

It started with a visit to the psychologist.

Behind the ominous, gray, concrete wall surrounding the Indiana State Reformatory, not many areas existed where one could go to in order to escape the late summer heat. That old maximum-security prison, a place born of a harsher time, was never known for comforts. Therefore, whether or not I felt the need for a counseling session with Eric, my psychologist and substance abuse counselor, I looked forward to the soothing sting of cool, dry air on my skin as I melted into one of the padded chairs in his air-conditioned office.

Every week, I visited the “nut doctor,” as the prisoners around me would say. It didn’t matter to them that I was taking my rehabilitation and recovery seriously. Most of the people around me had sentences of 60 years or more. They saw no need in exhausting energy to better a life that couldn’t be salvaged. As far as they were concerned, only the mentally disturbed saw a “shrink” once a week. Their opinions meant nothing to me, but in a way, they were right. Prison has a way of disturbing one’s sensibilities. During my incarceration, I realized that if I ever wanted to experience happiness in my life, I had to get to work on fixing myself. Eric was just as eager to help me as I was to helping myself. After enduring so many cold, stoic years in close quarters, it was refreshing to be able to open up to another human being. I enjoyed a sense of freedom at the psyche office that was well worth the jeering I endured from other prisoners.

One memorable day, I entered Eric’s office and didn’t receive his usual jovial, friendly welcome. I could tell that something was bothering him. He was all business from the time I sat down. In a serious tone, Eric explained that he had spent part of the morning reviewing my case and my mental health record. My progress was outstanding. My psychiatric therapy involved working out the bad and replacing it with good. His goal, and mine, was to develop a complete, functional person. Eric expressed concern that as I continued to mature mentally and

emotionally, prison culture was hampering my progress. He feared that I was in jeopardy of becoming institutionalized. To support his claim, he pointed out two things: I had no outside contact with the world, and I had recently averted yet another conflict with a prisoner.

I worked hard to stay out of trouble, but in a place where many men are embittered and hardened with the sick reality of never seeing freedom, all confrontation was impossible to avoid. Violence was an integral part of the prison landscape, the way trees define a forest and water defines the ocean. Eric was insightful enough to understand that he was limited to snapshots of my warped existence where I was bombarded with streaming video of it. When Eric spoke about prison as an animalistic environment, he was actually referring to my home sweet home.

As part of a plan to have me reconnect with the outside world, Eric wanted me to write to a pen pal, and with the aid of the Internet, he intended to help me find someone. From a pen pal website, I had to select three addresses from people in Indiana. (He hoped that I would get a pen pal who would come visit me.) The other two could be from anywhere else in the world. The opportunity to make a friend on the outside excited me. It seemed like an eternity had passed since I had interacted with people not associated with prison.

With curious enthusiasm, I watched as Eric logged onto his computer and conjured a pen pal website. As he scrolled through the many screens of addresses, I noticed that all but a few were labeled "No Prisoners." I had no idea that so many people were against receiving mail from a prisoner. While looking at addresses, I felt sick with the thought that no one would want to write to me. Fortunately, before the session ended, I had scribbled down three addresses in Indiana, one in North Carolina, and one in Canada. I believed that people on the outside didn't

care to write to prisoners, but the moment I was back in my cell, I went to work writing a brief introduction letter.

When I received my first letter, I was overcome with happiness. It had been years since I received any personal mail, so the arrival of my first letter was something to celebrate. Only someone who had been abandoned and alone for a long time could truly appreciate how I felt. The prisoner's around me noticed my delight and asked about my mail. When I mentioned "pen pal" they became interested in me and wanted to know how they could get someone to write to. I had promised Eric that I wouldn't say anything, so I told him that "my family" had set it all up. Besides, I didn't want to share my pen pal connection with anyone else. It could have jeopardized everything.

The first person to respond was Amy from North Carolina. She was a nice young, newly married woman with a supportive husband and toy poodle. Her husband spent a lot of time on the road for his job, and she thought it would be nice to have some pen pals help her pass the time. The next week, I received a letter from Sonia in Edmunston, Canada. She was a single woman with a son and an American boyfriend. She lived a blessed life of travel and extravagance. Every so often, Sonia rotated new pen pals into her life. She was a people person who loved to hear stories from people all over the world.

I didn't receive a letter from anyone in Indiana.

Amy wrote every week. Her southern charm appealed to me. She was a sticker fanatic who always put bright, puffy stickers on the envelopes. Sonia preferred to write once or twice a month. Her life was exciting and filled with adventure. Her boyfriend was a wealthy executive in the automotive industry. While Amy stayed home and cooked recipes out of cookbooks, Sonia

traveled the world. Amy sent pictures of her poodle and her quaint country home. Sonia sent pictures of her vacation in the Bahamas and her trip to the Detroit Auto Show.

My pen pals didn't seem to mind that I was writing from a prison. While prison life bored me, Amy and Sonia found it fascinating. I equally enjoyed hearing about their life outside in the real world. In a short time, I opened to the reality of life outside prison. During the first six years of incarceration, I had subconsciously blanked out any idea what the real world was like. I disconnected with most prisoners, whose idea of conversation consisted of crime and crying about their bad luck in life. To me, they were part of the prison, like fixtures or doorknobs in a house.

Unexpectedly, my clockwork-life flourished with excitement. I had been doing the same thing for so long that the introduction of a letter into my life completely turned my world upside-down. I had things to do now. Each letter was a project. I consumed every word and phrase before drafting and writing a response. I replied to every bit of news they had shared with me, and I gave them some news about my life in prison. I was no longer on the sidelines of life. I was a participant.

Just as soon as I had developed an appreciation for life, it all began to unravel.

After Christmas, Amy wrote that her husband didn't like the idea of her contacting a prisoner. Unbeknownst to me, for some time, she had disobeyed her husband and had continued to be my friend. They had a terrible fight after her husband discovered one of my letters in the mailbox. At first, I was shocked, and that shock soon turned to hurt for the both of us. She was such a great person to share her life with me. I had imagined her surrounded by like-minded people who supported her in everything positive. I had no idea that her husband had opposed her writing to prisoners. There was nothing for me to do but write a final parting letter.

Trouble didn't end there. Two months later, my world plunged into darkness.

Sonia, my sole connection to the outside, wrote that she could no longer be my pen pal. Her boyfriend didn't want her writing to a prisoner. Hurt swelled within me as I read her heartfelt apology. Everything had been going so good. Why did it have to fall apart? I felt so depressed that I was sick. I didn't want to work or go to the gym. I slept for a solid week. As with Amy, I wrote a composed goodbye letter.

I didn't dare tell anyone that I had lost my pen pals. I told those around me that I must have come down with the flu. That would keep them away from me long enough to regain my composure. If they knew that I had just been abandoned, they would have attacked like a pack of starving wolves. They would have enjoyed heaping salt into my wounds and watching me squirm, reminding me that I was no better than the rest of them. That's just the way many people are in prison, purveyors of misery. Misery loves company, especially when Misery has no reason to live.

Unexpectedly, I received one more letter from Sonia. It was a warning. She explained that one of her acquaintances, Bette, was going to write to me. She described Bette as a long time associate who was a drug user, thief, and liar. While visiting, Bette had copied down my address without Sonia's permission. Since Sonia had abandoned me, Bette thought that she would befriend me. Sonia thought that I already had enough problems in my life, and the problems her associate would heap upon me would make my life even harder. On top of it all, Bette was French Canadian and not good with English.

Of course, I used Sonia's letter as an excuse to write another to her. Perhaps she would find a way to keep writing to me, I hoped. Sonia cared enough to give me a warning, but she still had abandoned me. The mystery woman, trouble and all, seemed better than nothing.

Two weeks later, I received a letter from my new pen pal in Edmunston, Canada. The letter was written with blue ink on colorful stationary. I was immediately drawn to her artistic flair, which was quite disarming. The letter was written in a mixture of French and English. The grammar and words were put together in such a way that I could barely understand the message she was trying to convey. It was like reading an entirely new language.

I concluded that Bette was infinitely more comfortable communicating in French. Her English was terrible. She had used a dictionary and picked out certain words to string together to form sentences. It was a decent effort, enough to convey she wanted to be my friend. I imagined her spending many hours just to get the one letter completed. That was the best example of patience and dedication I had experienced in a very long time. She had did it form me, and this intrigued me. I decided that despite Sonia's warning, it was better to have a messed up friend than no to have friend at all. Besides, I wasn't confident that I would be able to keep a pen pal for more than a few months, anyway. The language barrier would be an issue, but I wasn't completely ignorant of the French language.

During my junior year of high school, I trudged through a year of French. I took a foreign language only because it was a requirement for college. My friends suggested that I take Spanish, which was becoming prevalent throughout the United States. I thought it was blasé. The thing everyone was doing never seemed to appeal to me. Besides, nothing sounded sexier to me than the French language.

By the end of the school year, I had wished that I had taken Spanish. The teacher had such a disagreeable disposition, to put it lightly, that I hated attending class. I was a good student and aced the class, but I saw no point in forcing myself to endure another year with that horrible French teacher.

After Bette's first letter, I scrambled to find a French-English dictionary. I sent word throughout the prison. Money meant nothing as long as I got a decent dictionary. Of course, everyone wondered why I needed a French dictionary, and I was all too proud to explain that I had just met a new pen pal from Canada who didn't communicate well in English. It felt good to be "that guy with the French pen pal." Within a week, a friend of a friend found a small travel dictionary misplaced in the library, and it didn't cost me a cent.

It was my turn to summon the patience and determination required to construct a letter in a foreign language. I did my best to write as many sentences in French. A few sentences were a mixture of French and English. I promised Bette that if she continued to write to me, I would learn her language and stay in contact with her. She did not have to worry about writing in English, unless she felt compelled to try. It was a cry for interaction from a lonely man who had recently discovered the value of having a connection to the outside.

After sending out my first letter to Bette, I anxiously waited for her reply. Just as I had given up, I received my second letter from her. It was a two-page letter written completely in French. Bette was excited to have found a friend in me and promised that we would go a long way together. I had heard so many empty promises over the years that I was expert at shrugging them off. I would appreciate the moment as long as it lasted.

Bette found constant occasion to express her care for me, often communicating how much she wished I were out. It was nice to be missed and wanted. Her words moved me to the point where my separation from the real world disturbed me. I wanted to be free, even if it were just for her sake. She couldn't wait to show me around Edmunston, and I daydreamed about seeing her town. The more time passed, the more my incarceration caused her pain. I told her that Canada did not allow American ex-cons entry. Bette didn't care. She would help me sneak

in through Maine. She wanted to introduce me to all her friends at the hair salon where she worked. Little things like that touched me. For example, I found it interesting that a woman would be so excited about the arrival of moose hunting season. It was charmingly odd, yet addictively appealing. I had heard that Canadians were the nicest people on the planet. Bette made a believer out of me.

Sometimes, Bette's writing would remind me of Sonia's warning. For example, she would explain that "why" I was in prison wasn't as important as what I was doing with my time in prison. I would describe a violent incident, and she would merely urge me to avoid the troublemakers around me. She seemed familiar with drug problems, running up debts, and other aspects of prison culture. I never confronted her about the things Sonia had written because I didn't want to back her into a corner. Her past didn't matter to me. I didn't need to know more than what she wanted to share with me. Perhaps that was something she needed from me – to be able to live freely and express herself openly as the woman she wanted to be.

Bette sent me the most incredible hand made cards. They were made of thick textured paper decorated on the outside with ribbons, tiny roses, baby's breath, glitter, cloth, etc. Inside were smooth stationary with her carefully scripted words. She wrote that I was a man with a very good heart. In the eyes of everyone else, I was just another convict, a waste. Oftentimes, she referred to me as her angel. I never would have thought that of myself, but Bette had a way of expressing her insight that made her reasoning seem logical. For her, I wanted to be better. I wanted to be that good person, her angel. I vowed to learn as much as I could about French and Canada and prove to her how much her friendship meant to me.

The Reformatory had no foreign language resources, so I had to build my own French resource center. I wrote to several places across the United States that offered free books to



prisoners. It was incredible what one could find. One place in particular, Books Through Bars in Bloomington, Indiana sent me French dictionaries, French language books, and French literature. Their remarkable generosity made it possible for me to quickly immerse myself in the language. When I could afford it, I would order books from bargain catalogues. After an upgrade to the prison cable TV system, I watched IFC, the Independent Film Channel, which often showed foreign films. Hearing the language spoken only reinforced my desire to learn it.

My quest to learn French elevated me to a higher existence. I read to fill my mind with knowledge instead of merely finding escape from empty days. The more I learned, the more I wanted to learn, to grow, to evolve. I went to college to study Psychological Science and graduated with a Bachelor's degree. I learned to read, write, and speak Spanish. I completed vocational training and became a Vocational Carpentry tutor. Somewhere along the way, I began to work on my writing.

My adventures with French inspired me to teach the language to a group of prisoners. I benefited just as much as they did. The group helped me to explore deeper into the language. They tested me constantly. The study group started with eight people. Over the period of a year, nearly all my students left, either moved to a different part of the prison, to a different facility, or gave up on the language altogether. At the end of a year, I had a single eager student, Damon.

Damon and I worked together for over two years. While others were playing cards or watching TV, we were studying. As we grew together in the French language, we grew as friends. It has been years since I saw Damon face to face. We were transferred to different medium-security prisons. Nevertheless, we continue to be the best of friends and maintained close contact through his mother, who forwarded our letters. The amazing part is that we communicated exclusively in French.

I talked about Bette constantly. I wanted everyone to know about her and Canada. My friends poked fun at me about my infatuation with anything Canadian. I eagerly showed off pictures of Bette and Canada. During the Olympics, I openly rooted for Canadian athletes. I sang along with the Canadian National Anthem. The more I connected with Canada, the more I felt connected to Bette. I couldn't think of a life without her.

Bette supported me through some significant times in my life. When my sister, Misty, contacted me for the first time in many years, Bette was there, excited and eager to give advice. When I rekindled my relationship with my father, Bette was there, urging me to focus on building family. With her support, I learned to forgive. Through the best and worst of prison, Bette was with me, sharing laughter and tears and teaching me how to truly live, encouraging me to strive to be a better me.

Her father's death was our first challenge. For a while, Bette was upset, but I thought she seemed to deal with it well. I consoled her through her grief, sending extra letters and cards. I wanted her to feel as if I were there with her. It took a lot of work on my end, and together, we pulled through this hardship.

Just as we had cleared one hurdle, we came upon another. A year after losing her father, her grandmother passed away. Bette's grandmother had practically raised her and had been her sole source of support for most of her life. It was as if a huge chunk of life was ripped from her. For months, she was inconsolable, and I, unable to alleviate her pain, felt helpless. My support never wavered, but I knew that she wished I were actually there with her.

Bad luck continued to batter her. She fell and broke her arm, which required surgery that put her out of work. We continued to stay in contact, but life was a constant struggle for her. All I could do was send her as much support as possible, as she had done for me over the years.

Bette's arm healed, and she returned to work. We had been through a lot together and had grown closer in spite of our trials.

Then one day, Bette informed me of the worst news. Her son died. Throughout the years, she wrote about Ian, her pride and joy, the culmination of goodness in her life. He was proof that she was capable of bringing good into the world. I struggled to formulate words that would even begin to penetrate the shroud of pain that enveloped her and held her prisoner. Although I continued to reach out to her, she stopped writing. Bette, as I had known her, died with the passing of her son.

I knew that feeling of giving up, how even death can seem like an inviting friend. I too had suffered irreplaceable loss. Alone, under horrible conditions, I had fought my case for two and a half years. One day, it dawned on me that everything that had meaning in my life was gone. I had forgotten what I was fighting for in the first place. It didn't matter if I lived or died, but I just couldn't bring myself to end it all. I chose prison to help me depart this life.

In the end, it did matter – everything matters. Things happen for a reason. I no longer believe in coincidence. As a teenager, I endured a miserable year of studying French. Six years into doing the 18 ½ years I expected to do on a 45 year sentence, I was set on a mission by a psychologist, who believed that I was a better person than even I believed. I met some amazing friends who helped change my mind about people and life. A woman I had never met, in another country that I had never visited, writing in a language I educated myself to understand, helped me realize my worth. It all happened the way it was intended to happen, so that I would suffer and endure, experience a remarkable renaissance, and share a story of a woman who introduced me to a wonderful life.

I didn't know the woman Sonia had warned me about. The Bette I knew was my personal angel. She was the dearest friend to bless my life, and I will always love her. I followed up with several more letters to her, sending all the love and support I could muster, but she had to be the one to accept it. Sometimes, I prayed that she wouldn't do anything to hurt herself. I had to believe that she was stronger than I was.

A few months later, I received a letter from Bette. Upon seeing the envelope, I was relieved, glad to have finally gotten through to her. Unfortunately, my joy was short lived. She was still writing from a dark place. Her grief had not diminished. It was then that I believed we would not recover from this loss.

I never heard from her again.

We were together for over seven years, and there was no goodbye.

It just ended.

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