

Sweet Release

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Sometimes all the color bleeds out of the sky. The world slips a groove and goes as crazy as the sound of rain through a ventilation duct. The wind makes coyote cries, the moon hides behind clouds as sharp as razor wire, and all the people everywhere lose themselves to madness so unexpected and severe they could hang out with Mr. Kurtz by a bonfire dancing like flames across his empire of darkness.

That thought always gets me wondering: if God made Man in His own image, and mostly men are gibbering idiots or goofballs with bad ideas that never go out of fashion, then what does that say about God? Doesn't speak well for the Divine Plan, does it?

Oh, hell. Who am I fooling?

Your will be done, Lord. Glory to You. And all the blame, too.

The chaplain told me once that I should pray for my enemies. "If you pray *for* your enemies," he said, "the Lord will rain fire on their heads."

No kidding? Must have been a *lot* of folks out there praying for me.

No matter, though. I did my time.

Weary and full of doubt, I stood in the bus station's Men's Room staring at my face in the first true mirror I'd seen in years. The mirrors in West Virginia prisons are made from a sort of polished steel or aluminum so there's no glass to break into shards for weapons or suicide attempts. The reflections they give are never perfect, showing funhouse images where fat looks skinny and skinny egg-shaped. Lines curve and blur, everything off. But here I was:

the real me—gray-eyed and dirty blond, wearing two-day-old stubble on my face. I looked sullen, lost, hopeless, at a time I should've been filled with the joy of my release. I could've been a father mourning over the grave of his child or a world-weary veteran leaning across the rail of a bridge to spit into the void while holding tightly to keep himself from jumping.

If I'd thought about it, if I'd realized how backward my reflection was, perhaps I would've laughed at myself. But I always had trouble with laughter. What's funny never brought the pleasure it should, and it offered much less after everything went wrong. So, I stared a bit, nodded to myself as if to say hello, then pulled a brown hood over my head and walked out into the looming Pittsburgh shadows to wait for my ride.

Uncle Mort's yellow Neon pulled up a few minutes later, looking like a robot version of a ladybug. Mort was the last real family I had. Broad shoulders, gray beard, small frame—he had the head of Jerry Garcia superglued onto the body of Danny Devito. Smashed behind the wheel of the Neon, he looked like the old hippie he was. He recycled, voted Democrat or Green Party, donated to "Save the..." campaigns and never ate meat. Only his love for all types of pastries explained the roundness of his dwarfish body. He waved a meaty little hand out his driver's-side window and over the roof. At the same moment, I heard his slightly effeminate baritone shouting, "Jerzy, Jerzy, Jerzy." The other Greyhound refugees must have thought he wanted directions to the next state.

I waved back to quiet him down, though I thought I also must have looked ridiculous standing there wearing that hooded Cleveland Browns sweatshirt. The prison chaplain gave it to me from a stash of donations so I'd have something "normal" for the outside. In the heart of

Pittsburgh, however, I might as well have been sporting a sandwich board with a sign that said, *I've wasted my entire life!*

When this new discomfort hit me, I lowered my head and rushed off the curb to Uncle Mort's car. I climbed into the passenger's side and closed the door behind me, granting myself sanctuary from the many eyes I could feel watching. Only when I thought I was safe did I turn to my uncle and smile. I said, "You can't imagine how glad I am to see you."

He laughed. "Maybe just a skootch," he said.

"Well, I *am* glad."

He reached an arm up and over my shoulder. It wasn't a hug or a pat, but it was some generous, reassuring gesture. "Well, *I'm* glad you're out of *that* place, Jerzy. You never should've been locked up. Free spirit like you, you must've felt like a dolphin in a tuna net."

"Uh, if you say so, Uncle Mort."

"Damn right, I do. Important thing is you're home now. So let's get you there, get you fixed up with a good meal and some...err...better clothes."

Embarrassment sizzled on my cheeks.

"I won't even ask about that," he said. "We'll just get you changed and pretend it never happened. Okay?"

"Thanks," I told him.

"Hey, no problem." He paused long enough to get the car moving. "Your room's all ready. Haven't had a guest in half a dozen years, so it might be a little dusty. I'm not the best maid, you know. But I kept it as best I could. Everything from your old apartment's there, like you asked. Except the furniture, you know. That's all in storage until you can get back on

your feet. But the important stuff's there: clothes, music, laptop. Your books are still boxed up. Closet's full of 'em. Don't know where to put those, so I just left 'em in the box."

"Thanks," I said again, not sure what else to add. It had been a long time since I'd spoken in depth to anyone who wasn't a convict or a counselor, so conversation didn't seem natural. It felt like I had to dredge my insides in search of the drowned bodies of every lost word. Prison life was filled with deep silences mixed with unceasing noise that's difficult to tune out. Now, as I tried to speak, both of those tugged at my thoughts, distracting me. Every time a word formed in my brain, it tore itself to shreds on the way to my mouth.

Uncle Mort didn't notice. He kept chattering on about all the normal this-and-that he thought I wanted to hear.

But I was a blank, an absolute emptiness of understanding. It scared the hell out of me. How was I going to adapt to life on the outside if I couldn't hold a simple conversation with someone I knew well and who knew all about me and my history? It didn't seem possible that I'd soon have to form enough words to speak to everyday people doing their everyday things. Even the notion of walking into a grocery store loomed in my future like some alien beast with claws like hacksaws and teeth ready to shred my skin.

I'd heard about cons getting institutionalized while serving their lengthy terms—people who couldn't even walk out through the prison gates without having a panic attack. I wasn't that bad. At least, I hoped I wasn't. I'd served three years. That's far from a lifetime, but forever to someone who had never been down before. Still, it was a short enough time that I should've felt safe and sane on the streets.

"We'll have to find you a job, of course...." Uncle Mort continued.

I heard the words but couldn't process them. My mind went elsewhere—following my eyes as they studied all the strange-looking folks we passed along the busy Pittsburgh streets. Many of them loped or ambled along like a lot of the prisoners I'd seen, as if their spirits were broken ... or their backs. Their heads hung down almost to their knees. Their eyes appeared to look ahead and toward the ground at the same time. Every now and then I'd see kids chasing each other down a sidewalk or a sharply-dressed college-aged guy smiling at himself in the window as he unlocked the door to his car. *Who are these people?* I wondered. I'd been like them once. Would I ever be like them again? I didn't believe I could recapture that simple reality, that easiness of being. Those days were gone, and that young man seemed so far away—exactly like the people on the streets, already faded from the rearview and now lost.

Off to the right, a lovely young brunette waved at someone I couldn't see. She radiated warmth and passion as if she were in love. And then, somewhat like a wave herself, she broke up into memory and vanished from my sight. She was another woman lost to me.

Just like Summer.

Summer Owens. That was her name, though she reminded me more of Autumn. She had pale skin the color of sunlight on a cloudy day, and red hair—not flaming, but a shade like oak leaves that have brightened, fallen and begun to fade. Her dark eyes were damp earth saturated from the rain. When she spoke, it was with a warm voice that seemed ready to turn cold at any time.

The other thing about her was that she had tattoos. Not just the usual butterfly fluttering at the pit of her back or delicate, alluring tribal bands around her biceps or thighs—etched into her skin were vines reaching down her arms and sunflowers abloom on her shoulder blades. She wore the *fleur-de-lis* like M'lady in *The Three Musketeers*, though hers was on her left breast, and a flower garden full of other patterns which grew along her legs. Summer wasn't into piercing so much, though tiny white scars on her lip and nose marked spots where old holes eventually healed over. Still, she loved her tattoos. She didn't get them as decorations the way most people do. She got them to hide behind as if masking herself one patch of skin at a time.

Despite how much of it she had, most of Summer's artwork could be seen only during the most intimate moments. Fully clothed, she looked as normal as any dark-eyed, pale-skinned redhead. Only vague traces of her foliage were visible when she wore sweaters and skirts of medium length—her customary look.

Her personality possessed that same two-sidedness. Most of the time, she kept herself demure and reserved, steady and calm as the breeze from an air conditioner. Other times, she raged in gale force, tearing at the foundations with her twin passions of rage and sensuality. She could fly off the handle, cursing and screaming, or she'd get turned on by a word or a scent and off she'd go, ripping her clothes, breathing heavily, losing her mind with some lustful frenzy. She was amazing and maddening and everything I ever wanted in a lover. Of course, I was young, so there was probably a lot about her I didn't understand or even relate to in any rational way. Still, we connected. Sometimes, that's the best anyone can hope for.

When I first saw her, I was a hometown Pittsburgh college student—junior year. She was a sophomore at the time. I'd been invited to a party by one of my female friends. She'd quickly disappeared, however, lost in the crowd of faces I didn't know. These weren't *my* people. I hadn't met them and couldn't speak to them in anything more than polite grunts of "Hello" and "Hey, how you doing?" So, I grabbed a bottle of beer and wandered off to find a quiet corner and maybe someone familiar that I could talk to for a while.

Instead, I ended up by myself, watching through the open doorway to an unlit room as this ghostly young woman danced all alone. She spun and swayed like Esmeralda the gypsy captivating the crowds that would later hang her by her neck until dead. As she moved her every muscle to whatever music she heard, from her body she radiated this uncanny energy that made its own light in the darkness of her private room. I glanced around to see if anyone else watched, but I seemed to be her only audience.

From somewhere in the house, lavender incense overtook the conjoined scents of cigarette smoke and liquor. It was like a prefab cloud from the smoke machine at a rock concert. The thickness of it caught me off guard, filling my nostrils and making me sneeze. I covered my mouth and tried to catch my breath, but sneezed again just the same. When my head finally lifted and eyes opened from their blink, I saw her watching. She wasn't dancing now. She stood there, arms akimbo. Her white blouse resembled the petals of a tulip just beginning to open. Her billowing brown skirt settled around her ankles as if soil hiding the roots.

"Uh," I said. "Hello."

She smiled. Or maybe she grimaced. In the dark of her room, one expression resembled another. But her lips definitely moved, acknowledging me, or answering. Then, without a word, she lowered her arms to her side and walked toward me. I thought she meant to speak to me at first. Then I thought maybe she intended to slap me. She didn't say a word, but walked right past and through a different doorway into another room.

On her way out, she also passed my friend Lindsey who'd been missing in action for a good while now. Lindsey's auburn hair was damp with sweat, and her green eyes looked grayed over and a little bit glassy. She laughed before she spoke, her amusement clear in the tone of her voice as she said, "Good work, Jerzy. I see you met Summer."

"Not really," I said. "Who is she?"

"Summer? This is her place. It's *her* party. Didn't I tell you that?"

"Oh," I said. That explained a lot, and it explained absolutely nothing. I had to find out more. It was one of those funny compulsions you get that, until you break down and act on it, just sort of sits there in your head mocking every other idea you have. So, I went on a quest. I sought her out and spent the rest of the night trying to get close to her.

A couple hours later, I'd found her, learned her full name, heard the sound of her voice for the first time and matched her shot for shot, downing *Popov's* and whatever brownish-yellow liquor happened to be on hand when the vodka ran out. The crowd started blurring away and soon faded to nothing. Maybe the partiers realized they couldn't keep up with us, or maybe they just weren't willing to waste their time hanging out with two people so uninterested in them. I don't know. I just know that, before long, we were by ourselves. The

others were there for revelry and dancing, flirting and frolicking. Summer and I had other business. Serious business. The business of drinking.

It seemed as if we both had liquor in our genes and bone marrow. We must have recognized each other as members of the same tribe. I didn't turn Summer into an alcoholic, and she didn't turn me into one. Both of us already had twelve-step meetings lurking in our future. That is, we were headed that way, and it probably would've been true if not for that chilly night in January....

Uncle Mort pointed me to my room, and I went straight in, a bit mystified and bedazzled as I entered this space that would be my new home after so long spent in my last one. The fact that I thought of a prison cell as home left me all the more unnerved. Still, this would be my place on Earth for a year or longer until my parole officer decided it was time to set me free. So, I had to learn to like it.

Mostly it was bland: beige walls and carpet, a beige bedspread crookedly made on a twin bed not much bigger than the steel bunk I slept on in prison. A beige lamp stood on a glass-topped nightstand. Beige curtains hid the lone window on the far wall, though I was not yet ready to pull them aside and inspect the view. Even the smell of the place was sort of beige, like an old stick of incense not yet lit. So much beige. At least it wasn't the gray of bars or the golden-brown of stone.

I turned my attention to the seven cardboard boxes stacked in front of the closet door. I eased down onto the floor and sat with my legs crossed like a monk or a hippie and started peeling off the packing tape. The first strip came away with the sound of a crow shrieking. Three more strips followed, making it a murder of crows. A murder. Murder.

I shook my head.

Opening the flaps, I saw that the first box was full of books—classics mostly, rather than the Pattersons and Grishams I learned to read by necessity over the last three years. These were the books I loved in college—Dostoevsky, Salinger, Hesse—back when I still preferred meat to a bunch of crumbling sweets.

I pushed the box aside. I wasn't ready to go through these books just yet, perhaps afraid of what memories they might conjure like a certain song at a certain time heard on the radio and bringing the unwanted past to life.

Moving on, I tugged at the second box, stripped it of tape and opened the flaps. More books. "No," I said, pushing it aside. The third box was the same. God, how I used to love the books. I kept them displayed so proudly on their prefab black shelves, waiting for anyone to come over and take a look. That never happened. The only *anyone* who came over was Summer, and all she focused her attention on was the next bottle of booze the two of us shared.

"Damn it," I said. "Where are my clothes?"

I opened the fourth box. Still more books. This time, I stopped to look. I couldn't help it. On top was my tattered, coffee-stained copy of *The Inferno*—the Pinsky translation, the one Summer gave me for my birthday. How many times had I read that book? My mind swam as I opened to the inside cover. There it was: her note.

*Gonna end up here,
might as well enjoy the ride.*

Happy birthday!

Love, Summer

I wiped my eyes with the top of my sleeve. I wasn't crying. Not really. But I felt like I could've been. I often felt that way when I thought about her. Somehow though, the tears just never came.

I don't remember why she wanted to drive west across the border to Wheeling, West Virginia. Maybe she had friends there. Not that we needed friends. We seldom looked for company beyond each other and the bottles that knew us on such intimate terms. But, if she wanted to go somewhere, we went. We were perfect companions that way. I'd follow her into a hurricane, and she would stare through whatever abyss I saw. That's all I ever wanted in a lover: someone to walk with me through the gates of hell.

I don't remember how much I drank before we left, or how much Jack Daniel's we burned off on the way. We were pretty far gone, I'm sure. It was an average day.

I don't remember reaching the West Virginia border.

I don't remember stopping for gas, though according to my credit card, I did.

I don't remember driving past crumbling buildings or over crooked streets.

I don't remember who we talked to or where we stopped. Even the police had trouble finding anyone who could explain our whereabouts or what we'd been doing. It was as though we disappeared from one state and reappeared in another—a state of total chaos.

I don't remember heading back out on the road. Maybe I got lost. Maybe the streets turned into highways. Maybe a hole appeared in the fabric of space and swallowed us. Maybe a cruel god played monkeyshines with my car, pointing that beat blue Ford in an opposite direction, deeper into the darkness of a West Virginia morning.

I don't remember her last words to me. There's just a vision of her unfastening her seatbelt and leaning over to rest her head on my chest while I slid my right arm around her as if to comfort her, as if to keep her safe.

I don't remember stomping on the brakes, despite what the skid marks said.

I don't remember the dog I swerved to avoid. Perhaps it wasn't a dog at all. Perhaps it was a black cat, or perhaps the angel of death.

I don't remember the tree.

I don't remember the tree.

I don't remember....

I don't....

I....

The next day, Uncle Mort loaned me his Neon. I was nervous when I sat behind the wheel, and I thought the car idled too fast when I started it up, but that turned out to be my hands. The engine burned with memory and regret as I backed out of the driveway. For a moment, I thought I'd have to activate the wipers to clear off sudden fluid from the glass. I got it together, though. Soon enough I felt grateful to be on the road again.

I had loaded the car with boxes—three squeezed together in the back and one beside me on the passenger's seat. After I relaxed some, I laid my arm on that one and used it as a rest.

My first stop was the parole office. I met my P.O. who came off with gruffness but overall seemed like a decent guy. He read me the rules and the riot act, all of which came down to my staying sober, staying out of trouble, staying in Allegheny County and staying off *Facebook* if I screwed up any of the other three. I assured him he didn't need to worry about anything like that from me, but I imagine he'd heard that a hundred times before. I was just another convict, another kid he had to babysit for a year.

After I left there, I headed up into the North Hills area to a store that sold used books. I found it online after several hours of figuring out three years' worth of modifications to the search engines and mapping functions. Everything had changed so much. I almost felt like I was using a computer for the first time.

Amanda's Used Books was a gray brick building surrounded by parking spaces on three sides and a concrete barrier on the fourth to separate its lot from the McDonald's next door. I pulled into a space on the right, the Neon's bumper almost up against the short concrete wall. Climbing out of the car, I reached over and grabbed the first box.

The front door of Amanda's opened into an entire corridor of books: old brown hardbacks with torn covers, crumbling paperbacks yellow like buried scrolls, random selections from encyclopedias telling the truth about the world in another era, colorful coffee-table books on subjects as diverse as trailer parks and kimonos, slender volumes of poetry and a hodgepodge of other editions looking like a going-out-of-business sale at the public library. The walls went floor to ceiling with shelves of books. It seemed as if I were walking through an ancient monastery and, if I kept going, I soon would reach the crypt. Instead of catacombs, I entered a whole room full of the buried dead. More books—thousands of them—eclipsed every free inch of every wall. Many of these were newer books: hardbacks from popular authors like the kind I read in prison. Even so, plenty of old fellows kept their places, too. Someday, I told myself, I'd come back and spend hours as an archaeologist of words.

Not today. Today, I had no more use for books.

When I first stepped into the room, I thought I was alone. There were no customers, and no clerk sat behind the counter thumbing through pages of a weary paperback. It took me a moment to sense movement off to my right and turn to see the young woman who stood near the top of a rolling ladder, her arm stretched toward the highest shelf. She was small, with short brown hair cropped above her neckline. She wore tight, faded jeans and a yellowish-orange tee that rose up with her arms to reveal the pit of her back and the purple, white and green of flowers tattooed there—orchids, perhaps. She hadn't noticed me yet, so she continued shuffling volumes on the upper shelf.

"Are you Amanda?" I said, getting her attention.

She startled slightly, turning her head. Her face—smooth and pretty—told me early twenties, but her dark eyes looked older, as if they'd seen too much of the world. “Oh,” she said, “it’s you.” She stared at me as if she knew me.

I felt a nervous twitch under my right eye. She couldn’t know me. I was a stranger anywhere I went.

Releasing whatever book she held, she descended the ladder, talking all the way. “Where did you come from? I didn’t hear you come in.”

What must I have looked like to her, standing there in my four-year-old, out of fashion checkered blue button-up and baggy khaki cargo pants? I wondered if she could smell the fear on me. Just speaking those three words to her had stolen my breath. Not ready to try others yet, I said the same ones again. “Are you Amanda?”

She moved closer, her head just rising above the height of the box I held like a sack of mulch. She looked dazed, but must have realized she didn’t know me after all. “I’m *one* of the Amandas, but I’m not *the* Amanda. You want my mother. She’s not in right now. Out to lunch. She’ll be back in a few.”

“Okay,” I said. “I’ve got these....”

“I’m sorry. We’re not buying any books today.” She seemed sad or maybe lost as she said it. Her hands gestured around the room. “We’re full up, and we just can’t afford to buy anything at the moment.”

“That’s all right. I’m not selling.” How foolish I must have sounded.

Her eyes squinted—a look that could’ve been menacing but more likely was confused.

“I’m hoping to give these to you. I have no use for them, and I hate to throw away books.” The more I spoke, the more natural the words felt in my throat.

She kept silent for a moment. Then her eyes brightened and lips bent up. “I know what you mean. No bigger crime, as far as I’m concerned.” She paused, waiting for me to say something or smile back at her. When neither happened, she said, “Well, drop ’em. Let’s see what you got in there.”

I lowered the box and sat on the floor, my hands already pulling back the cardboard flaps. Amanda number two went to her knees on the opposite side as if we were characters in a Kawabata tea ceremony. So intimate, those simple gestures. I burned inside, wanting to shout or flirt and seduce, feeling that Shino bowl warm in my palms. Yet how could I think like that? What was I supposed to say? “Hey, you’re gorgeous, and I just got out of prison!” No, as overcome as I was by the urge to tell my story, it wouldn’t come out just then. All I said was: “There’s three more like that in the car.”

She nodded and reached into the box for the first book: Hemingway’s *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. As she did, her right wrist turned toward me, and I saw a flash of another tattoo, this one a raven inked neatly in black with burning coals for eyes. Looking at it—mesmerized by it—I knew she was what I always wanted. She was someone who’d walk with me through the gates of Hell. As soon as I realized that, however, I also understood that what I wanted wasn’t what I wanted anymore.

“These are great books ... uhm, what was your name again?”

“Sorry,” I told her. “Jerzy. Jerzy Holt.”

“Nice to meet you, Jerzy. Well, as I was saying, these are fantastic.” She started sorting through them, naming the authors one by one. “Faulkner, Mishima, Hugo, Burroughs. Are the rest like these?”

“Mostly.”

“Why would you give them away? They’re wonderful, and they’re in such great condition, too.”

“I...” I stopped. There was the story I couldn’t tell. It floated between us like a black mist, an ill wind, a phantasm. She felt it as intensely as I did, and I could see from her expression that she also had a story she wanted to tell but, as with mine, the words just wouldn’t come. “I...,” I began again. “I can’t bear to look at them anymore.”

What I remember is the blood. Hers. It painted my face like a jogger’s sweat. It soaked the sleeve of my shirt and covered part of the airbag like a port-wine stain. I saw that blood all over me in the hospital when the doctor told me I was fine, and earlier when the policeman told me Summer wasn’t. I felt it across my cheeks like a gruesome mask as I stood before the magistrate, pleading *not guilty* to the felony charge of DUI Causing Death—a plea my public defender called for, a plea I knew would change soon enough. There wouldn’t be a trial.

I stepped over the concrete barrier on my way to McDonald's. I hadn't been in a fast-food place in more than three years, and new jitters hit me as I walked through the front door. This simple act of buying lunch felt like freedom to me, and freedom is a scary thing. You have to make choices. You have to decide between the Big Mac and the McRib. Do you want the small, medium or large order of fries? How about a Coke or a Sprite? Good God. How did people take all this for granted when it almost drove me nuts? I would've felt more at home if someone behind the counter handed me a random tray and said, "Eat this."

It took me a couple minutes to get my head right. Then I ordered a double cheeseburger and a medium-sized batch of fries. Even with that, I panicked and asked for a Coke before changing my mind, wanting the orange soda instead.

Getting it to go, I went back outside and over the barrier. I slid into Uncle Mort's car and closed the door, then scattered food across my lap. I picked up a couple fries and took a bite. I had never cared for the food at McDonald's. Even so, this was paradise.

As I took the first bite of my burger, someone tapped on the window by my head. The sounds were sudden and loud like gunshots. I flinched, choking on meat and sending fries in all directions toward the floor.

Taking a deep breath, I turned to face my accoster, expecting and almost dreading to see a cop. Instead, it was Amanda number two. Her shirt glowed like a springtime sun through the driver's-side window. She was hunched toward the glass and smiling as if the whole world were hers. It might've been, for all I knew. Maybe she was Queen of America, or maybe

Queen of the Moon. It could've been any world, really, that she possessed to make her seem so alive.

I pushed the button, rolling down my window. "Uh..." I said. Nothing else came out.

When she spoke, her tone, as with her appearance, was brighter than before. Warmer, too. "Were you waiting for me?" she said.

"What? No. I mean..." Why was I so defensive and clumsy? How long would it take before I could have a normal conversation with another human being?

"Oh. I thought maybe you wanted to talk some more."

"Talk? What, about books?"

"Or maybe you had something you wanted to ask me."

"I don't know..." What an idiot I was.

Amanda had her keys in her hand, and she nervously tapped one of them on the metal frame by the window. "You seem like a nice enough guy. I thought, well, I thought maybe you wanted to invite me out for a cup of coffee somewhere." Her smile widened.

I almost told her no before I saw a black tongue wagging from her key ring, the gold-embossed letters *N.A.* flaring in sunlight as she moved her hand. Just then, no was the last thing I could hope to say to her. I knew what those letters meant, and I knew this woman wouldn't walk with me through the gates of Hell. She had been there already, as had I, and those two letters told me she was never going back.