RSVP DEATH
"AS YOU ARE NOW, SO ONCE I WAS
AS I AM NOW, SO WILL YOU BE."

DEATH
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A CHAIR A NOTE, A ROOM A ROPE

I sit. I stare. I dream. I lean back in the wooden chair by lifting the front legs off of the floor. I dream of years past. My happy past, when I loved and was loved. The days and nights spent together. The times apart only reunited us with a stronger desire and trenchant love. I dream to love again.

I sit. I stare. I wish. To change my past? Perhaps. To change the impact my life has had on others? Perhaps. But, did I really impact others in my life? I must have, right? I wish. Don't we all at one time, wish? Don't we all at one time, want?


My comfort matters not at all.

I sit. I stare. I dream. My love, lost. Should I write of my love? Love really does hurt. It's not just a mild irritation. It's a full bore, gut wrenching, heart stopping hurt. It will knock you on your ass hurt. It will never scab over hurt. I dream of reviving that love, but it will never be. Never. So, why should I write?

I sit. I stare. I wish. Can I love again as I loved in the past? They say your first love is your worst love because it's your best love. Who is "they" that says this? It is I. Me. I wish I could love again. I wish for many things, but it will not be.

I sit. I stare. I cry. Why? Why do tears continue after I accept what has to be done? Because I loved? But my love is lost. So what is there to note about my tears? The paper is wet with my tears. No words appear.


I put the paper on the table. I put the pen down.

The paper remains blank.
I sit. I stare. I contemplate. Why is this room always damp, always dark? Because my tears are damp, my mind dark? Who decides to change the decor in this room? Who decides to change the decor of my heart?

Not I. I love the dampness. I crave the darkness. It matches my life.

I sit. I stare. I dream. This room is never made of dreams, but always of nightmares. Many of my dreams are just nightmares. But because rooms can be changed, can dreams? We remodel basements and then christen thee a rec room. Can I remodel my nightmares, then christen thee a sweet dream? Sweet dreams for me?

Not I. I don't want to change my dreams, but do I really want to change my nightmares? Perhaps not.

I sit. I stare. I wish. A room like this needs a strong foundation to support all that is above it. My life has always had a weak and crumbling foundation. I wish to remodel my foundation, to shore up the timbers of my soul. But my constant tears continue to dampen my foundation, keeping it weak. Soon it will simply implode. I wish for it not to happen. But, it will. It must.

I sit. I stare. I feel. The cold dampness of this room envelopes me like a glove on a hand. Its fingers grab at my heart, slowing the beat. My heat is now gone from my body. My heart is cold.

My soul, it is lost.
A CHAIR A NOTE A ROOM A ROPE

A ROPE

I sit. I stare. I contemplate. Why this rope? Why not one that is thinner, or thicker? Perhaps less prickly. Will this rope support the weight of my guilt? Will it snap as my heart beats faster? Do I really care at this point?

Perhaps.

I sit. I stare. I dream. Places of my past. Loves of my past. My heart tugs my memories with strings pulled tight, lassoes my dreams and corrals my hopes until I break out of my fantasies and face reality. In reality I have lost all of my dreams.

I sit. I stare. I wish. What? At this point in my life, what do I really want to wish for? To change my past so my present is different? Or, to change my present to amend for my past? Do I wish to change my mind? Perhaps. Change my heart? Perhaps. Will I wish for something different, something quicker or easier?

No.

I sit. I stare. I cry. Why? What good are my tears now? Since my mind is made up, can my tears change my path? Really, all the tears do is just blur my vision. Perhaps that is best.

I stand. I step up. I feel. My bare feet resting on the warm seat of my wooden chair. My blank note is still in my clammy hand. The hemp necklace is tight about my neck. My teary eyes scan the cold room as my foot steps off of the wooden chair. I am free.

I will no longer sit, no longer stare, no longer...
AT THE TIME OF DEATH, WHAT?
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Author wishes to convey his thanks to the Editor and Author of

FORENSICS

By D. P. Lyle, M.D.

Certain details contained in this story were derived from the above publication.

The Author highly recommends the above publication to the readers of this story.
It is a medical fact that, after a hanging, the heart can continue to beat for at least another fifteen minutes.

It is also a medical fact that, once the body dies, the brain for at least twenty-four hours, can continue to send electrical impulses from the cell body, along the axon, then continues to a dendrite of the next neuron across the minute gap that is called the synapse.

* * * * * *

The rope around my neck continues to tighten, the weight of my body aided by gravity pulls the noose tighter, causing extreme pressure upon my eyes. So much pressure that it causes them to pop out of their sockets.

I cannot inhale nor exhale a breath of air. My lungs have become useless bladders of flesh. Darkness begins to creep in as my eyes become sightless. The only sound that I hear is the rushing of blood streaking through my veins, searching for that vital oxygen, while my heart beats at a pace it has never known. It valiantly struggles to pump life-saving blood to keep my body, and itself, alive.

But it is to no avail, as my body now begins its checklist of "Shut Down Activities" to perhaps help to prolong life. By doing so only assists in its own demise.

Death!
My senses are shutting down, my body is giving up the fight. There is no turning back, it is now giving into the conclusion that it will die.

There is no one near that can save me, that can lift my legs and remove the noose, that can begin recessitation.

My mind, however, grabs my hand and drags me to a door that is marked "MEMORIES". I open the door, step into a void of darkness, and as the door closes behind me, a bright flash of light now fills my seeing eyes.

* * * * *

My lungs fill with sweet-tasting air as I inhale over and over again. My body seems to still be suspended in air, but not by a rope but by a pair of hands. I am suddenly swatted on my butt, causing me to cry out with a squeal of protest. I am then handed over to a pair of female arms that enfold me into a warm blanket of love. My mother gently coos into my ear. My introduction into the world is complete.

* * * * *

Heat loss of 1.5 degrees per hour is what the normal body will lose during the death cycle. Circumstances can slow or rush this loss; location of the body, be it outdoor or indoors, if the body is clothed or nude, covered or uncovered, the size and
AT THE TIME OF DEATH, WHAT?

weight of the body, and of course, the ambient temperature.

* * * * * *

My memory rushes me forward a few years until I find myself lying on a small mat, a blanket near my side. I am among a group of kindergarten students who have just completed their finger-painting projects, and we are now allowed a period of quiet time. We are told if we are good during this quiet time, we will all enjoy a few graham crackers and a small carton of milk. As I drift off to sleep, my body grows cold and stiff, I reach out for the blanket that is no longer there. My body grows colder, then stiffer.

* * * * * *

Rigor Mortis is the chemical reaction to the loss of adenosine triphosphate, also known as ATP. ATP is my energy for the muscles in my body. Without this chemical, my muscles would not be able to contract. As the levels of ATP fall, my muscles will begin to stiffen up, become inflexible, which results in rigidity. Thus begins the stage of rigor on my body.

* * * * * *

My memory rescues me from my rigor and drops me off on
the cool, green grass that covers the fields of Nottingham Elementary School, of Norwalk, California. It is the early sixties and kids are running about the playground, some at the basketball courts, while others are playing a game of softball.

I am flat on my back, my body cannot move. I gasp for air, which will not come. Suddenly, a face appears above my line of sight. It is the smiling face of Mary Milligan, the ugliest girl in the entire city of Norwalk who has the confirmed case of ultra cooties.

Mary leans down and places her lips upon mine. She then stands up, laughing, and points to my face with a single index finger. Mary yells out for all to hear, "Now that I kissed you, you have cooties too!"

* * * * * * *

Livor Mortis is the process of the bodies discoloration. It usually begins about thirty minutes after the body dies. This process is often known as lividity. When my heart stops beating, the flow of blood ceases. Gravity will take over and my now stagnant blood will flow to the lowest part of my body. Since my body is hanging from a noose, my legs, forearms and hands and feet will now fill with blood. My body begins to jerk and lurch around from the lack of blood flowing in my body.
My memory slams me onto a mat as the arms of an eighth grader wraps themselves around my neck, tightening its hold during our wrestling match. He exerts constant pressure on my neck, much as the rope does that is currently around my neck. My opponent is willing me to cede the wrestling match, declaring himself the victor. However, I refuse to yield, my body is still jerking and jumping around in response to his choke hold. Or is it in response to the tight rope around my neck?

I now flip the young opponent onto his own back, as my body responds to the tightness about my neck. My sweat-slick skin twists as I now dangle at the end of a rope.

Putrefaction is the beginning of my body in the stages of decay, or as it is well know, decomposition. It begins in two stages; autolysis and putrefaction.

Autolysis begins when the enzymes in my body cells begin the chemical breakdown of not only my cells, but the body tissue as well.

Putrefaction follows as the bacteria anaerobic decomposition of my body tissues begins. I will not go into the detailed step by step process, but I will say that putrefaction
is a very ugly process my body will go through after death.

Think bloating, gases expanding then being released, swelling of limbs, marbling of my skin, discoloration everywhere on my body, and very bad, bad odors.

* * * * * *

My throat burns as my stomach acids and other liquids spew upon the ground and over my baseball cleats as my vomit ejects a watery mess all about the baseball field. I know that the liquor that was snuck out of my dad's liquor cabinet and consumed with my friends was not such a bright idea, especially on a night before a big game that, if we win, would take us to the state championship.

Memory can be such a bitch. My stomach really hurts.

* * * * * *

The pain in my gut feels as if my body is tearing itself apart on the insides. And indeed that is just what is occurring. My one hundred and eighty-five pounds of flesh is slowly turning into a slab of rotting meat. My stomach swells out to a size double its norm, gasses building up inside the empty organ. The constant discoloration goes from a human pink to a redish tint and then to an ugly dying green.

My dead flesh begins to stink as rot sets in.
Purge fluids will now start to accumulate as my body tissues and other parts break down into a fluid state, which results into a liquid mess. It is now the start of fluid decomposition. Any activity to the body will purge these fluids.

All body cavities will discharge these fluids, although it will mostly occur through the nose and mouth. However, since my body is hanging in a noose, I will not detail which cavity will discharge what. Suffice it to say, my mother warning me about wearing clean underwear will be mute.

* * * * *

My memory snaps me to the Pacific Coast Highway in California, where a heavy fog rolls in as the coastal breeze comes in off the Pacific Ocean. The ocean air, cool from coming off the seawater, slams headon with the humid air of the inland coast, causing a heavy fog to envelope the area. The fog lights on my Audi do little to penetrate the fog. My eyes see nothing as my Audi creeps along the highway in the middle of the night. I used to hate taking those business trips up and down the coast. I hit the highbeams, only to have the light reflect off of the fog and back towards my eyes. I blink, rapidly, to clear my sight of the fog, but I am still unable to see clearly.

* * * * *
A few hours after my body dies, my eyes will become cloudy and opaque. If my eyes were open at the time of my death, the process would be faster. Because my eyes were open at the time of my stepping off of the oak chair, and because my eyeballs did pop out of my head because of the pressure exerted against my neck, the cloudiness appears sooner than expected.

I see nothing.

Within the first hours after death, insects are attracted to a dead body. If I were on the ground at the time of my death, crawling insects would feast on my rotting meat, especially the beetles. But no matter where the body is located at the time of death, blowflies will always find the target. Blowflies find a dead body a virtual banquet, a tasty treat. They will at first target the moist areas of my dead body, the nose area, the mouth area, the open eyes, the armpits, the groin area or any open wound. I hear the buzzing of their wings as they approach my body. The buzzing is at a higher pitch as the many blowflies now worm their way into my ears, crawl up my nose and fight their way into my mouth, eager to lay their eggs.

* * * * * *

My memory drifts me to my backyard as my ears continues to hear the buzzing noises, but I look up and realize it is only the helicopters of the police department on their nightly patrol. My
friends and I are enjoying the freshly grilled hamburgers and hotdogs that my dad is barbecuing on the patio grill. We are celebrating the state championship that we had accomplished this past week. As my friends chew and smile and carry on, I swat about my head as gnats and flies swarm about this summer day, looking for a feast to dine on as we humans eat the flesh of animals and call it food.

* * * * * *

The blowflies are in full force, feasting and laying eggs at a tremendous rate. Within hours, maggots will hatch, and they will feed as well, grow and molt. They will then enter the larval stage, mature into the pupae, then become adult flies and will begin to start the process all over again. My body has become a banquet table as the insects now eat the flesh of my body.

* * * * * *

This is the what of death. This is death personified. My one hundred and eighty-five pounds of tissue, muscle and bone are not just a slab of rotting meat, but a hunk of decomposing material, food for those who will accept the dinner invitation.

My lifeless, bloated, stinking mass of maggot infested hunk of rotting flesh continues to move at the end of a rope, discolored liquids of unknown origin dripping at my feet.
A chair remains below my feet, turned on the side as my feet kicked it over when my body first begin to jerk around. A loose sheet of writing paper, blank, lies close to the chair on the concrete floor of this empty room.

Have I ceased to exist?

Perhaps.

But then, why do I find myself on a path that leads me to a fork in the road? The path to the right goes down into a seemly dark valley, the deep cut canyons are filled with ash and lifeless trees. The path to my left goes off into a distance that I can see no end to. It winds itself up the canyon, onto a mountain whose top is obscured by fluffy clouds.

I am suddenly blinded as a bright light pinpoints itself onto the very center of the fork in the road. I now hear soft music coming from the white clouds above the mountain, and I see slight movement as lightning now projects itself around the spear of light. Is that wings that I hear flapping?

As I turn to avoid the brightness, I catch movement below in the canyon. I now feel a slight increase in the temperature as I now spy a horned-forktailed creature loping along the path, coming towards me as a rapid pace.

As the flapping of wings intensifies above me, the creature now picks up his pace and moves even faster.

My soul can do nothing. I wait to see the outcome.

The light brightens.

The heat seems to be stronger.
HEARTACHE
The large mansion sits quietly atop the hill that affords it the views of the small city below. The tall pines slowly sway as the night winds move across the hill and down into the valley. The quiet of the night is fouled by the sounds of the forest, a rat foraging for food, a night owl swooping in for the kill, a momentary stillness as a pack rat lets out a final squeal in death.

A new sound creeps into the night and spreads itself across the mansion, leaking towards the valley.

Chirp, chirp, chirp.
Silence.
Chirp, chirp, chirp.
Silence.
Chirp, chirp...

A thin, liver-spotted hand reaches out from under the grand comforter and picks up the charcoal gray portable phone receiver, which, once picked up, quiets the chirping.

"Hello." answers the tired voice of Melissa Braxton.

"MOM! You gotta help me, mom!" They're going to kill me!" the teen voice cries out in despair.

"Thurgood? Is that you, Thurgood? I don't understand, what is going on?" Melissa cries out, clutching her chest as she sits up in her bed.

"Listen to me carefully." a computer-enhanced voice says.
"I am only going to say this once. Do I have your undivided attention?"

"Yes. Yes, you do." Melissa says in a shaky voice.

"Good. In exactly one hour I am going to call you back with detailed instructions. This one hour will give you time to compose yourself, to settle your heartbeat down. I want you calm and clear-headed when I call back. Do you understand?" the deep computer voice asks.

"I do understand, yes." Melissa replies, now clutching her night gown tight across her chest, her legs folded up so as to form a tent under the covers.

"Do not call anyone. Do not call the police, or the FBI. You need to stay off the phone so this line is open. Who knows, I just might call you back in a few minutes. Do you understand what it is I just said?"

"Yes, I do understand. I won't call anyone. I won't..." Melissa is cut off as the caller hangs up the phone.

"Hello? Hello?" Melissa cries out in a cautious tone. Understanding the caller has disconnected the call, Melissa immediately places the receiver into the recharging cradle. The steady glow of a red light insures Melissa that the recharger is doing its job.

Melissa falls back onto the down-filled pillows, tears rolling out of her eyes and down her cheeks, her weak heart beating way too fast for it's own good.

Melissa reaches for her heart medication.
Melissa arises from the pillows, stands up and tightens her grip on her gown as she makes her way to the master bathroom. Her feet react to the coolness of the marble flooring in the master bath as she now turns on the tap and allows cool clean water to flow as she cups her hands under the flow and splashes the refreshing water onto her tired face. She allows the droplets of water to cascade down her cheeks, follow the contours of her slim but wrinkled neck, and get lost in the canyons of her breasts.

Stepping out of the bathroom, Melissa takes a quick glance at the telephone positioned on her night stand. A single red eye stares back at Melissa.

Grabbing her robe from the foot of her bed, Melissa walks out of the bedroom, down the curving staircase until her feet touches the deep pile of carpeting found in the living room. She approaches the gas fireplace, flips up a switch, and watches as blue-green flames erupt around the porcelain faux logs. Heat flows about as Melissa takes a step back and sinks her body into an easy chair.

Melissa Braxton, widow of Thurgood Braxton III, cries. Now is when she really needs her husband. Thurgood Braxton III was a man who made millions building custom made automobiles that were known across the world as Braxton Specials.

Each Braxton Special was built to the customer's specifications. Each Braxton Special retailed for a cool million. You were
really someone if you owned a Braxton Special.

Thurgood Braxton III died as he lived, a fast-paced life that included fast-paced drinking. He met his untimely death test driving his newest design, the Braxton Excellence. The steering linkage snapped, sending both car and driver over a cliff and into a ravine fifteen hundred feet below.

Miraculously, the whiskey bottle that was held by Thurgood while doing the test runs did not break in the crash. Even facing death, Thurgood would not give up his booze.

After the death of her husband, Melissa Braxton inherited the multi-billion dollar business, which included a yacht, various condos and pent-houses that are scattered throughout the world, and a now nineteen year old son who does everything to irritate Melissa.

Her son, Thurgood Braxton IV, their only child, sounded scared on the phone. He has always been an adventurous child, involved in all kinds of sports at an early age, doing the typical things boys do growing up.

He would push the envelope when he could, just to test the waters; yet he has always been conscious of his mother's heart condition. He was always careful not to put any extreme strain or hardship aimed towards his mother.

How is it even possible that he finds himself in a situation like this? Thurgood is supposed to be in the company of his troop group, who has the project of restoring the foot trails located in the Superstition Mountains. Thurgood is currently working on obtaining the rank of Talon, the highest rank that is available.
Speaking of the troop, how is it that Thurgood got away from the troop? Was he taken away forcefully? Or is the whole troop being held captive? And where the hell is Dean Jones, the troop leader? Where is he in this whole mess?

Dean Jones.

Melissa has never liked the man in the four years that she has known him. Granted, he has done a great job in getting her son out and about, he has helped Thurgood in his progression in the troops, and since her husband's death, Dan has taken a keen interest in Thurgood. Melissa thinks it might be a little too keen.

But, for whatever reason Melissa could not understand, although she has her suspicions, Thurgood and Dan have developed a somewhat unhealthy relationship.

This makes Melissa very uncomfortable. There is just some weirdness to the whole thing. Mothers just know.

Melissa walks in a clumsy hobbling gait as she makes her way to the kitchen. The stainless steel appliances reflect the various colors of her robe as she moves about the kitchen, preparing a pot of coffee.

The phone rings.

Melissa freezes.
Melissa picks up the phone.

"Mom?" Thurgood asks, his voice sounding as if he is in a barrel. A ripple of pain swirls through Melissa's chest.

"Baby, are you alright?" Melissa begins to sob as she grabs the marble counter for support, her legs growing weak as she can hear the desperation in Thurgood's voice. Melissa breaks out in a light sweat as her heart beat races, no sound coming from the phone line.

"Hello? Thurgood?" Melissa calls out, her sobs now increasing.

"Do I still have your attention?" the computer voice asks.

"When it comes to my son, you will always have my attention." Melissa responds with conviction in her voice.

"Oh, I like that answer. Well, as you can tell, we have your son. I will do him great harm if you do not follow my instructions to the letter. Do you understand what I just said?"

"Yes. Please, don't hurt my child." Melissa cries as she now reaches out for the back of a dining chair, pulls it away from the breakfast table, and sits down heavily onto the cushion. Melissa anchors the phone to her ear, the phone cord pulled taut as her breathing becomes rapid.

"Are you calm enough to listen to what it is I have to say?"

"Yes, I am calm." Melissa says as she dries her tears.
"I will do whatever is necessary to get my son safely back to me. I promise you." Melissa says.

"This is wonderful to hear. Then you and I will have no problems working together, will we? As long as you cooperate, your son will be just fine. But, once you fail to follow my instructions, your son will get hurt. I promise you that."

"There will be no need for that. I'll do what you ask." Melissa says as she feels a tightness in her chest.

"Good. I do know that you did not call anyone, so there is no need for me to ask you that question." the caller pauses. "Oh, did I fail to tell you that you are being watched, and that we are monitoring your phones?"

Melissa turns to the large bay window above the double sink in the kitchen, which overlooks the back yard. She sees nothing but darkness.

Melissa's heart skips a beat, then another. Gasping in pain, gulping for air as her heart tries to regain it's rhythm, Melissa gropes for the small pill bottle that sits in her robe pocket. As she fumbles with the cap, she accidently spills the contents onto the glass table top. Melissa frantically grabs for the tiny white pills as they skate about the glass top like pebbles on a frozen pond.

Grabbing one of the pills, Melissa places it under her tongue, willing herself to relax as moisture dampens the pill. The instantaneous burning sensation indicates to Melissa that she put the pill in the wrong spot under her tongue, but she allows the
pill to remain where it is as it continues to dissolve, releasing
the life-saving components into her bloodstream. The effect is
almost immediate. Melissa takes a deep breath as she now feels
her heart beat at a steady pace.

She wipes the sweat off of her forehead.

The phone!

Melissa looks about in a panic, wondering where the hell
the phone is, glancing at her feet, where she spots the phone
lying on the floor. She can hear a voice speaking in a subdued
voice.

Melissa listens in horror as a calm voice now fills her ear.
"If you would like to complete your call, please hang up the
phone and try your call again."

Melissa breaks out into heavy sobs.
Melissa jumps as the phone chirps. She grabs the receiver.

"Hello!" Melissa yells out.

"You Bitch!" the deep digital voice screams out. "Don't you ever leave me hanging again! You are damn lucky that I am calling you back. Do you understand me?"

"I'm sorry. My heart, it's weak and I have these attacks. It causes me so much heartache." Melissa sobs.

"Hmmm, bad ticker, huh? Perhaps I should cut out your son's heart and send it to you, seeing how you have such a bad heart you can't even stay on the phone with me."

"It won't happen again, I promise." Melissa says in gasps.

"I have my medication with me."

A long pause.

"Okay, since you promised." the voice says in a sing-song tone. "Now we need to get down to business. Are you listening?"

"Yes."

"At precisely ten this morning, you will leave your house and drive into town. You will go straight to your bank. You will make no side trips, nor will you stop anywhere. Do you understand?"

"Yes, but..."

"Once you are at the bank, you will make arrangements to have five bearer bonds processed, each for the amount of one million dollars. You will instruct the bank to process them fast, and make
arrangements to have them couriered to your business office. You must be clear that only you or your son will be authorized to sign the documents. No one else may sign them. Do you understand?"

"Yes, but..."

"There is no but!" the digital voice screams out. "There is no ifs, no ands, no anything! I will dictate what must be done, and you will do it, no questions asked. Do you understand?"

"I'm sorry." Melissa says quietly. "I understand."

"Good. Now, as an act of good faith, I'm going to let you speak to your son, just so you know he is alive and well."

Melissa can hear some movement over the phone, then a weak voice calling out for Melissa.

"Thurgood!" Melissa screams out. "Are you okay?"

"Mom, just do what ever you have to do to get me back. I love you, mom. Never forget that. I love you."

Tears fall from Melissa's eyes as she lowers her head.

"I will call you at exactly noon today to give you further instructions. Failure to follow what I just told you will result in you receiving a very young, but very strong heart."

Melissa's heartbeat is galloping at full speed. It pains her to draw a breath. The buzz of the dial tone cuts into Melissa's consciousness.

She hangs up the phone and lowers her head to the table, her body heaving in long drawn out sobs.
The dash clock on the Escalade reflects the current time as Melissa drives the big SUV down the winding road that will lead to the main road that will take Melissa into downtown. The mid-morning traffic is light.

Melissa drives into the bank parking lot, finds a spot to park, then looks about as she kills the ignition. Looking for what, she is not sure.

A non-descript vehicle is idling in the parking lot. As Melissa watches, the vehicle slowly makes its way to the drive-thru window lane. It pauses at the lane, then drives straight through, exiting the parking lot.

Melissa walks quickly into the bank. Scanning the interior, Melissa observes a few customers who are patiently awaiting the next available teller, while a hand-holding couple sit at the new accounts desk, perhaps wanting to open a joint account.

"Mrs. Braxton, how nice to see you today." a cheerful voice next to Melissa says. "How can we help you today?"

Turning to the sound of the voice, Melissa looks into the oval brown face of Marie Begay, the assistant vice-president of the bank.

"Uh...I need to make arrangements to purchase a few bearer bonds." Melissa mumbles as she scans the bank's interior.

"Okay, we can do that. Let's step into my office and I'll
get the ball rolling on that." Marie says with a smile. "Can I get you some coffee, or perhaps some tea?"

"Oh, no, no. Just the bonds, please." Melissa says as she glances at her watch.

"Very well." Marie says as she walks into her office, sets her cup of coffee onto her desk, and sits down in the black leather executive chair so common in offices.

Turning to her computer, Marie begins to type on the keyboard, asking pertinent questions to fulfill the task of preparing bearer bonds.

"You know it will take a few hours to process this, right Mrs. Braxton?" Marie says in a quiet voice.

Melissa swallows and responds, "Uh, sure."

"Are you okay, Mrs. Braxton? You seem on edge. Is there anything I can do for you?" Marie asks with real concern in her voice.

"Uh...oh, I'm just nervous. These big business transactions really gets to me." Melissa says with a forced smile.

An hour and twenty minutes later, as Melissa drives the SUV out of the parking lot of the bank, a very worried Marie Begay walks into the office of Terrence Witherspoon, president of the bank. After a fifteen minute discussion, Terrance phones the local police department.

Within minutes of the phone call, a patrol car is at the bank, a deputy sheriff standing in the office of the president, listening to a very intense story. Calling his supervisor at the station, the deputy is instructed to remain at the bank while the
supervisor contacts the FBI office in Phoenix.

As Melissa parks her SUV into the six-bay garage that sits behind her mansion, Troy Booska, Agent in Charge of the Phoenix office, takes down notes as the agent who initially took the call from the bank dictates the facts.
Melissa makes her way towards the mansion as she walks away from the garage, where she left the Escalade, the engine pingling as it cools down.

Unlocking the front door, Melissa walks directly into the large room that houses the massive oak bar that proudly displays various colored liquor decanters and bottles.

Upending the decanter that has a silver bracelet with a chain around the neck of the decanter, that is inscribed WHISKEY, Melissa pours out a healthy portion of the amber liquid, picks up the glass with some hesitation, knowing she should not be drinking alcohol while using her medication, then says to herself, fuck it, and downs the burning fire.

Her eyes water as the strong fluid burns a trail down her throat, dripping like hot lead into her stomach.

The phone chirps.

Melissa looks around, as if she is lost and not sure what it is she should do. Heart pounding at a fast rate, sweat dripping from her forehead, stomach now churning, Melissa picks up the phone.

"You stupid cunt!" the digital voice booms. "Can you not follow simple instructions? How much clearer can I be when I tell you what will happen to your son if you fail to follow my instructions? Now your son is going to feel pain like he has never felt before in his short life!"
Disoriented, Melissa does not know what to do. She gasps for breath as the alcohol now bombards her stomach. She struggles to reach for the right words to say, but she cannot think straight. The pressure intensifies around her chest.

"But... what... not sure, Thurgood?" Melissa stammers as she turns in circles, confused in her own mind.

"You left your house early. We told you to leave exactly at ten in the morning. Then there were cops at the bank. Cops! We told you not to call the cops. We told you what would happen to your son if you called the cops. Well, now your son gets to suffer the consequences!"

Melissa can now hear what sounds like screams way off in the distance. As she holds the receiver close to her ear, Melissa can hear the screams get louder and louder, now knowing that it is her son who is screaming.

"Stop! Please..." Melissa screams as her world begins to swirl into a mass array of numbers, digital voices and screams. Tears fall from her eyes as her body at first begins to shake, then grows cold. Pain fills her chest cavity as her heart beats in an erratic fashion. Her breathing is shallow as her shaky hands drop the phone.

Where is my medication, Melissa thinks to herself as she looks about, her purse no where to be found. Where did I leave it last, Melissa wonders as she takes a few steps towards the doorway.

Profusely sweating, gasping for breath as pain radiates up and down her left arm, Melissa spots her purse on the floor.
as her body drops hard to the wooden floor.

Her last conscious thought as her arm reaches out for her purse was the agony she heard in her son's screams.

Melissa would never hear anything, ever.
A non-descript sedan that can be found in any typical governmental car pool slowly makes the drive up the road that leads to the front door of the mansion. A brown and white car belonging to the county sheriffs department follows.

AIC Troy Booska steps out of the sedan as the deputy parks the patrol car behind the government automobile. Once the deputy reaches the area where Troy stands, both men make their way to the front door. Troy listens to the echoes of a familiar musical tune that floats about the empty rooms of the mansion as the deputy swings his head about, his eyes taking in every sight.

After a few seconds of listening to the chimes, the deputy steps away from the door, and says to Troy, "I'll have a look around."

Troy depresses the door bell button as he nods to the deputy in agreement.

"I see a body!" the deputy yells out as he races back to the front door. Troy grabs a hankie out of his coat pocket, wraps it around the door knob, and is surprised that the door is not locked.

Spotting the female body lying on the floor, the deputy places his fingertips onto the cool neck of the woman.

No pulse can be found.

The deputy stands, shakes his head in the negative, then indicates that he will check the upper floors of the mansion.
After securing the lower half of the mansion, Troy Booska returns to the body. He notes the outstretched hand, fingers pointing towards an open purse lying next to her on the floor.

Agent Booska picks up a small amber bottle that has a white screw-on metal cap. He reads the yellow and white label.

**WARNING!**

Avoid using alcoholic beverages  
Dissolve only under tongue  
Keep medication in original container  
Keep container tightly closed

Turning the bottle, Agent Booska continues to read.

Place 1 tab under the tongue for chest pain  
May repeat every 5 min X2  
Nitroglycerin - SL - 0.4 MG Tab

"Nitro pills." Agent Booska says to the deputy when he returns, indicating the bottle in his hand. "She must of had a heart attack."

"I'll call it in." the deputy says as he leaves the house.

Searching the room for something to cover the body, then doing so, Agent Booska begins to look around the large house.

Going room to room, looking over the items found on the oak desk in the library, bills, invoices, invitations, he makes his way into the bar, spots the open whiskey bottle, spots the used glass, then shakes his head. Stupid people, he thinks to himself.

He makes his way upstairs, finds a room that appears to be-
long to a young man, late teens maybe, but now-a-days, who really knows.

Looking about the room, he spots something that seems out of place in a man's room, a diary that sits on a work desk. Seeing that the diary is unlocked, Agent Booska sits down and thumbs through the hand-written pages.

Agent Booska is both embarrassed, and intrigued, by what he reads. Prompted by some information he learns from the diary, Agent Booska walks out of the house, approaches his sedan and unlocks the trunk. He withdraws a few pieces of equipment, returns to the bedroom, then manipulates the equipment to his satisfaction.
As Agent Booska pours a second cup of coffee from his thermos, a dusty and splattered CJ3 Jeep pulls to a stop behind the agent's automobile.

With squinted eyes, Agent Booska watches as a tall, slim built brown-haired young man steps out of the passenger side of the Jeep, a well-worn backpack in his hand. The young man is dressed in a semi-military jump suit, which appears to be very dusty and well-worn. The young man appears to be a masculine version of the dead woman Agent Booska discovered yesterday.

An older white male steps out from the driver's side of the Jeep. He is also dressed in a similar outfit as the young man.

"Thurgood Braxton?" Agent Booska asks as he approaches the two men who have questioning looks on their faces.

"That's me." the young man answers with concern in his voice.

"And you are?" the older man asks as he steps in between Thurgood and Agent Booska.

"My name is Troy Booska, agent in charge of the FBI office in Phoenix." Agent Booska says as he shows his identification, along with his badge. "What is your name, sir?"

"My name is Dean Jones, troop leader from the Flagstaff Troop 076." Dean says as he puffs out his chest.

Agent Booska nods, then steps around Dean Jones.

"Thurgood, we need to talk." Agent Booska says.
"What is this all about?" Thurgood asks.

"I'm sorry to report that your mother passed away yesterday. It appears to be from a fatal heart attack." Agent Booska says.

Dean Jones immediately grabs Thurgood into a full body hug. Thurgood grabs onto Dean Jones, and lets his tears fall. Dean begins to coo words into Thurgood's ear while his hands rub up and down the young man's back.

Agent Booska notes the close physical contact between the two.

"Perhaps we can go inside. I have a few questions that I need answers to, and I think it would be best to talk in private." Agent Booska says as he now walks towards the door.

Both men follow.

All three are sitting around the glass-topped table found in the kitchen. Dean Jones has yet to release Thurgood's hand.

"Mom had a weak heart most of her life. When I was younger, I really had to watch myself around her. You know, no sudden surprises or stress. After my father died, my mom encouraged me to seek activities outside of the home. Thus my enrollment in the troops. It was actually Dean here who encouraged me to join. He has been like a father to me, but I really regard him more like an older brother."

Thurgood smiles at Dean, who now sits up straighter and beams his smile as he pats Thurgood's back. Thurgood shyly glances at Agent Booska.

"If Mrs. Braxton died of a simple heart attack, why is the
FSI involved?" Dean Jones asks, his hand now rubbing up and down Thurgood's back.

"It appears her bank was a little concerned with her emotional state while she was at the bank requesting bearer bonds. Would you know anything about that, Thurgood?" Agent Booska asks Thurgood, ignoring Dean Jones.

"Excuse me?" Thurgood replies.

"Your mother indicated that she wanted the bank to draw up five different bearer bonds, each in the amount of one million dollars. Would you know anything about that?"

"Well, my dad had this habit of issuing bearer bonds as bonuses to the executive staff. Since my dad died, mom has taken over his responsibilities, and the end of next month is the end of the fiscal year, so I assume mom is continuing the tradition."

"But a million each?" Agent Booska asks.

Conversation is interrupted by the sound of door chimes.
Thurgood returns from the front door along side a well-dressed gentleman who carries a large leather briefcase.

"Mr. Stevens, this is special agent Troy Booska from the FBI office in Phoenix." Thurgood says as Mr. Stevens extends his hand in greeting.

Agent Booska returns the firm grip and handshake.

"And this is my troop leader, Dean Jones." Thurgood says with a smile on his face. Dean Jones extends his hand, but Mr. Stevens ignores the gesture.

"Yes, your mother spoke of him." Mr. Stevens says with a hint of disdain in his voice. Turning to Agent Booska, Mr. Stevens says, "My name is Henry Stevens. I am an attorney with the firm of Stevens and Price, out of Phoenix. My firm represents the interests of the Braxton Corporation, as well as the Braxton estate. I needed to come as soon as possible to discuss a few legal matter with Thurgood, matters involving this estate, the corporation, and a matter of some bearer bonds that require his signature."

"I understand." Agent Booska says.

"Mrs. Braxton instructed our firm many years ago regarding this untimely event, and she left specific instructions as to how it is to be handled. You see, Mrs. Braxton knew she has a bad heart, so she finalized all of the arrangements years ago."

"It seems everyone knew Mrs. Braxton had a bad heart." Agent Booska says while eyeballing Dean Jones.
"It was common knowledge with family and a select few close friends." Mr. Stevens replies as he opens his briefcase, removes a file folder, then places it on the table as he sits down.

"Mr. Braxton, you will need to sign a few articles of importance, including these bearer bonds so that we can transfer ownership to you. We will also need to discuss a few matters involving the estate."

"Okay." Thurgood says as he picks up the pro-offered pen.

"We should leave you to your privacy." Agent Booska says as he begins to rise, hinting for Dean Jones to do the same.

"Actually, I prefer to stay." Dean Jones says with defiance in his voice, giving Agent Booska a smirk.

"Perhaps it would be best if you did leave, Mr. Jones. This has nothing to do with you. However, Agent Booska, if I could persuade you to remain. I will need a witness to affirm all of these transactions; it will make my job much easier. And since your standing with the FBI is without blemish, no one will ever question your witnessing these matters." Mr. Stevens says as he looks between Dean Jones and Agent Booska.

"Hell, I can do that." Dean Jones says with a smile on his face.

"Agent Booska, if you please?" Mr. Stevens says, ignoring Dean Jones as he hands Agent Booska a pen.

"Sure thing." Agent Booska says as he takes the pen.

"Also, let me clarify a few things: There has been a few trust funds set up that will automatically pay any bills when
it comes to the estate. One less thing for you to worry about.

Mr. Braxton. You will also receive a monthly stipend of ten thousand dollars that you can use as you wish. This will continue until you reach the age of 25, which is six years from now, at which time you will be invited onto the board of directors of Braxton Corporation. Of course, your stipend will be adjusted on a yearly basis according to inflation and the cost of living."

"So who controls the interest of Braxton Corporation?" Dean Jones asks as he glances at the bearer bonds sitting on the table.

"To put it bluntly, Mr. Jones, that is none of your damn business. This is why I requested that you leave, Mr. Jones, so that I don't have to answer questions that do not pertain in any way, shape or form, to you. If you would please just leave?" Mr. Stevens says in a frustrated tone.

"Dean, please?" Thurgood says in a quiet voice.

"Hey, I'm only trying to protect your interests, Thurgood."

Dean Jones says as he rubs Thurgood's back.

"That, Mr. Jones, is my job." Mr. Stevens answers as he passes some documents to Agent Booska.

"This is the document that controls the payments of your monthly stipend, and this other concerns the upkeep of the estate. Please review each one carefully, and if you have no questions, you may sign on the line indicated towards the bottom." Mr. Stevens says, sliding some papers towards Thurgood.

Dean Jones moves his head to read over Thurgood's shoulder.

"Mr. Jones, if you don't mind." Mr. Stevens says with a frown
agent Booska suddenly stands up, grabs Dean Jones by the arm, and forces him to stand.

"Hey!" Dean Jones yells out.

"You've been warned three times. I'm telling you once, to leave this property, or so help me I will cuff you and take you to jail for interfering with FBI activity. It's your choice." Agent Booska says as he forces Dean Jones out of the kitchen.

Standing next to his sedan, Agent Booska watches as Dean Jones gets in his Jeep and departs the property, a scowl on his face.

Agent Booska smiles.

An hour and a half later, Agent Booska is shaking the hand of Mr. Stevens.

"We appreciate the FBI cooperation in these matters, Agent Booska." Mr. Stevens says.

"As far as the FBI is concerned, this is a closed case. In fact, we never should have been called in the first place." Agent Booska says to Mr. Stevens, then turns to face Thurgood.

"I'm sorry for your loss Thurgood. Good luck with your life. If I can ever be of any assistance to you in the future, you have my card."

"Thank you, I'll remember that." Thurgood says as he shakes Agent Booska's hand.

"Gentlemen." Agent Booska says as he heads towards his car.
The phone in the mansion chirps. Thurgood turns down the volume on the wide-screen television while he hits pause on the X-Box game he is playing. He picks up the receiver.

"Hello?" Thurgood says in a quiet voice.

"Our plan worked to perfection." the computer enhanced voice says with mirth in its tone.

"Turn off that damn scrambler and talk to me in your normal voice." Thurgood says with exasperation in his voice. "You know how much I hate that damn thing!"

"Okay, okay calm down." Dean Jones says with a chuckle. "So how is the rich, oh so rich, grieving son today?"

"Grieving. I was expecting you to come back today. I was looking forward to spending the rest of the day with you. This would have been the first time we could be together without my mom being around. I really miss you." Thurgood says.

"And I miss you as well, my love. I had to come home today, otherwise the little wife would be suspicious. She thinks I spend too much time with you as it is. We can't have her snooping around too much, can we?"

"I really hate that bitch! We should just kill her as well." Thurgood says.

"Whoa, cowboy. Just lighten up a bit. We'll be out of her life very soon." Dean Jones say quietly. "So, were you able to keep those bonds?"
"Locked up in my dad's safe in the study."

"You mean, in YOUR safe. Remember, everything is yours now. No more my dad's or mom's. Everything is now yours." Dean Jones says with mirth in his voice.

"No, everything is OURS." Thurgood says. "You and I are going to make a life together, so everything I have is yours as well."

"Now we can live the life that we dreamed of, without any interference from anyone, your mother or my soon to be ex-wife. And, most importantly, no interference from the police, or FBI."

"Yeah, no FBI. As if I would ever call that asshole." Thurgood says mockingly.

"So much for the FBI always getting their man." Dean Jones laughs. "So, we're on for that trip to Mexico next week?"

"I can hardly wait. You, me and nothing but beaches." Thurgood says. "I love you so much."

"As do I. Until we see each other again, my love." Dean Jones mimics a kiss over the phone line, then hangs up.

Thurgood sighs, then hangs up his phone, returning to his video game.

The man monitoring the phone line turns off his recorder, sits back in his chair, and thinks of a plan.
The large mansion still sits quietly atop the hill that affords it the view of the small city below. The tall pines again slowly sway as the night winds once again moves across the hill and down into the valley. The sounds of the forest are now interrupted by the chirping of a phone.

The constant chirping of the phone awakens the new owner. A slim, long-fingered hand reaches out from under the grand comforter and picks up the charcoal gray portable receiver, which once picked up, silences the chirping.

"Hello?" answers the sleepy voice of Thurgood.

"Thurgood! You gotta help me Thurgood! He's going to kill me if you don't cooperate." Dean Jones' voice cries out in despair.

"Dean? Is that you Dean?" Thurgood screams. "What the hell? Hello? Hello?" Thurgood cries out as he sits up in bed.

"Listen to me carefully." a computer-enhanced voice says. "I am only going to say this once. Do I have your undivided attention, Thurgood?"

"Yes, yes you do. Please! Don't hurt Dean, Please." Thurgood says, crying.

"I won't hurt him as long as you do what I say. In exactly one hour you are going to deliver to me all of the bearer bonds that are in your possession. You will call no one, no police, no FBI. Do you understand?" Special Agent in Charge Troy Booska asks.
IT'S ALL FOR THE SCRILLA
"Please Sylvia, give me a moment to think!" Paul King says to his wife as the two sit in the idling automobile that is stopped at the quiet intersection. The red stop light is very bright in the hazy late evening.

As the large automobile sits at the intersection, the traffic lights continues to go through the sequence of amber, red and then green. It was because of the red light that Paul had stopped the car at this intersection. Seconds after stopping, a man stepped out of the shadows, a large gun in his hand, and now stands in front fo the car, the gun pointed directly at Paul.

"What do you think he wants?" Sylvia asks.

"I have no fucking idea!" Paul retorts in anger.

"Don't scream at me. I'm not the one with a gun pointed at you. If you wouldn't have slowed down and run through the light like I told you to, then we would not be in this mess." Sylvia screams at Paul.

"The light was turning red." Paul says.

"The fucking light was green, but no, you have to slow down. If you had kept to your speed, we would never...oh shit!" Sylvia now whispers as she watches the man with the gun approach the automobile. Both Paul and Sylvia watch with fascination as the man grabs the door handle, jerks it open, and fires one shot.

Sylvia screams as Paul utters one word, "Shit."
"Okay, let's go over this one more time." the stocky man with the shiny badge says.

"Fuck man. Just how many times are you gonna make me repeat myself? When is you gonna understand what it be I be tryin' to tell you?" the bald-headed young man asks.

"As many times as it takes for me to believe every part of your story. You gotta admit, it is a little far fetched. It is, umm, like an episode from that old t.v. program The Twilight Zone." Detective Charlie Leonard says.

"So, from the beginning, let me hear it again."

"Alright, damn." Ray Sentenal answers, rubbing the sweat off of his hands by rubbing them onto his sagging pants. His bald head glistens under the fluorescent lights of the small interrogation room favored by law enforcement agencies nationwide.

The dull green walls of the room are stained with cigarette smoke, which aids in the peeling of the paint, leaving bare spots where the concrete shows through. The ventilation is poor, thus resulting in two sweat-covered bodies sitting across from each other on a dull gray metal table, which is bolted to the concrete floor. Two matching gray chairs completes the ensemble.

Ray, a wiry man in his mid-twenties, leans forward as the sweat drips from his forehead, his arms straight out on the scratched table top, his dull white muscle shirt clings to his
sweat covered torso.

Portions of his chest are covered in prison made tattoos, as are both of his arms.

In order for Ray to join the local gang, known in the area as The Local's, Ray had to have both of his arms filled with the gang's tattoos, from his shoulders to his wrists. Thus the term, 'getting sleeved by The Local's'. Ray was only thirteen at the time this took place.

"So, I'm having a beer, sittin' by myself, when this white dude walks in and damn if he don't sit right next to me."

"And where were you having this beer?" Detective Leonard asks as he readjusts his sitting position in the metal chair.

"At the Red Rooster."

"Over on Rosecrans?" the Detective asks.

"Yeah."

"Ah, a fine establishment indeed." Detective Leonard says with sarcasm in his voice. "Okay, so your sitting alone..."

"Yeah, so umm this white dude, he sits on the stool next to me, you know? I'm like, what the fuck, this dude be a fag or sum-thin' cuz there be a whole lot of empty stools in the place, you know? Then this dude offers to buy me a beer. Yo, I'm like whoaaa, what the fuck be goin' on, you know? Do the dude wanna suck me off or what, you know?"

"I'm not interested in that shit. Just meld up the facts and tell me what happened next." Detective Leonard says.

"Shit, that's what I'm doin'. What I'm tryin' to say is
that it seemed to me something weird was goin' on, you know?"

"Okay, strange. Got it." Detective Leonard says.

"So, anyway, after a beer the dude asks me about my
tats, pointing to the ones on my arms. I kinda back away, cuz
I don't want no fag touchin' on me, you know? And he be like,
yo, it all be cool. I'm just tryin' to verify."

"Verify?" Detective Leonard asks.

"That's what I be sayin' Verify? What the fuck you mean
verify? He be like, yo I'm just tryin' to make sure your not a
cop or sumthin'. Not be undercover, you know? So I laugh, and
I yell at Max. Yo Max! Do I be a cop? And Max, he say, yeah, like
I be the Pope." Ray laughs.

"And again, Max is...?" Detective Leonard asks.

"Yo man, Max be the bartender."

"Okay, so Max is not the Pope?"

"Naw man, Max ain't no Pope. That's the point. Max ain't
no Pope cuz I ain't a cop. But the dude, he got to verify. So,
he asked me if I was part of The Local's. What makes you think
that, I asked him. And he points to my tats and says that those
are The Local's sign."

"You mean the Gothic letters of L and A on your wrist?"
Detective Leonard asks as he points to Ray's wrist.

"Yup." Ray answers as he grabs a Newport cigarette and lights
it up. Blowing the smoke towards the ceiling, Ray leans back in
the metal chair, crosses his arms across his stomach, and sighs.

Detective Leonard stares at Ray, who, with his eyes now closed,
continues to puff on his cigarette.

"Any damn time you think you're ready." Detective Leonard snorts as he bangs on the table.

"Come on man, can't I even enjoy a smoke in peace?" Ray whines as he now sits up straight.

"You can enjoy all the smokes you want once you finish this..." Detective Leonard wiggles his fingers while humming the tune to the Twilight Zone show.

"Yo, it is not a story. It be the truth." Ray says.

"Okay." Detective Leonard says as he holds out his hands, palms facing outward as if he were trying to ward off an evil spirit. "So, tell me the rest of the...uh truth."

"Damm, I forgot where I was." Ray says as he stubbs out the Newport in the small butt-filled aluminum ashtray.

"The tat on your wrist." Detective Leonard answers.

"Oh yeah, okay. So, check it out. The dude, he ain't a fag or nuthin'. He be tryin' to verify that I do belong to The Local's, and he be it's all cool and stuff cuz I hear a lot of you are willin' to make a few on the side, if the bread be right."

"I said, bread? What, you be a baker or sumthin'? Yo man, check it out, who says bread anyways? If you wanna talk money, you talk cheddar, paper, scrilla, fuck you can even say Benjamins, you know?"

"Loot?" Detective Leonard asks with a smile.

"Yeah man, loot be cool. But not bread. Yo man, that so be a white mans word." Ray says.
"Well, you did say this dude was white." Detective Leonard points out.

"Oh, yeah. Ha, he be that, huh?" Ray laughs as he leans for another Newport.

"Anyway, I tell the dude it all depends on what the job be and how much scrilla he be willin' to pay, you know? So the dude says how much would it cost me to have someone killed? And I'm like, whoaa, back up Jack! I ain't no Lee Harvey, you know? And he be like, name me a number, man. So I said, shit, it gonna cost you dude, like thous, you know? I mean, come on, right?"

"Yeah, thous. Got it. Okay, keep talking."

"Yeah, so the dude he says I don't care what it cost, you name it, I'll pay it. So fuck, I just threw out a number, like fifty. And he be like cool, fifty thous is a good number. When can you do it, he says. And I looks at him and I think, you be serious huh? He just stares at me and I be thinkin' damn, I shoulda say a hundred thous. So I said, yeah, fifty thous and I kill who you want dead. Then he says, cool, can you do it on Friday?"

Ray double puffs his Newport cigarette as the smoke now curls up around his face before disappearing up in the ceiling.

"So I told him, yeah, Friday is cool. I ask him—who it is he wants killed, and he says his bitch. I said okay, cool. But why?"

Ray snuffs out the cigarette, then leans back in the chair.

"The dude says that the bitch be overbearin', she tries to control everythin' in his life. He just wants her gone. So I said
Well, how do you want it done. And he says quick! I want her to
die quick, like shoot her or sumthin'. So I said, yeah, one shot
to the head be quick. A lil ol .22 to the head will scramble the
brains, you know?"

"Yeah, a regular brain omelet." Detective Leonard says.

"Hey, I like that, a regular brain omelet. I'm gonna
hafta remember that one." Ray chuckles as he moves the ashtray.

"And so..." Detective Leonard says, moving his hands in the
forward motion movement.

"So he says that he is so tired of the bitch that he really
wants her dead ASAP. He says he is just pissed that she has all
control over everythin' in his life, even the stack. He says she
has major stack."

"Major stack?" Detective Leonard asks, cupping imaginary
breasts around his chest area.

"Naw man, not that kinda stack." Ray says laughing. "Stack,
N's, dough, money man. The bitch has major money and her old man
wants it all, you know?"

"Okay. So he wants his wife dead so he can inherit all of
her money."

Ray nods in the affirmative.

"Okay, so tell me how you guys worked it all out." Detective
Leonard asks as he unwraps a stick of chewing gum.

"He said if we did a car jackin' thing, that would work. He
said they would be goin' out Friday night, and to get out of his
neighborhood, they always go through the intersection of 166th."
and Norwalk. He says, just step out at the light, shoot the bitch, and lights out. One quick shot, boom, scramble scramble, wife dead, white man rich, and hello Vegas, you know?"

"Vegas. What happens in Vegas..."

"Yeah, like in them commercials." Ray laughs.

"Yeah. Okay, tell me how it went down." Detective Leonard says as he continues to chew on his gum.

"You sure this immunity thing is iron clad?" Ray asks.

"As iron clad as my handcuffs."

"Okay, this is it. I'm standing in the trees at 166th, and I see this big bronze Bentley, which is way off the hook, and it starts to slow down, then stop. I step out in front of the car, raise my hand like a traffic cop, then I walk over to the car door, jerk it open and one shot to the head. POP! Dead body tumbles out. I scoot, and everybody be happy."

Ray leans back and lights up another Newport.

"One question, Ray." Detective Leonard says. "Why, if the white dude was paying you to shoot his wife, why did you shoot him instead?"

"Shit. The bitch pay me triple when she found out what be going down. It's all for the scrilla man, you know?" Ray smiles.
MIRROR IMAGE
SAM

Sam Taylor is anxious. Pacing the upper tier of the concrete walkway, Sam is waiting for his name to be announced over the PA system. Sam takes a few more puffs from his Newport cigarette, tosses it down onto the walkway, and smears it across the concrete with his steel-toed black boots. Sam wants his name to be called so that he can leave this hideous place they call a prison.

It has been a long and torturous eleven years, or as Sam calculates, four thousand and fifteen days, or even worse, ninety-six thousand, three hundred ten hours, or...well, you get the idea.

In less than an hour, Sam should be a free man.

JAMES

James Parker is nervous. Pacing the crowded hallways of the county courthouse, James is waiting for his name to be called by the bailiff. James takes a few more puffs from his Marlboro, places it into the sand-covered tray that contains well-used cigarette butts, then unconsciously rubs the tops of his wing-tip shoes across the back of his leg pants. James wants his name to be called so that he can leave this smelly place they call a courthouse.

It has been a boring nine years, or as James likes to say, a waste of over three thousand two hundred and eight-five days of the tax-payers money to get this case closed.

In less than an hour, James should be a free man.
SAM

Sam was only nineteen when he had his first run in with the law. A breaking and entering charge drew Sam a fine of two hundred dollars, two years probation because he was a first time offender, and restitution of over two thousand dollars.

Sam Taylor's name was entered into the legal system, available to any law enforcement agency with the touch of just a few keys on a computer.

JAMES

James was only nineteen when he received his first promotion at his place of employment. As a prep-cook, James was responsible for the slicing and dicing of the many vegetables used by the chefs in the various stews and soups. After displaying a natural talent for using a utility knife, the move up to a French knife was nothing to James.

James Parker's name was entered into the "keep an eye on" this up and coming management potential candidate.

SAM

Sam had already turned twenty, when late one night, on a quiet residential street, he was arrested and charged with possession of a stolen automobile, an ounce of pot and resisting arrest.

Appearing before the circuit judge, Sam pled guilty to the charges, was
given a five year sentence to the state prison, four years suspended, so the remaining year was to be served in the county jail.

Not the best place to do time. But what the fuck, he’s gonna be out in a year. What a way to celebrate your twenty-first birthday.

JAMES

James was celebrating his twenty-first birthday a little too much and a little too loud. Because he would not cooperate with the manager of the local night club he had attended, the manager decided to let the police handle the matter. An hour later, James was in a holding tank in the county jail. Not the best place to celebrate your birthday.

The next morning James was promptly pulled out of the holding tank, handcuffed to another individual who was already part of a chain-gang, and was then escorted out of the jail area into a common room. Everyone was lined up against a brick wall.

"Sound off when you hear your name." the jailer yells out.

"Robinson, Jeff."

"Here."

"Taylor, Sam."

"Yeah." the man next to James answers.

"Stevens, Terry."

"Yo."

"Parker, James."

"Um, yeah." James answers.

And on it went until all ten men were accounted for. The group was then
led down a hallway, up a flight of stairs, then placed into a holding pen, where the cuffs and restraints were removed.

Two by two they were led out of the county jail, free men.

SAM

After his release, Sam Taylor was not welcomed back at the house that he shared with his mother and younger brother. Forced to move out of the house where he had lived most of his life, Sam found himself on the streets, looking for low-wage jobs with no-name companies who offered no futures.

Within a few weeks of living in shelters and cardboard boxes, Sam was able to rent a room in a low rent flop house on the outskirts of town. Once his junk-of-a car quit running, Sam had to depend on public transportation to get to work and back home. Because of the buses, Sam was often late to work, which did little to endear himself to his employer, who already held the strike against Sam as an ex-offender.

Life for Sam, in one word, sucked!

JAMES

After his release, James Parker, after paying an impound fee to release his new birthday present, drove himself home and to the open arms of both family and friends. Returning to work the following Monday, James found out that his promotion had come through, and he was now training as a sous chef. The jump in pay will allow James to move into the new townhouse development located downtown, near where he works.

Life for James, in one word, great!
Desperate for a better life, Sam put the word out that he wanted some action that would make him some money and a lot of it. Word came back via Ray Sentinel, a well known drug trafficer, to see him later in the week.

Sam learned from Ray that Ray was looking to expand his territory, and for him to do so, he needed people he could trust to take care of his product, and also take care of his customers. Ray wanted someone who had the drive and ambition, someone who was smart and at the same time, had a pair of balls to do what needed to get done, no matter what the task might be.

Sam told Ray that he was the man Ray was looking for.

Desperate for a better financial future, James put the word out that he would take whatever overtime might be available, no matter what the job assignment. James learned that management always looked out for the person who would bend over backwards to not only protect the product, but care for the fussy customers as well. Management was looking for the hard-driving young man who was not afraid to put in the hours at the company, who was not afraid of a little hard work, toiling for long hours.

James let management know that he was the man for the job.

After a few days of meetings and negotiations with Ray, Sam was hired to act as the middle man between Ray and his various distributors found in
the drug trade of the city.

Sam would set up a meeting with the distributors, find out their wants and needs, collect what monies were owed, then pass all of this onto to Ray. Ray would then supply to Sam what he requested, and in turn Sam would pass on the drugs to the distributors. After expenses were paid, a percentage of the monies were given to Sam for his efforts in his job.

Within a three month period, Sam was driving a new Jeep, moved into a new townhouse development that was located downtown, and was dressing in the latest fashions.

Sam's life was drastically changing.

JAMES

After days of meetings and negotiations, James was granted all of the overtime that was allowed in the restaurant, doing what needed to be done; taking a dishwasher's shift, running as a barback, or filling in for the frymaster or griller on the meat line. He even took a few shifts as Manager for the night shift. Within a two month period, James had made over ten thousand dollars in wages and overtime. James had made so much in the short time period that he felt this was the right time to ask his girlfriend to move with him when he moved into his new townhouse at the end of the month.

James life was drastically changing.

SAM

One night, while driving around town checking out his neighborhood,
Sam received a phone call from Ray, who was explaining to Sam that he was out of town, and one of his main supplier had an extra load of cocaine that he wanted to sell. Ray pleaded for Sam to take care of the buy, which Sam reluctantly agreed to do. After meeting with the supplier, Sam had his Jeep piled with twenty bricks of high-grade cocaine, which he covered with a tarp. He only had to cover a little over twenty miles to get to the warehouse where Ray kept the stash.

Sam drove on into the night.

James

That same night, James and his girlfriend were driving the streets of downtown, observing the new neighborhood where they would soon be living and working, shopping and generally living the good life. As they came close to an intersection that James had not noticed, because he was too busy pointing to the new development they were to move into to, James felt the lurch of his car as it slammed into the side of shiny new Jeep. His girlfriend was okay because she was wearing her seat belt and the air bag protected her face. James was pushed back into his seat by the force of the air bag when it deployed, but except for a slight cut on his forehead, he was unhurt.

The driver of the Jeep did not look so good.

James got out of his vehicle and walked into the night.

Sam

The night of the accident, Sam awoke to find himself in the jail ward of
the local hospital.

Weeks later, after finding out the narco squad was at the scene of the accident, Sam found himself in front of his Honor, Judge Darren Adams. His Honor, being a member of the bar and a great community leader advocating the Just Say No To Drugs campaign, Judge Adams did all he could in his courtroom to get any and all drugs off the street. Judge Adams just said no to all of Sam's pleas, and sentenced Sam to twenty years in the state prison for possession and distributing cocaine.

Sam's life would never be the same.

JAMES

The night of the accident found James and Leona at the emergency ward of the local hospital, getting checked out for any possible injuries. Weeks later, James and Leona found themselves in front of his Honor, Judge Tom McDonald, a family court judge and pastor of the local Path To Heaven church. His Honor McDonald was a firm believer in the sanctification of marriage, and his Honor did all he could to support that belief. Judge McDonald accepted the I Do's from James and Leona, and blessed the life sentence of marriage that James and Leona had agreed to.

James life would never be the same.

SAM

Sam, after enduring a bus ride of four hours, his legs shackled at the ankles, with a looping chain around his waist that is attached to the cuffs
around his wrists, finally made his way off of the bus and followed the rest of the men as they were herded into a concrete room that was designed for about fifteen men but was now holding forty.

JAMES

James, after enduring a flight of six hours, felt as if his legs were cramping up in the first class section of the airplane. There never seems to be enough leg room on any flight. James and Leona were finally able to stand and stretch out once they deplaned and were escorted into the executive waiting room of the airline. They were both invited to enjoy the complimentary champagne and cheese with crackers. There were only two other couples in the large plush room.

SAM

Once the chains were removed, Sam went through the process of being admitted into the state prison. Herded into another concrete room, where another thirty men were milling about, many vying for spots to sit on the concrete bench, while others leaned against the wall, Sam was left to wait until his name was called.

JAMES

Once the food and drink were consumed, James and Leona were escorted out of the executive waiting room, processed at the front desk so that they
could be admitted to the luxury suite specifically designed for newly-weds.

SAM

"Sam Taylor?" the young jailer calls out. Sam stands up and makes his way to the doorway, where a correctional officer with a large set of hands motions for Sam to follow him as the jailer walks down the hallway, a set of keys in his hand.

Following the yellow line that is painted on the concrete floor, Sam stops at a processing desk, where he was given a set of papers to read, then sign, or simply put your initials at the end of each paragraph, to indicate that you did indeed read said paragraph, and that you understood everything you read in said paragraph.

Once the paperwork was complete, Sam was instructed to once again follow the yellow line, and along with two other inmates, they all walk into another processing room where they were instructed to strip out of their clothes, down to bare flesh.

Standing nude, the clothing correctional officer barked for each inmate to show him their hands, then reverse, so that he could see both sides of every hand, lift their arms to observe the pit area, okay no contraband hidden there, open the mouth and stick out the tongue, while you wiggle it around, now run your hand through your own hair on your head, now lift your testicles and display what is beneath, and finally, grab a cheek in each hand, (And we are not talking face here) squat, then cough.

Once thoroughly humiliated, Sam is given one pair of off-white boxers, one pair of small off-white socks, one off-white t-shirt, and one pair of
tan pants, no belt, just an elastic waistband. A cheap pair of blue canvas shoes is issued. No arch support of any kind and the soles are so thin that Sam could feel the lint that lines the concrete floor. Nothing given to Sam is new, and every piece of clothing is either stained with an unknown substance or is torn in some way. The shoes are also too small. No sense in complaining, because the answer he would be given is, "Do I look like your tailor who gives a shit?"

JAMES

"Mr. & Mrs. Parker?" a young good-looking woman asks as she enters the lounge area. Both James and Leona respond by standing up from the plush chairs that they occupied. Following the young woman, the trio walk towards a set of elevators, which open automatically upon their approach, and they all enter into the small plush room. The mirrors on the walls are shiny and the carpet under their feet is thick. The elevator zooms quietly upward. Within seconds, the doors slide open and they all exit, walk a few feet to the left, and stop in front of a set of large oak doors, the shine on the finish is so that it appears to be wet.

The young woman opens the double oak doors that leads into the penthouse suite and stands to the side. "Welcome to the Mirage. Here is the key." the young woman says as she hands the key card to James, gives a slight bow and enters the suite.

She walks to the center of the large room where a glass and chrome coffee table sits atop a pure white plush rug. She picks up a remote control of some kind and aims it towards the satin curtains that hide the window. With a push of a button, the drapes begin to open, displaying a panoramic view of the city.
She then turns towards the gas fireplace, pushes another button, and the sound of a whoosh comes alive as blue and green flames eat up the air. She explains the functions of the remote to James, showing him how to activate the satellite radio with ten pre-set buttons, the seventy-two inch plasma television, which also has both gaming systems Play Station and X-Box connected to the television.

The remote activates the hot tub that sits on the veranda of the penthouse. Swirling jets of water are now moving about while light streams of heat dance in the air before disappearing.

The young woman now escorts James and Leona around the suite, showing off the formal dining area, the large master bedroom with dual walk-in dressing areas, the massive bathroom with dual vanities, a mini hot tub, a brass and glass shower area with seventeen full body shower heads, along with his and her toilet areas, surrounded with frosted glass for privacy.

**SAM**

Sam is escorted out of the R & D area and directed towards a trolley where a guard was handing out bed rolls. The bed roll consisted of one blanket, with holes of course, one off-white sheet, one roll of one-ply toilet tissue, one ratty towel that looks as if it came out of a garage area, and one wash cloth that looks like a single sheet of toilet paper, just as small and just as thin.

Sam was directed towards an open door that lead out to the prison yard, where three two-storied buildings made of solid concrete stood side by side.
They crossed the yard, following the concrete walk towards the building that was in the center of the other two buildings. Entering the building, the first thing that hit Sam was the noise. Concrete walls with concrete floors did little to dampen the noise of over a hundred men talking, laughing and hollering at one another. The echo effect only added to the din.

The lower area of the building contained forty-four cells, and an additional forty-four cells were on the upper tier. Ten metal tables with four metal stools attached to the tables were scattered about the floor area. Each table was bolted to the concrete floor. Most tables were occupied by men who were playing cards, chess or checkers. One individual was drawing.

Sam counted five twenty-five inch televisions, which were attached to the concrete pillars that are supporting the upper tier of the building. The televisions, mounted eight feet from the ground, are being watched by men who are either sitting in plastic chairs or just standing in front of the televisions. Everyone watching the televisions has a set of ear buds which are connected to a radio, such as a walkman or small transistor radio.

The guard who escorted Sam to the building went over to a older man who was seated in an office. Both men came out of the office, the escort guard now walking out of the building, while the unit guard came towards Sam.

"Welcome home." the guard says with a smirk. "You're assigned to cell twenty-three." the guard says as he points towards the roll of cells near the office area. The guard walks away.

Sam heads towards the indicated cell as other men either sneak peeks at Sam or just openly stare at him, waiting to see how Sam would react.

Sam opens the heavy metal door and is greeted by the sight of a triple tiered metal bed, the thick metal frame bolted to the concrete wall and floor.
The bottom bunk appears to be about eight inches from the ground, while the middle bunk is about four feet from the ground, and the top bunk is less than six feet from the ground. The concrete ceiling is eight feet from the ground.

Must be a bitch to sleep in that top bunk, Sam thinks to himself, then realizes that he just might be sleeping in that top bunk. Shit!

To the right of the doorway is a metal sink with a metal toilet attached to it. The flow of the water for both the sink and toilet is controlled by a push button, one for the toilet and one for the sink. There is a sign above the toilet, warning that if you flush the toilet twice in a five minute period, the toilet will be locked out. This is a water saving option the prison has instituted.

Three metal lockers, waist high and about two feet wide, sit against the wall just beyond the toilet. This will serve as your closet, where you will be expected to keep ALL of your possessions stored in them. In between the lockers and the bed frame is a small half-oval desk, also attached to the concrete wall and bolted to the concrete floor.

A small slit in the concrete wall, six inches wide and three feet tall serves as the cell's window. The glass is dull with years of dirt and grime attached to the outside pane. The inside pane is badly scratched.

Wall to wall, putting toe to heel, Sam is able to take seven steps for width, eleven steps for length. This is the living space for three full-grown men, men who are complete strangers to Sam.

This will be home for Sam for the next twenty years.
Once the honeymoon was over, James and Leona drove out to their new home, which was just recently put on the market and bought by Leona's father as a wedding gift for the new couple. The three car garage has a stall specifically for the Cadillac Escalade that James drives.

The tri-level house is a modern marvel of wood and glass, which is located in walking distance to the Pacific Ocean. The neighbors are business owners and executives.

Entering the front foyer, James and Leona are awed by the massive glass walls that show a clear view of the blue-green ocean. To the left is the kitchen, a modern affair with marble counters and up to date appliances, cherry wood cabinets, along with a walk in pantry.

West of the kitchen is a twenty foot by twenty foot family room, with a fireplace and large plasma television anchored to the wall. East of the kitchen is the dining room, which contains a wet bar and a full dining table, along with hutch and cabinets.

The lower level of the house contains the master bedroom and bath, along the the needed his and hers walk in closets, plus a small powder room along with a kitchenette, for those mornings when you just want to stay in bed but still have your hot coffee and maybe a bite of breakfast.

The upper level of the house contains three additional bedrooms, a den, library, sewing room and three bathrooms. Don't forget the laundry room.

This will be home for James and Leona for the next twenty years.
Overcrowding of prisons, both on a state level and on the federal level have forced prison officials to do something with the large ever increasing number of prisoners. Thus, cells that were originally designed for just two men are now being utilized to house three and many times four inmates at a time.

In the building Sam was assigned to, there exists many cells on the upper tier that house four men to a cell, while the majority of cells both on the upper and lower tiers are occupied by three men to a cell. The original two man cells, which only four of them exist, are occupied by the unit's trustees.

This position is not assigned or handed out, it is earned, and it usually takes years to even be considered for this position, much less get assigned to it.

Sam had no interest in this position, because it usually involved in some type of snitching or whispering in the guards ears as to the illegal activities that occur in each building, resulting in an inmate being taken to the SHU (Known as the Special Housing Unit-AKA The Hole) and after that inmates release he will lose his good time and usually commissary and telephone privileges.

Sam was assigned to the upper bunk of cell number twenty-three, just as he feared. Once assigned, he was issued by the laundry department the standard issue of clothing: four tan colored pants along with four matching shirts, four white t-shirts, four boxers, four pair of socks, a winter jacket, a pair of black steel-toed boots, along with a mesh bag to keep the dirty
laundry in until they can be washed. He was also given four motel-sized bars of soap, a no-name roll of deodorant, four orange disposable razors, a comb along with a thumb-sized toothbrush, and a small tube of toothpaste, which Sam later learned on the news had be outlawed in China.

If Sam had no money, he would be able to return to the laundry area to receive a new set of toiletries every month. If he had money on the books, he would have to buy his own in the commissary.

Two rolls of single ply tissue were also given to Sam. These were to last Sam for two weeks. The problem was that it was usually longer than two weeks before everyone was issued a new set of tissue. Pity the fool who did not ration his tissue!

JAMES

One of the specifications that James laid down with Leona was that there was always to be a good supply of the thickest toilet tissue that was ever available on the market. If nothing else in life, James wanted to enjoy his ass-wiping with the cushion softness of toilet tissue.

Leona's cat, Miss Kitty, loves playing with the three-ply tissue with the scent of lilac that hangs on the toilet tissue dispenser. Between the his and her bathrooms in the master bath, Miss Kitty spends hours of enjoyment clawing and pawing at the rolling tissues. Not a day goes by that Leona has to change out the empty cardboard rolls. Leona pities the day when Mr. Whipple ever decides to quit making toilet tissue!

SAM
Sam was quick in adapting to prison life, because prison life is nothing but routines. Cells were opened around five thirty a.m., breakfast served around six. Work begins around seven thirty, lasting until three thirty, at which time you returned to your cell for the four o'clock count. After count is completed, your cell is opened, you go to dinner at five, and the rest of the day is yours until ten p.m., which is bed time. Back to your cell for the lockdown for the night. Repeat and rinse each day.

The meals were an adventure in themselves. You usually entered the chow hall through one of two available doors, which sit opposite of each other, known as Side A and Side B. You got in line behind the person in front of you, and if certain individuals decided to cut in the line, some took exception to it and usually called the guy out, which usually resulted in a fist fight, or you just let it slide.

As you made your way into the chow hall, you would be issued a single plastic cup, along with an orange colored spork, which is wrapped in a single napkin. This was the only napkin you would receive. As you made your way along the serving line, the plastic trays were filled with your meal, and placed atop the stainless shelf, where you would grab the next available tray, and make your way to the dispensers that held the drink of the day.

Looking for a place to sit can be a problem for some inmates. The fifty, eight stool tables turn only as fast as the people sitting at that table eat their meal. The inmates are allowed twenty-two minutes to eat their meals. Some are quick, sit-eat-leave. Other like to socialize for a long period of time, only leaving when instructed to by a guard.

The meals are not great by anyones standards. Breakfast can be anything from dry cereal to oatmeal, one piece of fruit and one slice of bread. Eggs are
served only once a week, on Sundays, and they are always scrambled.

Lunch can be a peanut butter sandwich, or a piece of chicken, or a hamburger (Think turkey burger), tuna salad or chicken salad, sloppy joes to hot dogs, along with a potatoe or macaroni salad, mac and cheese or a baked sweet potatoe. Once piece of fruit and a drink.

Dinner can be anything from meatloaf (Again turkey burger) to chili mac, spaghetti to beek yakisobi (Think spaghetti with no sauce).

Sam lost fifteen pounds in the first month he was in prison.

JAMES

James was quick in adapting to married life, because his marriage he found out is such a drag. Leona insisted on James eating breakfast with her and Miss Kitty at five in the morning. Breakfast always consisted of the most expensive fresh ground coffee beans richly toasted, then freshly brewed with spring water for the perfect cup of joe in the morning. Crepes with cream and fresh fruit, usually strawberries but sometimes kiwi, was served. James sometimes wanted something easy, like bacon and eggs.

Lunch could be some fancy affair like Fusilli in mushroom sauce, hazelnut scones with fresh churned ice cream. And dinners, ah dinners...Lamb with tortellini, shrimp bella donna with citrus sauce, and for dessert, maybe some tiramisu swimming in coffee and whipped cream, fresh of course!

James gained over fifty pounds in the first year of marriage.

SAM
The days grew pretty boring for Sam, almost a never ending routine. Once breakfast was complete, the work detail would be called at 7:30 a.m., lunch would follow at 11:30 a.m. and then everyone would be back to work until 3:30 p.m. The pre-dinner count would be at 4:00 p.m., then dinner would be served, beginning about 4:45 p.m. until 5:30 p.m. The rest of the evening was free until the 8:30 p.m. recall, where everyone had to be back in their cells, getting ready for the 10:00 p.m. count. Lock down and everyone is going to bed.

JAMES

James grew disenchanted with married life and its boring routine. Once his breakfast was done, James would go to work at 8:00 a.m., had lunch around 1:00 p.m., got off work around 7:00 p.m. and spent his free time with Leona, who wanted to do nothing but bitch about her day, and the antics of Miss Kitty. James ended his day by going to bed around 10:00 p.m., alongside Miss Kitty, who snuggled deep into the comforter.

SAM

Many prison officials want the general public to believe that prisons have various programs to help in the rehabilitation of prisoners. They want the public to believe that jobs in the prisons are used as training tools so that the inmates can use these "skills" that are learned in prison as a means of obtaining employment once they are released. They want you to believe that various classes are offered to prisoners that will assist them in not
returning to prison.

Sam has learned that this is not true. Rehabilitation is just a 14 letter word that most prisoners cannot even spell. Some classes do help in getting inmates their GED's, but most classes only assist the inmate in "killing time".

Although most administrative officials want you to believe that most classes in prison help inmates, the classes are often taught under the title of "Adult Continuing Education" (ACE), Sam often wonders how some classes can help an inmate upon his release when that class is called the history of jazz, or watching videos of famous battleships, touring the old Route 66, or, as Sam likes to call his favorite, the history of dogfights and aerial combat.

Sam also discovers that the jobs in prison do not pay much, if anything. If you do not have a high school education, no matter what job you work at, you will only be paid maintenance pay, which is $5.25 a month! Most jobs start at $0.05 an hour. If you are lucky, you might get a job that pays just $0.12 an hour, such as plumbers who unclog toilets and urinals, or the kitchen worker who wipes down dining room tables and mops the floors after meals, or the cook who just completed cooking a meal for over 1300 inmates.

Sam quickly discovers that $5.25 a month does not even begin to cover the necessary items that he must purchase through the commissary system. Hygiene items such as deodorant, toothpaste, soap or shampoo are no longer free once an inmate has a job, no matter what the pay. When a tube of toothpaste is $2.95, a tube of deodorant is $3.45, and a bottle of shampoo is $1.95, that $5.25 does not go very far. And that's not counting medical supplies, such as pain medication, flu medication or laundry cleaning supplies.
James has been with the company now for over eight years. He has been led to believe that his course is set towards management, but that has yet to happen. He has taken continuing courses in his field of work, and no matter how many courses he has completed, no matter how many certificates he has collected, he still remains in the lower echelons of the business.

The years slowly crawl by for James and Leona. James is caught in that cycle of life that revolves around his work, and not life with his wife and family, or lack thereof. Leona is not happy with her life or her husband, and she seems fed up with Miss Kitty, a cat she has had since her late teens.

James is fed up with the routine of the restaurant, the constant rotation of old and new employees, the crassness of customers and the brown-nosing of management. To hell with it all, James thinks.

Leona wishes James would drop dead just like Miss Kitty did last week. Old age claimed the once queen of the house, and it is now reflecting it's rays on Leona's face, and body. James is dreaming of fitting Leona in a nice pine box.

The expenses he would save alone would put James on easy street if Leona were to die. The woman spends money as if she could magically place her hand in James's pocket and be rewarded with a wad of cash, which she does on a nightly basis, along with the various credit cards and gift cards. James is quickly discovering that there are some weeks when he cannot even buy a bottle of shampoo or other cleaning supplies. Man that woman can spend!
And so it is on this day that Sam Taylor hears his name being announced over the PA system, directing him to the administrative offices. He walks down from the second tier of the walkway, and exits the building that he has called home for the last eleven years.

After completing the necessary paperwork, then changing his prison tans for a pair of jeans, flannel shirt and scruffy tennis shoes, Sam Taylor is officially a free man.

Sam boards the Greyhound bus and heads into downtown. After a four hour ride, Sam steps off the bus and, ready for a real meal that he has not had for close to thirteen years (His total time spent in jail) perhaps a juicy hamburger smothered in cheese, hell maybe even a steak! Sam smiles at the thought that he can now choose what to eat and when to eat. He locates a small diner just down the street from the bus station.

Sam steps out of the diner a satisfied man. Darkness is now beginning to cover the sky scrappers of downtown, and Sam, admiring the heights of the buildings, inadvertently steps off of the sidewalk and is struck by a speeding automobile.

JAMES

And so it is on this day that James Parker hears his name being called by a bailiff of the court. As he finally approaches the Honorable Judge Ray Gladstone, James smiles as His Honor decrees that the marriage between James Parker and Leona Parker is hereby null and void, and after a few signatures on what seems like reams of paperwork, James Parker is officially a free man.

James Parker, wearing his best Brooks Brothers suit, jumps into his
new Camaro and begins to race towards downtown.

After a four hour stint of drinking and celebrating his release from marriage, James Parker begins the task of driving himself home, knowing that he really should just park his Camaro and call a cab. Darkness is falling, and being in the condition that he is, James is not exactly sure just where home is. All he knows is he must get off the streets and into his home ASAP.

Pushing the pedal as much as he can, James is driving at a high rate of speed, so fast in fact that he does not even touch the break pedal as his Camaro slams into some idiot who just stepped off of the sidewalk.

SAM

Sam Taylor never knew what ended his life on that city street on the day of his freedom. He never felt the impact from two thousand pounds of metal and plastic. He never felt the cold of the refrigerator holding his mangled body, never felt the lining of the pine box that his now embalmed body was placed into, never heard as the earth was slowly placed atop his coffin.

JAMES

James Parker never knew what ended his life on that city street on the day of his freedom. He never felt the impact of 155 pounds of flesh and bone. He never felt the cold steel that was wrapped around his wrists, never now feeling the coldness of the concrete walls and floors that surround his body. He will never know what it is to be a free man as he stares at his image in the prison mirror.
ONLY DEATH CAN HELP
Tony Harrison needs people to die. A lot of them. That would be the only way for Tony Harrison to continue to keep his business open. You see, the death of men, women and children, no matter their race or ethnicity, would mean life for Tony Harrison.

Well, at least a decent life. Tony does not need to worry about a place to live. He actually owns the house that he lives in, because he also works there as well. He does not need to worry about transportation, because he owns the automobiles used in his business. Four of them as a matter of fact, all cream of the crop, top line of available automobiles.

Cadillacs. You would immediately recognize the style of them, especially the hearse. Then there are the two limos to transport the mourners, and the one car most people do not recognize is the one that looks like a pick-up truck, the flower car.

Hey, it's still a Cadillac!

Tony, sole owner and operator of the Harrison Funeral Home, a family run business since it was started just a few years after the end of the Civil War by Tony's great-great-grandfather, Milford Harrison, was reviewing the financial statement in his study on the third floor of the stately Victorian mansion. If business does not pick up, thinks Tony, there will be no business left to pass onto his son, Michael.

Turning off the green-shaded bankers light on his oak desk, Tony removes his glasses and rubs his tired eyes. As he sits con-
requiring the status of his business, a light knock on the door of his office draws Tony's attention away from his financial problems.

Tony turns towards the door and spies his only son Michael standing in the door frame.

Always respectful of one's privacy, Michael would never just walk into an occupied room, especially his dad's office. He would simply knock on the door and await an invitation to enter the room, just as any navy personnel, before boarding a ship, would ask permission to come aboard.

"Come in, Michael." Tony says with a smile on his face as he puts his glasses back on and raises to meet his son. Michael, who at nineteen stands a good six foot five inches and carries a solid two hundred and forty pounds of muscle on a strong body frame, grabs his father into a bear hug.

"I'm not disturbing you, am I dad?" Michael asks as he releases his father, then smiles.

"No, never Michael." Tony replies.

"Mom told me to come and get you. Dinner is almost ready."

"Great! I'm starving." Tony says as he sits back down, removes his glasses and once more rubs his eyes. Tony then sighs.

"You look troubled, dad. Is everything alright?" Michael asks as he sits in one of the oak chairs facing the desk.

"Ah, these damn taxes. Nothing really to it." Tony replies.

"Dad, the taxes were in April, this is May." Michael smiles as he leans forward, his arms resting on his knees.
"You always were observant. I just can't get anything past you, can I?" Tony says with a hint of pride in his voice. He nods towards the financial reports on his desk, then hands them to Michael.

"It's the business, Michael. Life is killing us. There are just not enough people in our small city dying fast enough to keep the business open. Without death, I may have to close our doors."

"Dad, I can always delay going to USC. I can get an outside job, contribute to the household." Michael says as he reviews the financial reports. "I would do anything to help, dad."

"That is generous of you son, and I really appreciate it. But it won't be necessary. You go to USC and get your degree. On that issue, there is no discussion." Tony says.

"There has to be someway I can help." Michael says.

"You can help by getting your degree. But right now, it appears that only death can help the business." Tony sighs. "Only death."

"Well dad, if I come across death on my way to USC, I'll be sure to send him your way." Michael says as he places the financial reports back atop the desk.

Tony rises from the chair and places his arm across Michael's back. "Let's go down and enjoy the meal your mother has prepared. And uh, let's not discuss this matter with your mother, eh? The last thing I need is for your mother to worry about such things." Tony says as he leads his son towards the stairway.

The next day is bright with sunshine and clear blue skies as Michael loads the last of his belongings into his Jeep. After
lingering for a few seconds, Michael hugs both his father and
mother, climbs into his Jeep and with a final wave goodbye, he
drives away from his teary eyed parents, who now remain standing
in the driveway well after Michael's Jeep disappeared from view.

"You think he'll be alright?" Mary asks.

"Yeah. Michael will be just fine, honey. We don't need to
worry about Michael. He can take care of himself." Tony says as
he hugs his wife closer to himself.

"Let's go inside before the neighbors wonder what we are
doing out here." Tony says with a smile.

* * * * *

A week has gone by since Michael left for college, and Tony
once again finds himself in front of his desk, working on a list
of items that can be liquidated to help keep the funeral home
afloat for at least a few months.

The business line rings.

"Harrison Funeral Home, this is Tony. How may I help you?"
Tony answers in his best somber voice.

"Tony, got a tough one for you." the gruff voice of Doctor
Cummings says. "It's a family of five. Three are children."

Doctor Cummings is not only the medical practitioner for the
small city of Forest Glen, but he also serves as the coroner for
the sparsely populated county as well.

"My God, a family? Was it a car accident?" Tony asks.
"Well, the accident part is correct, but it's not from a car. As best as I can tell, it's carbon monoxide toxicity. I believe a faulty heater is the cause. There are no obvious signs of body trauma on any of the victims. Plus the odds of an entire family being found in their own beds dying at the same time leads me to believe carbon monoxide is the culprit. People nowadays just don't take the time to check their furnaces or fireplaces prior to the onset of winter."

"Doc, it's closer to summer than winter." Tony replies.

"Makes no difference what the calendar says. All the signs of death points to toxicity."

As Doctor Cummings drones on about faulty heating systems and the lack of awareness on the owners part, Tony is doing some quick calculations regarding five bodies being sent to his funeral home. If there are no relatives and the county picks up the tab, Tony could be looking at an income of over forty thousand dollars. That would prove to be a nice cushion for the bottom line of the financial report.

"So, what do you think?" the gruff voice registers in Tony's mind, bring Tony back into the conversation.

"Uh, sorry. You lost me doc."

"I was talking about running a public service announcement regarding the need for people to check their furnaces and fireplaces. What do you think?"

"Doc, I think that is a great idea!" Tony replies.

"Yeah, me too. Anyways, I'll release the bodies into your
care after I talk to the dead woman's relatives. They live out in Arizona. I'm sure she'll approve of the arrangements. Till then."

"Till then, doc." Tony says, then hangs up the phone.

Doctor Cummings is the only person Tony knows who ends all phone conversations with the phrase "till then" and proceeds to hang up the phone. As Tony smiles at that queer habit, he reviews his calculations he wrote down earlier, and now adds another ten thousand dollars to the subtotal.

Fifty thousand dollars to bury a family of five. Even in death, money is spent and made.

* * * * *

A hiker is crossing a popular area that is well known to campers and hikers throughout the state. Coming across a campsite, he noticed that most of the gear was haphazardly strewn across the area. Calling out for someone in the campsite brought no results. As he approached the dome tent that rests under a copse of pines, the hiker notices a strange smell. He made the mistake of unzipping the entrance to the tent and sticking his head inside.

"I've listed the cause of death as carbon monoxide, which was caused by a kerosene latern found to be still burning in the tent, hanging from a hook off the center support pole. How stupid can people be?" Doctor Cummings asks in a rhetorical manner. "I mean, what was it, a month ago we started running those public
"Well, I'm sure most campers don't think of their laterns like they do their heating systems." Tony replies.

"It'll still kill you just as effectively." Doctor Cummings says. "Anyways, the three bodies are going to be released to you. The families will be getting in touch with you later in the day, if not in the following days. Till then."

With that, Doctor Cummings was gone, and Tony was computing the costs and profits of caring for three more bodies. Such a waste of life at an early age, since all the campers were under the age of twenty years.

But then Tony smiles...a minimum of eighteen thousand dollars going into the bank. Death really does pay.

* * * * * *

After eight funerals and nearly seventy thousand dollars in the bank, Tony is in a very good mood. He becomes even happier as he hears Michael's Jeep turn into the driveway.

"Michael, what a great surprise!" Tony says as he meets his son at the front door.

"I'm here just for the week-end dad. I have to get back to L.A. by noon on Monday." Michael says as he hugs his dad, then bends down to pick up his duffle bag that is full of dirty clothes.

After dinner and a few drinks, Mary excuses herself, explaining her need to drive into town, as Michael and Tony retire to the
quiet and comfort of Tony's office.

"It has been a few interesting weeks to say the least."

Tony says as he sits in his leather chair. "As bad as I feel for the living relatives, these eight deaths have saved me from closing the business, and we appear to be solvent for the next four months."

"Well dad, I guess you were right. Nothing but death was able to save the business." Michael says as he now stands up. "No need to wait up for me dad. I've a few friends to visit before the week-end is over."

"Then I'll say good night to you." Tony says as he rises, hugs his son, and departs the office.

Michael departs. Mary is still not home by the time Tony climbs into bed.

Later that night, Tony is awoken by a ringing telephone.

"Harrison Funeral Home, this is Tony. How may I help you?"

"You know, as many times as I call you, I still get a little shiver down my spine when I hear you answer your phone." Doctor Cummings says. "I've got another body for you. This one is a no brainer, autoerotic asphyxia."

"Oh shit." Tony says, glancing at the table clock, which reflects the time of 3:38 a.m.

"Yup. One Brian Jones, nineteen years of age. Discovered by his mother who went into his room to say goodnight. She found him partially suspended by a hanging noose. He was nude, with various eroticica magazines and paraphernalia scattered about.
Poor woman was in hysterics, saying her son would never do anything like this. She also says that her son would never have the type of magazines that were found in his room. Says they had to have belonged to someone else, maybe left by the friends who had visited him earlier in the evening. With all of that said, it still is hard to dispute the evidence." Doctor Cummings says.

"I'm sorry for the mother, having to find her son like that. Michael will be upset as well. Brian was a friend of his."

"Well, what can one do but mourn the dead? Anyway, I see no need for an autopsy, so the sooner you can get here, the sooner you can begin the preparations. Till then."

Thirty minutes later, Tony is at the coronor's office to claim the body of Brian Jones.

Early the next morning, eating freshly baked biscuits and greasy limp bacon, Tony discusses the death of Brian with his wife and Michael.

"Wow dad, I was just over there last night visiting Brian." Michael says while chewing on a biscuit.

"And you know nothing about the magazines found in his room?" Tony asks as he pours another round of orange juice.

"Dad, come on, face the facts. What teen boy doesn't have some type of skin magazine hidden in his bedroom?" Michael asks.

"I can attest to that!" Mary smirks as she points her finger at Michael, who now laughs.

"Well, I rest my case." Michael laughs. "As mom is my witness, the evidence speaks for itself. Anyways, I have a long drive ahead
of me. I need to get on the road. I love you guys." Michael says as he gets up from the table and hugs both his mother and father.

"And dad, don't forget what I said earlier. I will do anything to help keep the business going."

* * * * *

"Here is a riddle for you. If you were deathly afraid of water, could not swim if your life depended upon it, why would you get into a swimming pool?" Doctor Cummings asks.

"Hell, if it were me, I would never even go near a pool, much less get in one. Why do you ask doc?" Tony replies.

"I got a strange one. I'm thinking I might send this one up to the state lab, let them take a look at this one."

"The state lab? Come on doc, I'm sure you could figure this one out." Tony says.

"Well, this one is a head-scratcher. I got a teen who was found floating in his neighbors swimming pool early this morning. His lungs are full of water, so all indications are that the kid had drowned. Here is what is weird. Both his parents and the neighbors who found the kid all swear that the kid was very much afraid of water, swimming pools and the ocean, lakes and rivers. He was no swimmer, and he had an early accident that involved the Merced River and a badly deflated inner tube when he was about 5 years old. He nearly lost his life, and has not been near water ever since."

"Well, if he was that afraid of water, what the heck was he
doing in his neighbors swimming pool?" Tony asks.

"The police found a note in his pants pocket, indicating that he was to meet someone, away from the prying eyes of his parents." Doctor Cummings says.

"So what, the water in his lungs proves that for whatever reason, this kid gets into the swimming pool?"

"Sure, but not necessarily on his own. You understand the difference? The kid is deathly afraid of water, would he really get into the pool of his own volition? No matter how much of a temptation that was placed in front of him, a naked women perhaps, I don't see this kid getting into the pool."

"But water was found in his lungs, right?" Tony asks.

"Yes! And that might be the key. You see Tony, the lungs and airways will always slowly fill with water if a body is left in water. It would only take a few hours for that to happen. So, no one can really determine if the poor kid was alive, unconscious, or even already dead when he went into the pool, or as I suspect, was placed into the pool."

"You mean he may have been murdered?" Tony whispers.

"Possibly. This is why I want to send the body to the state lab. They have better equipment to do a thorough analysis of a toxicology test."

"You're thinking that maybe someone may have injected this kid with something that may have caused him to be, what, submissive or something like that? Then he was put into the swimming pool to make it look like he drowned?" Tony asks.
"That is exactly what I mean." Doctor Cummings says.

"Wow."

"I agree. Till then."

* * * * * *

Walking into his kitchen a week later, Tony finds his wife
Mary sitting at the breakfast table, a cup of coffee near her
left hand as her right hand holds a book close to her face.

"Must be an interesting book." Tony says as he pours himself a cup of coffee and sits at the table.

"I find this stuff fascinating. Did you know that during a hanging, death is usually instantaneous, but the heart may still be beating for another fifteen minutes?" Mary says without looking at her husband.

"Wow, that is interesting." Tony replies.

"Here is something else. Did you know drowning is a form of asphyxiation?"

Tony chokes on the sip of coffee he was just taking and he begins to cough. Walking over to her husband, Mary begins to pat Tony on his back.

"Are you okay?" Mary asks as she continues to hit Tony's back.

"I'm fine. Really, I'm fine." Tony rasps. "You just took me by surprise."

"Well, are you sure?" Mary asks, looking at Tony.

"Yes. See? I'm good." Tony says as he smiles, then takes a
quick sip of coffee.

"Okay. Are you ready for some breakfast?" Mary asks. "I was thinking maybe some french toast with scrambled eggs." Mary says as she digs in the refrigerator for the makings of a breakfast.

"That sounds great." Tony replies as he picks up the book.

The History of Forensics, is the title of the book. Tony scans the table of contents: autopsies, DNA, asphyxia, drownings, hangings, poisons and toxic gases.

"Mary, where in the world did you get this book?" Tony asks.

"It belongs to Michael. I believe he uses it in one of his classes." Mary replies.

Tony scans a few pages, stopping at the passages that are highlighted with a yellow fluorescent marker. Tony reads about a family that had died from the results of a faulty heater, he scans the highlighted paragraph featuring the fate of some campers who had used a faulty kerosene lantern, each death attributed to carbon monoxide poisoning.

Flipping more pages, the chapter on drowning is also highlighted. Other subchapters deal with accidental drownings, murder via drowning, and the cover up from what appears to be a drowning but is actually a murder.

Tony finds the chapter dealing with toxins and poisons, and he finds a subtitle that is highlighted: injections.

Tony will have to index that one to see what it is. As he flips a few pages, the business phone rings.

"Harrison Funeral Home. This is Tony. How may I help you?"
"Tony, Cummings here. Listen, I just got the tox report back, and you'll never guess what came up."

"Go ahead and tell me doc." Tony says as he flips through the pages of the book.

"The state pathologist spotted it right off. He found a puncture site under the arm on the body, excised the tissue around the injection site, and took blood samples as well. Guess what he found?"

"You got me doc." Tony smiles as he sees Mary setting the breakfast table.

"It is an injectable drug that paralyzes every muscle of the body, prevents all movement, even breathing. Death is from asphyxia. It was once called the perfect murder weapon. This drug is popular with anesthesiologists. After injection, this drug is quickly metabolized by the body and leaves behind very little evidence of its presence. If you have a pen handy, I'll spell it out for you."

"Hang on a sec." Tony says, looking around. Tony spots Mary's purse, opens it and begins to look for a pen. He grabs the first round object his fingers find.

"Okay doc, spell away." Tony says as he uncaps the highlighter.

"S-U-C-C-I-N-Y-L..." Doctor Cummings continues to spell. As Tony writes, the letters begin to appear on the paper as very bright letters, yellow and almost flourescent. Tony looks at the letters on the paper, looks in the book at the highlighted sections, and notices that the colors are the same.

"...C-H-O-L-I-N-E..."
Tony hangs up the phone and looks at Mary, who has been staring at Tony during his conversation with Doctor Cummings.

"Mary, where did you get this highlighter?"

"It belongs to Michael. I found it next to that book when it was on his desk. Why, Tony?" Mary says in a whisper.

"Oh my God Michael, what have you done?" Tony says.

"Tony, what is wrong?" Mary asks as Tony gets up from the table and walks up the stairs.

Tony closes the door as he walks into his office, scans the phone directory on his desk, and picks up the phone. He dials the phone number.

"Hello." Michael says.

"Michael, please tell me you know nothing about... oh shit Michael, what were you thinking?" Tony begins to sob.

"Dad, is everything alright?"

"Michael, I know. I now know everything." Tony whispers. There is silence on the phone.

"Michael, talk to me son. We can work this out, together, you and I."

"Dad, I know how much the business means to you, and I just thought, oh shit dad, I'm really sorry. The last thing I want to do is hurt you."

"Michael, listen to me. The business is nothing, nothing without you in my life. Fuck the business. Just tell me what is going on and how I can help. Please Michael, talk to me." Tony pleads.

"Dad, I'm so sorry. I know how much you want the business to
stay in the family, and maybe we can work something out, but...

"Michael, fuck the business! You are what is important to me. Tell me everything so I can try to figure out what to do."

"Do? Dad, I'm already doing what needs to be done." Michael says in a sad voice.

"Just stop, Michael. You need to stop. Do you understand what I'm saying. Stop while you can. No one suspects a thing."


"What? Mom knows? How can your mother know of this? When did you talk to your mother about all of this?" Tony fumes.

"Dad, mom and I talked about this even before I signed up for my classes. We just did not talk to you about all of this because I did not want to hurt you. I know how much you want me to continue the business, but dad, I'm sorry, it is just not for me."

"Wait, what? Continue the business?" Tony asks, confused.

"Yeah, the business and me changing my major. I'm not taking the courses to become a mortician, dad. I'm taking writing courses. I want to be a writer."

Tony is confused, at first, then he begins to laugh. He holds the phone away from his mouth as both laughter and tears mix together.

"A writer? Oh Michael, if you were here I would take you into my arms and never let you go." Tony cries out.

"So, you're not upset, dad?" Michael asks.

"No son, not at all. My son wants to become a writer."

After a few minutes of intense discussions, both Michael and
Tony hang up the phones, Michael a little confused, Tony a very happy man.

"My son wants to become a writer!" Tony exclaims as he walks into the kitchen. Sitting down at the table, Tony begins to eat his breakfast.

"Now Tony, don't be too upset. Michael and I discussed this and I let it be known that he can do whatever he wants to do, and if that means he wants to write, then by gawd he will write." Mary says as she gets up from the table.

"More eggs, dear?" Mary asks as she places a heaping spoon upon his plate. Tony digs in with gusto.

Mary is sitting at the table next to Tony, the yellow highlighter in her hand, the book open in front of her. She highlights a word that attracts her attention, then slides it in front of Tony.

"What is interesting about this is that, not only can it be injected into the bloodstream, but it can be ingested as well."

Tony stops chewing as he stares at the highlighted word.

SUCCINYL CHOLINE

Tony's throat tightens up, his breathing becomes labored. He tries to raise up from the chair but his body fails him. He cannot move.

"It mixes well with eggs." Mary says with a smile.
SHOWER SHOES
FEDERAL MEDICAL PRISON - PRESENT DAY

Salvatore Gusseppie, according to his very close friends and neighbors, is a made man. Salvatore Gusseppie, according to the Federal Bureau of Prisons is known as inmate 10181065.

Salvatore, or as he is known to all in the medical center as Sal, lives the life of luxury, in comparision to the average inmate in a federal prison. He has a new, cotton-stuffed mattress that measures over 6 inches in thickness, compared to the average inmate mattress of 2 inch foam.

The clothing that gets issued to Sal is brand new, stark white T-shirts and boxers, thick socks, and freshly ironed and creased tan pants and shirts. The average inmate gets yellowed-white t's and boxers, socks which do not match and at least one pair will have holes in them, and the pants and shirts have be reissued to other inmates time and time again.

With either a nod of his head, a snap of his fingers, or a roll of his eyes, if Sal sees something that he wants, he gets it. Most of the time Sal usually gets things without even having to ask for them, from the kitchen he gets 'gifts' of sugar, fresh fruit, onions and bell-peppers, rice, and an extra helping of whatever meat was served during that days meal.

Because of his constant battle with his weight and blood-pressure, Sal is a poster child for getting diabetes. And because Sal does have diabetes, he is able to leave early with those men
who go to the prisons hospital for their insulin injections. Ironically, the hospital sits right next door to the chow hall, where it is might convenient for Sal to just walk into the chow hall instead of going into the hospital.

Sal is usually one of the first inmates served during the meal periods, and that is only if he decides to go to chow, which is usually every meal. Sal loves to eat, that is one of his joys in life. In fact, after Sal enjoys his meal in the chow hall, he is escorted back to his dorm where he is housed, and sits down with his group of friends to enjoy another meal that one of them has prepared. His friends, consisting of a core group of eight men who are faithful only to Sal, always gathers together to make a meal.

Breakfast is usually skipped because Sal, besides loving to eat, also loves to sleep. If Sal is not eating, he is either in his card room with his core of men, or he is sleeping on his thick mattress and new sheets and blankets.

During lunch and dinner, the core group of eight, or as everyone refers to them as the "Eight Balls", of course it is only said behind their backs and never to their faces, the core of eight gather their food stuff and puts together a fine lunch of dinner, with Sal being the guest of the Eight Balls.

* * * * * * *

The dorm that Sal is assigned to reside in consists of sixty-
eight block pods, two men to a pod. The entire dorm is also split down the center, with thirty-four pods to each side.

A pod is an enclosed area made with concrete blocks five feet tall and eleven feet deep and seven and a half feet wide. Each pod contains two metal lockers, one for each inmate that stands side by side and is 60 inches tall and 36 inches wide. There are also two plastic chairs, one for each man, along with a metal bunk bed set, along with one metal desk that measures thirty inches by fourteen inches. There are no doors on the pods.

Everything in the pod is bolted to the concrete floor, except for the plastic chairs.

The dorm also has two sets of bathrooms, one to each side of the dorm, along with a shower room. Each bathroom contains three urinals and three toilets, along with six sinks. The shower room has seven shower stalls and one shower stall for the handicapped inmates.

The dorm also has one small room which consists of a treadmill, a stationary exercise bike and a few floor mats for inmates to use during exercise time. The other small room has a television along with two card tables, and the other small room also has a small television along with two conference tables. The largest room of the dorm has four televisions, two mounted to the walls opposite of each other. One television is designated just for sports, the other for the blacks to enjoy, the third for the hispanic population, and the fourth for the white population.

What is watched on each television, with the exception of the
sports television, is decided upon by majority rules. Or, at least that is the concept because it usually is determined by two or three individuals from each group as to what is watched and when.

When you have over one hundred and thirty-four people (this is when the pod is full) you never know what might happen to the decision of what to watch on television.

And this is why Sal has control over the larger of the two small rooms that contains a television, he uses the one room that has the two conference tables. This large game room is the room Sal and the Eight Balls control. Thus, like the nick name given to Sal's friends, so everyone now calls that room Sal's Command Center, the room where all business involving Sal is conducted.

Besides using the Command Center as an eating establishment with television viewing, Sal also conducts "friendly" card games. Like their counterparts in Las Vegas, Sal's house rarely looses. Sal's house is usually set up to win.

For most prisoners in any prison across the USA, postage stamps is money. One pays one's debts with postage stamps. Now, although each inmate is allowed to purchase only one book of stamps a week from the commissary, (one book=20 stamps) one is never allowed to have in their possession at any one time more than two books of stamps, or a total of forty stamps. And because Sal tends to be an impatient man, when it comes to paying your gambling debts, Sal will not only take all the stamps that are in your possession, but he will also take any commiss-
Commissary consists of everything from instant coffee to ice tea mix, duplexe cookies to saltine crackers, summer hot sausages to tuna packets, shampoo to deodorant. Commissary is the bread and butter for a lot of gamblers. If you cannot pay your debts in stamps, you can pay with commissary.

Each inmate is allowed to buy three hundred and twenty dollars of commissary each month. So, if you were to run your debts into the hundreds, and in some cases into the thousands, you have two ways to pay off your debt, stamps or commissary. If that was not possible, then you usually had two choices, pay the debt off in the way that the holder of your marker deems, or check yourself into protective custody, which means you leave the general population of the prison and are kept locked up twenty-three hours a day everyday until your sentence is over or you are transferred to another prison.

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If your debt runs into the hundreds, Sal will remind those individuals, or he will send one of his Eight Balls to the person as a friendly reminder that the debt is due and payable. If you have stamps, that is great. Sal wants his winnings ASAP. But, if you don't have enough stamps, well Sal will take commissary, because Sal loves to eat. If you don't have enough commissary, Sal will, for a small fee, have his people put money on your
books each month, so that Sal will be able to spend his entire three hundred and twenty on commissary, and you too will get to spend your entire three hundred and twenty dollars on commissary as well, and then turn around and give it all to Sal. Hey, it's his money you're spending!

It is a win win situation for everyone involved. The inmate gets to pay down his debt to Sal, Sal gets to spend all his money and still have commissary coming in from others, which helps keep his store stocked with product, and he continues to make a huge profit in running his store.

Did I forget to mention that Sal runs a store? He stocks all of the commissary he gets from everyone in his locker and his cellees locker as well. For every item you buy from Sal, he expects in return a 50% mark up. So if you buy a candy bar for $1.00, you pay that candy bar along with a bagel or oat & honey bar, which sells for .55 each.

Sal's store is very profitable.

* * * * *

It was a quiet Thursday afternoon when the bus arrived at the prison, bringing new inmates to fill the open bed spaces. The bus brought in an average of forty prisoners a week, some will remain at the medical center, some will go to the psych unit for what is called pre-trial evaluations, while others are only held for over night and transported to other prisons the next day.
Cody Andrews, a young man of twenty-four years of age, was one of the new arriving inmates off the bus that day. He was assigned to Unit H-Pod 118, which is the same unit that Sal lives in. In fact, Sal's pod is number 124, which is directly across from pod 118. Sal has a new neighbor.

Sal loves it when new inmates arrive in his unit, especially new neighbors, because these are all potential customers, which Sal relies on to keep his store profitable, and his gaming table active. New blood always revives the body, Sal likes to say.

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Whenever an inmate is transferred from one prison to another prison, all of his belongings are packed up and shipped, usually AFTER the inmate has been transferred. Once the inmate arrives at his new destination, it will take anywhere from four to fourteen weeks for his own property to arrive. So, during this time period the inmate does not have any of his property, and therefore must buy new supplies from the commissary. Until he does buy things, he has nothing of his own to use, and one of the most cherished items that are greatly missed are shower shoes.

Any inmate worth his weight in gold will never, let me repeat this, WILL NEVER go into a shower stall or shower area without having shower shoes on his bare feet.

Between the fungus that is constantly growing between the tile grout, both on the walls and floor of tile, along with the
copious amounts of piss, phlegm, snot, cum and traces of shit that can be found in any shower stall, one never ventures into the shower area without having shower shoes on.

If, for no reason other than being stupid, one does go into the shower area without shower shoes on, one will very quickly experience a rash of burning, scratchy and flaking skin on the soles of one's feet.

* * * * * *

And this is where Sal's leasing company comes into effect. Because the newly arriving inmates do not have any of their property, Sal will lease to the new inmate, as a token of his good heart and fat wallet, a pair of shower shoes to any inmate needing a pair at the time of their showers.

Sal also leases radios, bowls, cups, and whatever the newly arrived inmate might need until his own property shows up. Sal also sells the idea that if you lease these items from me this week, why you won't have to pay anything until the following week, or until the money shows up on your books, which ever comes first.

Or, you can do him "certain favors" to pay off your debt. After all, a man does have certain needs that have to be cared for.

* * * * * *

And so it was that Sal, being the good neighbor that he pro-
jects for everyone to see, makes his way over to pod 118 and introduces himself to Cody, at which time he explained to Cody how his leasing program works, and the fact that if Cody ever needed anything, Sal also ran a store and would be glad to provide for Cody whatever Cody might need.

"Hey man, I really appreciate your offer, but I really have no need for anything right now." Cody says as he makes his bunk.

"Oh?" Sal answers, a little bewildered.

"Yeah, Lucky me, I was tied up in transit in New York, and my property made it here before I did. So when I was processed through, they already had my property bags ready to go." Cody says as he points to two green duffle bags that had been sitting on the floor beside the lockers.

"So I take it you have shower shoes then?" Sal asks.

"Oh yeah, I do." Cody responds as he leans over and opens one of the duffle bags, and withdraws a pair of shower shoes that immediately grab Sal's attention.

Sal's mouth drops open, as his eyes could not convince his brain that what he was seeing was real. Most shower shoes sold in the commissary are of a rust color, made entirely of a hard plastic, with a weave design to make it look like a basket, and the design of the shower shoe is so cheap that they are prone to snap and break in a very short time.

But the shower shoes that Cody was showing Sal were not rust in color, but a very light gold color. They were not made of plastic, but are a polyurethane foam, which means that these shower
shoes are very flexible, very thick in the sole area which makes them comfortable to wear, and when you put your foot into the shower shoe, they are so pliable it almost feels as if the shoe conforms to your foot.

These shower shoes appear to be a pair of very expensive dress sandals.

"Where did you get these from?" Sal asks, almost in a whisper.

"Oh, these were a sample pair that was sent to the commissary where I once worked at in Herlong." Cody answers.

"Herlong? Where is that?" Sal asks, his eyes still on the shower shoes.

"Northern California, high desert. About fifty miles west of Reno."

"What do you mean a sample pair?" Sal asks.

"Well, to drum up business, a lot of various companies will send in samples of their products, hoping to sell them in the prison stores. Because I worked in commissary, we are usually the first ones to get dibs on new items, or sample items. Because I had the most seniority over everyone else, I had first dibs on these babies once the commissary committee rejected them."

"Rejected them? Why? They really look like they are so comfortable." Sal says, still eyeing the shower shoes.

"Oh yeah, they are really comfortable. In fact, when I get off work or I'm just lounging in the unit, I don't wear tennis shoes like everyone else does, I wear these puppies."
"So why were they rejected if they are so good?" Sal asks.

"The cost. Most of the shower shoes sold in most commissaries go for what, about three bucks?"

Sal nods his head in the affirmative.

"These were going to cost over twelve dollars. So the committee rejected them, saying most inmates won't pay that amount for a pair of shower shoes. But trust me when I say this, if any of them had just tried the shoes, everyone on that compound would have bought at least one pair, if not two." Cody says. "I really love 'em."

Reaching out to grab the shower shoes, Sal asks, "Would you be interested in selling them?"

"Oh, no way man. I've had these shoes for over eight years. I mean look at 'em, they still look brand new, don't they?" Cody says.

Sal was fingering the soft foam heel, looking at the quality of the single formed, no seam shoe. Cody is right, Sal thinks to himself, they do look brand new, and damn if these shoes are not soft. Except for the five digit number that is written in black permanent marker, these shoes would appear to be new.

Cody was very smart in marking his inmate number on the shoes. Because the commissary sells the same style of everything to everyone, the only way for an inmate to make discernable his property, he usually writes his inmate number somewhere on that item, and he usually uses a permanent marker.

But that number can be obliterated, Sal thinks to himself.

"Anyway, it was nice meeting you." Cody says as he takes the shower shoes out of Sal's hands and slides them under his bunk.
Sal feels a surge of anger rise up in his body as Cody takes the shower shoes away from him. Eyeing the golden shower shoes once more, Sal fakes a smile at Cody and walks away with only one thought in his mind, I want them shoes.

* * * * * *

Later that night as Sal and the Eight Balls were gathering for dinner, Sal blurts out, "I want them fuckin' shower shoes!" The Eight Balls look at each other, wondering what Sal is talking about.

"Wadda ya mean boss?" one of the Eight Balls asks.

"The new fish in 118. He has a pair of shower shoes that I want." Sal whispers.

"You got em." another of the Eight Balls says.

* * * * * *

As Cody continues to store his property, a large man stops in front of the pod and stares at Cody.

"Who the fuck are you and what the fuck are you doin'?" the deep voice asks.

"I'm unpacking." Cody says without looking at the voice.

"Well, fuck-face, start packing back up, cuz you ain't stayin' in this pod."

Cody, knowing one of the first rules of prison life is to
show no fear or you will be eaten alive, turns to the source of the voice and asks, "And who the fuck are you?"

The very large man, not used to being spoken to like this, takes a step back and eyes Cody. He sees a six foot dirty blond haired young man with a firm jaw-line, blue eyes that bore into your own soul, and a firmly tones muscular frame that appears to spend some time working out.

"I live here." answers the large man, who himself stand a few inches taller than Cody with a mop of black hair atop a very large skull that holds two tiny beady black eyes, a days worth of stubble on the jaw line, and massive shoulders that holds up the large head. Tree trunks make up the legs along with tree branches for arms, along with catcher mitt hands.

Cody looks the man over, then smiles. A very wide smile.

"What the fuck ya smirkin' at?" the tree asks.

"Do you have a brother that goes by the nickname of Babs?"

The tree blinks his beady eyes a few times, then says in a gruff voice, "What of it?"

Cody sticks his hand out in the handshake gesture and says, "My name is Cody, but your brother nicknamed me Golden Boy."

A light blinks on in the big tree and he takes a step closer to Cody.

"You're Golden Boy? You were the asshole that helped get him his GED." the tree says as he lunges forward and grabs Cody in a bear hug, effectively lifting Cody off the ground.

"Whoa, whoa slow down big guy." Cody says laughing as the
tree now drops Cody and grabs his hand into the large mitts.

"It's nice to know ya man. Bab's has told me all about you. He said you were the best cellie he has ever had in all the time that he's been down. How weird it is that I got you as a cellie now, huh? Oh, I'm Tony, but everyone calls me Gags."

"Yeah, I know. Babs and Gags. Your brother was the blabber and you were the gagger. Your mother gave you those nicknames because your brother would always tell on you, and you would always try to stop him by gagging him." Cody says with a smile on his face.

"That's it!" Tony laughs.

"Yo, Gags." a voice speaks up behind Tony. Tony turns and faces a well-built man in his mid-forties. "Mr. G sends his regards. Do you mind if I have a few words with your cellie?"

"What do you want, Louie?" Tony asks quickly.

Just a minute of your cellie's time, then I'm outta here."

Tony stands aside and allows Cody to step out of the pod.

Louie gestures for Cody to step to the side of the pod. Cody does.

"Mr. G., who sends his greetings, would like to know how much you'll be taking for those shower shoes. Mr. G. is ready to pay whatever your asking price is."

"Sorry dude, but first off, I don't know a Mr. G. and second, my shower shoes are not for sale. At any price."

Louie steps closer to Cody and says, "I understand you're new here, so maybe you don't understand the importance of what I just said. Mr. G. wants to buy your shower shoes."
Cody now leans in close to Louie and whispers, "I may be new here, but I think you're not understanding me. My shower shoes are not for sale. Period!"

Cody walks away from Louie, leaving him out in the hallway that effectively circles the pods. Cody enters his pod, then glances back at Louie, who just nods at Cody, then walks away.

"Trouble?" Tony asks.

"Naw. Some dude wants to buy my shower shoes. I don't know who Mr. G. is, but I had a guy named Sal in here earlier also wanting to buy my shower shoes."

Pointing to the pod across from them, Tony says, "Mr G. and Sal are one in the same. He is our neighbor. When it comes to Sal, you best watch your P's and Q's. If he wants your shower shoes, he will find a way to get them." Tony whispers the last sentence.

"But Tony, they are just shower shoes!" Cody says.

"First things first. Call me Gags. Second, keep this in your mind. When it comes to Sal, if he puts his mind to something that he wants, no matter how trivial it may seem, he will find a way to get what he wants. And, most of the time, the other person he may be dealing with usually comes out with the shorter straw." Gags says.

"Damn." Cody says as he sits on his bunk.

* * * * *

Over the course of a few weeks, Cody adjusts to his new
routine that he has developed on a daily basis. He is up at 5:30 a.m., eats breakfast at 6:30 a.m. when the chow hall opens, goes to work as an orderly at 7:30 a.m., eats his noon meal a little after 11:30 a.m. Back to work at 12:30 p.m., then off at 3:30 p.m. In his pod for the 4:00 p.m. count, dinner after 5:00 p.m. and free time until the 8:30 p.m. recall, requiring all inmates to return to their pods to get ready for the 10:00 p.m. pre-bed count.

In prison, there are two types of counts. One is called a census count, which during the week is done at 8:30 a.m. This is when all inmates who are not at work, or at the library, or at recreation, are required to return to their pods and be counted. You do not have to stand up for the census count. The purpose of this census count is to assure prison officials that all inmates who are assigned jobs are indeed at their job, and not in the pod sleeping. If someone were found to be in the pod when they should be at work, they are considered to be "out of bounds", or some place they are not supposed to be. It is also done at 12:30 p.m.

Being out of bounds could be considered a serious charge, and one could end up being placed in the SHU, which stands for Special Housing Unit, aka The Hole.

While in the SHU you are required to wear an orange jumpsuit 24/7 and you are confined to a two man cell 23 hours a day. You are allowed an hour a day to go out to the caged in grass area for some sun, but even this is not guaranteed to happen. This punishment can last anywhere from a month to three months.
The second type of count is the mandatory stand up count. During this count, everyone must be standing on their feet, no talking, no radios playing, everyone must be quiet. This is done at 4:00 p.m. and 10:00 p.m., prior to lights out. This count is two-fold; one, is helps the officers count quickly and efficiently by being able to see two grown men standing in a pod, and secondly, it shows that the inmate is alive and well.

During the lock down, or sleeping period, there are three non-standing counts; one at midnight, one at 3:00 a.m. and the last one at 5:00 a.m. During these counts, one cannot be buried under their blankets without some type of human flesh showing, i.e. an head uncovered, an arm outside the blankets, etc.

If your body is completely covered, you can expect the officer to be banging on your cell door until you uncover and show yourself to the officer. It also proves that you're still alive!

* * * * * *

And so it was that Cody and Gags were standing for the bedtime count while the officers were walking the unit, counting inmates. Cody happened to glance over towards Sal when he spotted Louie, who was winking at Cody, then Louie points to Cody's shower shoes and does a 'give them to me' gesture.

Cody winks back at Louie and flips him the finger.

Louie frowns. Sal smiles. Cody smiles back.

"You know I got your back in any situation cellie. I just
gotta remind you not to antagonize Sal." Gags says as he prepares to crawl into bed.

"I know man, but it just chaps my hide to think that Sal thinks he can have anything he sets his mond to." Cody says.

"I hear ya bro. Just watch your back, okay?"

"I will. Thanks Gags." Cody says as he climbs into his upper bunk.

Early the next morning, Cody wakes up to find his blanket is covered in mustard. Gobs of the stuff is completely covering his blanket, his top sheet and parts of his pillow case.

Louie is standing at the entrance of his pod, his penis in his hand, laughing. "You want a hot dog with all that mustard?" Louie laughs as he wags his penis. Sal is sitting towards the rear of his pod, a smile on his face.

Cody carefully makes his way down from the bunk, gathers his sheets and blankets, pillow case and a box of washing powder, and heads to the washing machines that are located in the unit.

Over the course of a few weeks, Cody has had to endure a variety of hardships, waking up to find all types of condiments spread across his bed, coming back from work to find puddles of urine around his locker, a pile of shit in his pods trash can, or his clothes missing from their hanging places.

All because Sal wants the shower shoes Cody possesses. Louie has now convinced Sal that all of the little tricks have not worked, so maybe it was time to get physical with Cody.

Sal agrees.
While on his way out to the recreation yard, Cody was bumped from behind and shoved into the wall. Louie, who has a smile on his face, turns to Cody and says, "Oh, sorry."

While Cody was running the track, two guys whom Cody did not know pushed Cody off of the track, where he landed on the grassy area that surround the track.

Both men laughed as they kept on running. Cody stayed in the grass, thinking.

One code of prison is that you never go running to the officers complaining of someone else, or telling on someone. One shalt not snitch! You will then be labeled as a rat, and once labeled, it will always follow you, no matter what prison you go to. Keep in mind, there are others who are always transferred from prison A to prison B and some to prison C who has served time with you, and knows all about you. In prison, rats do not last long.

If you have a problem with someone, the expectation is that you will call out that person and handle it mano a mano. And when the bruises and black eyes are noticed by officers, your pat answer is always, oops I slipped.

So Cody was working on a plan to confront both Sal and Louie, and as he made his way back to the unit, he was still on par with what he could do. As he made his way to his pod, two correctional officers confronted him. One was the Captain of the
officers. This was bad news.

"You Cody Andrews, upper bunk in 118?" the Captain asks.

"Yup." Cody says.

"Put your hands to your back and face the wall." the Captain says as he cuffs up Cody's wrists. "You're under arrest for having in your possession a weapon."

Without saying another word, two other officers come from out of Cody's pod, holding a short piece of very sharp metal. This is famously known as a shank.

The Captain tells the two officers, "Take him to the SHU. I'll take the weapon." and he roughly shoves Cody towards the outstretched arms of the two officers.

"Bye bye punk." Louie says as he smiles and waves at Cody. Sal is standing behind Louie, looking a little green around the gills and a frown on his pale face.

* * * * * *

After spending more than five months in SHU, Cody was a little surprised when the officer came to his cell and said he was being released. According to the officer, after a lengthy investigation, it was finally decided that the shank found under Cody's bed was planted there by a person or persons unknown at that time. However, after reviewing the tapes that are kept for ninety days from the cameras that are found throughout the dorm, it was very evident that one Louie Polano and Anthony Luggio were seen entering Cody's pod, lifting the mattress and placing an
object under said mattress.

Plus, when the kite, which is known as a note delivered by an unknown source, was read, it told of a shank being seen under the mattress of Cody in 118, it was finally determined that it was all a ruse to get Cody into trouble.

All charges were dismissed, and Cody was released back to his dorm, were he was reassigned to pod 118.

* * * * * *

Cody was somewhat surprised to find Gags lying on his lower bunk, a pair of headphones covering his ears, his eyes closed while his feet moved to the beat of the music he was listening to. Cody thought Gags would be at work.

Gags, upon noticing the shadow that crossed his closed eyes, immediately opened them, spotted Cody standing near his bunk, and jumped up and grabbed Cody into a bear hug.

"Man have I got a story to tell you!" Gags blurts out in excitement, along with a short chuckle.

"Okay, tell me your story that has you in all smiles." Cody says as he begins to unpack his belongings.

Whenever anyone goes into the SHU, their belongings are always packed up and taken into storage. This does two things: A-it protects the inmates property from being stolen by other inmates, and B-in case the inmate is transferred to another institution, which happens a lot when you get taken to the SHU, your
property is already packed and ready to be shipped out.

Thus the reason Cody was unpacking his property.

"Well, first of all, you'll be glad to hear that both Louie and Anthony are the newest members of the SHU brigade. They got picked up about a week ago. From what I understand, Anthony was escorted to the Captain's office, and after a few hours of conversation, troopers came in to handcuffed Louie and took him away. So, it looks as if Anthony may have ratted out Louie. I hear they both look dashing in their orange jumpsuits." Gags says with a smile.

"Well, all I can say is, orange is not my favorite color." Cody says as he digs into his gear, looking for something.

"So, that day that they busted you with the shank, everyone knew it was planted by Louie. There were a few eyes who saw him and Anthony hanging around our pod, and from what I hear, someone actually dropped a kite on them. Anyways, when the CO (Correctional Officer) came to pack out your belongings, he had just opened your locker when some of the Eight Balls started a fight to distract the CO. When the CO left the pod to go see about the fight, the goons started to explain to the CO that it was not a fight, just a friendly slap-fest, they were just playing around. This allowed the time for Louie to come in and snatch your shower shoes. The CO comes back, not knowing what happened, and he then packs out all of your stuff."

"Shit, thats why I can't find my shower shoes in my gear. The bitches got them already." Cody says sadly.
Gags grabs a soda, offers one to Cody, who grately accepts one, and after taking a huge swallow, Gags continues with his story.

"After they took you to the SHU, Sal said he wasn't feeling too well, so they took him to the hospital. You know he is diabetic, and he was having problems with his feet. They had told him before that because of his diabetes he has real poor blood circulation that always affects the feet first, then works up the legs and so on. Anyways, Louie is pacing the floor waiting for Sal to return. One day, then two, then a week goes by, no Sal. Then a few weeks and they come out and after they handcuff Louie, they come in and pack out his shit. So the pod sits empty, but Sal is still assigned to that pod. Anyways, after like seven weeks, guess who comes rolling back to the pod?"

"Oh gee, lemme guess. Duh...Sal?" Cody says with sarcasm in his voice.

"Ding ding ding ding. You win the stuffed pig! Sal is back on the compound. Rumors were flying back and forth that he was in court fingering his buddies, but he was really at the hospital. And he really was cause you gotta see him to believe it." Gags says as he jumps up from his bunk. Laughing, he grabs Cody by the arm and says to him, "Come on. I want you to see this for yourself."

Gags pulls Cody out of the pod, down the hallway and they both make their way into the large television room. Pointing to the far corner of the room, Gags says, "Get a load of that."

Cody looks over and spots an old man slumped over in
what looks like a wheelchair.

"Is that Sal sitting in a wheelchair?" Cody asks quietly.

"Yup. But take a closer look. Tell me what you see." Gags says with a short giggle.

Cody looks, takes a few steps closer to Sal to get a better look, then gasps. Cody steps back to Gags, who has a big smile on his face, and says in wonderment, "What the fuck happened to Sal? I mean, look at him!"

"The fucker is dying. The docs give him less than three months. But its all his fault. They have been warning Sal for years that if he don't get his diabetes under control, he was gonna get real bad, and the first sign of real bad is losing your feet. They had to amputate both feet to stop the spread of whatever he has going on in him. But it was too late. The man is basically on his deathbed."

Gags breaks out into a fit of laughter as he leads Cody back to their pod. Upon entering the pod, Gags goes to his locker, unlocks it, and withdraws a pair of shower shoes that had once belonged to Cody.

"Here ya go Golden Boy. Your golden shower shoes."

"Damn, thanks Gags." Cody says with a smile.

"Hey, if ya got no feet, you got no need for shower shoes!"
STUPID CAT
Artie has a new job. Artie had a job, but he finished it, which is why Artie now has a new job. Artie likes new jobs. He hates when he finishes a new job, because it then becomes an old job, which means Artie must then look for a new job.

Artie hates looking for new jobs. Artie hates a lot of things. Like cats. Artie hates cats, in fact, out of everything that Artie hates, he hates cats the most. Artie has hated cats all throughout his life.

Artie thinks it is from his childhood, when as a two year old he was badly scratched by an old tom cat that Artie tried to hug.

What a stupid cat.

Artie's mind wanders a lot. It is funny how Artie's mind wanders. But Artie cannot allow his mind to wander right now. Artie has a new job to do. Artie has been paid ten thousand dollars up front, with a balance of fifteen thousand dollars to be paid when the job is done. Twenty-five thousand dollars for eight hours of work. Damn!

Earlier in the evening, while the woman was at work, Artie had brought an old sleeping bag, a backpack filled with four plastic bottles of water, four power bars, and a package of five-piece banana flavored bubble gum, and hid all of these items in the woman's back yard. Yum yum, banana flavored gum.

Artie likes banana flavored gum.

Artie thinks it is from his childhood, when as a seven year old he was trying to sneak bananas out of the kitchen. The old
tom cat followed Artie into the kitchen, and as all cats do, the cat begin to meow loudly, demanding to be fed. The constant meowing of the old tom brought Artie's mother into the kitchen, catching Artie stealing bananas.

Artie was punished. The cat was fed.

What a stupid cat.

Artie's mind wanders a lot. It is funny how Artie's mind wanders. But Artie cannot allow his mind to wander right now. Artie has a new job to do. Artie was given the woman's work schedule, which she followed to the "T" on a weekly basis. A late breakfast, arrive at work at noon, lunch at three, then dinner at six. Off work at eight and home for the night at nine. Watch the news at ten, David Letterman later, then in bed to fall asleep by one a.m.

Death will be at three.

Artie was told the method of death would be left up to him. Shooting is very quick, but noisy. Stabbing is good, but that tends to get messy, especially with all of the blood. Strangulation is best. Artie thinks that is very 'hands on'. Artie wonders if, while strangling the woman, will she kick her legs around and scratch with her nails the same way the cats did when Artie strangled them?

Their small eyes bulged out, their hind legs kicking, their claws scratching.

Artie likes to strangle cats.

Artie thinks it is from his childhood, when as a ten year
old he tried to enact his revenge on the old tom cat by attempt-
ing to strangle it. But the old tom, a wise old cat, began hiss-
ing and making strange growling noises, hell the old tom was mak-
ing such a fuss that Artie's mother came into his room to see
what all the commotion was about. Artie was caught.

Artie got punished. The old tom escaped from the room.

What a stupid cat.

Artie's mind wanders a lot. It is funny how Artie's mind
wanders. But Artie cannot allow his mind to wander right now. Artie
has a new job to do. Artie feels his legs beginning to cramp up,
so he changes his sitting position on the sleeping bag. Artie
checks the time on his wrist, the watch that has luminous numbers.

Not time yet.

Artie reaches over and grabs a power bar, unwraps it and
bites into it, his teeth sinking into the gooey mess. Artie loves
how the sweetness of the chocolate mingles with the saltiness of
the peanut butter, and damn if the honey-coated oats don't awaken
the taste buds in Artie's mouth. Damn!

Artie likes the word damn.

Artie thinks it is from his childhood, when as a twelve year
old, his hormones raging throughout his developing body, Artie
would get an erection no matter which way the wind was blowing.
And most of the time the wind didn't need to blow for Artie to
get an erection.

Take his neighbor Anna for example.

Artie was spying on the twenty-four year old while Anna was
swimming laps in her backyard pool. Artie had his eye next to the knot that was in the wooden fence that separated their yards. Anna got out of the pool and decided to work on her tan. Her lineless, all over nude body tan. No bikini for Anna. All nude! Damn!

By this point Artie had dropped his pants and grabbed his joint. Anna's cat, walking along the fence, began to meow at the presence of Artie. Anna, looking over at her cat to see what the problem was, walked over to where the cat was near the fence. Anna began to coo sweet nothings to her cat. Artie began stroking his joint as Anna got nearer.

Anna grabbed her cat, then noticed Artie. Anna began screaming, the cat was howling, Artie was still stroking.

Artie's mother, hearing Anna screaming, came out to investigate. Artie was caught with his pants around his ankles.

Artie was punished. Anna's cat was hugged next to Anna's bare bosom. The cat purred.

Damn, what a stupid cat.

Artie's mind wanders a lot. It is funny how Artie's mind wanders. But Artie cannot allow his mind to wander right now. Artie has a new job to do. Artie removes a piece of paper from his pocket. Drawn on the paper is the floor plan of the woman's house.

The drawing shows the master bedroom as being at the north corner of the house. The kitchen is at the south corner of the house. The woman will never hear Artie when he goes into the
kitchen. Artie is very sneaky.

Artie likes being sneaky.

Artie thinks it is from his childhood, when as a sixteen year old he snuck over to Anna's house. It was late at night, Artie was just in his underwear as he snuck up close to the window of Anna's bedroom. Artie wanted to see Anna naked as she prepared to get undressed for bed. As Artie stepped closer to the window for a better view, something began to screech so loud that Artie literally froze in his steps.

Anna's cat, whose tail Artie continues to stand on, begins howling and screeching, the claws scratching at Artie's legs. Anna, hearing her cat in distress, turns to the window and now begins to scream at the sight of the near nude Artie outside of her window, his hand down his underwear.

Anna's parents, hearing the commotion, calls the police. Artie was arrested and taken to jail. The cat was taken to the vets office and kept overnight.

What a stupid cat.

Artie's mind wanders a lot. It is funny how Artie's mind wanders. But Artie cannot allow his mind to wander right now. Artie has a new job to do. Artie once again looks at his watch. Two-forty five a.m. Wow. Time really flies when you let your mind wander.

Artie rolls up his old sleeping bag, shoves the empty water bottles and bar wrappers into the backpack. The banana flavored gum Artie puts into his pocket. As Artie walks to the rear gate
of the yard that leads out to the alley so that he can stash his
gear, a large tabby cat jumps out in front of Artie, causing Artie
to scream out in surprise. The cat hisses at Artie and bounds away
towards the rear of the house.

This is why Artie hates cats so much. They just suddenly show up when you least expect them. They are always scaring you. So, that would make them scaredy cats!

Artie laughs at his own joke.

Quickly walking to the kitchen door, Artie inserts the key he was given into the key slot, then slowly turns the key to the left. Unlocking the door, Artie slowly opens the door, which suddenly jerks open as if someone pushed against it.

Artie stops, then he walks in.

Closing the door behind him, Artie allows a few minutes for his eyes and ears to adjust to the sights and sounds of the kitchen: the low hum of the refrigerator, the bright green numbers on the microwave that is sitting on a marble counter, it's colon, which sits between the hour and minute numbers, is flashing every second.

As Artie waits and looks around, he unwraps the five pieces of gum and shoves each chunk into his mouth. Within a minute the chunks turn into a fist-sized viscous wad, which now occupies Artie's wandering mind as he chews and chews, slurping the copious amounts of saliva now present in his mouth, produced as a result of the sweet yet tart flavor of the banana gum.

Artie likes chewing gum and blowing bubbles. As his mind
continues to wander, Artie unconsciously blows a bubble.

POP!

A cat shrieks. Artie jumps at the sound of the cat, kicking over a stainless bowl of water that is sitting on the floor, spilling the contents. As Artie twists his body trying to regain his balance, his foot slips in the water.

Artie begins to fall, his sight now registering the fact that his head is going to hit against that marble counter. As his head does indeed strike the marble counter, the downward momentum snaps Artie's neck.

Shocked at the breaking vertebra, Artie takes a deep gulp of air, forcing the sticky gum to lodge in his esophagus, effectively blocking his airway.

Artie lies on the floor paralyzed.

A tabby cat comes and sits in front of Artie, watching Artie as Artie begins to choke to death.

The tabby cat seems to be smiling.

What a stupid Artie.
THE VIP
I am the VIP.

I have a very important performance slated for tonight that I just cannot be late for. In fact, my attendance is so important to the state of Texas that they have reserved for me this very exclusive VIP Suite, along with a staff at my beck and call for the remainder of the night.

If I mentioned a few names of past celebrities who have had the privilege of using this VIP Suite, and let's be clear on this fact, we all THINK we are VIP's, I'm sure you would recognize a few of the names.

But, since I am not a name dropper, I won't bore you.

However, I will give you a behind the curtain look at some of the perks of using this suite. For example, just this morning, I was awoken with the assistance of very bright lights shining into my eyes, with a loud voice announcing the arrival of my breakfast. I was not surprised when I was served one of my favorite morning meals that I've dine on for, if not most of my life, at least the last twenty-five years of it.

Hot oatmeal, skim milk, cold toast, no butter thank you, with luke-warm instant coffee with two of those pink packets of sugar.

What is also nice is the fact that the staff is well aware of the importance of my attending the program that is set for tonight. All have been given a schedule of the timely activities that are to
take place, and the appropriate time that I am to make my appearance. Because I am the VIP, the staff is to do everything in their power to see that I arrive on time.

We are on a tight schedule:

After eating breakfast, I was allowed a few hours to rest. I was a little nervous about tonight, so my advisors told me to just take a few hours to myself, maybe take some time to reflect on my past accomplishments and what is in store for my future. I come to the conclusion that if not for my past life, I would not be here to perform tonight.

Nothing in my childhood stands out that would indicate my being here for the main performance. I can recall a few events that would be a precursor to activities in my adult life. And I do remember that one time that also solidified the fact that indeed I would be able to attend tonight's performance as the main star.

11:52 A. M.

Ah, room service has just arrived with my afternoon meal. My mouth waters as the porter sets up the dining area. Alas, my meal is piping hot. I tell the porter to give my regards to the chef and the kitchen staff. He gives me the one finger salute on the sly, thinking I did not see. Good help now-a-days is really hard to find.

After the porter has left, I dig into the fried chicken, mashed potatoes with chicken gravy, green beans, whole wheat bread with one pat of butter, and a tall glass of iced-tea.
And for dessert, M & M cookies!

As I enjoy my meal, I make a mental note to let the staff here know how much I appreciated their efficiency and friendliness. Well, except for the porter, of course!

Reviewing my time spent here regarding the staff, boy they sure could give a few lessons to those so-called five-star establishments when it comes to efficiency. Speaking of efficiency, the porter appears in front of my door just as I take my last bite of my cookie. While he is clearing out the dishes, a barber appears at my door.

"Ready for your haircut?" he asks.

I sit in the only chair that is available to me as he preps his equipment. Sitting very quietly, I await the barber and his tools. It is within minutes that the barber has delivered to me not only a nice haircut, but a very clean, very close shave as well. The barber and I both have a laugh as he refers to my cut as 'The House Special'.

Oh, the porter returns, and boy does he have a scowl on his face. A large man is also with him, apparently his supervisor. It seems that the porter forgot to retrieve the knife that I had used on my chicken. Well, you can't blame me for wanting to keep a souvenir, can you? I mean, everyone does it, right?

This is just a reminder to me of how efficient and cognizant the staff is regarding their utensils. Other eating establishments can take lessons in avoiding the loss of such utensils. Such diligence should be rewarded.

Since I have a few hours to kill, oops, I'm sorry, I was just
told that saying is not welcome in these parts. My bad, sorry. Anyway, since I have a few hours before our scheduled performance is to begin, some of the staff members suggest that I do a little reading. A copy of the Holy Bible is given to me, but I prefer to read the local paper instead.

As I scan the front page of the paper, I note that my scheduled performance for tonight is a featured item. How nice, I made the front page. Mom would be so proud!

After a few minutes of reading, a knock sounds near my door. I look up and a rather older, regal-looking gentleman appears holding my favorite navy-blue double-breasted wool suit with thin grey pinstripes. He also has my sky-blue oxford shirt, my silk grey tie and the black wingtips that I am to wear after my performance tonight. A very smart ensemble, especially how it will contrast my pale skin and ocean-green eyes. Don't ask me why, but the producers of tonight's show insists that I wear the clothing that they have provided for me. Hey, free clothes!

After my performance tonight, I will be one dashing figure.

While the tailor is adjusting the fit of my suit, he whispers to me that a rather large group of reporters is already assembled in the lobby of the staging area. He even thinks CNN has a crew here as well.

Oh, and the man also informs me that the governor may even put in a call regarding my performance tonight. How exciting. Thus the reasons for my looking the best. There is nothing more lasting than making a good impression.

As the tailor finishes his adjustments, I notice a man that is standing at my door. He appears to be holding a Bible, along with a
rosary. He must be one of those door to door preachers, I forget what they are called, some kind of witness or something. Now there is a word I hate, witness.

Anyway, I really have nothing against people of the faith going door to door to preach their faith. I just have no room in my life right now for such things.

I myself have a basic understanding with God. He stays out of my life, and I won't try to run the universe. I am very polite when I explain this to the preacher man. There really is nothing he can do for me.

Sins? Forgive my sins? Preacher, I say quietly, you cannot forgive me of my sins. You are a sinner yourself. Where in the Bible does it say that I must go to a sinner like yourself to confess my sins to and to ask for forgiveness?

How can a sinner forgive a sinner of their sins? This has never made much sense to me. So, thank you preacher, but as you can see, I just don't have the will nor the time to speak with you. I have a performance to prepare for tonight, so I can't be wasting my time with you.

What is that? You'll want to be there tonight? I'm sorry, I smile as I say, I don't have any free tickets on me. Perhaps you can see the concierge and make arrangements with him. I wink.

No, thank you and God bless you as well.

5:47 P. M.

Dinner has arrived! What perfect timing, but then, what do you
expect from such an efficient staff?

I was given the privilege of ordering filet mignon, home-fried potatoes, corn with butter, parker house dinner rolls, with butter and honey, I might add, and for desert, a pint of pistachio ice cream.

I turn on the table radio for a little background music while I dig into this scrumptious meal. I mean, it is not everyday that you eat filet mignon. Am I right? And so, because this is a special meal, I plan on taking my time and really savor the flavor.

Wait, what? I need to hurry? What, you want me to get indigestion by eating so fast? But I just started to savor the flavor! Yes, I do understand we are on a tight schedule tonight, but sheesh, its dinner! Yes, I also understand the importance of starting on time, but damn, we have over six hours to kill, oops sorry, pass.

Well, let me remind you that the show cannot start WITHOUT me! Muh! Okay, okay, I'll stop blabbing and finish eating. Sheesh! All of a sudden everyone is in a rush.

Ah, the porter has arrived to clear out my dishes. I smile as I yell out, "Hey, don't forget to count the silverware!"

11:42 P. M.

Whoa, who are all these guys? My escorts? Oh, okay. Eight, count em, eight beefy bodyguards are escorting me to the staging area. Man, I think this VIP treatment is really gonna kill me. As we walk to the main stage, I see people take a quick glance at me, then shyly look away. Fans, you can never tell how they'll react!
Prior to the curtain being raised, certain steps are taken to ensure a flawless performance. I am directed to the center of the stage, where everyone handles me in such a way that I am very secure in my surroundings.

Everyone must be nervous because they all keep telling me to just relax, it'll be over real soon. Just take a few deep breaths to clear my head, and it will be as if I'm falling asleep.

They part the curtains. Oh look, I see the preacher is able to attend. Good for him. As the director of the performance steps near my outstretched left arm, I have to ask the only question that has been bugging me for years.

"Why, prior to my execution, do you swab my arm with alcohol before you stick the needle in?"