

Cinderblock Graffiti (1070 words approx)

By Ben Clifford

I spy it as I walk between the entry area and family visit rooms. It's scrawled in black marker on cinderblock walls and it's an epigraph worthy of this place, this situation, this part of my routine:

'josh sunderson jr fucks dogs'

One of the guards has tried to scrub it out, leaving behind only a ghostly shadow. But I can read it.

The man in a nondescript government uniform looks back at me as we reach the visiting room. He's checking that I'm still following him. He's worried, perhaps, that I'd disappeared along the way. I suppose he knows how badly I wish to disappear.

Shortly, I'm wiping sweaty palms on my jeans as I sit at a cement table, waiting. During this time I stare at the porous cement and wonder about the tragedies it's dutifully absorbed over the years here.

My son walks in before I can form a real train of thought about it, though.

The guard undoes the chain between the handcuffs and the one around my little boy's waist. I suppose I'd better be rushing over and hugging him eagerly, and I oblige. His face is all puffy, like he hasn't been sleeping. He sits across from me and stares at his iron-creased lap.

"Josh?"

He just nods, not speaking.

"Have you made any friends?" I ask, "In *here*, I mean."

"Yep. Homecoming king, Ma – might just take home the crown."

Eye contact, finally, and he's cracking a cheeky grin. I smile, too, both at my own artlessness and the American way he says *homecoming king*, lazily drawled out, like a poured soup.

"Okay," I say, "it was a stupid question."

He shrugs in accord. It's like he's six years old again, trying to make me laugh after I fight with his father.

I look out the window -- a view of a dirt exercise yard with a tree sapling -- and then back at Josh. By then, it's as if he's twelve and telling me about his first girlfriend, sharing in a conspiracy, just the two of us.

But not really. He's just *here*. Seventeen, and in a jumpsuit. A smattering of stubble on his chin doesn't make him look any older, but instead as if he's wearing a costume.

There was no stubble on Sunday, the first time I visited. He must have grown it during the week, I suppose trying to look tougher. To protect himself. I quickly scan him for bruises but find none.

"Your lawyer thinks we have a decent chance of a non-custodial sentence once you turn eighteen," I finally offer, stealing the silence.

"I'm not getting out of here, Mum.

I shake my head, "We'll see."

I reach out and hold his hand, rubbing my thumb against his palm. The guard watches the interaction suspiciously. Perhaps there are mothers here that try to slip contraband to their sons during these moments-- little baggies of nondescript white rocks, or razors. Anything to help their little boys be dangerous or powerful.

Josh is right, though. It's easy to accept that he won't be getting out. The fact that I'd prefer it that way is harder to swallow.

He's watching the clock now. Maybe he's dreading our goodbye or maybe he wishes it was sooner. A yellow light flickers. *This fluorescent-lit place is where I think my son belongs*. It's a fact that sits with me poorly, not entirely digested.

Later, driving home, I start sewing the visit together. Trying to make my memory of it, the story, well-ordered. Like journaling in reverse, I start at the very end --

Josh stood up; the guard having just said that it was *time*. The gruff, bureaucratic voice; the gruff, bureaucratic *time*.

Josh wasn't crying when he hugged me goodbye, but he still gripped me tight, like I was threatening to disappear, which I was. But when he pulled away, I noticed my shoulder he'd buried his face in was dry. I blinked the thought away.

Now, I'm channel surfing, I skip back even earlier --

Josh and I were running out of things to talk about. Every period of silence begging to be filled loomed over us, but made any attempts to fill them feel feeble. Josh finally took to task --

"Is there anything you want to ask me, Mum?"

"What do you mean, darl?"

There was a look in Josh's face. He resented me for playing dumb, for making him say it.

"About the day. That day. Anything you wanted to ask me?"

I was sure he could see my hands gripping my thigh, as if trying to pin myself to the chair. I thought we'd only get to this point after a number of visits, after we ran out of performances. But we were already there. Show's over, folks. No matinee. I told him that I did have questions.

"I read the affidavits. From the cops. Your father - I understand. I don't agree, but I understand why you felt you had to...."

"You read the reports?" he asked, looking somewhat perturbed. I ignored him.

"But why the dog, Josh? Why'd you kill the dog, too?" I said. I was trying to sound like a mother innocently curious about her son's inner life: *so why'd you pick art, buddy?*

"Scruffy was..." Josh started, "...he was another aspect of Dad we needed to be rid of. He was *Dad's* dog. I wanted to free us of everything Dad had poisoned."

Some of the reports – the psychiatrist's abstract, written post-court -- suddenly made more sense: *"Mr Sunderson Jr. appears of the view that his actions were that of cleansing; a common view in forensic patients exhibiting traits of --"*

It's raining now, back at home. I jump ahead to my memory of leaving the facility. The walk down the hall. Reports on the brain. The finer details. The ones I hadn't raised with Josh at all, even though he now knew I was aware of them. The veterinarian's report - one line in particular: *"Dr. Harris reports that veterinary analysts found corporeal evidence indicating--"*.

I passed that original cinderblock wall. I tried to see the phantoms of poorly scrubbed graffiti again, haunting the space. Natural light had dissipated during the visit, but after slowing down just enough, those redolent words appeared to me again; before me:

'josh sunderson jr fucks dogs'

It stops raining the moment I step outside.