

“Everybody lock up!” The guard barked over the intercom. “Get in your cells, now!”

“Oh God, what now?” One of the girls asked, picking up her plastic bowl and gathering her belongings beneath her arm.

“There’s a code purple,” someone announced as she stepped through the door that had been electronically unlocked by the fumbling guard at the control panel, “Somebody hung up in building two.” Building two hosts the youthful offenders and a mental health program. This wasn’t good. Either a child or someone emotionally fragile had attempted suicide.

I took one last glance downstairs as I stepped into my cell. Just below I could see a guard with his foot on the chair, standing two feet from the television designated for inmate use, flipping through channels with the remote control. The other guard pushed a few buttons on the panel and then joined his partner at the TV. I shook my head and let the heavy cell door shut behind me. My roommate was out of the unit so I stood alone in the dark cell. *A code purple?* Whoever she was, whatever her story, I knew that it wouldn’t end well whether she lived or died. If she lived, they’d cart her off to the hospital and then ship her back to York in a couple of days, strip her naked and lock her up in an observation cell in the prison’s mental health unit. She’d surely regret having survived once she found herself locked in that barren and frigid cell deprived of even the most basic comforts and human dignities.

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The cell door opened with a click and my roommate came puffing into the room. Her hand groped for the light switch and flicked it on.

“Did you hear?” Mimi asked. “There was a code purple in building two. They said it was Rosa.”

“Rosa ██████████? Really? That doesn’t sound like something she’d do.” My roommate shrugged her shoulders and plopped down onto her cluttered bed.

“Everybody has a breaking point,” she said, “Staff kept fuckin’ with her once she went off on that red-headed rookie who was messing around with Cammie ██████████. Once she let it rip, the staff targeted her. Kept harassing her, ticketing her. When she came out of the hole, she just wasn’t the same.”

“Yeah,” I replied, “LaRay was telling me about it while we were waiting for our appointments.”

In the medical unit, LaRay sat beside me in the waiting area, her fist sank into her substantial hip, the other hand wagged a pointed finger as she spoke, “Patterson ain’t have no business being in no inmate’s room. Plain and simple. Hmph, you know somethin’s afoul when you can’t even get in your own cell ‘cause staff in there with your bunk. You gotta sit outside the room, wait ‘til they done doin’ whatever they in there doin’.” LaRay shook her head in disgust, “Rosa ain’t make no mess like that up. He got Cammie to suck his nasty little pecker and can’t nobody tell me otherwise.” Her finger waved emphatically as if she were shaking something off the end of it. “He show up for work everyday and go home after eight hours of doin’ nothin’ while Rosa sittin’ in that

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pissy little cell in solitary confinement. They need to walk his ass off. Terminate 'im, relieve 'im of his duties. But nooo, yet they got the nerve to stick her in 2-North with the loonies to make everybody think she ain't got good sense. Rosa got alotta shit wit her but she ain't no liar and she damn sure ain't crazy." LaRay swatted at a fly that was circling her helmet of neat finger-waves, "Uh uh, she ain't just pull an accusation like that out her ass. No, ma'am, somethin' ain't right here." She leaned toward me and lowered her voice, "Chas, you mean to tell me that you ain't never wondered why Cammie the only one prancin' around here in full face, poppin' bubblegum and sportin' penny-blonde hair when commissary don't sell none of that shit?"

Back in my room, I wadded up a bunch of damp paper towel and wiped down the countertop, "I wish Rosa would've just kept her mouth shut. No matter what you say around here, an inmate's word means nothing. Because we wear maroon shirts, we have no credibility." My anger surged. How many times had I witnessed a staff member, arms crossed, scowling at a teary-eyed prisoner, dismissing her with these words: "You're an inmate so you're a liar," or, "If staff said it happened, then it happened." As if an iron-on badge and a walky-talky makes one impervious to any form of dishonesty or corruption.

"Well, something must have set her off." Lowering myself to my knees, I began scrubbing the floor with a sponge, "Rosita isn't the type to set it off for no reason."

"I guess Patterson wouldn't let her get a drink of water from the fountain and she went off. You know how she's always thirsty because of the diabetes, so when he denied

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her that drink, she said she wasn't gonna suck his dick for water, right in the common area in front of everybody. There were a couple of nurses and two other guards there, too, so you know he had to cover his ass. He wrote her up for it and threw her in solitary. Staff's been riding her ass ever since. I passed her on the walkway a couple of weeks ago and heard one of the guards threatening her. He said that her days were numbered. She was on her way to the medical unit, minding her own business. She just kinda looked at me and shrugged her shoulders."

Disgusted, I stood on a chair and began organizing books, "So, what about the accusation? He's still struttin' around here. Isn't anybody going to look into *that*?" I dropped my coffee mug and cursed underneath my breath, "yeah, that sounds about right for this place." Stepping off of the chair, I retrieved my mug, slammed it onto the countertop. "Come to York C.I. unzip and take your pick. That's what their 'help wanted' ad should say." Mimi nodded in agreement, "Hey, that rhymes," she added thoughtfully, shoving her fist into an open bag of potato chips and stuffing her mouth, "You should make a jingle for their hiring slogan."

I hadn't seen Rosa in weeks but I was all too familiar with this classic DOC technique: punish and silence the inmate who knows too much and dares to make a public accusation; and the most effective way to break her spirit is to throw her into solitary confinement for a few weeks. Put her on "investigation," teach her a lesson and let it serve as a warning to anyone else stupid enough to think that they have a voice. I climbed up onto my bunk and snatched my sheet over my head. "I hate this place. I hate the way they talk to us. I hate the way they treat us," I said, "I bet 'prison guard' is the

only occupation in this country where someone can do just about anything and never have to answer for it.”

“We’re prisoners, a bunch of nobodies,” my roommate said in between chews, “We don’t matter. All we are to them is a steady paycheck and an early pension.” I didn’t respond. What she said was true. Even though most of the staff here are decent human beings, there’s still the *other* ones; those drawn to this work by the allure of dominating the weak and crushing the already broken. Even with those who perform their duties with dignity and compassion, still, there will never be enough decent and humane people working in corrections to completely shield us from those who seek out this line of work for all the wrong reasons. We remain targets for any power-thirsty asshole with a score to settle with his overbearing mother, his unavailable father, the playground bully, the girl who rejected him in high school, or the police exam that he just couldn’t pass. Who better than female prisoners to ejaculate ones anger and to act on one’s own feelings of frustration, inadequacy and lack of control when naked of the blue uniform? I lay on my back and swallowed back the painful lump in my throat. I closed my eyes tightly and felt hot tears stream toward my pillow.

Rumors quickly circulated throughout the prison. “She’s a vegetable,” a girl seated beside me in the cafeteria stated, “It sucks because her mind is fully functioning but she can’t move a muscle.”

“No,” her lunch partner corrected. “I heard that she woke up and took a breath on her own. They said she even had a cup of ginger ale and a few saltines last night.”

Who's they? I wanted to ask but I didn't. I'd heard enough. The rumors were only upsetting me more. I stood from the table and went to dump my tray. At the tray receptacle, I heard another group of girls talking about it.

"As soon as the swelling goes down in her brain, they're going to ship her back here. But she'll be housed in the hospice unit because she won't be able to feed or bathe herself."

"She coded in the hospital," a passerby chimed in.

"No, that's not true," a blonde haired girl with her mouth full of sandwich yelled after her, "she's in stable condition."

"Nuh uh, critical."

"No, no. She's being discharged by the end of the week."

"How can that be?" A thin voice cut in, "I heard she's dead."

I walked out of the chow hall and pulled cold air into my lungs. Rounding the corner, I stared at building two. Which tier was she on, which cell was she in? What was going through her mind when she looped that noose? I reflected on my own suicidal impulses but quickly shook those desperate moments out of my head. I, all too well could relate to Rosa's feelings of anguish and desolation. Somehow, I'd survived those weak, vulnerable periods and surely, there'd be many more that I'd have to brace myself against. But Rosa, she was a fighter. Never someone that I would think would ever carry out her suicide, even though I knew that she didn't have it easy. She'd lost her trial and had been sentenced to almost twenty years. Still, she kept her head above water. Her two girls, Jasmine and Destiny, were what she had to live for, she told me this a few weeks

after she'd survived the shock of her mother's death. "Can you help me fill out these papers," she had asked, unfolding some life insurance documents. "I want to be sure that my babies are taken care of in case anything ever happens to me. You know my health ain't too good. I'm a real fragile diabetic and I have epilepsy. Anything could happen. Not to mention the shit that goes on in here. One of these dick-heads could kill me," she said referring to the staff.

I took the papers and heard her ruffling through her things. She produced a picture. "You see these two little girls, Chas?" Rosa handed me a photograph, "they're all I have left. This is what I live for." I looked at the picture and saw two smiling children that resembled their mother. "These two girls are the light that will lead me out of this place. Do you have a light, Chas?" She asked. The question took me off guard. "Everybody needs a light. If you don't have one out there, you need one in here." She put her fist to her chest and then to mine. "Everyone needs to find their own light."

A couple of weeks later, Rosa stood waving at the threshold of her door the moment I came into view. "Hey, Amiga, guess what I did this morning," she had a big smile on her face, "I smudged! I've been fighting for that for seven long years."

"That's great, Rosita," I answered and hugged her tightly. I had learned a little about this sacred Native American ritual, of the mixture of herbs that were set aflame in a ceremonial abalone shell. I was told of the prayers to The Creator, and of the circle representing all humankind as one race. I knew of the scattering of white and desert sage, sweet grass, juniper and tobacco ash onto Mother Earth, the ever-fertile provider.

“I didn’t want to sue for my right to practice my religion but I would’ve. The men prisoners who follow Native American beliefs been smudgin’ a long time ago. They have sweat huts too, but I’m just happy that I had the chance to smudge today. All my bitchin’ finally paid off.” She shook her head but still had the same look of contentment on her face. “What you gotta do around here just to make these people understand that we have something that we believe in too.” She turned her forearms out to me, exposing columns of ugly scars of shed blood, something that she told me that she did in the name of her belief. “In my religion,” she explained, “we shed our blood in sacrifice. Nothing in this world or the next can be gained if you’re not willing to give something precious in return.” I guess that made sense. Christianity required sacrifice for both earthly and heavenly treasures. Why would her God not have a like request?

After I gained a small degree of understanding of Rosa’s beliefs, I’d bring her feathers and stones whenever I’d find one that was particularly beautiful and she’d thank me with the sincerity of a child and carry them around her neck in her medicine bag. I’d never known anyone who so appreciated a gift that most of us would view as valueless. Her love of the earth was a rarity in an environment where some inmates didn’t think twice about throwing candy wrappers in the grass and where staff thought nothing of spewing globs of brown-tinged tobacco spit onto our walkways.

Sometimes, it was easy to forget that Rosa was around; she was such a recluse who spent most of her free time locked in her cell. But one trait she possessed quickly reminded us all that she was definitely present. She had a hair-trigger temper. Like an

angry wasp, she'd emerge from her hive in a rage if she was awakened from sleep, or jolted by someone calling to a guard or the slam of a door, or if she were disturbed by the volume of the tier television, or just by laughter.

"Shut the fuck up, you dumb bitches!" She'd jump up from the bed and snatch her cell door open, "I'm trying to sleep!" After she'd administered her sting, she'd retreat back to her cell.

Rosa had classic symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, the most obvious one being noise sensitivity: the slightest sound would set her off something fierce. I felt bad for her and always wondered what had happened to her in life to make her so volatile, so fragile. One day I decided to ask. Rosa, sitting Indian-style on her tightly made bed, stood and leaned against the bedpost, "When you were little I bet you fell asleep huggin' your little teddy bear after Mommy and Daddy read you a bedtime story and tucked you in. Well, where I come from, we slept with one eye open, clutchin' the handle of a gat, not knowin' when somebody was gon' try to rob us or shoot us up. And if that ain't bad enough, how can you sleep when you never know if the narcs gon' show up, kickin' the door in for a raid? When you ain't never had no peace, you try to find sleep whenever you can get it. You crave silence." In fact, most of the arguments that Rosa got into were over noise and her inability to sleep. She wasn't easy to live with and some of her roommates would be in tears, begging to be moved out. They would check themselves into mental health or Rosa would take it upon herself and have the unwanted cellmate evicted. She went through more roommates than anyone I know. Rosa was a tiny, ninety- pound firecracker, feisty and explosive but she was also lovable and true.

Strangely, that was her: earth-lover and earth disturber. But Rosa was always willing to apologize whenever she was wrong or even if she were a little too hard on one of us. I'd been on the receiving end of her tirade many times and each time had received a warm apology and a hug the very next day.

I sat in the dayroom in front of the television that Mimi as well have been watching me, "Chas," Dee-Dee's voice broke my train of thought, "are you thinking about Rosa?" I nodded my head. "She's good people." I nodded again, unable to speak for fear that I might start crying. I was doing an awful lot of that lately and my inability to control my emotions was becoming a bit embarrassing. I was broken-up about Rosa but I think, in a small way, I was also crying for myself. Crying for my loss, my loneliness; for having traveled there in my mind and knowing much too much about a beat-down and desperate woman's capacity for self-harm. "She remembered my birthday," Dee said in almost a whisper, "actually, I didn't even know that Rosa *knew* when my birthday was. Remember, the morning of my birthday? She'd put a card and a Hershey's bar on my pillow. I found it when I came in from school that afternoon." I couldn't hold it in and when I glanced at Dee's reddened face, neither could she. I rested my head against the curve of her neck as she put her arm around my shoulder and held me there.

"Try not to think about anything negative," Dee-Dee encouraged, taking a deep composing breath. With the sleeve of her sweatshirt she wiped her own tears and then mine, "think about all the fun we had. Remember how you always use to go to her door and ask her to show you her titties, and she would crack up laughing?" I smiled at the

memory, "That was always you guys' running joke," Dee said, "you'd ask to see her titties and she'd laugh and fold her arms across her chest and say, 'No, you're my *amiga!*'"

"I know," I sniffled, "Rosita was a lot of fun. I remember when she told me how one sexual experience made her 'un-gay.' She said Fuzzy was so bad at it that she gave up trying to be a lesbian. That was a funny story. Did she ever tell you about it?"

"You started telling me about it in front of her and then she took over and finished the story," Dee-Dee answered.

"I'll never forget that," I said with a smile, "I've never heard no mess like that in my life. I've heard of women saying that a *man* turned them gay but never a woman turning another woman un-gay!"

Rosa had a comical side to her too but more times than not, she was all about business. We talked a lot about the injustices within the department of corrections and the injustices of the judiciary system. Rosa and I talked about our sentences, and how we were going to get out of the system one day. We brainstormed about court appeals, sentence modifications, applying to the board of pardons. We talked about finding loopholes, never about looping nooses. "I'll write the goddam President if I have to. Obama's in the house now." Rosa said, half-joking but I knew she meant it. Our judges had sentenced us to a long time, but we were determined to get out somehow, somehow.

Gabrielle, one of the facility social workers came by a few days after Rosa's suicide attempt. I knew that it couldn't be good. Of all the social workers, Gabbi has the

best rapport with the long term prisoners. Even though she had been transferred out of the zero building months earlier, she had enough decency and compassion to personally break any emotional news to us. So anytime Gabbi showed up to the “lifer’s” building, we knew to expect bad news.

“Whatever you believe in,” Gabbi said, as she took a seat at one of our tables, “now may be a good time to offer some good thoughts for Rosa. It doesn’t look very good for her right now.” Gabbi’s pretty face was masked with a somber expression. Some of the girls began asking questions, looking to dispel some of the rumors that were still traveling around the prison. The only thing Gabbi was able to confirm was that Rosa was in a bad way and that her life was hanging in the balance. At the moment it could go either way.

When Gabbi left, I stood with my back facing the door and felt the inside of my nose stinging. Finally, I just allowed myself to cry. I imagined Rosa’s small body draped in a pale blue johnny, lying still in a white hospital bed, her ankle shackled to the bedrail though she posed no threat to anyone. I could hear the rhythmic gush of air made by the respirator, the beep of strange machines. I could see each of the plastic tubes that were connecting her to life. I saw small bruises atop her pale hand and in the crease of her arm, the small strips of medical tape holding needles in place. I wondered if there was some form of consciousness beyond her unconscious body? Would she have frightening, fragmented thoughts or experience a complete and euphoric clarity? What did it feel like to slip into a perfect peace, to have a day outside of these walls? I wanted to speak to Rosa, to hug her, to hold her hand. I found myself feeling guilty that I was

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not able to be there for her in her most vulnerable moment. How many times had she been there for me? How many occasions had passed when Rosa had just taken one glimpse of my face and known that I was in distress?

“I’m here for you, Chas,” she’d say, “Don’t let them get you down. They can’t keep us here forever. We’ll get out of the system someday. You and me, we’ll do it together, Chas. You and me.”

It was on a Saturday night when Gabrielle and Naomi, another social worker, showed up at the building. Immediately, everyone began to murmur. I came out of the room and faced the news head on.

“Rosa has been taken off of life support,” Gabbi announced as gently as possible. “I know this must be hard for you girls. It’s hard for me. I just didn’t want you all to hear it from anyone else. I wanted to be the first to tell you so that you won’t have to sift through gossip and rumors.” The day room was silent but for the sound of sniffing and soft weeping. Mimi took a strong hold of my hand and my friend, Liza, took hold of the other one. I put my chin to my chest and cried for Rosa.

On Monday morning the administration called for a full facility lockdown so that the guards could search each cell for contraband. As if what grieving women needed was for reckless and overzealous staff to barge into our cells and vandalize our meager belongings, and confiscate our precious mementos, leaving us in the wreckage to bemoan our lost property. This of course, would be followed by a period of complete isolation

lasting up to five days. Didn't we already have enough to mourn without facing the despair that comes with a twenty-four hour a day lockdown? I guess that the administration wanted to make sure that we had ample time and opportunity to stew in our grief, to make absolutely certain that women like me, who have contemplated suicide but were just too damn afraid to do it, had sufficient time to envy Rosa's courage. Perhaps my anger and grief may have caused me to project this motive onto the department because truthfully, I don't know if this was their intent. But certainly, our despair wasn't one of their concerns.

On Friday, when we came off lockdown status, we had yet to hear anything about Rosa from the administration. The following Tuesday, a group of girls gathered around a memo that was posted in the dayroom window. I assumed that it must have been a memo generated by the administration about memorial services for Rosa or maybe a way that we could access grief counseling. I stepped through the crowd and read the memo for myself. As my eyes went from line to line, I became incensed, almost faint with anger. It was a memo signed by Deputy Warden Mitchell, the Deputy Warden of *Support Services*. The memo mentioned nothing about Rosa but rather issued a threat of disciplinary action in the event that graffiti was found in a prisoner's cell. "...**All** offenders will be held accountable via the code of Penal Discipline should they deface their cells," the memo read, "This will include restitution for cleaning materials and/or paint if necessary." *Graffiti? Penal Discipline?* What about Rosa? What about *her* restitution? I asked myself this question first and then I found my voice and asked it

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aloud. "What about Rosa?" I demanded. "We just lost Rosita and all they care about is graffiti?" This was too much. I stormed into my room, slammed the cell door behind me and gave it one good hard kick. And then another. And then another. My roommate's words resonated in my throbbing head. *We're a bunch of nobodies. We don't matter. We're just a paycheck and an early pension...*

In my ten years of incarceration, I have seen a lot of insensitivity by staff; either by their actions or inactions. But even I was shocked that the administration didn't even feign the slightest bit of interest or compassion, or even acknowledge, that someone had just lost her life a few days ago. Cell graffiti had trumped Rosa's worth.

I always think back to my conversations with Rosa. I remember how I used to peek into her room to check on her and see her furiously writing letters to the court by the light of her television. I could hear her voice and see her looking at me with those big owl eyes. "We'll get out of the system one day, Chas. We'll do it together. They can't keep us in here forever, Amiga." Panic clutched my heart. Thoughts of my own desperation and mortality ricocheted through my skull. Rosa was half-right. She had found her way out of the system but she'd left me behind.

On the night of Rosa's death, when I went to bed I lied on my bunk and gazed out at the stars that speckled the black sky. *Do you have a light, Chas?* Rosa's words resounded over and over again in the silence and I could almost feel the flickering of a

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struggling little flame inside my heart. And as deserted and dismayed as I felt at that moment, I knew that I could not allow myself to be shaken off course. I would have to follow the words that my dear friend had imparted upon me. My heart wrenched, for I knew that we had reached our crossroads that our journeys had drifted in separate directions and that I, alone, would have to press on and find that very light that Rosa once told me to hold on to. As my eyes began to blur with tears, they caught hold of the brightest, most bounding and distant star in the surrounding blackness. *Go, go towards the light, Rosita, mi querida amiga. Find peace, find sleep, find silence...*