

Letter 19

3-8-26

Throne in Jail

As his eyes fluttered open, he had to wonder if someone had shit in his mouth while he was sleeping. Since he was locked in his cell by himself, he knew it was impossible, but damn, it sure did taste like it.

He stumbled the couple of feet to his sink and began to clean his teeth. He was too young for dentures, but his real teeth were too weak for the life he put them through

He had slept for the better part of three days. His head was finally starting to clear up. Getting clean was always the hardest part of the transition back to jail.

The familiar ache called to him from his stomach. Chow would be soon, and he was grateful for it. The hunger reminded him of being a kid. Back then he was mad at the government for never giving his mother enough food stamps. Now that he was older, he realized she sold them for drug money. He was still mad at the government, just for better reasons.

As he ran the comb through his short hair, he noticed a little more gray. He had been seeing more and more of it on the towel after his girlfriend cut his hair. He was getting old. He would be forty soon.

Despite it all, it was good to be home, back behind bars. He had been in and out of jail so many times since his youth that this felt more familiar than that new trailer they had moved into last month. God, he hated going back to that trailer park, but they were the only ones in town that didn't run a credit check.

He had lived there a lifetime ago with his mom. This was where they lived when she had signed him up for those free classes for poor kids. She really thought Judo might fix him. The high school had failed, she had failed, and there was no way that crazy old man was going to do any better.

Maybe it would have been useful if that guy had actually taught him to fight. Instead, it felt like all he ever learned was how to fall down. He could still hear that old coot in his head, "If you learn to fall, then you can attack without fear. If you are prepared for the worst that can happen, then you can act without fear." Yoda, that guy was not.

After chow, his daydreaming was interrupted by another inmate. This guy needed help figuring out what his court paperwork said. This was his specialty. He had enough experience with court that he knew all the terms. If school hadn't been such a drag, he could have been a lawyer.

Lawyers probably don't even need math. He could do math with ounces and grams. That was all that mattered for real life.

He answered the guy's questions and pocketed the nicotine pouch that the guy used to pay him. He had to admit to himself that he liked the respect he got in here.

It wasn't always like that. Back in juvie, he was just a dumb punk kid. It wasn't until his third case, when he did his bid upstate, that he really figured shit out. Now that he's back here in county jail, he was king of the cellblock.

He'd probably be here long enough this time to get clean and fatten up a little bit. This timing was good since his supplier had gotten picked up. It had been hard lately to get product. He sure as hell wasn't getting a real job!

It wasn't that he was afraid to work, no sir! It was that people on the outside never gave him any respect. Who would want to work for a bunch of assholes that think you're stupid?

He did have to wonder why he'd been getting picked up more often lately. His buddy had said he'd been getting reckless. He knew better. There was a difference between reckless and fearless. On the streets, he had no fear.

He looked up and saw a new guy standing nervously in front of him, holding more paperwork.

Damn, the king's work is never done, he thought with half a grin.

Letter 20

3-10-26

Peter + Paul

“Achoo.”

“Bless you.”

“Thank you.”

This sneeze-based ritual annoys me on a good day. Here, it's taken to an extreme. My first issue with it is that it shatters the illusion that you could possibly have a moment to yourself. You could be alone in your cell, covered in blankets and mentally transported to another universe within the pages of a good book... until you sneeze. Then you are treated to a chorus of “Bless you” from an assortment of folks that you are always hoping are a little further away. It only takes one sneeze to instantly be reminded how much you are never alone.

Then, to make it worse, I am expected to thank them. I'm not sure if I'm supposed to be thanking them for the reminder of their unrelenting presence or for their blessing. Even outside of jail, I have a hard time thanking people for their blessings. With the dubious company I keep, I'm not sure any god, old or new, would be compelled by their blessing.

Finally, I feel annoyed that this three-part call-and-response forces me into small talk, which I despise. Admittedly, it's the smallest of small talk, but I still don't like feeling obligated to thank someone for something I didn't want to begin with.

The constant companionship is the most noticeable when you have a cellmate. Though I have no legitimate complaints about my current cellmate, it reminds me of taking a road trip. Except the road trip is months long, we are stuck in traffic not going anywhere, and the radio is stuck on an audiobook that is an autobiography of someone I don't give a fuck about.

A road trip with people of your choosing can be taxing. I know the feeling of being frustrated with the way my best friend chews, or even breathes, a few feet from me. That is nothing compared to the current trip, where I seem to have picked up a hitchhiker that is definitely a criminal.

Some cars on this road seem to be sharing a rougher go of it. For example, Peter was moved to our cellblock three weeks ago. He was put into Paul's cell.

Paul had thus far decided to keep to himself and only be an issue for the staff. He was extremely unhappy with the amount of Suboxone he was given. I'm not sure how much he wanted, but it was more than the zero that this county provides. While this displeased him, his frustrations were all staff-focused. His fellow inmates were generally ignored.

Once Peter was introduced to Paul's cell, they became fast friends. Peter would only be here for twenty days, but they would enjoy all of them. Or, that's how it seemed for two weeks. With six days to go, things soured in cell 160.

We aren't sure what started the feud, but it was obvious that things had changed.

They stopped choosing to spend extra time together, and they stopped trading leftover food with each other. It seemed unfortunate, but not a big deal.

Then, one day when the rest of us were playing cards, Peter and Paul were in their cell. Peter emerged with a folded blanket that he left by the main door to the cellblock. "It's dirty," was all he said as he looked at us and walked away. I don't know all of the details, and probably never will. However, I was able to piece together that somehow, in an afternoon spat, Peter ended up with some shit in a cup that found its way onto Paul's bed.

Somehow everybody was cool with this turn of events, so life went on, despite the scat spat.

The next day, when the COs came in with a routine med delivery, Paul appeared carrying his shoes. He threw them down at the CO's feet, declared, "There's piss on them," and stormed off. The CO appeared to decide the problem had resolved itself and left. The shoes remained until the garbage went out that night.

Maybe the shoes were somehow the victims in a sole urination misadventure, but I doubt it.

Peter and Paul were both counting down the days until Peter was released. It would be a type of freedom for both of them.

Finally, the day came. Peter would be released at 3:30 p.m. He waited in the dayroom with eager expectation. Paul waited in the cell, no doubt planning the redecoration of his soon-to-be solo accommodations.

Peter was released at 3:30 with little fanfare.

At 1:30 a.m., Paul wearily opened his eyes but assumed he must be dreaming. There stood Peter, dressed in orange, getting ready for bed. This dream had rapidly turned to a nightmare for both of them. Peter was back in jail within 12 hours.

Back to the same cell.

Later the next morning, Paul needed to speak to the counselor. We aren't sure what was discussed, but she was overheard telling Paul, "I'm sorry you feel you need to say that just to get your own cell."

Minutes later, Paul was removed from the cellblock. It was clear he was going to isolation, the direct result of threatening harm to yourself or others. We aren't sure which.

Within a few more hours, Peter was packed up and moved to another county. Apparently he was already wanted there and should probably not have been released to the streets to begin with. Since he couldn't even make it 12 hours without an interaction with law enforcement, it wasn't hard for them to find him.

So, here I remain, in this traffic. The car with Peter and Paul has passed, their story told. God, why does my passenger need to yawn like that!