year. It was all fucking wild and shit...I thought I was fuckin' trippin'!*" retorted a woman in a head wrap who'd been in court all day.

"Oh ma bull-*shit* you saw a fuckin' rac-coon in fuckin' Rock-away Beach!" protested Tara's friend from the Bronx.

"Naw, I *bet* this bitch saw a fuckin' raccoon. Bet her black ass went *runnin'* down that platform as *soon* as she *saw* it. Ain't that *right*?" chided Rosaria from Inwood.

"*Biiitch*, you're talkin' *shit*. Pics or it didn't *happen*!" Gloria chimed in.

Then, a lull.

"Yo, what's the weed like in Africa?" the woman in the head headwrap asked me. The pregnant woman rolled her eyes again. I shook my head. *Did I really have to answer that?* The women stared at me with raised eyebrows, expectantly. *I guess I did.*

"I don't know ... It's better here... The weed there has a lot of seeds. You're not missing much." The women smiled at each other, exchanging smug glances.

"This bitch thinks they ain't even got fuckin' cheap-ass *outdoor* in America anymore."

"Yeah, but white people don't even *know* about mids, *know what I'm sayin'*? They drop *bills* on their weed. Like, they like to fuckin' *eat* it. Turn it into fuckin' *desserts* an'shit."

The women turned back to me, the only white person at the table, as if it was my turn for rebuttal. I just shrugged and kept quiet, smiling into my cup of Kool-Aid, as the conversation moved on to everyone's preferred method of getting stoned.

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After dinner everyone lay on their beds and talked shit across the room without looking at one another, everyone chiming in while doing their own thing. The bell on the wall rang; it was time for a bed check. Gloria and Tara had explained the procedure to me earlier that afternoon.

They were military-like drills that happened a few times daily, announced by a bell that would ring throughout the whole jail. The sound would come to remind me of the PA system bell that would ring to announce the end of a class period in high school. Immediately, every inmate would stand, make a beeline to their cot, make their bed, organize their possessions in their storage bin, and place it on their bed before standing at attention, awaiting inspection by the CO. A few more officers would come to join her and the gang of them would walk from cot to cot to inspect each inmate's container and bedding, before ordering the inmate to identify herself by name and ID number. Then the guards would inspect the plastic badge affixed to the shirt of each inmate with their name, ID number and photo, confirming they were the same person before checking a box on the CO's clipboard and proceeding to the next inmate.

“What do I do if I don't have an ID badge?” I asked Gloria and Tara when they got to this part of the story.

“What do you mean you ain't got an ID badge? Didn't they give it to you in *intake*? When you got the *rest* of your shit?”

“No. They said something about the machine being broken? They just gave me this.” I pulled out the dogged piece of white paper with my ID number and the directions for how to use the telephone. The two women studied the paper skeptically. Tara shrugged, and then said, “Well *shit*, there ain't much more you can *do* about it. So, *fuck* it I guess.”

I fussed with my bed linens and stacked my belongings in my storage bin. I refolded everything quickly so that it was neat enough to pass inspection, before placing the entire bin on my cot and standing at attention, my arms crossed behind my back like an erect soldier. A group of corrections officers made their way through the first row of beds. When they reached my corner, I dug my nails anxiously into my arms.

“Where's your badge?” one of the officers asked sharply, as a others searched through my storage bin.

“I didn't get one. The machine in intake was broken. They told me to show you this.”

I took the folded white paper out of the left-breast pocket of my shirt. The COs gave it a skeptical look and glanced at one another before handing it back to me without a word.

“Yo, this lid's all wet,” one of the other CO's mentioned to Officer Longlegs.

“Yeah, I... I used it in the shower...To stand on.” I volunteered meekly.

The looks the officers gave me then were a mixture of confusion and disgust. Longlegs looked

at the clipboard she was carrying and before crossing off my name. “Yo, Rourke, you gotta go line up in front. You're on the script list. Script walk's in five.”

Her words were quick and scornful. I felt as if she couldn't wait to stop speaking to me. Once the COs had moved on to the front of the next row, I fastened the lid onto my bin, sliding it beneath my bed and walked, perhaps too eagerly, to the front of the room.

A male CO escorted about twenty of us single-file through the greenly lit hallways to the infirmary. At every metal detector the line was halted because of my belly button ring once again. The other inmates in line all glared in my direction each time I got frisked, obliterating my anonymity. Outside the infirmary, we waited in a row, along with lines from other blocks, assembled like a battalion of misfit girl scouts, all waiting expectantly for our meds. I remember thinking how strange it was that I'd be getting them for free. I'd have to pay \$70 out-of-pocket at the drugstore for a day's worth of my medication. Here, it was handed to me in a Dixie cup, on the dime of New York City's taxpayers.

As our line finally snaked to the barred window where the scripts were being dispensed, I buzzed with anticipation for the moment when my hands would stop shaking and I'd stop feeling so faint. Maybe I'd finally be able to stomach some food. At the window, a stern-looking gray-haired nurse, dwarfed in a cardigan, looked up from her clipboard as I handed her my white identification paper.

“Rourke?”

“Yes, ma'am?”

She began checking whatever was on her clipboard, scanning the pages before crossing off my name with a yellow highlighter. From a rolling cart behind her she retrieved and opened a small paper envelope with a pharmaceutical label and my last name written in thick marker. She shuffled back to the window with a little box and a small cup full of water, passing them both to me through its vertical bars. I opened the box and saw four identical pills.

“Sorry? Excuse me?” I followed up, confused. “Yeah, I think there are supposed to be two *different* pills? I take two different prescriptions daily so I kind of need both...”

The nurse looked at me with the same incredulous glare I'd received all day. I stared back at her wearily, but without backing down.

“The chart says you only have one.”

“Okay well, in all of my medical paperwork I *definitely* included both prescriptions. I don't know what happens if I only take the one...”

“Welp. You'll have to come back *tomorrow* and see if your chart's been *updated*.” Her words were punctuated with condescension. “There ain't *nothin'* I can do about it *now*. NEXT!”

I was shuffled past the window, the box in my hand. I figured one antidepressant was better than none, so I cut my losses and swallowed a dose before placing the box in my breast pocket. Following the line, I tossed my paper cup in the large custodial-sized trashcan that every prisoner passed as they exited infirmary.

I hadn't wanted to be in Rikers in the first place; now I *really* didn't want to be in Rikers with pills on me. I had no other pockets, and the box was peeking out of my shirt. I tried to stash it in my bra until my next compulsory, navel-induced pat down at a metal detector on the walk back to B block.

“Don't'chu go *hidin'* no shit! That's how you get in *real* trouble in here!” The male CO spat in my face as he scolded me. “Now you gon' *tell* your CO they *gave* you this shit when you get back to your block, *a'ight?* ... Better yet, *I'll* tell her!”

“That would be *great*, actually. If *you* could let her know. So that *she* knows. It will probably sound more legitimate coming from your mouth than mine,” I told him with a sincerity that only irritated him further.

Getting back to B block, I was told to wait at Longlegs' desk before the male CO told me to “cough up what I was *carryin'*.” So I pulled the box from my pocket and handed it to Officer Longlegs, who squinted at the label with skepticism.

“Yo, what's this shit *for?*”

“Well, it's actually an epilepsy medication... But my doctor prescribed it to me for depression.”

“You ain't *got* epilepsy?”

“No. No, I don't...Somehow it's actually prescribed to treat both illnesses? Which is crazy, I know...Actually, I have another prescription I was supposed to get too...But they didn't have it...Is there someone I should speak to about that?”

“What's *that* one for?” The male CO asked me.

“It's an anti-anxiety medication.”

“*Mmm*...Yeah, it ain't comin'.” Longlegs said, handing the box of pills back to me.

“Why's that...do you think?” I was ready for any number of answers.

“*Half'a* tha women in here gon' go around tellin' you they's got *anxiety*...Askin' for fuckin' *sleepin'* pills an'shit. Ain't nobody give a *Gad'damn* unless you tryna *hurt* yo'self or somebody else...But if you up and have a *seizure?* ...*Then* you're a li-abil-ity. And ain't *nobody* wanna fill out'tha paperwork for that! *That's* why they only bothered t'give you the *seizure* drugs.”

“So, what should I *do* then?”

“Shoot...” she stuck out her lips and gave me a face that said, *'not my problem.'*

“Okay.” There was no sense in trying to argue with her. “Oh, and since I'm here... May I have that toothbrush now?”

“Now *that* is somethin' I *can* help you with.” Longlegs bent over and opened a drawer in her desk that contained candy, small bags of potato chips, and other bargaining chips for convincing inmates to mop or sweep up the block.

“A'right *here*.” She extended a generic-brand boxed toothbrush over the desk to me. “You gotta bring this back to me when you're done. I gotta watch you throw it away.”

“Why do I have to throw it away? Can't I just use it again?”

She gave me a dirty look that implied my question was too idiotic for a response.

“I mean I *will* throw it away if I *have* to...I don't *mind*. I'm just...curious?”

Longlegs sustained her look, blinking her false lashes like an annoyed Valley Girl.

“Thank you.” I headed into the bathroom, thinking the whole time about how many pounds of plastic must be wasted annually on account of this backwards, but clearly not without precedent, rule. I seethed with eco-conscious millennial self-righteousness the entire time I brushed my teeth. Gloria had told me that this island was tripled in size after a citywide trash-dumping project some time back in the 50's. The whole place was built on an enormous landfill of trash. It all seemed very poetic. *Dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return*. They're just collecting building materials to make the garbage heap even larger, I thought to myself.

In the polished steel mirror nailed to the wall in front of me, I noticed a young white inmate I hadn't seen earlier, with a concave wafer-thin frame and stringy blonde hair, sitting on a toilet and staring intensely at the back of my head. We were the only two women in the bathroom. I felt the back of my neck tensing, but I kept brushing, paying her no mind. I spat, rinsed, and made my way to a toilet on the far side of the bathroom before she started walking to the sinks. I wondered why she was veering so close to me as she made her way across the room. She was very obviously in my personal space. As our paths intersected, she turned her head in my direction, burying her face in her shoulder as if she were smelling her armpit.

“Yo. You got any tuchie?” Her tone was hushed and secretive, like somebody on the street in a big city trying to sell something they shouldn't.

“I'm sorry, what?” I asked earnestly.

“I *said*-- you got any *tuchie*?” She was impatient, eyes darting around.

“*Tuchie?*” I squinted my eyes and looked at her, repeating the word louder than I probably should have. She spoke so softly that I honestly couldn't make out what she was asking.

“*Yeah...*” She refused to make eye contact. I thought about asking ‘what's that?’ but realized that I didn't really care to know.

“I'm sorry,” I turned to face her with my eyebrows raised, summoning as much sincerity as I could muster. “I honestly have *no idea what that even means.*” I felt like I might burst into nervous laughter or run out of the room if this stolen conversation lasted any longer.

“What'*chu* got in ya *pocket?*” She jutted her chin in the direction of my heart, where the paper box was peeking out of my breast pocket. I began walking, already halfway to the door before I whisper-yelled to her over my shoulder, without stopping.

“It's for my *epilepsy!*”

The young woman stood alone in the middle of the gloomy, half-lit bathroom. Her expression looked as if she had just stuck her nose in a carton of sour milk and taken a big whiff.

From the bathroom, I darted to Longlegs' desk, handing her my wet toothbrush without stopping, and walked the length of B block back to my cocoon. Beneath the blanket I started to laugh, which became a muffled, frantic cackle. *Was I just propositioned for drugs in the bathroom? Did I just lie about having epilepsy to get out of it?*

The absurdity of my situation had reached a level where I was no longer scared, just resigned to the mess I was in, and amused by my own panicked reactions to it. *I couldn't have been more lame if I tried.* I laughed to myself, replaying the scene in my head, imagining how I would tell this story to my friends once I was out of there.

* * *

One woman in the block had put me on edge since dinner. Rodriguez was a short, young Latina woman with a cropped haircut, tattoos all over her body. During dinner, Rodriguez had sat on the opposite side of the room, shooting glances over her shoulder at me the whole time.

Rodriguez's bed was set up in the opposite corner from mine, beneath the rear-facing windows in the back of the room. She paced the length of the block, punching one fist into her other hand, complaining to anyone who would listen about her time in court that afternoon.

“It's *fuckin'* ri-dic-ulous,” she said about her proposed sentence. “*Fuckin' whack!*”

She took up as much space as her petite frame possibly could, using a booming voice to compensate for her small stature. I felt like I was looking at my opposite in every way. She seemed so comfortable here, so truly herself and uninhibited. I wondered if maybe the whole thing was an act. How many times she had been here before?

I made a point to avoid looking at her, trying to become a grey cinder block in the wall behind me. She made me nervous and I was keen to stay unengaged. I heard her ask another woman about me on her side of the room before she yelled. “Hey *white* girl! *White* girl...Com'ere!”

I was afraid that not doing so would only make her angry, and put a bigger target on my back, so I went. I was a head taller than her, face to face. Rodriguez looked me up and down with the same incredulous glare I'd received from the pride of lionesses earlier.

“Yo, those that Warby Parker shit?” She pointed at her eyes, indicate that she was asking about my glasses.

“Yeah. They are actually.”

“Yeah—*white* people...fuckin' Brooklyn *hipsters*, all walkin' around with the same fuckin' glasses and shit. Like it's fuckin' *film* school or some shit.” A few women in close proximity scoffed at me, emboldening her to carry on. “Why did you get 'em there? Your glasses?”

“I mean I *liked* them? And... All the frames there are only \$99. If you buy a pair, the company donates a pair to a child in need. Which is...*nice*?”

“*Shit!* Just buy *my* fuckin' kid a pair.”

“I mean, I...”

“*Shit* girl I'm just *playin'!* Y'all are so up-tight. Re-lax, I'm *playin'* with you!”

“Oh. Sorry, I just...”

“Whatchu *so-rry* for? What'chu gotta be *so-rry* to me about? You ain't even barely opened your *mouth!*” The women around us laughed. “Where the fuck you come from?” she asked.

Rodriguez was completely unphased by my story, expressing no sympathy or concern. When I had finished, she returned to pacing the block. Her outrage was still there, only now when she spoke, she addressed me alone.

“Hey white girl, you wanna know what *I* did to end up in here?” Rodriguez shouted. “It's even *more* fucked up than what happened to you!”

“Sure. I guess so?”

“I got caught suckin' the wrong *dick*! I ain't even *do nothin' illegal*. Just got caught with the *wrong motha'fuckin' dick*. And I up and got *motha'fuckin' framed* and now I'm up in *this* joint again! So...that's *my shit*!”

“That sounds really horrible,” I said, well meaning. “But I have *no* idea what that means...I'm sorry...” I shrugged, shaking my head. Rodriguez accepted the invitation to elaborate.

“So I fuckin' go out on Saturday ... I'm posted up on Grand Concourse, *right*? And some *mother* fucker agrees to give me *fuckin' forty-fi' dolla's* to suck his dick. And after a fuckin' *hour* – *I shit you not*, a fuckin' *hour*! – That mother fucker *still* ain't fuckin' finished cuz his ass is fuckin' drunk as *hell*. So I tell him ‘I'm *done*.’ Like, ‘*Sorry*, n----a, it ain't *hap-penin'*, *know what I'm sayin'*?’ Then I go to split, and take the fuckin' forty-fi’ dolla's from his wallet. But before I'm even down the block, mother fucker comes up *behind* me! Throws his *wallet* in the *street*, starts *followin'* me and yellin' about how *I* up and tried to steal his motha'fuckin' *wallet*! I was like ‘*Biiitch*, I ain't want your *wallet*! I want that motha'fuckin hour of my *life* back, you *know what I'm sayin'*?’”

“So...He threw his wallet in the street and said you stole it?” I asked, doing my best to make sense of what I was being told.

“Yeah! N----a fuckin' *did*!”

I thought about how this scenario, and the motives therein, really didn't make much sense to me at all. There were some obvious plot holes in Rodriguez's story. *Did anybody else see him throw the wallet? Had they been outside this whole time? How did she know it had been an hour? Was she wearing a watch? Was he?* I suppressed my urge to clarify and waited for her to lose interest in me as quickly as possible.

“So *e'erybody's* on the street now, they see him *followin'* me and shit, they hear us fuckin' *screamin'* at each other – Cuz you *know* I ain't take those fuckin' *false allegations* lightly. So then some nigga up and calls the fuckin' 5-0 and mother fucker's all *lyin'* to the cop's fuckin' *faces* and shit. And *next* thing I know, *I'm* the one being fuckin' *handcuffed*. And charged with grand *motha'fuckin' larceny*!”

My face strained as I tried to look as sympathetic as I could.

“And I got fuckin' *priors*! I ain't gonna get sprung at the end of the week, *know what I'm sayin'*? I ain't payin no fuckin' *bail*. *Hell* nah, I'm fuckin' *in* this shit. Fuckin' *a-gain*. Because of the wrong *fuckin' ...limp-ass Bronx-ass dick*.”

Rodriguez then went on a tangent about how she didn't even like dick and that she was, as she put it, "as bull dyke as they get," which was something she repeated a number of times, before turning back to me.

"What about you, white girl, you *gay*?"

Mia from Philly vetoed sharing my complex, nuanced opinion of sexuality as a spectrum, and opted to keep it simple.

"Me? *Hell* nah," I said, puffing out my chest.

Rodriguez to burst into laughter and start dancing around her corner of the block, singing, "White girl likes the *di-ick!* White girl likes the *di-ick!*" like a schoolyard bully.

I pursed my lips, feeling my cheeks grow red hot. I didn't bother joining in the laughter this time. I knew Rodriguez wouldn't notice anyway. She was far too caught up in her own bravado.

* * *

Sometime after the seven o'clock news ended on the TV in the next room, I noticed that the phone was vacant, and seized the opportunity to call Mom once more. Muscle memory kicked in while dialing the elaborate set of codes and, on the first try, Mom answered.

"Micaeli?"

"*Mom*?"

"She sent it! Beverley faxed your release through to Rikers at 5:30! She wouldn't let the DA leave for the day without signing it first. It sounds like she practically chased the bastard out the door!"

She laughed at her own profanity.

"So that means I'm getting out tonight? I don't have to spend another night here?! Oh my God this is the best news. I could *kiss* this Beverley!"

"She even stayed late to make sure it was received!"

"I wonder when I'll be able to get out of here. If she sent it at 5:30, that's almost two hours ago."

"Maybe you should ask the person in charge?"

"Yeah, in the real world that would be a totally normal request. But things aren't really as...*transparent* here, you know?"

"Well, don't worry my girl. It won't be much longer. You'll be out of there before tonight is over...Have you called Danny? I want to make sure you have somewhere safe to go when you get out."

"I'll call him once we get off the phone and I talk to my CO."

The automated voice chimed in. "*You have sixty seconds to complete your call.*"

“Oh, shoot! I hate that stupid message!” Mom muttered. “Okay sweetie, just worry about getting out of there safely! I mean, *don't*-- don't worry! Don't start any trouble just because you're leaving soon, or anything.”

“Mom, what kind of trouble do you think I'm capable of starting? Some kind of political insurrection or something? Don't worry, *okay*? I'm doing fine in here. I've made some friends.”

“Oh no, don't tell me *that*! What kind of friends are they?”

“Good people, Mom. There *are* some good people in here. And they're looking out for me.”

“God is *good*! Okay, I love you, sweetheart.”

“I love you too, Mom. I'm so sorry.”

“*Stop* saying you're sorry. Call me when you—”

The call cut off and I heard a dial tone once again. I made a beeline to Officer Longlegs, still sitting behind her desk.

“I just found out my release was sent two hours ago!” I declared, triumphantly. “Do you know when I can expect to get out of here?”

She shrugged apathetically. “Could be an *hour*. Could be *t'marrah*. If it doesn't come through by midnight you'll have to wait until t'marrah night to be released.”

“Do people only get released at night?”

“...*Yeah*.” She looked at me again like I was the dumbest person on Earth.

“Well, could I maybe speak to the warden, please?”

“...No. No you *can't*,” she snapped, without lifting her head from the game of Candy Crush on her phone.

“So I just have to wait, then?”

“Unless you wanna clean the fuckin' *bathroom*.”

“Is that something I *have* to do?”

“No. Somebody else'll do it for a bag a'chips or somethin'.”

“Okay, then, no thank you.”

She glared at me, and paused the game on her phone. I darted back to the payphone and dialed Danny's number. He answered on the fourth ring.

“Micaeli?! Are you okay?”

“Hi. Yes. I'm okay and I'm getting out! Some time tonight, most likely. And listen, apparently

we just get dropped off in the middle of Queens, so I'm coming to crash on your couch. But you just moved and I don't know where you live.”

“Okay. Great!” he exclaimed before telling me his address.

“Shit! I don't have anything to write it down with! How am I going to remember it?”

“*Shit*, um... Let's sing it to a catchy tune so you don't forget it,” Danny suggested. This was one of our old favorite ways of remembering things.

“Okay, but this call can only last for six minutes so start singing...”

Danny told me he'd be on standby all night, waiting for my call. I told him I'd call him as soon as I was out and had access to a phone, before reciting his address to the tune of “Ba Ba Black Sheep” one last time to confirm.

“Excellent. I'll see you when you get out. Be careful, Micaeli.”

* * *

I hid under my blankets, rife with anticipation for the next chapter in my story, the chapter of granted freedom, of 'what happened after.' Another CO walked into B block and handed Longlegs a clipboard and left without a word. After a skeptical glance at whatever was on the clipboard, Longlegs called mine and Gloria's last names. My stomach knotted in anticipation as I walked the length of the room. She said the both of us were on the list of detainees to be released that night. *Glory, Glory Alleluia!*

I returned to my corner and began to pack my storage bin. When Longlegs saw what I was doing, she shouted across the room at me to “slow my roll.” She didn't know when the CO would be by to fetch us. It would probably be a few hours. “Nobody tells me any'a that shit.”

I took my things from the rear corner and moved to a vacant bed right in front of Officer Longlegs, so that I would be ready to leave as soon as the CO came back. I sat staring at her expectantly until she became visibly irritated. She put down her phone and countered my stare with a resentful glare.

“Yo, what's your *deal*, Rourke? You don't belong here, *do* you?” She peered at me through her trendy, black-framed plastic glasses, doing her best to intimidate me. Before I could answer her, a chorus of responses piped up from around the block.

“*Hell* naw, she don't!”

“That's for *damn* sure.”

“*Psshh*, that bitch? *Nah*.”

Gloria joined me at the front of the room not long after, putting her plastic bin on the cot next to mine and asking me more about myself. Longlegs began interjecting her two cents into our conversation and slowly warmed up to me.

“You've been here since I arrived from intake this morning.” I eventually said to her. “When do you get to go home?”

“I'm out at twelve,” she replied with a sigh.

“Midnight? So how long does that make your shift?”

“Well today's a double so, sixteen-hours? I'm loadin' up on mutuals this weekend so I can have next weekend off.”

“Mutuals?”

“Yeah. Mutuals.”

“I don't know what those are.”

“Mutual swaps? Where I take somebody's shift this week and they take mine next week? I mean I'm here 16 hours today but the OT is worth it. You do know what OT is, don't you?”

“Yes, overtime. But *16 hours*? That sounds brutal.”

“It's only brutal after this weekend. It's my third double in a row.”

“Shit! How long have you been doing this? Working here, I mean?”

“Ah, ‘bout four years.”

“And before? What did you do?”

“I worked at a public junior high in Brooklyn. I taught science.”

“You're kidding! You were a teacher? And now you're a Corrections Officer?”

“Yup.” she replied, unphased.

“Have you ever seen any of your old students in here?”

“Actually, *yeah*! Once or twice.”

“Did it make you sad?”

“Nope...Could'a guessed they would'a ended up here anyway.”

“So what made you want to make a career switch like that?”

“Well,” Her icy demeanor had melted. She was beginning to enjoy talking about herself. “I was kind'a gettin' tired'a teachin', and I was already working for the city. I heard that working in Corrections

brought in more money, and the benefits make it worth it. Me and my daughter got full health benefits and insurance now. And only 16 more years until I can retire and get my pension.”

“Hmm...So everyone here can retire after how long?”

“The COs get pension after 20. That's why a lot of 'em do it. They get in real young, they put in their 20, then they get out with a lifelong pension and start their own business, or move to Florida or some shit. You know, do what they *really* wanna do.”

Longlegs' language made it sound like her and her fellow CO's were serving a mandatory minimum sentence of their own.

“You said you have a daughter? How old is she?”

“Fourteen.”

“Wow! You look *goood* for having a fourteen year old. I would've never guessed.”

The beginning of a smile emerged before she wiped the expression from her face.

“What does your daughter do when you have to work here for so long? Like today, who takes care of her when she gets home from school?”

“*I* do.” She retorted, almost defensively.

“Oh, yeah, I know. But like, when you're here until midnight, like tonight –What does she do?”

“She's a *good* girl. She knows how to take care of herself. And she like to cook. So she makes herself dinner, does her homework by herself, texts me when she's gettin' in bed.” She paused. “She can look after herself,” she added, as if trying to convince herself as much as me.

“That must be hard. I bet you'd like to be able to spend more time with her.” I sympathised. Gloria just sat next to me the whole time, shaking her head at my persistent line of questioning.

“Well next weekend it's her birthday,” Longlegs divulged. “So that's why I'm takin' all these mutuals. She know what's up.”

As Longlegs spoke I couldn't help but notice how strikingly beautiful she was. Her already attractive natural features were accentuated with heavy makeup, false eyelashes, trendy plastic glasses, a full weave of ebony box braids to her waist, and lavender acrylic fingernails that extended like claws, adding a solid inch to the length of each finger. It seemed silly to me that she would get so primped just to come sit here with a bunch of prisoners for 16 hours straight.

Like the COs in intake that morning, I wondered how much of the Officer Longlegs' beauty regiment was done for 'look good, feel good' motivation, and how much of it was done as a means of differentiation, to reinforce the visual distinctions between herself and the inmates in her charge. Perhaps her display of glamour was a reminder to the rest of us, that at least COs still had the freedom

to look beautiful. And perhaps by spending what little money and free time they had on those amenities, the COs were able to remind themselves of their dominance, convincing themselves that they were still members of the outside world and entitled to its privileges.

“How come you askin' so many questions 'bout me *anyway*?” Longlegs snapped suddenly.

“She's a *journalist*!” Gloria interjected, explaining on my behalf. “She ax' people about themselves for a *livin'*!”

“*Journalist*, huh?” Longlegs replied.

“Yeah.”

“*Biiitch!* You better write about *this* experience. Laugh all the way to the *bank!*” And then Longlegs laughed for the very first time. It was a shriek that ascended into her falsetto and punctuated itself with shorter, stacatto laughs that made Gloria and I both laugh along instinctively

* * *

Just before midnight the phone on the wall beside the CO's desk rang. Officer Longlegs crossed to it and answered it before looking at us.

“Yeah, I got 'em. Yeah, they all set.” she mumbled into the receiver before hanging it up.

“Espinosa! Rourke! The CO is on his way up to get you. Better pack your things.”

This seemed like a strange instruction, given that we'd been sitting in front of her for the past three hours with our respective storage bins in tow. But Longlegs' instruction was not meant for us. It was a message to every other inmate in the room that meant '*fair game.*'

The other women scrambled towards us with expedience. Once more I began to panic, my adrenal gland flipped on like a light switch as my scalp tightened. *What's about to happen?* I was relieved when, a moment later, I learned that everyone else just wanted to swap out articles of clothing from my bin before I brought it downstairs. Women who hadn't paid any attention to me all evening suddenly came forth to demonstrate how their shirts were too tight, or that the only pants available to them at intake were a size triple XL, or that their blankets were smelly or full of holes.

“Are you sure that I won't get in trouble for this?” I asked them. The group unanimously dismissed my 'fish' concerns and began digging through my storage bin, every woman for herself.

I decided to take the opportunity to thank the room at large, in a characteristically impromptu speech that was definitely uncalled for and, in hindsight, borderline inappropriate.

“So, um, before I go I just wanted to thank everyone for your kindness. Thanks for being nice to me. I wish each of you the best, really and truly.”

My words were not particularly well received; I didn’t expect them to be. But I felt compelled to say them anyway. I felt like I needed a coda, some last words of gratitude. Real Micaeli had shed the Mia from Philly costume for a fleeting moment, waving goodbye with one hand and holding a white flag of surrender in the other.

“Only a white person would fuckin’ *thank* everybody when they’re leavin’ fuckin’ *jail*,” Rodriguez bellowed from the back of the room.

X: Outtake

Gloria and I received our clothes back in their sealed, transparent-plastic envelopes, through the bars of the holding cell in intake where we'd been brought. Intake, it turned out, was also outtake. Although anything was better than the jail uniform I was surrendering, my own clothes now felt tainted in some way. The only welcomed article of clothing was my mother's jacket, the last thing I took out of the envelope. I breathed in its scent and put it on, buttoning it all the way to the top, flipping the collar up to hide the bottom of my face. I promised myself then that I'd never wear any of those clothes again except the jacket, which felt even more important now. It contained an even greater prowess having endured another life crisis on my back.

I winced as I saw Gloria zipping up her high-waisted jeans over her skin-tight, lace-up bodysuit. She donned her Saturday night heels once again. I really tipped my hat to her. I kept my jail-issued shoes on since they kept my feet warmer than the flimsy pair of flip-flops I had worn in.

"You plannin' on taking those home as a *souvenir*, Mia?" she asked me facetiously.

"No, I just hate having cold feet. And these flip-flops won't cut it right now."

"Do you want *everyone* to know you just got out the *joint*?"

"What do you mean?"

"I *mean*, you're *obviously* wearin' bo-bo's, ain't chu? Everybody's gonna know you just got out."

"Who's everybody?"

"Everybody who sees 'em who's been jail. *They're* the ones who's gonna notice."

"Whatever. So be it." I tucked my sandals under my arm before handing my plastic bin over to an intake officer to be inventoried, the jail shoes still on my feet. I'm still not sure why I was allowed to take them home with me, but, for yet another inexplicable reason, I was.

There were two other women in the holding cell that we were brought into when we arrived. They'd been eager to get the hell out of there even before we had joined them. The more talkative of the two informed us that we were now waiting for the CO on bus duty to swing by and transport us to another building. There we would get our possessions back and be "cleared for re-entry" before boarding the Q101 bus off the island.

They were about as different as two women can be. The woman who'd spoken- let's call her the Roadrunner of Ronkonkoma- was a petite but muscular white woman with wiry blonde hair and paper-

white skin. She wore a man's tank top, overall shorts, and combat boots, all in black. Roadrunner didn't stay in one place for longer than a minute. She was as loquacious as they come, and could hardly contain her boundless energy. Every few minutes she stretched as if she were warming up for a race. When she wasn't talking or pacing or stretching, she was compulsively lacing and unlacing her scuffed black Doc Martens. The other woman remained on her perch in the corner like an indoor cat, a look of permanent scorn on her face. She kept her legs crossed and her arms folded beneath her bosom. She had light black skin and her hair was dyed fire engine red. On her feet were furry grey UGG boots with satin ribbons tied into bows.

"This *motha'fucka'* could'a been here an *hour* ago!" the Indoor Cat sniveled, combing her fingers through her weave. She was incensed with the inefficiency of the entire outtake process. "We fuckin' *saw* him comin' in here, getting his fuckin' cup of *coffee* and talkin' up those intake *hoes* behind the desk. Then *motha'fucka'* up and *left*. An' he ain't been back *since*! The *last* time I was in outtake, I was outta there in a half'an *hour*. This is act-ually *bullshit*!"

Road Runner dropped to the floor and began to do push-ups in the middle of our cell. "Listen. Ain't like we can do anythin' about it so I don't see *why* you're getting so fuckin'...*butt* sore about it. Just....chill the fuck out, a'ight?"

"Bitch, I'm just *sayin'*..."

"Yeah well," Roadrunner had switched to crunches and was speaking between loud, rhythmic exhales. "We *all* fuckin' *heard* you. *Okay?*"

"Yeah...yeah, okay. We okay... I'm just try'na get up *n'outta* here. I gotta go make *right* with my man, *you know what I'm sayin'*? I gotta like, see where we're at once I'm out. 'Cuz some real shit's been going down since I got in. Like, shit'chu cannot even *imagine*."

Roadrunner flipped to plank position. "Are those Jeffrey Campbell's?" she asked, eye-level with Gloria's heels, completely ignoring Indoor Cat.

"Nah, but they're a pretty decent knock-off." Gloria responded.

"Where they from?" Roadrunner probed.

"DSW. At thr East Elmhurst Galleria."

"Word. I can fuck with DSW *hard*. Their *sales*, man! You can get that shit for like, 70 percent off. *Easy!*"

Gloria nodded at her with an unimpressed pout. Roadrunner didn't seem to notice. Instead, she honed in on me, walking over to the wall next to me and slid her back down the wall until she sat in an invisible chair, her arms held out straight, parallel to the ground.

"I can also fuck with DSW pretty hard. I'm on their email list. They send great coupons." I volunteered, mostly to Gloria.

"What's your story, ginger? Where th'fuck'd *you* come from?" she asked me without looking.

"Pennsylvania."

"Yeah but where?"

"Philly. Philadelphia."

She nodded, her eyes wincing and closed as she continued to hold her pose again. "I fuckin' *dig* Philly, man! I almost even went to *college* in Philly. But I got a better scholarship playin' soccer for Monmouth, so I went there." She exhaled with gusto through her mouth. "You heard'a Monmouth?"

"Yeah. It's in South Jersey, right? By the shore?"

"Yeah, man. *Fuck!* 20 minutes flat to Atlantic City. Shit used to be *insane*... What about you, chick? Where'd *you* go to college?"

"Emerson? You know it?"

"Fuck yeah, man. *Boston!* Fuckin' *love* Boston. Almost went to school *there*, too. Northeastern. And they had a fuckin' *stacked* athletics program."

"Go Huskies," I said faintly, waving an invisible miniature flag.

"*Yes*, dude! The fuckin' *Huskies!* Honestly, I really wish I *had* ended up going there. Monmouth was *shit!*"

She laughed harder and harder until she fell out of her wall squat and landed with her legs spread on the floor next to the bench on which Gloria and I sat. "And I ain't even *from* Jersey and even *I* thought it was shit! 'Cept I'm from somewhere *just* as shit! I'm from fuckin' Long *Island*."

"I actually have a lot of friends from Long Island," I told her, with a bit too much enthusiasm.

I shouldn't have said this. I had taken the bait. My words gave Roadrunner the validation to continue her verbal acrobatics. "Oh yeah? Where they from?"

"Uh...Rockville Centre? And Oyster Bay. One's from Islip, I think?"

"Islip, *yeah!* That's near me. I'm Ronkonkoma... *Ron-kon-koma, bitch!*" She bellowed at the ceiling like a wrestling match announcer, mimicking a bullhorn held to her mouth with her hands.

"Oh cool...Yeah, I dated a guy from Ronkonkoma for a--"

"Oh yeah? What's his name?" She said, clipping the end of my sentence.

“You probably wouldn't know him. I think he graduated in like, oh si—”

“Oh cool. I was '02. Does he have any siblings?”

“Yeah, actually. I think he has an older sister—”

“—Oh yeah? How old? What's her name?”

Each of her inquiries came faster and faster, like a steady volley in a ping pong match that I didn't want to be playing.

“...I don't know. I never met her. I just know she exists from Facebook.”

“No, what's her name? I bet I know her!”

I made something up just to appease her so we could change the subject, hoping she would finally stop talking. “Jennifer?”

“Yep. I *definitely* know 'er. Blonde, *right*? And like, real *pretty*, type'a *prom* queen-y type of *chick*?”

“Yes! That sounds *just* like her.”

“Yeah. I definitely know her. We *weren't* friends. But those were the type'a girls I used to hang out with.” She made me sad but I couldn't quite figure out why.

Roadrunner volunteered the story of how she ended up there. She told us how she was set up while “turning tricks” one night with a girlfriend of hers at a hotel somewhere in the far reaches of Brooklyn. All night they'd been bringing ‘gentlemen callers’ from the alley, through the front lobby and into the room they'd rented for 99 dollars flat, split evenly between them. From each client they extracted a fifty-dollar room charge on top of services rendered.

“We were *fuckin' making bank!*” she bellowed again to the ceiling.

Gloria was not amused by her bravado. “Yeah but what happened? Something *obviously* went south if you ended up in here,” she said, eager to get to the good part.

“Well, *turns out*, the guy behind the front desk cut a sweet fuckin' deal for *himself* with Brooklyn Vice a full *week* before we pitched up. We'd been there a month earlier and everything was gravy. Same guy n'everything. Fuckin' *Gary*. I hate that stupid fucking name. *Gary*.”

“So what does Gary do?” Gloria prompted.

“So fuckin' *Gary*, right? He *takes* our fuckin' ninety-nine bucks. *Pockets* it. Calls the cops. *They* fuckin' set up a fuckin' *sting*. Send a few of their boys out around four, four-thirty. It's the end of the night. We're fuckin' blitzed, you know? We been turnin' & burnin' 'em since sunset. In and out. *Boom*

boom boom. We're fuckin' *invincible*, right? I was gonna go buy new thigh-high boots from DSW the very next fuckin' day, I shit'chu not!"

"...And?" Gloria raised an eyebrow, trying to keep Roadrunner on track.

"So these two five-oh come around, but we don't know they're five-oh, right? So they come around, and we *should've* fuckin' known, because those fuckers were *tryin'* too fuckin' hard. I'm all for flirting with my clients, but like...*they're* the ones fuckin' *payin'* me, you know? It's never *not* transactional, right? These guys were like bending over fuckin' backwards for us. Askin' us all about ourselves, pretendin' to be all interested and shit. Like fuckin' *choir* boys, right? *Should'a* fuckin' known... Anyway up we go, right? *Boom boom boom*. Money's on the table. Belt buckles undone, pants are comin' off. You know what I'm sayin'...

Then outta nowhere one of 'em starts to ask us about *coke*. All of a sudden they're both really lookin' for coke. But we ain't *got* any blow on us and we tell 'em that. But they say they *heard* we got some. We tell 'em we ain't ever bother *finding* our own coke, it's a perk of the *job*, so whoever told them that was talkin' *shit*. But they *wouldn't* stop, and they were starting to get real *aggressive* like, so I went to take the money and split. I'm stuffin' it down my bra, fuckin' halfway out the door when a whole fuckin' baseball team of police team barges into the room and pins me down on the bed. Everybody's grabbin' the cash outta my fuckin' dress. My girl's over there in the corner'a the room, cryin' an' shit. They fuckin' ripped off her fuckin' wig. They callin' her a fuckin' faggot. Fuckin' spittin' on her an' shit. It's terrible."

"Oh my *God*." I said, always sympathetic to a sob story.

"Yeah, dude. Shit was *real* fucked up this time around. I ain't *ever* had shit like that go down. And I've been in here, *what?* Like, *four or fives* times, maybe? In and out, you know?"

"For how long?" I asked her.

"First time I got brought in *here* was in '08? This was the longest I've ever had to stay though. Been in *this* fuckin' dump since fuckin' Labor Day *weekend*. This shit went down on fuckin' Labor Day and now it's October," she lamented, gesturing around the cell as if to indicate that the seasons had changed. "I mean look, I'm still wearin' *shorts* n'shit."

Roadrunner seemed to remember what we were all waiting for and went over to ask a guard through the bars how much longer we'd have to wait. I motioned to Gloria, silently asking '*What's her deal?*' She pantomimed driving a racecar, which I took to mean that Roadrunner was very much on speed. *Clever, Gloria*.

But the math didn't add up for me. Roadrunner had just told us she'd been there since Labor Day. That was over six weeks ago. *How could she be high right now?* Wouldn't all the drugs have left her system weeks ago? I realized that then that sure, if you knew the right people to ask, you could probably find just about anything in a place like Rikers.

I also realized that I knew way less about jail after two days than I thought.

Roadrunner retreated from the bars with no answer about our release. Instead, she opted to share the rest of her life story as the four of us waited. Her face was agitated, but it still had a certain softness to it. She was a mischievously pretty blonde with ringlet curls and blue eyes, freckles sprinkled across the bridge of her nose. She started with why she had chosen the college she did, and ended by telling us how she'd graduated from pills to meth after senior year. While she never explicitly said so, it was quite clear that she had not stopped using since then. She told us she was 31, but she looked frighteningly older.

I thought about how, if things had gone differently, we could've ended up friends, Roadrunner and I. She was intense in a captivating way, obviously smart, but *clever*, too. She had a vibe that resonated with me, even after I realized the cause of her augmented personality. She was only a couple years older than me, if she had gone to Northeastern we could've ended up at a party together in some shitty basement, two college chicks, costumed for an arbitrary theme-party. We definitely would've split a flask of cheap vodka or a joint while judging the scene around us, our exchange peppered with shit talk and witty banter. But things hadn't gone differently.

* * *

Indoor Cat had been preening on the bench opposite, half-listening the whole time. She'd been in there with Roadrunner a lot longer. I could see she'd had her fill. When it became her turn share, she never disclosed her charges or how she got there. She really didn't talk about anything except for 'her man.' She appeared to be very much in the honeymoon phase of a budding romance.

"I was flouncin' down th'street in this tight little dress, right?" she said, recalling their meeting that summer next to Bryant Park. "And all'a sudden this real *handsome* brother's comin' up behind me, tellin' me about how he just saw me drop my MetroCard out my phone onto the sidewalk. He was holdin' one between his fingers, actin' all *smooth* and shit. I told him *I ain't keep my Metro Card in my phone, it's in my wallet*. And my *wallet* is in my *purse* on my *shoulder*. He told me that line usually

worked, but I must've been smarter than all the *rest'a* the women he tried it on." She laughed as if she'd told this story a hundred times.

He'd brought Indoor Car white roses on their first date, and brought her to the most lavish restaurants in Manhattan.

"He's kinda like an oysters n'champagne, Cuban cigars kind'a brother. A *gentleman*...real *classy*, like. He's a businessman, an *en-tra-pra-noor*. He owns four, five smoothie shops up n'down Manhattan. *Two* in BK. Got other people runnin' 'em, but he *oversees* all that shit. Makes some *serious* bank. Took me to Fire Island for the 4th. VIP suite, top-shelf bottle service all weekend, no *pro 'lem*. He ain't even bat an *eyelash*. Like, he *aight*, know what I'm sayin'?"

We did not.

"So what's the trouble?" Gloria asked her, irritated. "You were talkin' when we came in here about how shit's blowin' *up* with him. Sounds like a pretty *choice* situation from where *I'm* sittin'."

"Yeah, shit *was* real good," Indoor Cat muttered. "'Til he kept gettin' new temporary *numbers* and goin MIA, *ghostin'* me and shit. He gave me a fuckin' burner phone last month, told me to only call him on *that*. Just real shady-ass n----a shit like that, you know? I finally asked him what's up and *he* comes out and tells me he's a fuckin' *married-ass* man!"

"I knew it." Gloria said, shaking her head and frowning into a stank face.

"And like, don't get me wrong. *Like*, that shit ain't a *total* fuckin' deal-breaker, all things considered." Her voice had ascended into a higher register, her opinion sounding more like a tentative question. "But it ain't *nice*, y'know what I mean? It ain't *nice* bein' the other woman. It ain't *fun*, know what I'm sayin'?"

The three of us nodded, knowing her story had sounded too good to be true, particularly coming from a woman on her way out of Rikers.

"So *yesterday* was my fifth day in here. An' the whole time I'm tryna get in touch with my *man*, right? I keep *callin'* and shit. All his numbers! Radio fuckin' *silence*, right? I try him back once time last night, called his most recent number. And this *bitch* picks up and starts fuckin' *hollerin'* like a fuckin' *banshee*!" Her hands are in front of her in a defensive position, as if to say 'don't shoot.' "His *wife* fuckin' *stole* his fuckin' *SIM* card. That bitch put it in her phone so *hers* rang when I called, instead of *his*. This bitch knows *the game*, if she knows *that* trick. She answered my call, heard the operator sayin' this was a monitored call from fuckin' *Rikers Islan'* an' all *that* shit. By the time I get connected, she fuckin' yellin' at me not to drop the *soap*! She keep yellin' that shit over and over, '*Don't drop the fuckin' soap, bitch! He my man, bitch! Don't drop the fuckin' soap!*' And I'm thinkin' like, does that bitch even *know* that ain't *happenin'* up in here?" She condescended with a sneer. "That's fuckin' *men's*

prisons, *bitch!* Like, what the fuck type of bad shit's gonna *happen* when a bitch up and drop the soap in *here*? Ain't nobody gonna fuckin' whip their *dick* out! ”

“*Amen!*” Roadrunner chirped from the front of the cell where she was doing vertical push-ups against the steel bars.

“We can fuckin' drop our soap all we *want*. Ain't *no* trouble! *That* bitch is dumb as *rocks*, though.”

* * *

The last woman I encountered in Rikers was brought into intake a while after Indoor Cat finished her tale, once our conversation had finally died down. To call this woman ‘mad’ would be a gross understatement. She was a rabid dog in the midst of a fit. Her waifish build didn't reach the shoulders of the two male officers who half-held, half-dragged her through the door from the infirmary. They held her by the shoulders and she swung suspended off the ground, kicking and flailing her legs like a little kid between her parents. And *oh* was she screaming--not intelligible obscenities or lewd insults, just wordless, blood-curdling shrieks.

Suddenly, the woman escaped the COs' grasp and threw herself on the cement floor in front of our cell, thrashing and screaming, kicking and clawing. As they dragged her to her feet, I got a good look at the woman's face. She appeared decades older than any other woman I had seen there so far, even Mona.

I remember having the unsettling thought that I'd never before seen another human who bore such a striking resemblance to Charles Manson. A dark nest of matted hair framed her tiny, frenzied face. Her skin looked like sandpaper and her eyes rested in deep voids within her skull.

The COs behind the intake desk, all female, began yelling at the men to keep her quiet.

“Wait, she *back* again? *Already?*” one of the CO's asked the male guards. “What's it been like, *fuckin'* three weeks?”

“Four. We ain't equipped to deal with this type'a shit,” the older of the two guards replied. “This hoe's a *liability*,”

“Yeah, no *shit!*” another female CO chimed in. “She fuckin' took a *dump* on the ga'damn *floor* last month! *I* ain't paid t'clean up *shit!*”

“Yo, we gotta get *that* bitch a *muzzle*,” a third CO added over the noise.

They shared a laugh as the younger of the two guards strode over to the intake desk and leaned against it to catch his breath.

“Yo! I just read her fuckin' *chart*.” he gossiped to the women. “Take a wild guess about the first time she got picked up.”

“*Shit...*” one of the COs said, intrigued.

“Just guess.”

“I don't *fuckin'* know...The fuckin' *Civil War*?” she replied.

“*Nah!*” He continued without acknowledging the joke. “*That* bitch got arrested in New York for the first time in 1964...*Shit'chu not!*”

I gasped and looked around at my three cellmates who were all listening intently with horrified looks on their faces.

“Fuckin' sixty *four*?” One of the female COs behind the desk gawked, leaning forward to gossip further. “What's that *make* her? Like, a *hundred*?”

“What the fuck's even her *deal*?” the third CO wondered aloud. “Like, what's actually *wrong* with her?”

“Psh!” The older male guard scoffed. “What *isn't*? I don't think that bitch remembers anything from this *century*.”

I shook my head, looking at Gloria, who responded with a disgusted grunt.

The old woman in the cell was a symbol of everything that seemed to be wrong with Rikers. She was the embodiment of recidivism, an example of the fundamental darkness that exists within the correction system, and an example of what happens when you fall through its cracks. Her quality of life seemed abject. I wondered when the last time she was even lucid enough to know what was going on. *What was she doing here with the rest of us? Her mind was gone.*

I'd learned that, unless she was an obvious threat to herself or others, she would not be admitted to the Mental Observation Unit. Apparently the doctor on duty in the infirmary had decided that wasn't necessary, so she was brought back to intake to be sorted into gen-pop.

There is a long-standing debate about the prison industrial complex, one that weighs the merits of a 'preventative' approach to criminality, against the merits of the widespread 'punitive' approach to crime— the 'commit, arrest, serve, release' cycle that seemed so prevalent among the women I had come across in B block.

What if, instead of arresting and re-arresting the old woman in the cell since Johnson Administration, someone somewhere up the line had taken the initiative to address what was actually wrong with her? This woman might have had a shot at being an actual contributing member of society.

Here, she was anything but.

I imagined how her life's trajectory looked from a quantitative perspective— How many thousands of taxpayer dollars had she single-handedly racked up on her jail tab over the years? How many nights in the care of a New York City prison could've been avoided if she had received preventative treatment? How much would it have cost to diagnose and treat her underlying issues in the first place?

I was back home in America, one of the richest democracies to ever exist, the crown jewel of modern civilization, and the nation with the highest incarceration rate on the planet. All of the statistics I'd heard in the public sphere about systemic re-incarceration rates suddenly felt very real, after laying eyes on this woman. She appeared to have slipped deeply between the cracks of the justice system, succumbing so completely to illness, addiction, and/or crime that somewhere along the way, she seemed to have lost herself entirely.

I began to say a prayer for her when Gloria kicked my foot softly, getting my attention. "Nineteen. Sixty. *Four!*" she mouthed to me, her eyes wide in disbelief.

"I *heard* of her before," Indoor Cat whispered in a scandalous tone. "Ain't ever *seen* her, but *e'rybody* knows about her. She's a fuckin' *legend*."

"Yeah, but like...a *heartbreaking* legend." I retorted, thinking that she had missed the point. "I mean, don't you *think* so?"

Indoor Cat shrugged and raised an eyebrow, answering my question.

* * *

At one point, the route bus that transported inmates around the island had been a school bus. But now it had been painted white with royal blue letters on the side that read: 'NYC DOC.' The windows were covered in steel mesh and upon entering, I saw that all of the seats had been removed.

When the CO behind the wheel of the bus left loading dock of the Rose M. Singer Center, I didn't even have a chance to look back. The four of us were all too preoccupied in the back of the bus, trying in vain to avoid getting jostled about as it snaked around the nine other jails on the island.

After a brief trip, considering how long we had waited to take it, the bus idled outside of a white building that looked to be a converted storage container. The CO marched us off in a single-file, and stood with us on the narrow ramp of an entrance corridor. We entered one-by-one, waiting until the last person had finished before being nudged by the guard to proceed. I was last.

Inside, a flushed and rotund CO sat on a stool behind an elevated counter in the middle of the space. It was the only piece of furniture. The rest of the space was completely white and sterile, save for a few laminated DOC signs stuck on the walls. The lighting was fluorescent but patchy, casting gleaming halos onto the expanse of linoleum tiles beneath my feet. In the far corner of the container, there was a television set mounted to the ceiling that played an old early 90's re-run of *Star Trek: The Next Generation*. Captain Jean-Luc Picard's impeccably British baritone resounded through the length of the empty room. The CO asked for my inmate ID # to find out what possessions had been logged under my name.

"So listen, I ain't gonna be able to retrieve any of your stuff because the system was down, alright?" he recited for what seemed like the hundredth time. "It's back online now. But we're still processing all detainee possessions from the weekend. But I can at least confirm we've correctly logged what you brought in with you." After confirming with him that my debit card, driver's license, and passport were indeed somewhere on the island, I asked how I would go about getting them back.

"Yeah.... You're gonna have t'call," he said unsanctimoniously. "Probably tomorrow...The prison inmate info line. Give 'em your inmate ID an' ask 'em if your stuff's been processed for collection. If they say yes, you'll hafta come back and get 'em. If not, keep callin'...Should come through in the next few days or so."

The prospect of returning to Rikers was one I sought to avoid at any possible cost. I immediately weighed the options of just getting my driver's license, debit card and passport replaced and never coming back here. But the admin seemed like a ton of trouble, and who knew how long that would take. I was still supposed to fly back to South Africa in twelve days. I resigned myself to the hurdle, telling myself I would conquer it in the morning, with a rested mind and a full stomach.

I was given \$55 in cash, along with a MetroCard with two pre-loaded fares, one for the bus across the island, and a connecting fare from its last stop.

"Sorry? I'm pretty sure I had \$60 in my pocket when I got here."

He squinted at the screen in front of him. "Yeah, you did. I see that here. We automatically deduct \$5 for the MetroCard."

"Really? Does everyone get a \$5 MetroCard when they leave?"

"Yep. It's the only way off the island. You can't just walk out and cross the bridge on foot. Gotta take the bus. And for the bus you need a MetroCard"

"What about the inmates that come in without any cash. How do *they* pay for their bus fare?"

"*We* pay for it, and put it as a debit on their commissary balance. So when they come back next time around, they've got minus \$5 on their account."

“Do that many people really come *back*? Enough for you to actually break even?”

“*Yeah...* Now have a nice night,” he said with just enough of an edge to tell me to get moving.

“Sorry, where do I go now?” I asked.

The CO pointed to an open door at the opposite end of the room. “Out through there and wait with the rest. You just missed the last bus. 'Nother one should be comin' over soon.”

Well look at that, I remarked to nobody. *An open door. An open door that I have permission to walk through.*

The Star Trek episode on the television ended during my procession. As the credits rolled, Captain Picard's voice was replaced with a startling fanfare of trumpets and a trilling cadre of strings. It was an instrumentation that evoked a certain high-energy, intergalactic triumph, one that remains difficult to articulate and all the more perfect for that reason. The schmaltzy melody kept repeating in modulated keys, causing the music to swell higher and higher, lifting me right along with it. I could've sworn I floated out the open door and into the biting chill of October. *Finally! A song that perfectly matched the moment!* Somehow, as I wafted out the door into the freedom of the night, I was reminded of the New York state motto, “*Excelsior!*” meaning “onward and upward.” I didn’t know the name for the Star Trek closing credits music, but I decided the song sounded how the word excelsior meant. Ascending, aspiring, culminating into something better.

XI: 'Excelsior!'

When I was three or four, I had a strange affinity for the theme song from the documentary television show *COPS*. In fact it was my favorite song, to the point that whenever I heard it, I cheered. Every Friday night, when the reggae bass line would start after *Unsolved Mysteries*, I'd leap from between my Grandparents on the couch and dance around the room, singing, "*Bad boys, bad boys, What'cha gonna do? What'cha gonna do when they come for you?*"

I can remember this routine vividly. Every time I hear the song, I'm brought back to being four feet tall and wearing a zip-up pajama onesie, dancing without a care in the world. When the theme song ended and the program began, I'd take my place between my grandparents and watch, wide-eyed and riveted, as the bad guys and cops jumped fences in the midst of heated pursuits in states that I had never been to, like Florida.

The cops always apprehended and arrested the bad guys by the end of every episode. The closing credits would roll over footage of a police cruiser driving off with their lights flashing and sirens blaring. The suspect du jour was always in view, hiding their face or peering out the car's rear window into the camera with horror, as "Bad Boys" rose to a closing crescendo. But on the show, the bad guys always seemed like *really* bad guys. It really was that black and white to me back then, a testament to the innocent duality that existed within my child self: People were either good guys or bad guys. I didn't know enough to know that duality always comes riddled with exceptions and contradictions.

It's strange, really, that a song precluding a show all about true-life arrest and incarceration would come to be closely associated with the joys of my childhood. I thought about that miniature version of myself, dancing around and singing my own made-up lyrics to the song's undulating melody.

How that little girl would have just wept if she'd been told, one Friday night in the early 90s, that one day she'd be the one peering out of the back of a police cruiser.

Thinking of the purest, most-protected, and freest version of myself, I felt like this moment was happening, not to a different version of myself, but to a completely different person altogether. I wanted to be the dancing girl in the zip-up onesie pajamas again. I felt more like her than the person I was then, who stood shivering with cold and desperate for nicotine at 2 am, waiting for a ride off the prison island with a bunch of other newly-released strangers. That wasn't the 'me' I knew myself to be, but in that moment it was who I was. I summoned Mia from Philly to take me over the bridge for one

last hurrah, and retreated into the subterranean bunker within my consciousness to watch reruns of *COPS* until the coast was clear for me to emerge for good.

* * *

The Q101 was twenty minutes late. The group of two-dozen cold, recently released men and women waiting for it paced impatiently, asking one another for cigarettes. All of us were fiending for a victory smoke and a cigarette. A well-dressed black woman, about my age, stood separate from the rest of us. She was the only one of us that had a phone, typing away feverishly at its screen, her face illuminated in its blue light. I wondered if she was perhaps a CO, just getting off of her shift. I walked over and asked her, as unphased as possible, if I could borrow her phone to call my Mom.

“Fuck off,” she replied curtly without even looking at me. *Hmm, that seemed extreme.* I retreated to the cluster before finding Gloria and whispering to her, a bit too eagerly, about what had just happened.

“Who said that?!” She snapped, before following my gaze to the woman standing alone. “Her? *F’real?* Well...She’s a *ratchet*-ass bitch. *Fuck* her.” She grabbed my arm and led me over to a group of benches, to where the bulk of the group had migrated.

Men and women mingled all around us. Hormones were raging. Something about watching these exchanges unfold felt provocative and slightly dangerous. Roadrunner from Ronkonkoma had found some guy she seemed to know and they flirtatiously debated the strengths and weaknesses of the Mets’ opening line-up. Gloria was indulging a slimy-looking guy from Ozone Park who was discussing his budding career as a promoter-cum-DJ. Two men crossed from the other end of the group and headed towards me. Mia from Philly gave a stiff upper-lip and ignored any instincts to hide.

“Ma, what’chu doin’ here?” The smaller of the two men, dressed in a black beanie and leather jacket, asked with his chin raised. I was so tired of answering this question. But it would be the last time I was asked. I gave them a 30-second condensed version of my story while they muttered expletives in sympathy. The larger man, who was a solid 6’5” with a shaved head, a soul patch and a full-color Tweety Bird neck tattoo, told me he had also been detained and arrested at JFK. He was the first and only other person I met there who was from out-of-state. He behaved like our similarity brought an inherent camaraderie, that we were wronged by the same arm of “the Man.” He evoked the same aversion from me that Mona had when she pointed out we were both in jail for the same charge.

In a strange kind of pissing contest, he went on to brag about how he'd been coming from California, on his way to Italy, when he found out at JFK that his passport had been flagged for an outstanding warrant. Tweety Bird, however, had been quite aware of his. He'd been (allegedly) mailing pound upon pound of marijuana through the US postal system for *years*, acting as a middleman between a manufacturer in Humboldt County, California and a wholesale distributor in Brooklyn. He'd gotten out on bail after being arrested the year before but, for reasons unspecified, Tweety Bird never showed up for his court case in Los Angeles. He told me he'd been "layin' low," although I couldn't understand how he'd expected to vacation to Rome with an outstanding warrant for drug trafficking. I didn't bother trying to learn the details.

"*Fuckin' bus!*" someone called out in front of us, pointing to the Q101 that was slowly making its way across the bridge in our direction. A strangely unified howl of relief erupted from the group. The crowd surged forward once the bus came to a stop and the door opened. Making our way across, the bridge was so low to the water that I was unable to see the East River beneath us through the darkness. I wondered if the bridge had ever been washed out by heavy flooding, effectively closing off the island to the outside world completely.

The only entrance to Rikers was on 19th Avenue, on the edge of East Elmhurst. I had seen it on my ride in, but I hadn't gotten a good look at it. As we passed, I turned my head to study the well-lit billboard-like sign shining outside the bus window to my left. It was more than six feet tall, sitting on a brick base with brick columns flanking it on both sides, and a triangular marquee bearing the seal of New York State. The sign was defiantly well lit in the dead of night, painted in the same royal blue, white, and neon orange as the route bus to the discharge container. In enormous block letters, the sign read:

New York City
Department of Correction
RIKERS ISLAND
Home of New York City's Boldest

Gloria noticed what I was looking at. "Say goodbye, baby girl," she whispered. "And good riddance."

* * *

The bus made regular stops up and down Queens Boulevard. I had assumed that its sole purpose was to take prisoners from Rikers to Queens Plaza; I hadn't imagined that we would so quickly be sharing the space with a drunken groups of kids, or single women and their dogs, or a couple of tired-looking waiters in wrinkled uniforms. They took their seats around us and just like that, I realized, we were reintegrated into the wider world, our most-recent whereabouts unknown to everyone else. If any of the other passengers were aware of where we'd come from, they did quite an impressive job of pretending they didn't. To everyone else it was just a regular Tuesday, another 2 am bus ride through Queens.

Gloria and I sat two rows in front of the rest of the inmates, like we were two girlfriends on our way home from a long night out. The bus soldiered through East Elmhurst, down quiet streets lined with brick duplexes, through green lights at empty intersections. It dawned on me that the blocks looked just like Astoria because that's where we *were*. I hadn't noticed until the bus was heading towards Astoria Boulevard and the Hell's Gate Bridge. (*Amazing that New York has a bridge with this name and it **doesn't** lead to the city's notorious jail island, really.*) It was too dark to make out all the street signs, but I knew we were driving through the remote industrial part of Ditmars, parallel to the Bowery Bay Water Treatment Plant along the banks of the river.

The bus turned left onto Astoria Boulevard and proceeded to drive down the length of Astoria Park, where I would go running whenever I had an anxiety flare up. After the next light we passed my favorite spot to watch the sunset over the river, on a row of benches next to where the Mr. Softee ice cream truck was always stationed in the summertime. A few blocks later, we passed a defunct-looking bodega that bore the first name of the man I dated when we lived there a year earlier. I had always pointed it out to him when we passed by, remarking that my name would never be on the marquee of a bodega like his was. I hadn't thought of that since I left. There was no reason to. And here it was, all right in front of me again, in dramatically different circumstances.

I was beyond grateful to realize that the bus wouldn't be turning down Ditmars Boulevard in the direction of my old block. That could have been just the catalyst needed to obliterate the hard-earned sense of safety that Mia from Philly had maintained on Micaeli's behalf for the past two days.

Still, I was overwhelmed with nostalgia. I had hoped that these first moments post-relief would be something more akin to the sound of the Stark Trek theme. '*onward and upward.*' Instead of feeling empowered, I just felt exposed and raw, like a scraped knee beneath a pair of rough wool trousers.

I wondered how I would've spent that evening if I hadn't moved away. Would I still have been living in my 4th floor walk-up apartment, a mere two miles from Rikers? Would I still be wholly

unaware of its proximity? Back then, I couldn't have pointed to it on a map; Ending up there wasn't even in my perceived realm of possibility when I lived in New York. Every night I slept soundly behind a bolted door, in complete ignorance to the fact that the Q101 was making its nightly pilgrimage from Rikers through the borough of Queens.

* * *

At Queens Plaza, the air felt twenty degrees colder than it had when I arrived on Sunday morning. The wind whipped scraps of trash around our feet as Gloria and I said goodbye under the elevated-platform on 36th Street. She was taking the E train back to Ozone Park. She clutched the neck of her oversized coat, holding it shut and grimacing in the wind, as she extended out an arm to hug me. I gave her a bear hug with both of mine before taking her by the shoulders and looking her square in the face.

"I honestly don't know what I would've done if you and Tara hadn't called me over," I said. "You really took care of me, you know."

"Nah, girl. You would'a handled your *shit's* whatchu would'a done! Would'a kept to yourself...Would'a *prob'ly* stopped crying."

We laughed together for the first time, after spending over twelve hours around each other.

"Well thanks," I said. "For everything."

* * *

As my cab crossed over the Pulaski Bridge from Queens to Brooklyn, en route to Danny's on the BQE, the gleaming skyline of Manhattan was framed perfectly between the two boroughs on either side. I put down the ringing mobile phone that I had borrowed from the cab driver, rolled open my window, and breathed in the city as much as I could. It tasted of salt and fire and trash and vitality. I was on the verge of weeping when I heard my Mom's groggy "*Hello?*" from the phone in my lap.

"Mom? It's me...I'm *free*."

I could run as fast as I wanted to, through any field I chose to. As I declared my liberty to my greatest supporter, I thought about all of the women I had met and left behind, still sleeping on their steel-frame cots in B block.

The pit of my stomach filled with shame. But still, I rejoiced.