

It started in December. A week before Christmas, that time of year when people feel the need to celebrate something, anything to counteract the impending dreariness of winter.

Here, in South Texas, it doesn't really get cold. There's no snow, no treachery of ice. It's just less oppressively hot than the rest of the year. Still, we should take comfort in that, be grateful for the respite. In the confines of this institution, this is when doing time is easiest.



After years, decades, of incarceration we may say we no longer like to write letters to the free world because nothing's new, nothing happens that's worth committing to paper. That's true, for the most part, but it's not the whole truth. Another part is that, with each expired calendar, our potential audience shrinks – friends fall away, family pass on. Even for those who remain, the gap between their lives and ours only widens.

The smallest part, however, the sliver of truth we try to overlook and would be wrong for worrying our loved ones about is that the significant events of our reality are things they would not grasp, that they have no context for. Like any human being, they share a degree of sympathy for the animal caged, but the depths of desperation that drive it are beyond their ken. To have a voice that penetrates past these bars and bricks, it is not enough to merely open one's mouth. Mundane speech gets lost in the relentless percussion of metal and flesh.

To be heard, one must scream.



I was awake that morning, not fully, still gearing up with a shot of gunpowder coffee to face another day. It's part of my process. I claim to be at my most creative, most productive during these early hours, yet most mornings I don't accomplish squat. Maybe string together a few sentences, but sometimes not a word. Today would land among the latter.

The yelling came from the end of the run, one guard telling another in the picket to open 20 Cell. There was nothing unusual about this, as my friend who lives there works in the maintenance department and is often called out to fix something. Maybe that's why I didn't detect the urgency in the officer's voice, not until it grew more frantic, now calling on his radio for immediate medical response and summoning rank to the cell block. He yells again to the picket to open 20; the picket yells back that he's pushing the damned button but nothing's happening.



Before Dante begins his descent into the Inferno, he encounters a sign at the threshold: Abandon hope all who enter here. Standing on the outside, it is a potent warning not to proceed, that things will only get worse if one does. For those already being digested by the bowels of the prison-industrial complex, however, Dante's caveat becomes practical advice. It seems a small burden at first, but the longer one must persist down this treacherous path, hope hardens into a crushing weight.

Comparing hope to a carrot dangling just out of reach at the end of a proverbial stick trespasses into cliché, but it is no less apt. The carrot leads you nowhere, leaves you with nothing. You suffer at the whims of those the state has deemed your moral and intellectual superiors. Against all evidence you cling to the faith that there's some way of seizing that unattainable prize, that whomever's holding the stick will turn their head for a moment, loosen their grip, and in that lax second you'll be ready.

You'll grab that fucking carrot and take the biggest bite you can.



The officer on the run eventually realizes the cell door won't open because it's been tied shut. Later we will learn my friend bound it to the bars with a clothesline fashioned from a twisted bed sheet, a Gordian knot that the guards lack the tools to sever. My friend, who repairs the doors, knows this. He knows that what he has planned, they will be powerless to stop.



The carrot's a symbol, of course, but over time it mutates into something other than freedom. When you're pushed to the limits of desperation, the utter absence of agency, it becomes an affirmation of life. Clawing for that carrot is an act of defiance that proves we still exist.

Even so, there are days when the carrot dangles too far away, when you cannot deny you'll never reach it.

When your only meaningful move is to quit playing the game.

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My friend is ashen as a blank a page when they ferry him past my cell on a stretcher. I hear the guard mutter "non-responsive" on the radio. From where I'm standing, my friend looks untroubled, unwritten. The inert whiteness is broken by a brushstroke of crusted crimson across his cheek. Lower, the body is still streaked in a vibrant red.

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Near the end of November, when the turning of a new decade held such promise, my brother Thorstein and I decided 2020 was going to be our year. Some of our writings would find their way into print, we'd gain a financial foothold with our craft shop projects, the garden at our job would rebound from the destitution of the previous summer. Anything seemed possible. Past experiences be damned; with over 55 years of incarceration between us, we were primed for the good days ahead.

Each of us has been here long enough to know better.

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It's mid-January, already humid as hell, and I'm on the verge of breaking down. It feels like I should cry, purge my psyche of emotional baggage, but somehow cannot. Perhaps it's been too long and that neural pathway has fallen into disrepair, its synapses grown too distant to be bridged. Maybe prolonged exposure to this toxic atmosphere has crippled my capacity for sensitivity.

Whatever.

Undoubtedly I cried as a child, probably over nothing, but in groping toward adulthood I only recall it happening twice. Once at my grandmother's funeral, and then only after witnessing my father in tears. Seeing that made it okay somehow. Like I had permission.

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I dreamt of my friend last night. He zombie-marched by me on the cell-block, mind in another place. I grabbed his arm, his attention, couldn't help but smile, relieved to see him again. He gave no recognition.

Expressionless, he walked away.

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The other time I cried remains almost too painful to rehash, too personal to commit to ink. As a convict, my crime is a matter of public record. There's no secret there. But what you can't dig up on the internet, what no one knows except the people who were in that room, is what happened after I was sentenced.

It was unusual, a rare circumstance, and I'm not sure who initiated it. After I pled guilty in court, agreed to a life sentence, all the concerned parties met in the conference room: the victim's family, my family, attorneys, law enforcement. Everyone wanted to know how a young man, a college student who seemed to have such potential, could have committed such a brutal, heinous act. In a word, they sought closure.

Looking into the faces of those whose suffering I'd caused, whose mourning for their son, brother, uncle and friend remained an open wound, I could not give them what they thought they wanted. Truth is a multi-faceted gem, and it's human nature to turn the light away from the ones marred by imperfections. From where they were sitting, my side held them all.

I never knew the person they loved and valued, the man they remembered as a kind, compassionate soul. The individual I encountered had been a predator, someone who took advantage of

my youth, my naiveté, my stupidity. Fueled by alcohol, he fell to baser instincts; reacting with rage, I resorted to violence.

Neither of us had been people our families would have recognized that night.

Staring into the accusing eyes of his loved ones, I saw the horrifying truth, and it crushed me.

They wanted answers, but the only words I could choke out were "I'm sorry."

Then I wept like a wounded child.



January persists, a month of malaise and flu shots. At least word has come back that my friend has survived, that his attempt to sever his jugular fell short by a mere sixteenth of an inch. Another swipe of a semi-sharp blade.

We tend to ignore the tenuous threads from which our lives hang until they snap.

On Sunday, a guy I've known for two decades dies. Nothing as dramatic as suicide. Blood sepsis, they say. When I'd last seen him on Friday, he'd been feeling under the weather, but a bug was going around. No one took it seriously.

Today he is gone.



It's not often spoken of, but the most persistent fear of prisoners is dying in here. Not from violence, as you might imagine, but from growing old, growing ill. Watching hope bleed away with our health. It's unnerving to imagine that the thousands of mornings we've awoken and clad ourselves with grim determination have been for nothing, that the nourishing taste of freedom for which we have starved was, in our end, only a mirage. That for an eternity of days we've survived by swallowing sand, feeling it scrape away the tender pride in our guts, because somewhere over the distant horizon awaited a promised land, another chance at life, only to ultimately succumb to this desert with a belly full of grit, our brittle bones unclaimed.

We tremble at the possibility of a tomorrow that may never come.



Four days after the blood sepsis victim, another guy I've known for 20 years, one I actually like, dies unexpectedly, but he's been dealing with health problems most of his life, the ceaseless side effects of multiple gunshot surgeries that culminated in his asshole being sown shut.

Long before I met him, at a unit where violence had been part of the daily menu, a known bootie bandit had, as we say, "charged him up." The potential rapist had no clue my buddy lacked the necessary orifice to fulfill his desire, nor could he fathom the couldn't-give-a-fuck mentality of someone who endured the daily indignity of excreting through plastic tubes.

He had, in penitentiary parlance, picked the wrong one.

My buddy answered the threat by soaking the predator with the contents of his colostomy bag. If you've never been exposed to the overwhelming odor of unfiltered fecal fluid, suffice it to say that it will clear a room. Like the tail-end of a skunk, people will climb over one another to avoid it. To have it sprayed directly in your face, rivulets run into your mouth...

There was no inclination to assault my buddy after that, sexual or otherwise. He was affectionately given the moniker "Shitbag" in honor of his actions. He wore it, as he should, as a badge of pride.



There's a quote I came across in the '90s, when incarceration was yet new to me, juxtaposing prison and war, calling them "maddeningly boring stretches of time punctuated by sheer terror." I assume the author of those words, Jim Hogshire, had seen both sides. From the limited experience I'd had of the former, his characterization seemed spot on.

Anything can become normalized though. After living for decades in a war zone, you learn to fill the empty spaces with routines, to busy yourself as a means of holding fear and madness at bay.

Anesthetized by repetition, you no longer worry what horrors tomorrow may bring, at what unknown enemies lurk in wait. Your routine serves as armor against the forces of chaos and uncertainty, your only means of imposing order on an arbitrary world. Like coats of paint, each day adds a layer that insulates your inner walls. After a while, you barely feel anything at all.



On the morning after hearing about my buddy's death, I am too numb to write. The casualties are piling up, all those wasted years of hoping for a better place, a better life. The pen dangles loose in my grip as I watch cracks widen in the walls.

R.I.P. Shitbag.



In prison, drawing is a common hustle. There's always somebody on the cell block who pays bills by penciling portraits or cranking out Christmas cards. I respect those who support themselves through their own abilities, whatever they may be, but there's a big difference between people who reproduce existing images and those who bring to life the creations of their own mind.

Anywhere, true artists are rare.

They also often qualify as what the American Psychiatric Association would call "batshit crazy."

My friend, the suicide, is a true artist. His paintings are otherworldly vistas, visual labyrinths that can entrap your eyes for hours. He is also manic-depressive. It's hard for me now to not see those extremes written in the rise and fall of his brushstrokes, to not color my perceptions through the tinted lens of what our society considers mental illness.

His station in the craft shop, the few square feet that served as his studio, sits directly to my left. It's there, in my peripheral, packed away now except a sole canvas. Last I'd seen him working on it, he'd been pushing the limits of his abilities, seeking a breakthrough.

The night before he sawed through his own flesh, my friend obliterated his work-in-progress with a blitzkrieg of black paint. You'd think that would've been a warning, a red flag of inner turmoil, but he'd destroyed paintings before. Those of us who strive to transcend our past and its present fetters open ourselves to inevitable failure. Frustration is our constant companion, and we come to know her intimately.

The point being, even if I'd been there to witness the destruction, I wouldn't have read too much into it, wouldn't have taken any counteractive measures. Nothing would've changed. In hindsight it's tempting to reinterpret the signs in light of what we now know, but that's a rigged game.

This will piss some of you off, but it's a symptom of self-centeredness that we try to insert ourselves into other's suicides: If only we had been there, done this, said that. Maybe in cases where the attempt is merely a cry for help, for someone to care, *maybe* we get to play hero in that story. But when it's an individual's decision to take destiny in one's own hands, to laugh in the face of Fate, what makes us think we have the right to interfere? That a wrong-headed sense of our own righteousness should trump another's will? If each of us is not in charge of our own lives, what freedom do we have?

The problem, of course, comes in our imperfect ability to read other's intentions. We tend to err on the side of caution, to stick our noses in where they may not belong. Because if the individual does want help, we may have saved a life; and if he doesn't, if his internal discussion on the matter is settled, our interference will not dissuade him anyway.

But it might absolve some of the guilt we seem so desperate to claim.



His canvas is not completely black, blank. The veneer grows thin at places, the primal layers peeking through. Standing askew in the corner, it speaks too plainly to be symbolic, a palimpsest of my friend's once vibrant presence entombed by a subterranean depression. Several times a day my eyes are pulled toward it, a black hole slowly sucking spheres into its orbit. It's not his masterpiece, yet it stands

as my friend's most enduring work, a constant reminder of the void he left. More than a month has passed and you'd think somebody would've covered it by now, thrown an old sheet over the darkened canvas, but I'm glad no one has. I need to see it, to be reminded, to feel that constant stabbing in my conscience. The pain is proof you still care. That you're still alive.



Like any slang, prison terminology evolves with the times. Granted, our lingo lags behind the free world, the final destination for cultural diffusion before a meme melts into a puddle of obsolescence.

The rumor mill here has gone by many names since these brick walls were built a century ago. No one is sure how the changes occur. It's not like we have a meeting and vote on them. Every so often a new phrase enters the lexicon that everyone can intuit by context, and it sticks. These days it's inmate.com.

As with the actual internet, discerning users know to take what they hear on the prison grapevine with a grain of salt, to seek confirmation from a reliable source.

There's a lot of fake news.

Today, four days after we heard of Shitbag's untimely demise, we hear his curmudgeonly voice emanating down the aisle of the craft shop. I lean out, catch a glimpse of him hobbling toward us on a makeshift crutch, damned and defiant as ever. Like a white-trash Lazarus, stank and all, Shitbag has returned from the grave.

He details to us the hell he's experienced, intubated in the ICU while his intestines were scoured. Given a choice, he'd prefer the stark alternative to enduring that again. Relieved as we are to have him back, we get it. Fighting for one's life when you're condemned to never leave these confines seems a quixotic quest with scant hope of a happy ending.

And yet, that 4-letter word persists.

Hope.

Despite knowing better, Shitbag's resurrection has lured out buried emotions, reached into the guarded recesses of our psyches to stroke feelings we're reticent to allow touched. Maybe we won't die in here. Maybe hope is more than a mirage.

Maybe, if we can just get through this infernal month, things will start looking up.

This could still be our year.



Even if we accept the executive stance that taxes are only for suckers, no exemption from death has yet been found. Life remains a terminal diagnosis, its final stage a bitter pill we refuse to swallow until forced down our throats.

More than anything, most of us fear our own absence.

Tougher to admit, we resent those who do not.

Even if death is accepted as part of the natural order of events, we still see suicide as its premature ejaculation, a moment stained with shame that we attempt to clean up. It pisses us off that someone had the audacity to shove death in our faces, for presenting its inevitable entrance on life's stage as a personal choice.

It's hardest to admit the shame comes not from their act but from our silence.



First week of February my friend comes back to the unit, fresh from the psych hospital. The scar on his neck has healed cleanly, not something you'd notice unless you were looking for it.

We're all looking for it.

Furtively, you'd hope, not so he'd notice, but subtlety has never been a prison virtue. He has to be aware of the wandering eyes drawn like magnets to the wound. Because if the scar were on another neck, he'd be looking too.

The hangers-on greet his return with fanfare, crowding around the *cause celebre*. We've been talking about him for six weeks now, some with genuine concern, and this is the long awaited chance to rubberneck up close.

I stay back, wave across the chow hall, wait, avoid a public conversation. I'm not comfortable in crowds. Later, I catch him alone, brush past his extended hand, and give him a bro-hug.

Men suck at this stuff. Or we're really good at it.

Later still we're able to talk. He details his trials from the emergency room to the funny farm, how the shrinks at the latter diagnosed his enthusiasm for an upcoming graduation as a delusion of grandeur, refused to believe that such a thing as a Master's degree program existed inside these walls. To be fair, higher education is exceedingly rare for the incarcerated, and it's unlikely anyone in their institutional occupation had ever encountered a patient with a graduate degree. Easier to attribute such aspirations as products of a fractured mind.

It's also typical of free-worlders, no matter how empathetic, to cling stubbornly to convict stereotypes. To dismiss any claims of notable accomplishments within those confines as untrue. And they're not always wrong for thinking that way, but that's not the whole story. The very concept of prison itself is so cancerous that it taints anyone it touches, eating away our credibility, our worth, our humanity. The fortunate who have never set foot on this side of the fence cannot fathom that those branded moral inferiors could in any way be their intellectual peers. Conceding that would mean people as smart as themselves, from similar socio-economic backgrounds could end up behind bars – a thought so repulsive as to be unutterable. Prison is for the Other.

Yet here we are.

My friend and I discuss how, unlike the efforts in recent years to identify and eliminate prison rape, the issue of mental health has gone unmentioned. The elephant in the cell. As if on cue, a suicide song comes on the radio – Badflower's "Ghost" – and someone covers my friend's ears, as if shielding

him from the mere mention of the thing that's already shadowing our words will banish the specter. It's not the interloper's fault though. None of us quite know how to act.

People are grateful that my friend – their friend – seems alright, that the darkness has passed. Maybe I'm the asshole in the room, but I can't help scoff at this display of collective ignorance. Sure, he's fine now, jubilant even, as he has been before when riding the crest of a manic wave. What no one wants to ask is what will happen when it crashes. Are we any more adept at detecting the signs? Have we not learned a goddamned thing? My friend undoubtedly has, and he's unlikely to fail twice.

February has been called the cruelest month, a reference to the enduring bitterness of winter. The morning I write this, clad only in my boxers, already sticky from the Gulf Coast humidity, it's not the weather ahead that worries me. It's that the worst is yet to come.

That we have yet to reach bottom.

Still, you can never tell what tomorrow may bring. If indeed the gods know our fates, I'm glad they're keeping their mouths shut; spring is just around the corner, and we prefer to remain eternal fools for believing things are about to get better.

Because even if we admit the carrot's out of reach, it helps just to keep looking forward.

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