

*Aphesis*

I used to count the days by what I couldn't take with me. The birds chirping at dawn, the breeze against my skin, my musty scent in paper sheets, the dryness of my tongue, the little patterns in the drywall. At some point, I realized if I kept on, the days would never end, so I stopped. They say ten years went by. I stopped counting after thirty-one

They let me stop and take it all in before they load me into the car. The sun hangs low in the sky, no clouds, no jet trails, just blue becoming lilac, becoming indigo. I never cared much for the sky and for a few minutes, I still don't. But then I focused on the sun. When I was a kid, I used to stare at it for minutes at a time. The edges would sharpen the longer I looked. I liked closing my eyes and watching the afterimage float across the backs of my eyelids. I do it again, staring, then closing my eyes. If this is what eternity is, a series of blurred, dancing silhouettes, then maybe it won't be so bad.

The guard holding my elbow tells me, "Alright, McStay, time to go."

"One more minute?"

"Sorry, man. We gotta go."

It happens in a different place. They call it the death house. My world for ten years has been nothing but a redundant series of processes and obfuscations. It's nice for the ending to at least spare me another set of lines to read between. The death house. What else would you call it?

My cell in the death house is the same as the one I was just in. I stare at the bed that has everything the last one had except the history. Not that there was much of one to speak of. The

highlights include sparse masturbation sessions, a fickle attempt at journaling, tears, nightmares, and memories of Folsom.

It happened one day, the way everything does. I woke to the regular sound of thunderous booms against the door. I raised my head at the moment the thick, metal door swung open. The CO—I think his name was Ramos—stood with his hands on his hips. “Rise and shine, McStay,” he said. “You’re going on a vacation.”

I rubbed my eyes and sat up. “What?”

“They need to do some construction on the facility. Not up to code, apparently. You’re all going away for a bit.”

“Where?”

He unlocked the door, grabbed my elbow and pulled me up, slapping a pair of cuffs on my wrists. “The Bahamas,” he chuckled.

After the strip search—unceremonious, but routine—he guided me into the hall, where a second CO sidled up beside us. With my wrists locked behind my back, and hands gripping both my elbows, we marched down the hall, turned right, and merged into a line of guarded inmates walking in equal distance from each other. It had been years since I’d seen so many people in one place, the shock of which made me forgo the other startling realization that this was the first time I was seeing my neighbors.

Outside, white school buses lined up across the road. Each of us boarded one-by-one, accompanied by a CO, who sat with us on the seats. I felt Ramos nudge me forward, and I

moved to take a seat in the middle by the window, where he joined me. It was at this point that I began swiveling my head around to assess the men who were supposedly my peers. I didn't see mostly old men; an even mix black, white, and brown. I saw a bunch of kicked puppies who weren't curious or confused. I saw guilt where there might well have been innocence.

They put us in the cafeteria. One corner had rows of mattresses and sleeping bags. Another had a long table. The rest was a wide open space. The floor had little indents where the rest of the bolted-down tables had been removed. There were two doors, one where the prisoners entered from and one where the guards entered from. The prisoners of Folsom who lived in the cells near the cafeteria were moved to another space so that they couldn't see or talk to us when we went to shower or go outside. A guard told me that they all had to eat in their cells to accommodate us. All this to say that it was a whole operation.

“Alright, inmates of Paul S. Grant, listen up!” A young guard with a toothcomb mustache stood at the head of the room near the guard exit. “The folks here at Mark Folsom have been generous enough to offer this space while our humble little house on the prairie is renovated. Apparently, it's *not up to code*.” He air quoted this last point, and his colleagues laughed with him. “But make no mistake, this isn't a vacation. The rules are still the rules. You will still only be allowed one hour of outdoor recreation. You will still only be allowed to shower every other day. The only difference is that these things will not be solitary. We've divided you into two groups, and will rotate recreation and shower times.

“For meals, we'll serve you at the same times we did before, but instead of handing them to you, you will collect a tray from a CO at the beginning of your meal time. You will have thirty minutes to eat before we take them back. No exceptions. For logistical reasons, visitations and

phone calls have been suspended. However, if you'd like to speak with your attorney, we'll find a way to arrange it.

“We realize we can't prevent you all from fraternizing with each other but know this: we hear everything. We see everything. And if any of you try anything funny, there will be severe consequences. Dismissed!”

I wake not to bangs against a heavy door, but a symphony of clangs against metal bars like windchimes in a tornado. Beneath the pandemonium, I hear my name, and for a moment, I forget where I am and what I've done.

I admire Demi's commitment to me. It's easy enough to abandon a prisoner, but it's really easy to abandon someone who's going to die anyway. You'd think family would make it harder, but it doesn't. It makes it even easier.

She's wearing a maroon, striped sweater and ripped skinny jeans. Through the holes, you can see her compass tattoo on her right thigh. I have the same one. We got it when I turned eighteen, five years after Dad died. She stands when I enter the room and rounds the small table for our five-second-permitted hug. She sinks into my arms. She's always been so small.

Like hundreds of times before, I let her do most of the talking. I relish the boring little updates about her kids, her job, her annoying neighbors, and sometimes Mom, who hasn't visited me once.

Once more, I tell her, “Thanks for taking Digger.”

“Of course, Owen. I know how much that dog meant to you.”

“I’m glad she had you in the end.”

“God, putting her down broke the kids' hearts, I’ll tell you what.”

When I heard they euthanized the mutt I had since I was a teenager, I couldn’t help but be a bit angry. Not because I wasn’t there, and not because I hadn’t been there the whole time, but because of the whole idea of putting her out of her misery. Is there not some misery in such an undignified death? What if all they’ve done is put her in a new kind of misery, one that lasts forever?

“I’m sorry I won’t be there,” Demi says.

“It’s okay.”

“I just—I just don’t want to remember you like that.” She sniffs, wipes her nose on her sleeve. “I’ve been coming here all this time and—and when I think of you, I try not to think of you in here. But it’s hard, you know?”

I reach my hand forward, but I don’t touch. “I get it,” I say. And I do.

Demi would’ve been a better help to Guidrey than I was, being a nurse at a retirement home. Like her patients, he didn’t always know where he was, but he knew it was not where he wanted to be. His aged face was both frightened and exhausted. His hair and mustache made him look like Einstein on crack. He waddled when he walked, needing to make frequent stops for his knees. He liked me the most because I looked like his nephew in South Carolina. When I told him my father died, he said, “I wish my dad died when I was a kid.”

I laughed the way you do when old people say things like that. The bluntness that comes from age can feel refreshing to the insecurity of youth.

“He was a real rat bastard, I tell ya. Beating us and our mom was fine, but he made us beat each other, too. He used to make me whip my sister’s bare ass with the buckle end of his belt. Ain’t that fucked up? My fucking sister! Jesus Christ!”

“That is fucked up.”

“And you know something, there were would be points where I kinda liked it, just cause it wasn’t me, you know? I feel bad about that. That hurts worse than anything else.”

I am a religious man. I grew up going to church, but when Dad died, we slowly dropped off. As a child, I hated it. I hated getting dressed, having to keep quiet and sit still. I would pull on Demi’s intricately braided hair, and she’d punched me hard in the shoulder, leaving bruises the size of apples on my scrawny shoulder. Mom would never yell. She’d simply say one of our names in a low, threatening tone, and that was all we needed. I accepted Christ like I accepted the law. I stopped for a while after Dad died, but I never said it out loud. I picked it back up in here. It wasn’t forgiveness I was after, although that’s what Chaplain Varga thought when we first met. What I wanted was to feel a little less lonely.

The Chaplain is wearing a white suit, a turquoise bolo tie, and a somber expression. He reads me some passages from his heavily annotated bible. I pretend to read along in the one he’s provided for me. The words vibrate on the page, turning to static. He closes it and asks, “How’re you feeling, Owen?”

I want to say I am at total peace. I've accepted my fate. I've forgiven myself. I believe God will take me as I am now, despite what I was then. Even if it's not true, I want to be able to say it. "I'm scared, Chaplain."

"I know, son."

"I don't want to be."

"It's okay. It's natural." He does this sometimes, turns into something other than a Chaplain. He knows his role goes beyond religion, and although he might not have the proper qualifications to be what I need, he does his best. The only comfort the state feels it owes me is religion, and so religion does its best to comfort.

"Chaplain," I murmur. When did I start crying? "Where am I going?"

"I don't know, son. God only knows."

"Where do you think?"

"I don't know. I'm sorry, son." When did he start crying? Does he always cry? I hope so.

"All I can hope is that's better than here."

Something I had in common with everyone on the outside for a decade was that I didn't know when I was going to die, I just knew it was going to happen. Death was no more an inevitability than it was before. You could say a difference was that I knew how it was going to happen, but even that was no guarantee. I could've died from something in the food. I could've

contracted something and waited weeks to see a doctor, but by then, it'd be too late. I could've gotten into an altercation with a guard on a bad day. I could've killed myself.

Oh, I thought about it. Almost every day for ten years. Especially during my countless attempts to appeal. I imagined doing it after approval to shove it in everyone's faces. All that time spent trying to save his life, and he kills himself anyway. What a waste. But is it? If I got an approval, I certainly wouldn't be a free man. I'd have to spend my life in a different prison. That would be better, I suppose, but two things would remain the same: the uncertainty of my death's arrival—the same uncertainty as everyone else—and the certainty of my death's meaning. That's the real difference. Nobody knows for certain when or how they're going to die, and most don't know what they're dying for. Sacrifice, expiration, victimization, or just bad luck. I know why I'm dying. I've known for ten years. Whether through sickness, violence, suicide, or the state, it's all for the same reason.

The only time I didn't think about it was at Folsom. I have Anton to thank for that. Anton Marcellus Collier Jr. To his family, he was Junior. To the world, he was Tony. To Folsom, he was Collier. To me, when we were alone, he was Anton.

We were the youngest, the only ones in our twenties, so a friendship couldn't be helped. On paper, we didn't have much in common. Besides the racial divide, we were born in different places, raised by a different number of parents in different kinds of towns with different kinds of people. We were different kinds of criminals, too. Having joined a gang at thirteen, he did it all with friends. I almost always did it alone. These differences enticed me, especially the difference in our innocence. I did all the things I was put here for. Anton was a thief, a murderer, and a drug dealer. But he wasn't a rapist. He was a father.

“He’s five years old now,” he told me, “I missed his birth.”

“Shit, man. I’m real sorry to hear that.”

He gave the same heavy-head nod that I give when I tell people about my dad. The kind that’s filled with an old grief that no one can do anything about. “Yeah, I didn’t feel too great about it.”

“Have you seen him at all?”

“Jade brought him in once a couple months after he was born, but that was it. She seen me a couple of times to show me pictures, but she don’t visit me no more. You know something, Owen, I thought fatherhood would set me straight and get me out of all that gangbanger shit, but it didn’t. I didn’t do the shit that got me here, and I’m fighting like hell with all these prosecutors, but I don’t know. Sometimes I think I deserve it anyway.”

“Don’t say that, man. You deserve to be with your family.”

“I would’ve been a shit dad.”

“Come on, man, you can’t tell yourself shit like that.” Because if you do it too much, you’ll give up, even if it is the truth. Most of what people call honesty is pessimism, which is why the truth always hurts. That’s why delusion in moderation is crucial.

I pick at the PB&J and baked beans on a cold metal tray—lunch meant to tie me over. I am hungry, I’ve always been hungry, but I’m saving my appetite for later. The guard tries not to look at me. I imagine myself in his place, watching my pale, scrawny body take bird bites out of a stale sandwich. I imagine the stories I’d tell myself about people that. He deserves it. I’m just

doing my job. I can't stop what's going to happen. It's not my fault. This manifesto echoes through the minds of everyone in this business.

I imagine myself as an executioner. I know what taking a life is like. I know what looking them in the eye is like. I know the guilt. I try to imagine the guilt in such an environment, because surely it's there, even if it isn't the same. How does it feel when everyone wants you to do it? Perhaps you feel like the guard with me in this cell. You can tell yourself it's not really you. You pulled the trigger, but you didn't shoot. They told you to do it because someone told them to do it because someone told them to do it, and so on. I'm being punished because no one told me to do anything.

"What was the best car you ever stole?" Anton asked me once.

"The last one. Oldsmobile Jetfire, 1962, Chariot Red."

He whistled. "Now that is a car worth going to jail for."

"The Jetfire is a car worth dying for."

I didn't steal vintages, normally. I usually just stole clunkers, the kind that ought not to be missed. When I stripped them down for parts, I felt like an anthropologist exploring the remains of past lives. Puke stains on the floors, scratches on the steering wheel, clogged air filters from cigarette smoke, what an interesting species that once operated such ornate machinery!

But that Jetfire was different. When I watched Chase Lowry rev the engine and tear down the neighborhood with Carrie in the passenger seat, I swore I could hear my name through the sound of the tire screeches. I imagined the car wanted me just like the girl inside did. She wanted me once, at least.

The water feels heavy on my skin like paint. I scrub each nook and crevice of my body with the same fervor and delicacy as I did when I dissected cars. I try not to feel disconnected from my body like I typically do. I remind myself that this mind has always belonged to this body. I try to convince myself this body is an okay place to be in, but such affirmations are hard to land in these circumstances. Neither body nor mind wants to be here. So I take my time caring for myself. I rub my shoulders, my cheeks, the parts of my back I'm able to reach. When I did this ritual at Grants, I would always imagine someone else doing it. My mother. My sister. Carrie. Anton. My father. Now, I try to accept it from myself.

I used to look at Anton's body in the showers since we were in the same group. Obviously, I tried to be subtle, but I think he and other people knew and didn't say anything. Maybe they thought it was as simple as one man admiring another man's physique. Anton was in incredible shape, after all. I don't know why no one ever beat the shit out of me for it. I would have. I have. I don't feel great about it now. I don't feel great about all the ways I've mistreated people in the past. I've had ten years to feel awful about everything I've done wrong, especially the things the law didn't know about.

It was so surreal watching his muscles flex as he washed himself with the water running down his toned back. I had showered with her other men before and knew well enough that what I was doing was not only inappropriate, but dangerous. And yet, even in the presence of other violent criminals just as strong and dangerous as Anton—even if he and some of them were innocent—I couldn't look away. I gaped in animated wonder, the sight of him felt almost unbelievable. When I looked at other men, I usually found myself feeling insecure about my own physique. I thought prison would give me time to transform my body into what I always wanted

it to be, something akin to Anton, but it never happened. I just got skinnier and skinnier, no matter how many pushups, pullups, sit-ups, dips, bench-presses, and planks I did. When I looked at him, I didn't feel that way. I felt something I knew I could never say out loud. I wanted to tell him because I told him nearly everything else that was on my mind. I thought I would run out of things to tell him, and that's when I'd say it, but we never did. There are still a mountain of things I could say, but never will.

He had a pen pal in Flagstaff, someone on the outside to share his thoughts with. She was a retired kindergarten teacher whose letters consisted of fervent rants against the death penalty, and what an injustice it was that the state could do such a thing to an innocent man. "For a while, there were a lot of people who were fighting for my freedom," he explained. "It was like, a whole movement. 'Free Anton Collier.' A lot of them dropped off because they either got bored or found it hard to defend me, you know? Like, sure, maybe he didn't do *that*, but he sure did a lot of other shit. He's *no angel*."

"But your girl in Arizona's still fighting?"

"Yeah. Just Debbie. I don't think I'm the only one she writes to. I think she only writes to the innocent, or likely to be innocent. She also writes to the prosecutor's office. When you're a retired widow, you got a lot of time to write letters and be angry about things."

"Why just innocent guys?"

"It's easier, I guess."

I didn't need to ask what he meant.

Outside the shower, a fresh set of clothes awaits me, different from what I came in with. A white jumpsuit that smells of cheap detergent. I wish I had a mirror so I could see what I look like. I wouldn't dwell too much on my reflection, because I'm fine never seeing myself again. I will miss myself, but like Demi, I want to remember myself in a different way. I don't want to see a white jumpsuit or beige scrubs. My high school prom would be a good one, the last time I wore a tuxedo. That was probably the best I had ever looked.

At Folsom, it would get hot, so most of the time, we'd walk around in our undershirts with our scrubs tucked into our waistbands. The body odor was horrendous.

"Collier stinks the worst," Guidrey said.

"How do you know that?" I asked.

"Look how much he sweats!" Indeed, Anton was always dripping, even when he didn't work out. He'd wake up soaking through his scrubs, tugging his collar back and forth to fan himself. All the same, he probably wasn't the worst among us, and there was no real way to tell. The real reason Guidrey said that was because he had it out for Anton. At first, we thought it was racism, but he never quarreled with the older black inmates, who made up almost half the group. So we thought perhaps it was age, but that couldn't be the case given how well he got along with me. To be fair, Anton did little to de-escalate things, sometimes goading him on further. It always felt malicious on both sides, one always feeling superior to the other.

"Give the old guy a break," I said. "He ain't right."

"He fucking started it. He always fucking starts it."

I slept next to Guidrey on the mat row where he would keep up with loud, wet snores. Sometimes he'd wake up in the middle of the night with cries of 'Where am I? What's going on?' and I would try to calm him, explaining the best I could. I'd try to think of what Demi would do, and would wish I could call her and ask for help. One night, I was really at a loss, my words entirely ineffective, so I wrapped my arms around him and held him tight. He flinched, and for a moment, I thought he was going to fight me off. Instead, he sank into my embrace, tucking his face into my shoulder, where I could feel his warm tears. "I got you, old timer," I whispered. "Keep it together, and we'll be alright. If we keep it together, we'll be alright."

I don't eat a bite of my spaghetti and meatballs. I take micro sips of water, but I can't bring myself to touch the food. The state of Texas no longer grants death row inmates last meals because of an incident with a certain Lawrence Brewer. I stare at the plate, thinking it looks like something I would have made myself. I was never a good cook, despite working for restaurants for six years. I got fired from most of those of jobs.

On the phone, my lawyer reviews my sentence again and all the failed times I tried to appeal. I used to resent her for not trying hard enough. I used to loath every visit or phone call, but once the loneliness started to really kick in, I began to forgive her. Sometimes, you have no choice but to forgive. She was young when she took my case, only a few years out of law school. She cites me as the biggest failure in her career, and she claims she fought hard for my appeal, but I don't believe her. I think she struggled to look over my case, too ashamed to rehash old wounds.

"That's it from me," she says. "Is everything set on your end? No loose ends?"

“I think so,” I say. “Not much I can do in under an hour.”

“I guess not.” The phone’s static is a thick fog, a manifestation of everything she wants to say, but can’t. When she talks to me, I know she feels like the young, arrogant woman she was when she took my case, and she hates it. I feel younger too, and although I’m no longer hopeful, I relish the memory of it. “I’m sorry,” she mutters, “I guess I don’t really know what to say in a time like this.”

“It’s okay. I don’t really know either. Thanks for talking to me.”

The last night at Folsom, I was awoken by Anton’s hand shaking me. “Come with me, let’s go.”

I propped myself up, immediately feeling an absence next to me. “Where’s Guidrey?” I didn’t realize it, but the clamor coming from a couple feet behind me answered my question.

Anton grabbed my arm and pulled me up. Others were following suit, rubbing their eyes and shoving off their blankets. Anton led me to the other side of the room, weaving us through mattresses and cafeteria tables. My eyes were struggling to adjust to the darkness, so I clung to him for guidance. When we finally got to where he wanted us to be, I could make things out a bit more. It was then that I saw tunnels of flashlights waving about on the other side. I could faintly make out Guidrey’s voice along with shouts from the guards. “What’s going on, dude?”

“That fucking oldhead’s lost it. Fuck it, doesn’t matter, I gotta tell you something.”

“What the fuck is going on?”

“Listen man, I’m sorry we’re both here in this mess. I’m sorry we can’t live forever. But I’m glad I met you. I’ll remember till the end, I swear.”

I heard a gunshot, and once again, the world ended.

The hall leading to the gurney feels like it’s getting longer with each step, spiraling into a bottomless pit. The men who escort me have no faces. Somehow, after what feels like years, we finally get there. In the small, white room is a sight I imagined so much, it feels like a memory. Two more men in CO uniforms, one with a clipboard and pen, one standing over a with a needle. The gurney is a frightening mechanism; a bed lined with thick straps, two loops at the end for the ankles. The upper part has two planks with more straps sticking out. On one of the walls is a large curtain. What I did not expect was a microphone hanging from the ceiling.

“Owen Richard McStay” the man with the clipboard announces, “for the murder of Carrie Hannah Bowen, Chase Edgar Lowry, and Emma Faith Wright, the State of Texas has sentenced you to death by lethal injection. Here to witness this execution are the families and loved ones of the victims.” He goes to the curtain and unveils the double-sided mirror behind it. I can’t see them, but they can see me. “If you have any last words for them or otherwise, now is the time to speak.”

I look at the microphone hanging overhead. I know what it wants to hear, what they all want to hear. Words of absolution that will wash our hands forever. Some simple thing to make it all worth it. Something they can remember without losing everything over and over again. Permission to move on without leaving anything behind. An apology. As if an apology ever brought anyone back. As if enough people haven’t died, as if one more death can make it right. I

suppose it's nice to have some control like that, to be able to choose who to share the world with. It was a choice I made ten years ago. If I could do it again now, I wouldn't cut anybody out. I'd let them in. And so I say into the microphone the same thing I said on that final night.

“I love you. I will love you forever”