



This is an enchanted place. Others don't see it but I do.

I see every cinder block, every hallway and doorway. I see the doorways that lead to the secret stairs and the stairs that take you into stone towers and the towers that take you to windows and the windows that open to wide, clear air. I see the chamber where the cloudy medical vines snake across the floor, empty and waiting for the warden's finger to press the red buttons. I see the secret basement warrens where rusted cans hide the urns of the dead and the urns spill their ashes across the floor until the floods come off the river to wash the ashes outside to feed the soil under the grasses, which wave to the sky. I see the soft-tufted night birds as they drop from the heavens. I see the golden horses as they run deep under the earth, heat flowing like molten metal from their backs. I see where the small men hide with their tiny hammers, and how the flibber-gibbets dance while the oven slowly ticks.

The most wonderful enchanted things happen here—the most enchanted things you can imagine. I want to tell you while I still have time, before they close the black curtain and I take my final bow.

I hear them, the fallen priest and the lady. Their footsteps sound like the soft hush of rain over the stone floors. They have been talking, low and soft, their voices sliding like a river current that stops outside my cell. When I hear them talk, I think of rain and water and crystal-clear rivers, and when I hear them pause, it is like the cascade of water over falls.

They are so aware of each other, they don't need to speak in complete sentences.

"Heading now?" he asks.

"Room," she says.

"Hard."

"Aren't they all?" Again I hear the rain in her voice.

The lady hasn't lost it yet—the sound of freedom. When she laughs, you can hear the wind in the trees and the splash of water hitting pavement. You can sense the gentle caress of rain on your face and how laughter sounds in the open air, all the things those of us in this dungeon can never feel.

The fallen priest can hear those things in her voice, too. That's what makes him afraid of her. Where can that freedom lead? Nowhere good, his pounding heart says.

"Which one?" he asks.

The lady is one of the few who call us by our names. She says her new client's name. It drops like a gem from her mouth. She has no idea how precious it sounds.

"York." The man in the cell next to mine.

The other men on the row say his mother named him for a slave who traveled with Lewis and Clark, or after

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his royal English father from some fabled city overseas—only in prison can you get away with a lie that big.

York knows the truth doesn't matter in here. Inside, the lies you tell become the person you become. On the outside, sun and reality shrink people back to their actual size. In here, people grow into their shadows.

I press my face against the crumbling wall. The soft rocks absorb their voices, but I have learned how to listen. I pick their words off the moss and stone.

He is warning her that this case, above all others, will be tough.

“Ready and prepared,” I hear him say.

“Soon?” the lady asks.

I can hear the pleading in her voice. How can he not hear it? But he doesn't. He is too busy being scared of her.

The fallen priest doesn't hear the whipping in his own voice when he talks to the lady. He doesn't hear the longing and desire. He doesn't feel the wonderful wildness of the world. Though he lives inside this enchanted place, he doesn't see the enchantment in the lady; he doesn't see the enchantment in here or anywhere.

For me, being taken to this dungeon was like landing in sanctuary. For the priest, it was worse than exile. He came here not long ago, with his face dejected and the fluorescent lights shining on his thinning hair, the wrinkles drying around his eyes.

This place freezes you. Then one day they thaw you out and take you to the back of Cellblock H, and you are dead.

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“Catch you later,” he says.
I drop my head from the wall.

The lady walks past my cell. I slide along the cell wall toward the bars, careful not to let her see me. If she turns, I will jump on my cot and hide under the blanket. Instead, she keeps walking.

I creep closer to the bars to watch her walk. I catch a triangle of shirt at the bottom of her narrow back, the back of her heel. I have become practiced at this game, so sometimes I catch more: a tendril of shining black hair, a glimpse of a seashell ear.

I listen carefully as her footsteps recede down the row, savoring each tiny, muffled clop, saving it for later.

The fallen priest is also there, on the other side of my cell, watching her go. Slowly, he turns and walks the other way. His footsteps sound leaden. An inmate calls to him—that would be Striker, on my other side—and the priest moves reluctantly to the cell bars, ready words of comfort on his lips. He has sweat under his oxford shirt from talking to the lady. Sweat rolls down his calf and falls from his bare ankle under his loafers to the porous stone. It seeps down below to the underground caverns where the golden horses run, but no one sees.

The lady doesn't look back at the fallen priest. She strides away, her back straight and firm. She thinks of the priest

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and twitches the thoughts away. She needs a clear mind for meeting her new client.

The men watch her pass silently. No one catcalls the lady.

At the far end of the hall, a narrow set of ancient stairs rises out of the gloom. We are buried here in the dungeon, deep under the cellblocks above. The cells here have never seen sunlight, and the lightbulbs in the stairwells are old and flickering.

The tight dungeonlike stairs are dark corners and spittle-drying places that a wise man avoids. The lady takes a deep breath and plunges up them. Claustrophobia has always plagued her. It has taken her years to get used to entering this prison, with its loud slamming gates and shocking claps of metal locks and her own deep memories of knowing what it is like to feel trapped. She got over her fears in the way she gets over everything—she pretends they don't exist.

Still, the stairs in our prison disturb her. Once she happened to glance up at the wall and saw a torn fingernail dangling from a crack in the stone. She knows about the crimes that take place in our enchanted place; the brutal acts that the outside never hears about, the gougings and rapes and killings. She knows these crimes occur not just against inmates but against guards and people like her.

The stairs are so old, they slope at the middle. The stone is porous and absorbs blood. It is true, ancient lettings have left pink stains. The stains have soaked into the margins of the old stones, the lady thinks.

She gets to the top of the landing and lets out a sigh of relief. The door leads down a silent hallway. Now she is at least on the ground floor. She turns down another narrow hall and climbs another short, steep set of stairs.

There, finally, at the top of an old alcove, is the room they call the Library of the Guards.

It is a large open room lined with shelf after shelf of huge ancient leather books. These are the ledgers of the dead, kept back before the days of computers. The guards sometimes pull down the old ledgers for visitors, to show them the archaic names and the spidery writing. A great-uncle of mine is in one ledger, though I would never openly admit to that. Elbert James Knowles, the faint handwriting says, and the date of his death. My own death, I figure, will be written in invisible ink, wound into the secret channels of the walls, where the little men climb with their hammers. Of computers I cannot say. I have never seen one.

In the middle of the Library of the Guards is an old scratched desk. A guard sits bleakly in the too small chair. He is large and looks heavy with discomfort. He is having his meal break. He eats from the blue regulation lunch box that all the guards carry, with an accordion lid and sections that can be flipped open easily to search for contraband. Every now and then they bring in a drug dog to sniff the lunches, though really, there is no way to stop contraband altogether, at least not in this prison, where the temptations are great, the stress is high, and corruption is common. When a guard can sell a pack of smokes

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for a hundred dollars inside, you bet the temptation is there.

The guard waves at the lady with a handful of squished sandwich. She is free to enter the door at the far end of the room.

Inside this door is the death row visiting room. The death row inmates jokingly call it the parole room.

The death row visiting room is small. There is a beautiful old yellow glass fixture on the ceiling—not just a bulb in a metal cage but a real glass fixture that throws a warm light. There is a real wood table, too, and you can pretend it smells faintly of lemon even if you know that no one here cleans with anything beyond sudsy gray water.

The important part is the window on the far wall. If the inmates strain hard, they can see the sky through that window. The clouds might be fluffy and white one day, traced with pink and mauve the next, or lit on fire from a sunset.

The window is the reason the death row inmates go to the visiting room to see their lawyers and investigators. The lawyers think their clients want to see them. No, they want to see the window. When the visit ends and they are led in chains back to the dungeon underground, where they spend their days trapped in a six-by-nine cell with no window and no fresh air, a flat cot and open toilet with an endless circle of dark brown in the bowl and a flickering lightbulb in a metal cage, they can remember that scrap of sky. They might go months down

in the dungeon between visits, even years. But on those rare days when they are summoned to the visiting room, they know they will see the sky.

When they return to the dungeon, they can tell the others. “It was reddish today, and the clouds were the color of plums,” they might say. Or “I saw a bird—so pretty.” No one will dispute them. There are some things people lie about in here—okay, people lie about most things in here. But there is one thing on death row that no one lies about, and that is what they saw in those scraps of sky.

York is already in the cage, waiting for the lady.

The cage is just big enough to hold one man. It stands nine feet tall and is made of lathe-carved wooden bars as hard as iron. Back in the early 1800s, a company in Louisiana called Dugdemonia Holdings made these cages from wood they imported from Africa on the slave ships. The slaves made the cages and sometimes died in them. The cages were sold to small towns where jailers needed a place to hold the ranting or insane, and to plantations where owners needed a holding cell for runaways. The Dugdemonia cages became popular with correction officers and revolutionaries, as cells for prisoners and for torture. More than one man has died of starvation in a Dugdemonia cage.

There are only a handful of these famous cages left in the country. One is in our enchanted place, and it is used

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to hold the death row inmates for their professional visits. This is where York waits for the lady.

The lady sits in the single chair facing the cage. Her movements are deliberate and relaxed.

The lady and York study each other.

York's eyes are dark and oblong, like a bird of prey's. He has high cheekbones set in a thin face, a narrow skull capped with thin dark hair. Despite the years underground, his skin has a high, resinous color. Usually, the men who work with the lady look bleached by years spent living under the earth. The white men turn a strange translucent shade, like clear jelly, and the black men turn the sad color of eggplant. York has retained color, as if in defiance.

The lady sees York is a small man, bent and oddly formed, as if his bones grew funny. Even in the cage, he holds himself with a sense of contained force.

His ankles are chained above his paper slippers. A heavy bull chain is attached to one ankle cuff, and the bull chain threads back between the wood bars to a huge bolt embedded in the stone wall. The bull chain is in case he tries any funny business. The funny business never ends up very funny, I have noticed.

The lady sees that York's front teeth are oddly notched with a strange little groove in the middle—as if God, or the devil, wanted to fork him. These notched teeth are surprisingly clean. He brushes them three times a day, he will tell anyone with his monkey grimace. He flosses with bits of thread he pulls from the cover on his cot.

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Four hundred count, he chortles to anyone who is listening outside his cell door. York keeps up a constant litany on the row. Sometimes he will repeat the same soliloquy for days, until the guards swear they will go mad for listening, and then he will retreat inside his cell and stare at his hands.

York likes to think about what other people are thinking. He believes it gives him an edge. He says that twelve years on the row have honed his psychic abilities, but then, he claims, he was always psychic. Just as a blind man learns to smell better, York says his life has helped him read minds. The intense deprivation of our dungeon, he says, has made him better at what he does best: getting inside your head.

Of course, when he says this, the guards roll their eyes and comment that the only head York gets inside is his own.

Right now York believes the lady is thinking about him. He thinks she is feeling sorry for him, her poor new client who has spent twelve years waiting for death.

The lady isn't thinking that at all. She isn't even thinking about York. She is wondering how bad the roads will be on the way home. The spring weather has been fickle, and floods might close the single road leading away from our enchanted place. If that happens, she will have to stay overnight at the nearest motel, with its clanking radiators and mildew smell. Her mind is disconnected from

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her new client. It works better for her this way. She hasn't even brought a notebook to the interview.

The lady smiles at York and relaxes into her chair. She has been on her feet all day, and sitting is a treat. The window shows the sky is full of dark rain clouds, as dark as slate. The yellow light fixture above them is warm.

In a prison full of liars, the lady has the advantage of being completely authentic. Even a man like York—especially a man like York—can see there is no game in her smile. There is warmth and kindness and something that looks like steel. You can tell me anything, her eyes say, because I will see the beauty in everything you say.

Eventually, York has to say something, anything, has to make his mouth move and ease the friction from his throat. The words tumble out as rough as rocks, but they are soon worn smooth, and more and more he hears himself talking—blessed surcease, a person just to *listen* to me—and the vowels round and the consonants grow into planets that become the universe that expands in the light in her dark eyes. She hears me, he thinks wildly—she *hears* me.

York talks and talks until his words sound like poetry even to him. He tells her why he has volunteered to die. “It isn't just that it is torture,” he says, “being locked in a cage. It's never being allowed to touch anyone or go outside or breathe fresh air. I'd like to feel the sun again just once.”

Her eyes show a sudden distance. What he said is true, but it isn't true enough.

“Okay. I’m tired of being meaningless,” he admits. “I’m done, okay?”

He talks about the confused mess inside of him. He says everyone thinks sociopaths are super-smart criminals, but he is just a messed-up guy who doesn’t know why he does what he does. Except there is like a switch in him, and when the switch flips on, he cannot stop.

“If it made sense, I would tell you,” he says. “When you kill people, it is supposed to make sense. But it doesn’t. It never does.”

The lady nods. She understands.

With each secret he tells her, her eyes get darker and more satisfied. York can see from the precious slot of window that the rain clouds have lifted and the sky itself is dark. He has been speaking *forever*; he has told her secrets he has been afraid to tell anyone, secrets he suspects she knew all the time.

The look in her eyes is of a person who drank from the end of a gun barrel and found it delicious. Her eyes are filled with a strange sort of wondrous sadness, as if marveling at all the beauty and pain in the world.

She stands up. For the first time he notices how tiny she is. She looks like a little dark-haired sparrow. Her equally dark, oblong bird eyes could be his eyes, her narrow skull his own. But her bones are long and finely made, while his are crooked and bent.

She raises her hand in a gesture that looks like good-bye but also says yes.

He lifts his hand cautiously. His fingers are thin from

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lack of use. He holds his fingers out of the cage. It is the eternal gesture of hope that says *touch me*.

She knows the rule. Death row inmates are not allowed to have human touch. It is part of their punishment. She could lose her license for that gesture alone. So she gives him another gift instead. She steps just close enough for him to feel her human warmth.

The warden hates her. But how we love her, the lady.

When I first fell so long ago, I was placed in general population—Cellblock A, what they call the Hall of the Lifers.

I knew the dangers of prison for someone like me. I was so scared that I hid in my cell when the doors clanged open for yard times. I waited silently until the other men had all gone down the line, then I slipped along the walls until I made it to the prison library.

I can still remember the path from that cell to the library: two turns with the hand you write. Down the stairs. Then turn the opposite direction, like the way you turn off water.

I wasn't very good at reading back then. The last time I remember being in a real school was when I was eight. It was a little schoolhouse near my grandparents' place. I remember the smell of wet woolen socks on the ancient radiator, and the freshly shaved red neck of the older boy who sat in front of me. Those are the only details I can remember. As for most men in prison, my memories of the outside have become faint over time. The outside world

has become the unreal world. When I dream, my dreams are of the inside.

Reading was hard. Even the simple words stumped me. But I kept going back, mostly because I had no other place to go. Eventually, I came to like puzzling over the words in the dusty sunlight that came in the barred windows and lay in long slashes across the wooden table.

Bit by bit it got easier, and when it did, the floodgates opened, and all of a sudden I was reading. I read Nancy Drew and the Hardy Boys. I read Louis L'Amour and the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, *Wuthering Heights* and the Best American Short Stories collections. I read every book I could on nature, so when the author took us on a walk in the woods, I was there, too. I fell completely for the dark strangeness of Sidney Sheldon and the magic of Ray Bradbury. I read my favorite books over and over again and each time found new things inside them, as if the writers had put in new words in my absence. I'd be reading a passage from my favorite, *The White Dawn*, by James Houston, and all of a sudden there would be a new paragraph that I could swear I had never read before.

I read everything in that dusty little library. I read the prologues and the epilogues until I could tell you how many times Stephen King thanked his wife, Tabitha. I could tell you how the Columbia Indians made their long-houses, or how to make a solar toilet, or how to dry bear meat in the sun. I could tell you all of this if I could talk, but instead the words stayed inside of me and marveled.

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This I could accept, or so I told myself for a long time. Because the words were there, and they carried me to another place.

After many years of this, the warden came in. The chair I sat in had two deep grooves in the seat where my skinny shanks fit. The area of my table had come to be known as for me and me alone.

The warden was brand-new back then, and a lot younger. His hair was glossy and black, and his face was tanned. He looked like a man who went boating. He held his hand as if proud of his thick gold wedding ring. Everyone joked about how he paraded around his young wife when she visited.

He stood next to my spot at the table where I stacked the books like walls around me. He picked up *Butterfly Collecting for Young Boys*. “Here you are, just like they said,” he said.

I nodded, swallowing.

“They say you don’t go to the yard or to mess.”

No. I shook my head. I wanted to say: The books are enough.

He paused, turning the book over to see a photo of a boy on the back cover. The boy was wearing a short-sleeve shirt. He had a face full of obligatory freckles and a wide innocent smile. He was holding a butterfly net and stood against a field covered in dazzling blue flowers.

“I appreciate you staying out of trouble.”

I knew what the warden meant: He appreciated me staying out of the yard, away from the inmates who liked

to hurt me, because he was afraid I might someday hurt them back.

“Fellow like you is smart to play it safe,” he added, putting the book gently down in front of me.

The other inmates in the library that day were watching all of this with their jaws open. One was a man I knew—he lived in my cellblock. He was a huge, muscled ruddy man with narrow teeth turned in like a rabbit’s. I knew as soon as I left, he would lumber up and saunter after me, following me down the dark, empty stairs.

The ruddy man watched the warden talk to me. His smug grin turned to puzzlement at what the warden did next.

The warden smiled and patted me on the back. The warden—patting me.

And for the next long years of my life, I tried to remember only the reading, not the terrible things that happened to me as I came and went up and down the stairs. The library became my sanctuary. I loved the ways the precious stories took shape but always had room to be read again. I became fascinated with how writers did that. How did they make a story feel so complete and yet so open-ended? It was like painting a picture that changed each time you looked at it.

Some of the things in the books troubled me. The high school biology textbooks reorganized my mind into epicenters of new worlds until the cells of my own walls began to race. The color plates in the medical textbooks showing the insides of people made me shake. It was as if

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someone had planted these books in the library to remind me of a question that had troubled me for so long: What lives inside the coils inside people? Why did God create us with so many winding, dark puzzles? In times like these, I would have to go back to something comforting like *The White Dawn*.

Sometimes, when reading a book, I would think of the other people who might have touched it before it was donated. A nice woman who lay down with her baby for a nap might have held the book I was reading. I could see her, lying in a sundress on faded rose-printed cotton sheets, the book splashed open in the sunlight. A little of that sun could have soaked into the pages I was touching.

After a time, it seemed that the world inside the books became my world. So when I thought of my childhood, it was dandelion wine and ice cream on a summer porch, like Ray Bradbury, and catching catfish with Huck Finn. My own memories receded and the book memories became the real memories, far more than the outside, far more even than in here.

But after many more years, I did the other bad thing, and they sent me here.

When you do a really bad thing inside a prison, they don't have many choices. They can kill you and call it an accident, or they can send you into the dungeon. I got sent to the dungeon.

The doors here no longer bang open. If they ever did,

I would panic. I would hide on my cot with the blanket over my head. There is no library down the hall with two rights and a left. There is now only me, in my cell, trapped forever. But the trusty still brings me books on his cart.

And the warden comes. Every few weeks he passes my cell, silently pushing a book through the slot. I wait on my cot, blanket over my head, and after I hear the book drop, I scramble for it.

The warden always seems to know which book to bring. When the sun grows dusty hot outside the walls and the sky is gunslinger blue, the warden brings a western. When rain slates against the towers and the world has gone hopeless with gray, it is Bible stories. When the halls ring with the cries of riot and the bars of my own cell rattle with pain, the warden drops a soft book on the floor, solace in its pages: the collected poems of Walt Whitman.

And oh, my favorites, like the tastes of childhood. Every few months the warden passes me *The White Dawn*, and for a few precious days I traverse the open heavens on hard-packed moonlit snow and see the blue splashing arctic lights, and I fill my belly with frozen seal meat and laugh with my Inuit friends.

When I first started reading, I didn't know how to sound some words. I would whisper them inside my head. Sioux, paisley, ruche. Obsolete, rubric, crux. How do you say

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those words? How do they sound when others say them?
Are they as pretty as they sound inside my head?

Once, early on, I tried endlessly to say the word “Sioux” inside my head. I am still not sure how it sounds. Is the X silent? I would think for hours how strange it was that some parts of words are silent, just like some parts of our lives. Did the people who wrote the dictionaries decide to mirror language to our lives, or did it just happen that way?

I decided that in the end, it doesn’t matter. In my mind, the words sound right. They chase each other around like boats on a lake after dusk, and who cares if my metaphors or semicolons or whatever are correct.

The books brought brilliance to my life, and they brought an understanding: Life is a story. Everything that has happened and will happen to me is all part of the story of this enchanted place—all the dreams and visions and understandings that come to me in my dungeon cell. The books helped me see that truth is not in the touch of the stone but in what the stone tells you.

And the stones tell me so much. But if I get some things wrong, then please forgive me. This place is too enchanted to let the story go untold.