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Insulatus

ONE MONDAY IN DOWNTOWN SEATTLE as I waited for Frank on the ninth floor of the King County Jail, I watched prisoners shooting hoops in the yard. I grew up in New York and New Jersey watching John Starks sink threes for the Knicks, and I've been a basketball fan ever since. The recreation area at the edge of the building contained a hoop with a chain-link net and a concrete floor enclosed with wire. The prisoners wore standard red jail-issue uniforms—short-sleeved shirts and long pants made of cotton-and-polyester blend—but managed a wide range of fashions: cornrows, tattoos, long hair, shaved heads. One of them shot from behind the three-point arc. *Swish*. I whistled. The eleven-story-high jail recirculated its own rancid air, so the wind blowing in through the wire must've felt good to them.

Though I've taught prisoners for only ten years, I first visited a prison in utero in 1977, when a five-month-pregnant journalist named Kathryn Watterson drove thirty miles west of Philadelphia to Graterford Prison, where she visited a man named Tony. They sat at a table in a conference room enclosed with reinforced glass walls. All during the interview she scribbled notes. Tony, bearded and slight, sat across from her in his shirt and pants and low-cut leather shoes, and gave her a piece of gold the size of a half-eaten olive. He and other prisoners had extracted gold fillings from their teeth and melted them down to make her this gift.

The story of my life is bound up in my mother's prison work. With this in mind—the story of my mother and me—I'll tell you about Frank and I'll tell you about Tony and I'll give a brief history of my own petty crimes. All I ask of you, incredulous reader, is that you concede that we are all on some level isolated from one another. The verb “isolate,” or *insulatus*, means to place apart or alone. It's fair to imagine that by learning others' stories—fragmentary things—we may glance sidelong at our existential isolation. The pronoun “our” modifies a cold and lovely noun and highlights a paradox: the very act of speaking of isolation bursts boundaries containing consciousness. The moments that interest me are the ones that overflow containment: metallic-tasting air, the scratch of pencil on paper, pauses when what is said is said in silences. If what's above doesn't interest you, stop reading this instant. If you're still with me, I'll tell you about Frank, Tony, my mother, and me, and with a little luck I'll get closer to my

mother's work and mine and say what it's like to follow in her steps.

The gate to Frank's tank slid open, and he walked toward me looking sour. With his short gray hair and unshaven cheeks and wide-set pale-blue eyes, he looked older than his fifty-four years. We sat on plastic chairs in a tiny conference room. My job as a volunteer tutor was to help prisoners pass the General Educational Development tests. Frank wanted to pass the GED math test so that after he transferred he could get a higher-paying job in the prison in Monroe. Only he didn't focus on math all the time. Almost every week he looked up from his equations and we began talking. Or really *he* began talking, since I mostly listened. On that particular Monday he wrote $? \times ?$ and executed the equation correctly.

Over the past few weeks he had mastered the basics of multiplying fractions. He did a few more problems. Then he lifted his pencil, pushed out his lower lip, and said, "I saw my brother's ghost go to heaven. It looked like a ball of gas, and he was just floating. He said, Frank, help me. And I thought, Tommy. I went to the bathroom and came back in the room. I was eighteen then. Tom was eight. In 1992 my other brother, Doug, died of AIDS. The Lord told me to talk with him. There was turning points. My grandma Clara died that year in May. I was closest with her. No one told me she died. In first grade I got in trouble with the principal 'cause I brought a picture of Momma to school. She was nude on a bearskin rug. She was always doing her dance routines in front of us kids. I was always dancing to the music too. Now she's learned about real estate. Rents out rooms."

My mother taught a writing workshop at Holmesburg Prison—a maximum-security men's prison—from 1969 to 1973. In June 1970 she learned that the guards at Holmesburg had planned a riot for July 4, 1970. She got in touch with lame-duck Pennsylvania attorney general Fred Speaker. She told him what was about to happen. Unlike her editors at the *Philadelphia Evening Bulletin*, Speaker believed her, but said he could do nothing. The riot occurred on schedule. It was a way for guards to injure or kill prisoners they disliked. Later that year she heard a rumor that Speaker planned to single-handedly abolish the death penalty in Pennsylvania. He confirmed the rumor's veracity and asked her not to leak the story. She stayed quiet. He called her the day before he carried out his plan in January 1971—a year ahead of the Supreme Court's decision to suspend capital punishment—and the next day her front-page story broke news of Speaker's dismantling of the electric chair. Speaker rewarded her loyalty by giving her a letter that commanded state penitentiaries to admit her at a moment's notice. She used the letter to visit over a dozen jails and prisons and juvenile facilities. She investigated the prison system and published a series in the *Bulletin*.

A man who had lived on death row for ten years in Graterford Prison

read her series and wrote her a letter. The man's name, of course, was Tony. He lived in a row of solitary cells blocked off with double bars and double doors in a maximum-security building on prison grounds. On the day he and other condemned men were to die, they would be driven to Rockview Prison and strapped into the electric chair. Tony had been sentenced to die for the 1958 holdup murder of a Philadelphia merchant. Several months after Tony pled not guilty, his brother Joseph pled guilty as an accomplice to the murder and was sentenced to life imprisonment. The gun that killed the merchant has never been found.

Tony had taught prisoners on death row such as Boo Rivers how to read and write. When Speaker dismantled the electric chair in January 1971, prisoners like Tony who had lived on death row were released into a population of about sixteen hundred prisoners. On the day Tony was released into general pop, he stood at the top of three stairs and couldn't move. He was terrified. He thought he would piss his pants. He had lived for so long in isolation—leaving his cell only once daily to pace back and forth on a concrete strip for fifteen minutes—that at the sight of those stairs leading down toward hundreds of prisoners milling about, he panicked. Boo Rivers took his arm and led him down those stairs.

After my mother interviewed hundreds of prisoners and prison officials and after her series on the prison system was published in the *Bulletin*, the critics gave her 1973 book, *Women in Prison*, fair reviews. The *Village Voice*: “It is a book filled with truth, with humanity, with pain. And fashioned with extraordinary craft.” The *New York Times* called it “Valuable, compelling, long overdue.” The attention spurred a change in statewide laws that made it no longer illegal for prisoners to help each other with their legal cases. Tony had been doing legal work his whole time on death row. After the laws changed he started a law clinic for prisoners.

A few weeks after Tony gave her that piece of gold, and eight months after Jimmy Carter was sworn into office as the thirty-ninth president of the United States, she witnessed Tony's wedding at the prison chapel. Two days after I was born, Tony typed a letter from Graterford. “Dear Kitsi & Jack,” he wrote. “Congratulations! Mazel tov! Sha-lom!! And a hot damn, too!!! I'm sitting here with a Cuesta-Rey #70 [a long cigar] that I gave to myself from the proud and happy papa, and feeling like someone unique in being the uncle of Zachary.” On down the page he ended with, “I'm also drained and beat, so lemme close with a simple: Enjoy! enjoy!! enjoy!!! Also lotsa love and stuff. More good wishes, Tony.”

Tony applied to have his sentence commuted. Because he had represented prisoners and taught Boo Rivers and others how to read and write, his sentence was reduced. He was released in the early 1980s.

On the outside, he did all right for a while. He worked as the maintenance man for the apartment complex where he and his wife lived. But Tony had always been a thief, and when he got into a squeeze, he stole a TV and sound system from an apartment in their complex. Since he lived and worked there, he was of course recognized. When the cops came after him—he had not only violated his parole/commutation but had new charges and would be sent back to prison—he talked them into letting him have Christmas with his wife on condition that he would turn himself in the next day. The day after Christmas, Tony made himself a hot bath. He stripped, lay naked in the tub, and slit his wrists.

Frank, like Tony, wanted a life beyond the dreariness of his days, the constant flare of tempers and fists, the day-to-day drag of living in a jail too long. On one of our visits, Frank sauntered toward me, half moons under his eyes. We sat in our little room. I pulled out papers smattered with sample problems, fractions like hieroglyphs. But I could see that that evening he had zero interest in doing math. He started talking, and I just listened. “I was selling pills,” he said, “speed by the jar. I had no idea who I was working for. He was organized in his crime. Somebody had told him about how a guy pulled a gun on me and I just took it from him and shot him. Trouble’s met me, but I’m not trying to find it. After I got saved I crushed the pills into the ground. My boss was working for a pharmacological company. He was a distributor. Ephedrine sulfate. He had ninety-five people working for him at the time. He was making Quaaludes, Procaine, all kinds of pills. Used the same ingredients as diet pills. Nothing written on the jars. One thousand pills of Criss-Cross with ephedrine and caffeine in ’em. He sold ’em to me for a buck, and I turned around and sold ’em for five bucks. Twenty pills. Nickel bag. I was selling Black Beauties for two hundred bucks a jar. Bought ’em for twenty. Back then it was just a misdemeanor. Now it’s a felony. My uncle got shot over twenty-five dollars of heroin. The guy I worked for asked me to kill this guy. He wanted to have him mopped ’cause the guy—Bozeman—had stolen from him. Bozeman could bench four seventy-five. I’ve actually gotten into a lot of fights with guys that big and got the better of ’em. It’s got to do with God.”

As a teenager I stole from classmates and teachers and stores. I swiped cassettes, wallets, backpacks, bicycles, and stashed everything that would fit under a blanket in the trunk of my Honda, where it remained until one afternoon I drove north of the city and unloaded it all beside the Hudson. I doused the stuff with lighter fluid and struck a match and watched it burn.

As a fifteen-year-old kid, I was nervy. I thought that by stealing I would have a string of conquests that would add up to one big conquest. I was wrong. I stole because I was angry and hungry for something. What I was hungry

for I didn't—and still don't—know. In my twenties I was still hungry. I taught an improvisational theater class at a state prison in Ypsilanti, Michigan. Then I taught theater and writing classes in two other Michigan state prisons. Not long after that I quit college and worked, one after the other, at a lot of different jobs: I loaded grain, sold bread, washed dishes, felled trees, cooked in a Red Cross shelter, wrote narrative voiceover, taught ESL, tended bar, entered data, and doled medication to schizophrenics at a halfway house. I lived and worked in the Adirondacks, Albuquerque, Nicaragua, and Colorado, where I finished college. Meanwhile, my mother was going through her third divorce.

The first two I understood. Her first marriage had started and ended in her twenties. Her second marriage was with my father. That one ended in 1984, and I never lived with him again. But her third divorce—with a carpenter I had liked—I didn't understand. She left the carpenter for a blues musician. The blues musician was her fourth husband. He died of lung cancer. I helped her bury his ashes in a Quaker cemetery outside Philadelphia city limits. His name is carved on a gravestone there. Though my mother is alive, her name has been carved under his. That's what she wanted. It was her way of acknowledging that she too would one day die. And that she loved him the most. The last time I visited her we stood together inside the gates of the Quaker cemetery and listened to the bells toll across the street at the Greek Orthodox Church. I looked at her gravestone, and at the swollen sky, and at the spongy earth, and then I touched her shoulder and asked if she was ready to go. I reminded her that we had planned to have dinner in Center City. She agreed, but said I should go to the car and she'd follow in just a minute. She said she wanted a moment alone.

What I was looking for was a closeness with my mother that would help me deal with her death, whenever it came. That was the impulse; that was the reason I tutored at the county jail. That's why I revisited corridors and conference rooms and buildings like the ones where I first traveled as a fetus. The isolated world of the jail mirrored the isolation I experienced locked in my individual body and brain, knowing that no matter what else happened, I was born alone and would die that way too. That is the nature of isolation: yours, mine, my mother's, Frank's, Tony's, and that of all individuals from one another.

Other voices have said it well: "prison is a room / where a man waits with his nerves / drawn tight as barbed wire, an afternoon / that continues for months, that rises / around his legs like water." M. A. Jones, 1982, Arizona State Prison—Perryville. "But then, the encroaching darkness that began to envelop me forced me to re-form and give birth to myself again in the chaos. I withdrew deeper into the world of language." Jimmy Santiago

Baca, 1991, Reflections on Albuquerque County Jail, New Mexico and Arizona Prison—Florence. “i shouted / i banged / i yelled / i hollered.” Vera Montgomery, 1976, Edna Mahan Correctional Facility, Clinton, New Jersey. “I am lifted out of the limits / of this jail cell, / and on the road / with you, my son, / who more than any map or dream extends my world.” Kathy Boudin, 1998, Bedford Hills Correctional Facility, Bedford Hills, New York. “... even though you leave the / prison / the prison will never leave you.” Ajamu C. B. Haki, 1996, Sing Sing Correctional Facility, Ossining, New York. “The free side of the walls / Night, warmth, a parking lot.” Henry Johnson, 1987, Sing Sing.

The year I tutored Frank I was thirty years old. As I went through security check on my way into the jail, I sometimes thought of the stupid things I did as a kid. At thirty, those moments should’ve been safely behind me. The truth was, I still occasionally caught myself pocketing bubble gum at a drugstore, but that sort of pointless theft was rare, and I didn’t chalk it up as anything other than an embarrassing leftover instinct I couldn’t seem to quit.

The last time I saw Frank he’d been moved to the fourth floor. That Monday evening, our last, we said little. He riffled through sample problems. Less than a week later he would be transferred to a prison east of Seattle. The following morning he would take the GED math test, which, I learned later, he passed. I scanned the N4-F Dormitory with its plastic stackable chairs and a clock on the wall near a microwave. The stink of urine from a nearby bathroom had leaked into the air. A cleaning lady pushed a cart loaded with a mop bucket and jugs of disinfectant. Around us were the sounds of footsteps echoing off the concrete floor and the electric hum of gates moaning shut. As I left the jail that evening and walked toward home, where my wife had all the lights on, I was awed by the hugeness of the sky over the Sound. It was getting toward dusk. A sadness flooded me.

*Note: The works cited can be found in the PEN American Center Prize Anthology *Doing Time: 25 Years of Prison Writing*, edited by Bell Gale Chevigny.