

# ballad of a sick girl

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Part One:  
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## F U LIFE

The clanking of keys is a tocsin. The chime of brass and nickel creates a percussive rhythm and stays in time with the beat of echoing footsteps. The sound swells toward me, and the anticipation of a crescendo leaves me anxious. I don't know who or what to expect. I fade in and out of consciousness, my mind tumbling beyond the instinctive line that separates reality from imagination.

I stare at the palms of my hands, both stained from wrist to fingertip in black ink. The rubber slippers I wear feel cold against my bare feet. Dressed in a bright orange, two-piece uniform made for someone twice my size, I study the upper half of my right pant leg and spot four characters stenciled onto the garment. The branding is an acronym, and despite the washed-out condition of the stamp, I decipher it: L.C.D.C.

But, it's inconsequential which four of the twenty-six markings of the English alphabet are present; I know I'm locked up in jail right now.

Still, I'm uncertain where or why.

The cell door swings open.

"Smith, Stiegler, Cash!" A uniformed guard shouts.

Two women sit near me on a tattered wooden bench.

They each raise a hand, so I follow suit.

"Alright, ladies. Let's go!"

My spine shivers each time a door slams shut. The clanking, the slamming, and the shouting; it's a shriek of unrest that is soon-to-be a sourly familiar jangle.

"When the hell are they gonna feed us?!"

The more petite woman I learn is Stiegler cries out.

"And, dammit, we need some diapers up in here! My cousin is shitting herself up in this bitch, y'all!"

Stiegler's small frame twitches like my mother's chihuahua as she begs. My mother will get me out of this mess. She's a veteran of jails and institutions. She has to know I've been stuck for hours in a holding cell with a woman in a mental health crisis and her cousin who's in the throes of heroin withdrawal.

We approach a rolling bin packed with scratchy wool blankets, ripped bedsheets, and fire-retardant sleeping mats. The bedding material is stacked high and ready for the next inmate to settle into her more permanent accommodation. In our case, it's the third floor, and that agitates Stiegler.

"Why are we going upstairs?"

The begging chihuahua yelps.

"That's Max, man! All I did was hit my damn husband before he had a chance to hit me! This is bullshit! I need to be in the pod, man, in the dorms, not in lock up with the fucking crazies! Those bitches kill people!"

The officer ignores her constant banter, but she persists.

"My cousin needs a nurse now! She's coming off three grams a day! She needs a medic! Y'all are animals, man!"

At the end of the hallway, we arrive at an elevator. The woman in uniform takes the two-way radio strapped onto her right shoulder, presses a button, and speaks.

"Three females coming up."

I feel paralysis take over my body as the elevator doors shut. I visualize them reopening in the lobby of the five-star hotel where I spent last night and the night before, drinking away my marital problems. But, no. When the doors open, I'm inside a room full of women wearing the same orange attire as me. I count maybe twenty of them, scattered around four bright, blue picnic tables. A pair sits close to one another. The duo seems unshaded by the presence of the other inmates, most of whom are engaged in clangorous card games. Everyone in the room is speaking louder than I deem necessary.

A new officer appears before my two comrades and me and introduces herself as Miss G. Her body language is villainously militant, like Ursula from *The Little Mermaid*. Maintaining an arched brow and tightly pursed lips, she begins distributing the bare necessities required to constitute humane punishment; a small brown towel that smells of mold, a zip-lock baggie containing a tiny rectangle of soap, a miniature

tube of generic toothpaste, a toothbrush without a handle, and a cheap black comb.

"At least we got a fucking kit this time," Stiegler whispers to her cousin.

Cherry, the junkie, is hunched over in agony, struggling to keep the pace of Stiegler and me. Miss G signals for us to stop at a mesh wire gate that opens up into one of three identical wings. Each wing on the third floor houses twelve maximum security cells. Once we're on *B Wing*, Cherry goes into a cell where another dope sick girl lies curled up on the floor. Stiegler is ordered into the cell directly across from her cousin, where she'll continue to be a nuisance until the man that beat her ass eventually bails her out. I am in cell number nine, and my heart drops as soon as I enter the box.

It has to be nearing midnight. I lay my sleeping mat onto the empty metal cot affixed to the wall, sit down and scan the small room; it's a sobering moment. I fix my eyes on the chipping paint covering the cinder block walls; the color is a drab and uninspiring pale yellow. The doors and trim are covered in a deep pastel blue color reminiscent of the sky on a sunny, cloudless day. Because I am an over-analyzer, I find this color combination intentional and cruel. I run my fingertips along scratch marks decorating the wall next to me—claw marks that tell a story—and read off names of girls' before me, their inherent cries out to God, and the words CARE BEAR.

A message, F U LIFE, is written on the door in generic toothpaste.

As I take in the scenery, I grow increasingly petrified by its uncertainty. Who will sleep across from me in this cell? Will she like me or hate me? If I keep staring at the door will it open? I feel trapped. What if I scream? Probably nothing. I'm delirious and dizzy. I feel out of control of my own body.

I hear the same voices that surrounded the blue picnic tables as they form a single file line up outside of my cell. I'm fearful of these women, even though I do not know them. I listen to their careless dialogue of trivial threats and uneducated guesses acting as clever rebuttals, and I allow that fear to consume me. My pulse climbs as my eyelids begin to twitch from the force I hold them shut. The lock turns and the door to cell number nine opens up.

A herculean woman with skin the color of dulce de leche walks in. My eyes follow a single braid of coarse hair that's tightly spanning from the tops of her ears, and I can't help but notice that her head seems small and disproportionate compared to her prodigious frame.

Shyly, I introduce myself to her and my voice cracks with terror.

"I'm Queen." She says.

I watch in silence as she slips off her orange plastic slippers and carefully places them beneath the foot end of her cot. She inhales deeply through her nose. It's an exasperated breath to convey a new scent overwhelming her territory. Later, she will tell me that the smell of alcohol permeated the small room so intensely that it surprised her to see that the person who put off such a stench was coherent enough to speak her name.

I ask her for the time. Little does she know this is the beginning of many questions I have for her. She says it's shortly after eleven, that the lights go off around midnight and then come back on at four in the morning for breakfast.

"I've never been in jail before," I tell her. "I'm scared."

Then, she asks me *the* question.

"So, what got you locked up in here anyway?"

My first instinct is to falsify an elaborate tale; triple homicide or aggravated arson, maybe even a fucking jewel heist. But, I know that I mustn't give off the impression that I don't deserve to be here. I'll fare better by keeping my mouth shut, lest I invite trouble my way—but she's staring at me, and I have to say something.

"My charge is public intoxication."

My tone sounds like I'm perplexed by my answer.

"I don't know why they thought I was intoxicated, though." I chuckle.

"I only had one beer. Not even a whole beer! I only drank half of it before I fell asleep."

I wonder if she knows the forced laughter is my attempt to cover up the incredible amount of guilt I'm harboring.

"Where were you drinking?"

"In my car," I answer in a whisper. "With my baby."

Her caramel complexion turns a faint shade of pink.

"Oh shit, girl," She claps.

"Lexington County, don't fuck around when babies are involved!"

Lexington County, that's where I am.

I recall leaving home the Friday before my arrest with the intention of driving to Tennessee to see my mother, rob her husband's liquor stash, and enjoy some of her prescription painkillers; all-the-while causing my husband to experience an air of malaise I callously believed he deserved. Running away seemed like the right thing to do any time I was drinking, and I was always drinking and running and running and running.

"Yo, you alright? Hello?" Queen calls out to me as she rigorously snaps her chubby fingers in front of my eyes.

"Yeah, yeah, I'm good." I say, snapping back to reality.

Still, my skull is full of audible static. Behind my eardrums there is a ringing sound about to reach a hundred decibels, as if I've been drilling into concrete for hours.

This feeling isn't new, it's the beginning of alcohol withdrawal. However, it is my first time experiencing delirium tremens while locked up against my will, in the sole company of a stranger who doesn't know a thing about me nor the extent of my illness.

Memories of the days leading to this one are slowly coming back to me in a series of mental photographs.

"I panicked," I whisper. "I called my dad and begged him to bring my husband to get my son and me."

Tears are streaming down my face now.

There's no holding back at this point.

"I told him the hotel's name where I was parked just before my phone battery died."

"And then your ass fell asleep?" Queen smirks.

"I woke up to an officer knocking on my window."

Unrelenting nausea washes over me. It's like that feeling you get when you're in the passenger seat of a speeding vehicle hugging sharp curves while attempting to read and

comprehend small-font text. I feel this way often after a drinking spree. The gut-punch of guilt, shame, and remorse that comes the morning after is a product of the fear of facing the mess I made while wasted. But, this time, it's different. I'm locked up, away from everyone I know and love, stuck inside a Lilliputian room with the six-foot-tall woman scrubbing her face with a bar of soap and a maxi pad.

"Damn, girl," Queen shouts.

She dries her face and hands and walks toward her cot. She slips off her orange uniform and is left wearing nothing but a white tee shirt and panties. Above her right knee, prominent prison ink reads *Sweet Pussy*. Strategically, she begins folding both uniform pieces until she's fashioned the fabric into a tight square and neatly places it atop the bath towel she's already folded in half lengthwise. I watch as she carefully rolls the contraption. Now, it's a rustic lumbar pillow that could've come from Williams and Sonoma. She tucks the makeshift bolster behind her neck and uses the ripped bedsheet and scratchy wool blanket to swaddle herself from the waist down expertly. A gray plastic bin sits beneath her metal cot, it's the type bussers use to clear dirty plates from tables in twenty-four-hour diners. She retrieves a tattered and spineless book.

She speaks to me without diverting her eyes from the page she's reading.

"Dead of summer too. I sure hope you had your air conditioning on in your car when that officer woke your ass up."

"I did."

I'm lying. Knee-walking drunk or not, I know better than to drink in my car with the engine running.

The lights go out. I am wide awake until morning.

The door to our cell opens up, and a petite brunette with piercing green eyes appears inside the doorway. Queen slowly shuffles over to her and takes two purple plastic trays and two tiny red cups. The door slams shut. The securing of the sturdy lock is a reverberative and jarring sound.

"Take a tray; take it from the bottom," Queen says authoritatively.

"And you can take my cup too if you want it. I don't drink that shit."

She is watching me closely, studying my hands—so unsteady that the liquid within my cup spills over the rim and onto a pile of what appears to be congealed vomit. It's grits. The remaining liquid inside the cups is pale and cloudy, like lemonade. I'm so dehydrated that I finish mine in one gulp. It's not lemonade.

"What the fuck is this?" I ask, gagging.

"It's supposed to be milk." Queen winces. "But, they put saltpeter in that shit, and I plan on having more babies when my ass gets out of prison, okay!"

I'm confused. Peter who?

I bite off over half of a silver-dollar-sized mystery meat patty and begin to chew. A rather forceful regurgitation ensues, sending small chunks of fodder over the tray, the wall, and my trembling legs. Queen's head shakes from side to side again as she speaks with a mouth full of food.

"I was going to give you till tomorrow morning, but not after that. So it's your turn to clean when Peaches comes through with the mop and the spray bottle."

I'm sure that I am sonically hallucinating as the room fills with loud and melodic mouth-whistling noises. The opening jingle to the Andy Griffith Show is whirling throughout the entire third floor. Queen and I can hear the notes as if the broadcast is coming from inside our very cell. Over and over, it plays.

"We get deprivation and sound torture up here!" Queen snaps.

The third floor is permanently locked down. Around the same time each day, Queen and I get one hour to spend outside of our shared cell. The other twenty-three hours, we sit inside the claustrophobic room. I'm over a hundred miles from home and likely on the verge of a nervous system breakdown. I rest my back against the cold wall and slide my body down onto my cot—curling into a fetal position—where I begin to think and think and think.

What have I done?

Why did I leave my house on Friday?

Why did I try to drive Sunday morning?

Why was I parked in front of a hotel?

Why did the cops come?

Did the front desk clerk of the shit-hole hotel call the cops on me?

When will I see a judge who will give me a fine to pay and let me the hell out of here?

I can't stay here much longer; I just can't.  
And, where the hell is my mother, for Chrissakes?

My internal monologue shares a tempo with the whistling jingle; no narration of the opening credits, not even a pause. Instead, the audio track continues on a loop. Just the whistling, over and over and over.

Finally, it stops. Not a second later, Miss G's raspy voice takes over.

"Get ready to clean up, B wing!"

Though her head stays buried beneath her scratchy wool blanket, Queen gives verbal instruction on how to properly clean this empty room, one no bigger than the walk-in closet of a main middle-class suite. She finishes her speech by making sure I know not to mop the floor of our cell if the bucket has visited a particular neighboring wing.

"Them bitches on C wing got lice, and they don't rinse that mop out!"

Her head emerges.

"Black people usually don't get lice on our heads. We get it in our pubic hairs, though, and that's crabs."

I'm speechless.

I turn my attention away from Queen and plant my face against the door. Unfortunately, there is no worthwhile view by way of the five-inch square piece of frosted plexiglass covering a hole that Queen calls a window. Still, I see the silhouettes of two figures approaching.

"I don't know what you are looking for, inmate. Are you in a hurry? You got somewhere to be? Sit your ass down and wait your turn. This bitch is eager to clean this morning, Peaches."

It's Miss G. And, Peaches.

Sitting up from her cot, Queen wipes the sleep from her eyes.

"Peaches is a run-around." She announces.

"Monica is a run-around too. She's the girl who brings the food trays."

I stare at her. I'm waiting for her to translate.

"They're going to be here for a while awaiting other warrants. Usually multiple sentencing hearings. So, they make the bitches run around and do chores and shit."

She confirms that I'm still paying attention before continuing.

"After she sprays the bleach, wipe everything down with one of those."

She gestures toward a stack of small boxes, each of which contains a single maxi pad.

"Get the pad all up inside the toilet! Sweep up that mess you made, too." She orders.

"And, put your damn shoes on, girl! Walking around this bitch like you at home! Shit, I don't even walk around barefoot at home. Parasites live on your floorboards and get up in your body through your feet!!"

I retreat into my head which is pounding. It's like, where my brain should be, there's a snare drum instead. Tap, tap, tap--to the beat of my racing heart.

"The bond court is usually before lunch."

Queen's voice snaps me out of the trance I'm in.

"If I were you, I would go my ass to sleep until they come to get me. Ain't nothing you can do but wait."

So, I wait. I wait and wait some more.

Finally, I fall asleep.

I wake up in a cold sweat whenever a transmission comes through on the two-way radio affixed to Miss G's tactical belt as she does her rounds. I listen for my name, or some codeword in the auditory stream, that will instruct her to let me out of my cell and lead me through the mesh wire gate where we'll make our way through the rec-room. I'll count four blue picnic tables—my hands clasped behind my back—before passing by the three-person shower stall with the clear plastic curtain that sweeps the moldy tile. We'll take one final passage through the heavy metal door at the backside of the glass-enclosed guard tower before making our way across the threshold that tracks the stainless steel doors of the elevator. Now, we're moving downward toward the first floor. My mom is waiting in the sunshine, just outside the booking area. I can picture

her there in the parking lot—her frail frame propped up against the door of her electric blue hatchback—a cigarette burning to the filter between her bony fingers.

She'll start to cry. I'll hug her tight and say,  
"Let's get out of here, Mommy. Please take me home now."

I'm only dreaming, of course. I toss and turn in futile attempts to find a comfortable position to wait and sleep and dream while wide awake. The fluorescent lights are so bright that even with my eyes shut, the backs of my eyelids seem incandescent. There will be no more sleeping today, though. Not for me. Not here. I'm freezing. I am wrapped in the wool blanket but sweating profusely. My husband claims he can smell when I've been drinking heavily. He's not lying. My cold sweats encompass a bittersweet smell, which parallels that of a potent strain of medicinal marijuana. It's an earthy but metallic scent like copper wire or the must of a wet forest, densely covered in spore-bearing mushrooms.

The clanking of the keys tells me something is about to happen. I'm correct in my assumption; it's time for my first jailhouse lunch. I'm disgusted by the meal before I even lay eyes on it. I know I need to get some food into my stomach and keep it down if I want to come out of this foggy episode of delirium tremens successfully. I am acutely aware of the dangers of detoxing from alcohol without medical assistance. Still, I'm afraid if I let anyone know about the symptoms I'm experiencing and to what extent, then they will discover what a real-life drunk I am. I can't have that happen. I mustn't give them further evidence against me in their felony child neglect case, nor the misdemeanor charge of public intoxication.

It's time for chow. Monica's shoulders slump as usual, and not surprisingly, she's holding two trays. I balance mine like an amateur circus act until I reach my metal cot. I scan the bright purple tray and notice some suspicious luncheon meat unidentifiable to the naked eye. The cold cuts are a grayish pink color, seemingly dressed in a transparent film so incredibly slimy that it mirrors the reflection of the bulbs in the fluorescent light affixed to the dingy ceiling above. In addition, there are four slices of stale white bread, one packet of generic mustard, a watery pile of cold corn kernels, and a checkerboard square of chocolate cake sans frosting—Queen takes my piece without asking.

She's already finishing off her second sandwich. I prepare one but can barely swallow the first bite. The taste is rancid, and my gag reflex is working overtime. The small hunk of food feels like a horse pill, so I take a big gulp of stale water to force it down. I'll puke if I eat a second bite, and I don't want to make another mess.

"Make you that other sandwich and put it in this bag."

Queen says, handing me wrinkled and reused plastic food packaging.

"I'm not gonna eat this before I get out of here."

"You will if you get hungry enough, okay."

She got the last word.

Afterward, I observe Queen disassembling her pillow. She shakes her uniform shirt and pants hard like my grandmother did when she gathered fresh laundry from the dryer in preparation to fold.

"Don't ever spit in the sink, that's one of my pet peeves," She says, "I wash my face in there, okay, so spit in the toilet when you brush your teeth!"

She's brushing hers, slowly and thoroughly.  
Queen's teeth are strikingly white.

Then, after gracefully spitting into the toilet, she places a small bar of soap on the side of the sink and says,

"And, please, wash your hands after you shit,"  
"That's another pet peeve."

## FENG SHUI

As the entirety of the B wing enters the small room with the blue picnic tables, I stay close behind Queen as she moves across the room with prowess, strolling confidently toward the closest hanging telephone.

I'm overwhelmed by the sea of women, beaming with an antagonistic presence, especially the tall one with ginger hair. I see her right away because she stands tall above the crowd. She's Queen's height but with pale skin broken out into bright red scabs across her chin. She's usually either picking at her face or adjusting her uniform trousers. Finally, she charges like an ox toward the remaining telephone, which hangs next to the guard tower and the shower stall.

Queen tells me to stay close, and she'll make sure I get to use the phone when she finishes her call.

My fingers shake when I pick up the receiver and dial my mother's phone number. I can barely operate a touch-tone phone.

The operator on the other end of the line is prompting me for my PIN, but I don't have one.

"What's my PIN? How do I get a PIN!?" I call out to whoever is close enough to hear me.

A slender girl with a mousy brown ponytail—missing all but her two front teeth—appears over my shoulder. She speaks with a slight lisp. I assume this is due to her lack of teeth. She tells me her name is Jennifer and offers to lend me a hand in the form of her very own personal identification number. I watch her watching my hands shake. Perspiration is leaking from my every pore. My forehead looks like a glass of iced tea on a summer day, covered in condensation. I run my fingers through my hair, and I'm embarrassed by how damp with sweat the roots of my tresses are.

"Let me dial it for you," Jennifer says.

She smiles wide. She doesn't seem to be the least bit ashamed of the condition of her mouth.

"What's the number?" She asks.

The phone rings eight times before I hear a click and then an automated voice of the operator. The robot thanks me for using the most expensive collect calling service in America. That's when I hear my mother's voice.

"Ashley. Baby, are you okay?"

I hate when she calls me that. She sounds frightened and worried.

"Are you here? Are you working on getting me out of this place?" I sound like I'm five-years-old and just woke from a nightmare. "It's horrible, Mommy. I can't stay here much longer."

Tears are streaming down my face faster than I can wipe them away with the back of my hand. I don't want the other women to see me cry, but the sound of my mother's voice, and the fact that this phone call is my only connection to freedom—my only hope for absolution—sends me over the edge. I have no control over my emotions. I've

become one reaction after another. I hope my mother can hear my pain. I want to tell her that I'm harboring an ocean of shame and regret in my belly, and that it's overflowing, making waterfalls on my eyelids. I want her to hear my tears in a way that translates the desperation I feel. I can't wipe away waterfalls. I need her for that. I want her to hug me in the parking lot. I want to rest my head on her shoulder so that my tears become soaked up by the fabric of her shirt.

"I'm in Tennessee."

Her words sting like thin blades cutting into my skin. I buckle at the knees and crouch down as far as the armored phone cord will allow me to go.

"You're not getting me out!" I shout into the receiver.

My tone changes from terrified and desperate to angry and aggressive.

"I can't, Ashley."

She tries her hardest to be stern, but tough love has never been my mother's strong suit. This time, I suspect that someone—either my father, my step-father, or my brother, the cop—has prepared her for this inevitable phone call.

"You're facing a big charge, Ashley. After they booked you in, you told me it was Public Intoxication when we spoke on the phone. It's bigger than that. You are facing hefty charges, baby, a felony. They're going to set a bond for you either today or tomorrow when you see a judge. Your brother said it could be between five and ten thousand dollars. You are in big trouble." She bellows all of this information in one breath.

I can't crouch down any further—not physically anyway—or I'll drop this phone and become a puddle of my sweat and remorse on a cold concrete floor, so I cringe inside instead. I go inside of myself and get lost in the fog. My head feels lighter, like a helium balloon preparing to leave my body and float away.

"I can't be here another day, Mom. I won't make it. I'm going to die here. This place is bad. Someone is going to hurt me here."

I'm whispering my manipulative slander so that Jennifer doesn't hear me.

"Ashley, you'll be okay." A vexed remark.

"Ron and I were locked up for six months, five years ago, and it was the best thing that ever happened to us. We survived. We quit smoking crack."

She makes it sound so simple, and that drives me crazy.

I'm not her or my step-father, Ron. I am me—scared, shaking, detoxing, and beating myself to the core. I tell her that I don't believe I'll survive the next tray of inedible sustenance or another night of sleepless dreaming.

"Your Dad isn't going to answer your calls, so don't call him. He can't talk to you. He says if the two of you speak, you will get into an argument because you are too much alike." She continues.

My father doesn't want to hear my voice because underneath my cloak of addiction—beyond my betrayal of his trust—I'm still his little girl, and I'm suffering. Sure, he wants me to learn the lesson that comes with being locked up, but he wishes that he could save me from my misery.

My dad is smart; a medically diagnosed bi-polar manic depressive and a self-diagnosed alcoholic. He's battled this beast. Yet, he cannot go to battle for me in my place. My father cannot save me by listening to me cry, and he can't hear me cry without risking his serenity.

"Your father is on the phone, noon and night, trying to find a bed for you at a rehab center. Every member of his Alcoholics Anonymous homegroup is on the job, and there are hundreds, if not thousands, of people praying for you right now. But, he's not getting you out of your situation right now until there is a safe place for you to land." Her voice is trembling.

She knows that I don't believe in prayer or rehabilitation centers, but I hear the automated operator's robot voice again before I can cruelly remind her.

"Your time has expired."

Three days after the arrest, I make it to bond court. The judge is a small-framed man in his mid to late fifties. He tells me upfront that he's going to say some things, and after he's finished saying them—not a moment sooner—it will be my turn to speak my peace. After explaining the charges I'm facing in detail, he asks me if the Department of Social Services took custody of my child. He quickly amends himself, then inquires about my career path and family life. He sets the bond amount at a little over twenty-five hundred dollars—a low amount, he says—before mentioning good faith.

When given my turn to speak, I extend the same gentle humanity he's shown to me.

I take a deep breath and tell him, despite the information printed on the paper he is holding, I am a good mother with a good heart.

"I don't know where your heart was yesterday, Mrs. Cash, because what you did is not what good mothers do. Best of luck to you."

After being escorted from the chambers and back into my cell, I recount the details to my cellmate. She laughs, and it feels condescending.

"How much is your bond?" I ask her.

"I don't have a bond, okay."

She pronounces the word okay with a sarcastic tone.

"You have no bond?" I ask, confused.

"Well, let me clarify."

She stretches out her fingers, crossing them into an exaggerated knuckle crack. Then, crosses her vastly legs in a way that's far too ladylike.

"My bond for attempted murder is two hundred and fifty thousand, meaning my family would have to come up with twenty-five grand to get me out. But, they couldn't get me out anyway because of my federal charge, which is manufacturing and distributing crack cocaine. That charge has no bond. So, I will serve fifteen years in federal prison for that shit, and I didn't even get caught with nothing."

I want to correct her. The word she's looking for here is *anything*, not *nothing*. But, I resist the urge.

"The dude who got me into the game got busted and squealed. He got beat to hell for it, but my ass is still sitting up in here." She says.

"Wow," I whisper.

"I've been in this piece of shit for eleven months now on an appeal for my attempted murder charge. I was already in prison for four years on my fed charge, but I had to come here and get sentenced. So soon, I'm going back to prison to finish out my other sentence in Florida. They'll take me to Tallahassee, Federal prison, sometime this week. That shit is like Club Med compared to county. I get to work in the kitchen and make good food. We get free time for six to eight hours a day."

She chuckles some more.

"Lexington County jail is a fucking joke. Nasty ass food and being in this cold ass cell all damn day. I can't wait to get to prison so that I can eat!!"

Later that night, I convince Queen to braid my hair into cornrows; eight of them, to be exact. Simultaneously, she's teaching me how to play Rummy. Now, I'm chuckling. We hear the gate buzz, then footsteps. When the door to our cell opens, the pale-faced guard appears. She's not alone.

"It's a packed house. You're on the floor until a bed opens up, Drayton." The guard speaks to a frail and disoriented, middle-aged, bald woman.

Sharon Drayton's arrival on the scene compromises the zen of my and Queen's living space, and I'm not too fond of it. It's an inconvenience for me to move my orange plastic slippers from underneath the sidebar of my cot. The foot end of my bed is too far of a reach. Not to mention, I've finally procured a novel through the bartering of cold oatmeal, and I'm storing it down there—right next to my damn slippers—in the exact spot where the intruder lay curled up. She's fast asleep already, too, snoring like a chainsaw.

Then, the lights go out.

My mind races. Sleep is unimaginable, so I picture a neon-lit room somewhere in the building's damp basement. Floor to ceiling, and wall to wall, the place is packed with towering stacks of fire-retardant sleeping mats.

I draw a mental picture of a parolee sharing a hand-rolled cigarette with three fellowmen. He's covered jaw to ankle in tattoos; the linework is sloppy, that of a prison yard tattooist. With each flick of burning ash, he uses a switchblade to slice each mat at the seam before removing the poly-fill stuffing. Of course, he leaves a few handfuls inside the shell—*just* enough to be snide.

The following day, I'm startled awake by a conversation between my cellmates. Drayton's head bobs like a kitschy dashboard figure as she recounts a tale of returning some stolen merchandise to a store to acquire cash to support her crack habit. Her accent tells me she grew up in South Carolina's Lowcountry region. The jargon she's using is Gullah or Geechee, and it's the native tongue of my hometown.

Drayton can't weigh more than ninety pounds. The aged skin of her face hangs onto

stark cheekbones and a darkness surrounds her eyes—two perfect black circles—like a tweaked-out Uncle Fester. I don't want to talk to Sharon Drayton any longer. She reminds me of broken pieces of my childhood that I worked hard to drown with alcohol. She smells like a crack house, a scent I became familiar with at seven years old, the year smoking a joint or snorting a line at a party wasn't satisfying my mother anymore. The sizzle of crack rock heating up in a glass pipe haunts me to this day.

With every passing moment, being incarcerated seems a bit more routine. During my hour of freedom, I hike my leg over to straddle the picnic table and take a seat with Jennifer. She's sitting with Kathy, the woman with the wild hair who robbed a crowded bank and is consequently doing time for the kidnapping of her accidental hostages.

"What are you playing?" I ask, studying the spread of cards on the table.

"I'm reading her tarot," The dealer confirms.

I watch as Kathy shuffles and stacks the deck into three piles with trick-fast hand movement. She glances down at a cheat sheet that provides a prison-themed denotation for each suit in the deck, then picks a card from the bottom;

Jack of Spades.

"Someone on the outside is thinking about you!"

Kathy moves her tongue in and out of a space she's made between her index and middle finger.

"Ahhhhh!" Jennifer blurts out. "Yeah, baby!"

I want in.

Kathy shuffles again, and I cut them.

The first card she turns over is the eight of diamonds.

"Time served." Kathy groans.

"That's a good one." Jennifer nods.

"You ain't going to sit in here forever, girl, and maybe you will get time served. But, if no one bails you out and you sit until your court date, they will probably let you walk." She continues. "And Kathy's like the Oracle, man; she's a psychic and shit, everyone's tarot comes true when she does their cards for 'em!"

Our gaggle is hushed when the pale-faced officer with rosy cheeks appears to order us into a lineup. After unlocking the door to cell nine, she hands me a book.

"Here's the Bible you asked for." She whispers.

"You gone find God now and shit?" Queen chirps.

"I need something to read other than the teenage angst novel Jennifer gave me," I tell her.

She turns to face me, her big brown eyes widening.

"You better finish the book you started. Everybody knows if you get out of jail and leave an unfinished book behind, you'll be coming back to finish it! Okay!"

Queen finishes her sentences with the word okay. But, with a period, not a question mark. She doesn't give a shit whether or not you're picking up what she's putting down.

I'm not buying her book theory, though. I'm never coming back here. I will never be trapped again against my will in a seven by ten-foot room. Even if I do leave behind a worn-out paperback, partially unread, I will not be stepping foot in the Lexington County Detention Center again for as long as I live.

"Tomorrow is Friday, and my lawyer told me Monday I would be in transport before this week is over. So I know my ass is gone in the morning; I know it!!"

Queen is singing her words.

"I can taste that chicken alfredo already, okay! I'm about to be sitting pretty in prison by this damn weekend!"

She dances a jig from the sink to her cot and back to the sink. She moves her arms in a rowing motion; maxi pad in one hand and a soap bar in the other.

"And you best believe my ass will finish my damn book before the night is over, okay!!" She glares in my direction.

"Well, you've only got a couple more hours of light left, girl, and I see at least a hundred pages left beneath your bookmark, so you better stop dancing and start reading." I smile.

My eyes return to the book of Psalms, but I can't give my full attention to this book. Never have been able to, really, but especially not at this moment. I don't feel well. I

don't want Queen to stop dancing, and I don't want her going anywhere as long as I'm here. After all, my cellmate is the light when things get dark, and things get dark a lot. She's the snapping fingers that bring me out of the fog. She's all of the answers to my millions of questions. In a place full of unexpected twists and turns, Queen is straight and narrow. I know what to expect from her. As animated and intimidating as she is, she's still quiet and soft. The others, inmates and guards alike, are not. She's likely unaware of how terrified I am to lose her.

The room grows silent, aside from the hum of Drayton's sinuses. My circadian clock knows it's time for sleep, and soon the overhead lights flicker before powering off. My eyes are closed now, but not for long. I hear movement within the cell. It's Queen. Slowly, she slips into her orange plastic footwear and stands up. I find her silhouette, and my eyes follow it as she moves toward the cell door, romance novel in hand. She stands propped up against the cold heavy metal—wrapped tightly in her scratchy wool blanket—squinting her eyes before the ragged paperback. She reads page after page, lit only by the scant sliver of light seeping in from the hallway. I fall asleep before she stops reading, but I'm confident that she finished the book.

The clanking of the keys and the voice of Miss G wake me the following morning just as Queen launches from her cot. It's the fastest I've seen her voluptuous frame move.

Then, the door opens.

"Addington, you got two minutes to get dressed and get all your shit ready to go. They're waiting for you at transport."

The door slams shut, and my heart sinks to my feet.

"Glory hallelujah!!" Queen sings.

"I'm getting the fuck out of this bitch, y'all! Damn, these eleven months felt like eleven years, okay! Glory be to the Lord on this fine day!"

She drops the gray plastic bin onto the cot and neatly places her belongings into a brown paper bag. Electricity radiates from every nerve ending within her dancing body. She sways, sings, and is so damned happy that I can't help but be pleased for her. Still, I am afraid.

I slip on the orange pants, then the shirt. My uniform top is stained around the armpits by the vile toxins that my body has sickly secreted. The shirt smells putrid enough to be detected from a few feet away. I don't want to lift my arms, but I need to

hug Queen. I move toward her. Disregarding the mysophobia she openly possesses, I wrap my arms around her. I hug her body tight. Whether or not she might appreciate such an intimate form of farewell does not matter to me.

"Thank you for being nice to me," I whisper.

Painstakingly, I try not to cry.  
She hugs my body tight. Her embrace is a pleasant surprise.

"I didn't do nothing for you but braid your hair and beat your ass at cards." She smiles. "Here, trade mats with me. Mine's like a pillow top mattress compared to that flimsy piece of shit you've been sleeping on."

I pull the sheet off mine as she tosses hers towards my cot.

When the door to our cell opens up, so do the voices behind the other eleven doors. Their hoots and hollers follow Queen as she dances toward the mesh wire gate. Eyes of friends and foes peer through each tiny window, fighting for a view of her departure

"Bye, bitch!"  
"The Queen is leaving the castle!"  
"Godspeed, my nigga!"

And, just like that, she's gone.

Thirty-six hours later, I make bail.

Miss G escorts me from my cell. We pass the picnic tables and the shower stalls and stop when we reach the same elevator that brought me to the third floor ten days ago. I crack a smile when I hear her speak into the radio unit for the last time.

"One female, coming down."

## THE ROAD

I reach inside my black leather handbag, searching for an unopened pack of Marlboros. Because I'm no longer drinking, I fancy myself a smoker. Being an addict—even one in recovery—makes me a lifer for a fix. Cigarettes sound like a sweet alternative to gut-rot whiskey if you ask me.

It's a brutally hot day in the seaside town of Beaufort, South Carolina, and I feel like I'm directly underneath the broiler of a gas oven. I push open the white paneled door that leads me inside an inconspicuous building one might mistake for an Elk Lodge or a Masonic Hall. The name of the clubhouse is Alano Hall—Alano is shorthand for Alcoholics Anonymous.

I step inside. Two open-entry access points to the large room are to my left, taking up roughly eighty percent of the entire building. Clouds of cigarette smoke, smiling faces, and lively chit-chat fill the room. To my right is a small kitchen. It's empty, so I walk in. I pour from a carafe of stale and weak coffee and fill a styrofoam cup nearly to the brim before adding a heaping spoonful of sugar. I stir as slowly as I can, but not because I've got the shakes. Nearly all of the alcohol withdrawal symptoms have ceased to exist by this point, but my deep-rooted social anxiety remains aglow.

To avoid any possible one-on-one conversations with other human beings, I typically refrain from entering the big room until the moment after the meeting begins. I refuse to be the newcomer that arrives at an A.A. meeting early enough for an oldtimer to strike up a conversation with me.

Twenty-eight days have passed since my release from jail, and I've attended at least one twelve-step meeting per day, sometimes two or three. I can recite the twelve steps from memory. Perhaps, it's because I stare at a list of the steps—a poster print, framed and affixed to the nicotine-stained wall—instead of making eye contact with my peers.

Some of the group members are reserved and quiet, others loud and boisterous. Then, there is Stan. I like Stan a lot. He always has a story of a dark and nasty binge, and I can fully relate to that. When Stan shares his thoughts and feelings with the group, he starts off the same way every time: "I'm Stan, and I'm an alcoholic. I'm just trying to get through these twenty-four hours. It's only an hour and a half until the liquor store closes and only six or so more hours till midnight, and then I'll be living for the next twenty-four."

I'm not here for this evening's closed discussion meeting, though.

I'm here to meet one-on-one with my sponsor, Vicki.

"I have news," I announce.

"Oh yeah?"

Vicki opens up her Big Book—A.A.'s acknowledged guide to living— and finds a story about acceptance.

"I'm not going to rehab. My dad and I talked about it, and we agreed that I'm taking every measure possible to stay sober here at home. He thinks, and I agree, that my family needs me home." I confess. "I want to do this without clinical intervention. With your help, of course."

She nods in agreement.

"I see that in you, girl, I do. I've seen ready people, and I've seen a lot of folks that were not ready. You can do it, and I will help. But, I'm only an instrument of God's work."

We hold hands and recite the serenity prayer in unison.

Vicki is expecting me to present her with a written log of shit that I'm pissed off over. She calls it a *Resentment List*. The one I've prepared isn't very lengthy, maybe five or six line items which Vicki finds funny. She chokes her laughter and expounds, sincerely and gracefully, on what the fourth step inventory means to her.

Vicki is a tough-as-nails-biker-babe that sugarcoats nothing. When I listen to her speak, I hang on every word. She tells me that the hurt in my soul—battle scars from late-night fights, tear-soaked phone calls, irreverant blackouts, and even the reinvention of bottomless rock bottoms—exists because I allow it. She tells me that I've been using the pieces of my broken heart as hand grenades for too long, and it's time to surrender.

"So, what do I do next?" I ask.

"Prepare for tomorrow's confession."

The next evening, Vicki picks me up for our dinner engagement.

"Do you like Mexican food?" She asks, fastening her seat belt.

I tell her Mexican food is fine by me. I'm nervous, and I hope she doesn't pick up on it. I haven't had dinner with a friend in years. The last leg of my drinking career took me to a place of hermit-like solitude where something so commonplace as having dinner with another woman makes my stomach turn.

The host leads us to a booth in the back of the restaurant.

We slide into the tall banquettes.

I motion toward the drink menu, asking Vicki if this place makes a decent margarita—my not-so-subtle way of breaking the ice.

Luckily, Vicki has a sense of humor.

"I've heard they don't use enough tequila!" She chirps.

"But, was there ever enough? I always felt like I could drink the whole well dry and still want more! Hell, I did drink it dry. A few times!"

A man appears with our first round of nosh. I reach for a hot tortilla chip and break it in two. Vicki's smile fades.

"It's time to get everything off your chest." She says.

I tell her I don't know where to start. Perhaps, I should start with the first meeting of Alcoholics Anonymous I ever attended—with my parents when I was nine years old—and how the course of my life changed due to my parent's mutual involvement in A.A. when my mom left my dad for his sponsor. We moved in with the guy for six months.

Vicki interrupts my inner monologue.

"Start with the first time you fell for a mind-altering substance."

**TO BE CONTINUED...**

Thanks for reading!