

Inmate

By Myra Sherman

On the job, Harry could almost convince himself he was the real deal. Dressed in discounted Brooks Brothers, hair styled to enhance the wave; he grabbed everyone's eye, the sharpest detective in homicide with a great career and a wife who looked like Cameron Diaz.

It was Alicia who convinced him to get rid of the Armani knockoffs, to trade his pinstripe poly-blends for subtle wool plaids. They'd only been together a few months when she took him to Figueroa Street for a new wardrobe. And when they got home that day, he'd surprised her with the fancy little woman's pistol she wanted, a 9mm Beretta Vertec.

But he couldn't convince himself at 3:00am. Not after guzzling Glenlivet for hours, getting jittery instead of juiced, waiting for Alicia to come home, doubting himself and their marriage.

So where the fuck is she?

Like I don't know she's off-shift at midnight?

Married three years and going down fast. Especially since Alicia went to swing shift.

Cares more about being a supervisor...

He was in the bedroom, still in the pleated-front tan gabardine slacks he'd worn to work, his leather harnessed pistol on the bedside table next to the Detective Dalglish he'd been reading, sitting with his back against the headboard of the Amalfi canopy bed Alicia had insisted on, half watching CNN--

The next day around the globe, October 7th... Goddamn Iraq, Afghanistan, Israel, whoever...don't identify with that scene and never will...ain't no soldier like my father, no liberal like my mother, don't give a fucking, flying shit for politics...got enough troubles of my own...

--when he heard tapping on the oak parquet floor...

Heels in the ER, fuck no way,

3:00am, fuck no way.

Perfume...jasmine, musk, pomegranate...

Not in the ER, fuck no way.

Sweat, creamy raw potato, chlorine...sex smells.

Alicia, with her two-tone blonde hair half-up, half-down, wearing low rise bell-bottoms, a crocheted black cropped sweater, showing off her ruby studded gold belly-ring.

Ruby earrings for Valentine's, matching body jewelry like she wanted for her birthday.

"Harry, you up?"

"You're fucking late."

"Don't like a taste of your own medicine?"

"It's 3am."

"Drop it."

"And if I don't?"

“Fuck off.”

“Bitch, I could kill you.”

“You don’t have the balls.”

“Fucking cunt.”

“You don’t have the balls.”

Not their first fight, but one of many.

Not their longest fight, but the last.

Six days in the small concrete-walled room that stank from the toilet, body odor and stale greasy food. But what bothered Harry most was the narrow, lumpy, stick-to-your-skin vinyl coated mattress, planted on the steel wall-mounted bunk like a rotting fungus.

Shit, don’t want to be up...

Dark module...

Glaring night light...

Cold room...

Giving up on sleep, Harry reached under the mattress and pulled out a yellow legal-sized notepad. Ms. Penney, his lawyer, gave it to him on her last visit. When he was still in protective custody at the Men’s Central Jail, in downtown L.A. and couldn’t quite believe what was happening to him.

“I have to know everything about that night. Even if you don’t remember the details now, you will. Just write it all down,” she’d said. “And whatever else you think will help. People who knew both of you, character witnesses, anything.”

Grey-blond old fashioned hairdo, dowdy clothes, an American Miss Marple...

Harry wasn’t impressed, especially with so much at stake. Even if his Lieutenant said she was good.

“I don’t know about having some tired old white woman,” Harry told Lt. Palmers.

Black man to black man, brother to brother.

This is my life we’re talking about, my fucking life.

“Trust me on this,” Palmers advised. “She’s just what you need.”

He’d tried to write, but couldn’t. Not during his three week lockup in L.A. or the six days he’d spent in Franklin County. Except for the homemade calendar he’d devised, the notepad was empty.

With his one allotted pencil, he checked off November 7th on the calendar and returned the notepad to its place under the mattress.

Already a whole month since Alicia...

No, don’t go there

Do anything not to.

He put his kiss-ass extra blanket on the floor, no way was he going to touch his body to those stained filthy floor tiles, and started his morning workout. Three times a day no matter what—fifty pushups, a hundred crunches and jogging in place for fifteen minutes.

Harry was halfway through his workout when he heard the graveyard deputy approaching.

Jangling keys...

Squeaky footsteps...

Stomach crunches—seventy-nine, eighty, eighty-one—muscles tight, breathing hard, bitter sweat—ninety-eight, ninety-nine, one-hundred.

Jogging fast, mind racing...

Fucking deputy spying through the window...

Won't stop, no way Jose, no fucking way...

Unlocking the door...

One month, four weeks, thirty-one days...

Invading my space...

“Didncha hear the first time? I don’t give a flying fuck who you think you are, or who you used to be. Food cart’s here. Getta fuckin’ move on.”

Beer-belly hanging out, tan uniform strained at the seams, scuffed cheap black boots, red face.

Yokel deputy, hick jail.

When his Lieutenant told Harry he’d spend pretrial in a small county jail up north, Harry didn’t know what to expect. Incarceration far away in redneck country didn’t sound so appealing. But it wasn’t like he had a choice. He couldn’t stay in L.A., jailed with the same gang-bangers he’d locked up...

Even in PC, fucking payback time...

Officer Simmons last year, pretrial for tranny rape, dead in his cell...

Fucking payback time...

Harry was still in a holding cell in Intake, just changed into a yellow poly-cotton jumpsuit, when Sgt. Barnes took him to the glass-walled Classification Office adjoining the booking area.

Flushed sergeant-face, cheap navy blazer, almost brass

Uniformed deputies walking by, staring, Franklin County Jail...

“We’re gonna do right by you here. Shit, could’ve happened to any of us,” Barnes told Harry. “Don’t know how familiar you are with the jail setup, being from Homicide, but we keep our looney-tunes on a separate module. It’s small, only fifty at max, usually more like thirty-five. The problem we got is they’re too crazy to be of much use. We’d like you to house there and be a module worker.”

“Like a trustee? I don’t know, man. Being exposed like that.”

“Not to worry. Everybody’s mental. No way would they know who you are. We’ve used it before for high security types who aren’t dangerous.”

“Yeah, I get it. So what kind of work would I do? And how’s that going to help me?”

“The work’s nothing. Get the food carts, clean the rooms when someone’s cut loose.”

“No janitors in this place?”

Fucking slave work.

“They don’t handle that stuff. It’s in their contract or something.”

“I don’t know; seems kind of demeaning. You thinking because I’m black, I’ll be okay with it?” Harry asked.

“Hell, ain’t nothing like that. We’re not racist ‘round here. Look, I know this gotta be tough, the change in status and everything. But I’m doing you a favor. Gets you out and moving around instead of locked down all day. Plus you get extra food, blankets

for those cold nights and TV. And if you need more...this comes by way of your Captain. It's a good deal."

"No doubt. Only I need a barber to shave my head first. Don't want to take a chance on anyone recognizing me."

Terrence to Tupac...

"Hell, your case hardly got any press up here. No one's gonna know you. But no problem with the haircut, I'll take care of it."

Harry was back in the holding cell when a deputy came in with an elderly nun carrying a worn, brown leather satchel. "You requested a haircut?" she asked.

Short, tiny, modern-neutral-Sister clothes,

Laugh wrinkles, magnified bifocal blue eyes.

"You're the barber? I'll be damned. Sorry, didn't mean..."

"Nothing to apologize for, I'm Sister Annabelle. You're the not the first to be surprised."

"You're from a service order?"

"Are you Catholic, son?"

"I used to be, as a kid. But my mother turned Muslim."

"Father Patrick comes here every Sunday. Just put in an Inmate Request."

On a cold day in hell

Don't have a thing to tell anyone.

It wasn't until he saw his shaved head in Sister Annabelle's hand mirror that Harry realized he'd lied to Barnes. He wasn't worried about somebody recognizing him. It was more like he didn't want to recognize himself.

Harry the inmate—orange scrubs, grayed-white thermal underneath. Sky-blue kitchen worker's paper shower cap, navy rubber-soled canvas slip-ons, colorless socks.

Stand at attention before the outer sallyport door.

Wait for it to crank open.

Enter the sallyport, get the food cart.

Wheel the cart to the two microwaves on the shelf behind the TV area, next to the water cooler filled with red Kool-Aid.

Heat powdered scrambled eggs and stale white toast for breakfast, brown meat with pale gravy and canned blanched green vegetables for dinner.

A half pint of milk for all meals, cold pink-tan deli and orange cheese sandwiches for lunch, canned peaches for dinner dessert.

No caffeine—no coffee, no tea, no cola.

Deliver trays through open food-ports of each room, accompanied by the deputy who stands watching.

Clean empty rooms. Sweep the floor. Wash everything with non-toxic bright green disinfectant kept in five gallon jugs in the supply room.

Don't think about the kid who hung himself in the supply room your first night.

Put dirty sheets and towels in red plastic bags. Leave in the back sallyport for the janitor.

In between—go crazy from worry, guilt, boredom and confinement.

Harry had the lunch cart ready for the sallyport and was standing by the door when the librarian came on the module. In her late twenties, pretty, with long flame-red hair, wearing a short violet dress, pushing a small metal rolling cart stacked with books and magazines, seemingly comfortable on the module as she waited for the deputy who came rushing to greet her.

Deputy Sands, who was doing lunch relief, who'd been sitting behind his station, inmate TV positioned so he could watch, along with two escort deputies who had nothing better to do. Harry didn't know any of them and didn't want to.

Rednecks, watching Cops reruns, like they couldn't get enough. Young, blond, brown, bald, buffed fools.

Harry backed away, watching Sands, listening to him fall all over the librarian, whose name was Rosa. It was strange to see a civilian woman, especially dressed like that, parading through the day room.

Even though M module was coed—*crazy, pasty-skinned, medicated, overweight females, never more than three or four, have to house them somewhere, so out of it mixing sexes didn't matter*—Rosa was hot.

All too aware of how he looked, to say nothing of his diminished status, Harry knew Rosa was off limits.

So he waited until she was occupied with the three deputies, the four of them laughing and joking around, ignoring the inmate eyes that stared out from behind each locked door, then walked to the book cart, pushing aside the hot rod and girlie magazines, searching among the yellow-stained musty paperback westerns for something to read.

Harry picked up one of the few hardcover books, "Agatha Christie's Detectives: Five Complete Novels." He loved English mysteries.

Backing away from the cart with the book in his hand, glancing at the first few pages, he slowly sensed someone behind him.

*Rose-geranium-carnation-spicy cologne
Soft, silky material, the feel of tits, pressing tits
Alicia...*

Not Alicia...

Rosa, curious and looking around his arm to see the title of his book...

Turning, Harry was struck by Rosa's glistening lavender eyes,

Purple dress to match her eyes...

Purple eyes to match her dress...

He noticed her sad little smile and reached out to touch her cheek with his index finger, a small impulsive gesture.

Sweet woman skin, softness...

Deputies yelling...

"What the fuck? Scum-bag, get your filthy paws..."

"Grab him, get the cock-sucker."

Hands twisted behind, smarting pain

Hard rubber-room floor

Bare-ass naked

Latex covered fingers.

"Okay, fuck-mouth. Bend over and spread 'em."

Finally back in his room, a day in hell, starting with that fool graveyard deputy.
Cold foul hard-edged haven...
 Harry knew touching the librarian was out of line.
The feel of her, the soft- silky-woman-feel...
 But she should've pulled away, not stood there with that Mona Lisa smile on her face, confusing him.
 Then the deputies, manhandling him like hog-meat, body-searching for no reason...
 Stripped of dignity, a piece of shit in their cesspool world...
 And all because of one night, one fight, one mistake ...
Alicia.
 Their last argument, Alicia screaming, "I'd rather be fucking dead. But you don't have the balls."
 Blanket on the floor, fifty pushups, a hundred crunches, run in place...
 Sweating, angry, hateful, shameful, stinking...
 Lying in bed, inhaling sour sweat...
 He'd tried so hard, pretending to be what he wasn't and didn't want to be. Acting the man after his father died.
 Fucking eight years old and his father lying in the open casket with his horn, dressed in his stupid Vietnam vet uniform. Like everyone didn't know it was the heroin that killed him.
 Trying to please his mother...
 Tiesha, born Mildred, widowed and active in the Movement...
Struggling for purpose....
Determined to give her boy a better life...
 Her hard-earned counseling degree, her work in the women's jail...
Changing the system from within...
Earning respect...
 Following his mother's lead...
 "Forget about art school," she told him. "Drawing's nice, but it won't get you anywhere."
 "The scholarship," he said.
 "Your father was a dreamer."
 "I'm not like him."
 "Not if I can help it."
 Going to junior college and the police academy...
Being a good son....
Doing what she wanted.
 Until Alicia—
 Harry remembered the last time he saw his mother, just before he left L.A. His Lieutenant came with her and arranged for a contact visit. After reassuring Harry his case was good, "Self-defense, all the provocation...," Lt. Palmers left them alone.
 Looking at his mother sitting behind the narrow wood table, dressed in a pale green tweed blazer and black slacks, her silver-gray hair freshly braided, carefully made up and manicured, Harry felt like crying.
 "I'm sorry to put you through this," he said.

“Was I wrong?” she asked.

Lying face-down in bed with his eyes closed, in his dark jail room, thinking of the visit—his mother’s reddened swollen eyes and anxious trembling fingers, the clammy coldness of her skin when she kissed him good-by.

Loved me well as she could

Did what she thought right

Harry the module worker...

She’d die of shame.

Kiss-ass make-do fool

She’d die of shame.

With tearing eyes and shaking hands he retrieved his notepad and started writing.

On the night of Oct. 7th I was sitting in bed, waiting for my wife to come home.

No, I can’t.

Not while I’m hidden away with the crazies, playing Stepin Fetchit for honky fools.

Harry stopped writing. He turned the page and for the first time in years began sketching, drawing Alicia’s face ...

The springy smooth soft silk golden feel of her honeydew-smelling hair,

Contact eyes deep blue and piercing, true eyes soft and light, loving hazy gaze,

Slight gap-toothed white, white smile,

Dimples, nose freckles faint and sweet, pale cream creamy skin.

Alicia when they first met, moving across the hall, struggling with boxes...

Pony-tail, cut-offs, fresh from nursing school, Atlanta, eager, young, flirtatious.

The midnight flight to Vegas, the drunken hokey romantic wedding chapel.

Do it while the doing’s good.

Their West L.A. condo, starting to feel trapped, staying out late, partying with his boys, a few ladies on the side...

But it never meant shit, I kept telling her.

Alicia slipping away, growing distant...

Drinking...mean, ugly sex.

I love her, I love her. I’ll always love her.

“You don’t have the balls.”

No, no more Stepin Fetchit.

The ad-seg module was just what Harry expected. Cold and sterile, but clean, without pretense. The deputies worked in pairs. One stayed in the raised security cage in the center of the module, looking at the screens that showed the inside of every room. The other circled the module, looking through each room’s small square window to make sure no one was under the bed or hanging from it. There was a high suicide rate on ad-seg.

Like Barnes had warned him, except for an hour every other day in the small exercise yard, Harry was locked in his room.

“What the fuck’s wrong with you?” Barnes exploded when Harry said he wanted to leave M module. “First acting up with the librarian...”

“I don’t want to be here, dressed like a clown and acting the flunky. I got better things to do. My case’s coming up.”

The funny thing was Harry didn't mind the lockup. It felt right to him.

Being his own man...

Taking care of business...

He remembered what his lawyer told him, "I can understand the shock of it all, so you don't want to remember, maybe you even had a blackout, I don't know. But you need to listen up here. The only way to save yourself is to show you killed your wife in self-defense. I believe that's what it was, that's what you said to the arresting officer, and in your initial statement. I need the details, exactly what happened."

On his third day in ad-seg, Harry got out his notepad and a freshly sharpened pencil—

November 11th, (Veteran's Day)

Notes for Ms. Penney:

On Oct. 7th, I was in bed reading a P.D. James mystery and drinking scotch, waiting for Alicia to come home. She was very late, over three hours. We started arguing.

She wasn't making sense, talking crazy, like she wanted me to hurt her. Taunting and daring me. Saying the only way I could keep her was to kill her. But I knew she was high—maybe uppers, or even meth—acting nuts, not at all herself. I told her I'd never hurt her, I loved her.

I don't know when I realized my gun was on the table, within easy reach, but soon as I did, I went for it, just to get it out of sight, so Alicia wouldn't get ideas. I grabbed my gun and threw it under the bed.

But Alicia had her little pistol. I didn't notice her bag before, but all of a sudden she was reaching in it and bringing out her gun, pointing it at me. I lunged at her to get it and we struggled.

I swear to God, I never meant to hurt her.

Fucking blood, dark, hot, oozing animal red...

Eyes fading out, dimming...

On December 9th, Ms. Penney came to visit. "Lawyer's here," the module deputy said, cuffing Harry's wrists and ankles. In a soiled jumpsuit, stubble on his head and face, smelling rank, he was escorted to the visitor's room.

Ms. Penney's nose was red, like she had a cold. She looked at Harry over tortoise half-glasses and sighed. "What's with the hair?" she asked. "Grow it back. You want to look like as middle-class as you can, not like a thug."

"My trial's coming?"

"January 12th. You're lucky to get such an early date."

He sat stone-faced as Ms. Penney explained voluntary manslaughter, a three year sentence reduced by time served and good time. He wondered what Alicia would think, if she'd be happy for him.

Three years for a life.

Three years a fucking lifetime.

Wife-killing criminal cop....

"You understand?" Ms. Penney asked. "It's a good deal."

Harry bit his lip. He looked at the ceiling, the brown stain and fire sprinkler. They were locked inside the small room. The walls were wire-meshed safety glass. A

deputy paced outside the door, waiting for them to finish. It was hard to talk around the lump in his throat, hard to see with his eyes watering.

“Yeah,” he finally said. “I understand.”

Myra Sherman lives in Lake County, CA. Her fiction has appeared or will appear in: The Blotter Magazine, Fifth Wednesday Journal, Workers Write-Tales from the Couch, 10,000 Tons of Black Ink, 580 Split, Another Sky Horror Anthology, and others.