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Crimes So Great

By Emily Metcalf

About three years ago, he was led in by two guards in black uniforms, his hands restrained behind his back, and blinded by a dark hood covering his face.

“Crimes so great,” the jury had said, “He will be forced to live. Death is undeserved.” That jury condemned him to the torment he arrived at just three years ago.

When the guards unlocked his specially made cell and freed his hands, he made no move to take off the dark sack that shielded his eyes. He didn’t want to see his personalized punishment. But in a final hateful gesture, the guards removed the hood, along with sweet ignorance, leaving him to face his fate.

The cell was made entirely of glass, forcing him to see just exactly what they wanted him to see. A library. Shelves and shelves of books surrounded him, the glass walls separating him from everything he could know. Even if he craned his neck to the point of pain, he would only see more books. Titles etched into leather spines and stamped methodically onto books mass-produced and glossy. He nodded and sat down on his institutional cot. He should have seen it coming. He closed his eyes and let out a breath, his lips forming an “o,” like he was going to whistle or kiss someone goodbye. He held his eyes shut tight like that for a few hours, until he heard the door, also glass, click open and admit a guard with the same black uniform and serious expression as the other two. The guard set down a tray with dry chicken breast, canned peas, and a tall plastic cup of water, and then stood silently in one of the transparent corners, waiting patiently for the man to finish the meal. After the man had eaten, he handed the tray back, and murmured, “Thank you.” The guard gave a curt nod, and then strode out, locking the door behind him before disappearing in the maze of shelves.

Three times a day, after every meal, his hands were tied and eyes were covered by the dark hood as the guards led him to a bathroom before removing the hood once more. He was allowed extra time in the mornings to wash himself. He avoided the mirror. Had he glanced up, he would have seen almost exactly what you might see today, if you’ve the inclination to go see him at the library. A slight

man, tall, with glasses in gold-wire frames. His scalp flirts with balding. He's not old, though. Just nervous.

After two months or so, the guards quit using the hood and handcuffs. He wasn't dangerous or deranged. Just a different shade of pathetic.

Around the time his guards became lenient with protocol, he began exercising. As his cell wasn't conducive to running, he was limited to push-ups and sit-ups. 100 of each, twice a day. He wasn't preparing to break out, like some believed when he'd first developed the habit. He had no elaborate plan. He just desperately needed to kill time.

For three years, the man paced his cell, counting the days and the books in sight. He would read their titles and imagine their content. He could see a book of Grimm fairy tales, and he recounted all stories he could remember. There was a cookbook on what he was pretty sure was the eastern side of the building. He'd never cared much about fancy food, but it hit him that he'd never eat any delicacies like scones or quiche. He could see a book on quantum mechanics on the opposite shelf and he practiced the equations he had memorized so long ago, utilizing velocities and distances and constants whose meanings simpler minds could only guess at. Surprisingly, he was in view of a collection of essays by those who had worked on the Manhattan Project. Next to that one sat a biography on Schrödinger. It reminded him of his cat. He'd told the jury she was in his apartment, but they didn't seem to take much interest in her survival. Maybe there was some kind soul who saw his trial on their television, and was now taking pity on the poor creature.

Sometimes when a book was removed from the shelves parallel to his cell, new books were revealed to him, taunting him with all of the worlds he would never travel to. Books containing knitting patterns were hidden behind one of the shelves. A how-to guide on canine agility was on another.

He wanted them all so badly. He ached for their words, spelling out the facts he would never know. He craved their company, the only company he'd ever needed, and would ever need again. If only he could reach them, touch them, devour them.

There were people around him, of course. Patrons of the library, citizens of the world that didn't want him. They were poor substitutes for company, though. In the beginning, some had tried to

engage the man; he was exciting, a novelty. Children would come up and breathe on the glass, until their mothers pulled them away.

Teenagers after school would try to initiate staring contests or would flip their middle fingers at him then run away laughing. But when they realized he wasn't violent or interesting, they started ignoring him. Though he never lunged at the cell walls or tried to communicate silently, he continued to make them all nervous. He reflected their choices as a society. We all put him there, and that made most people feel a twinge of guilt. So the majority of the library's patrons avoided his eye contact, like strangers passing on a sidewalk. If they stopped looking, maybe he'd stop existing. They only served to reinforce his solitude, his inhumanity. But those books, oh, how they could soothe him, shelter him from his own mind which slowly deteriorated in full view of all who would watch him.

He had to content himself with titles and authors' names. Once he'd guessed the content, or repeated all he knew of the subject and writer, he'd start inventing facts. He created where Giovanni's room was air-locked, and where Willa Cather and Sherwood Anderson were drinking companions.

He had, of course, considered leaving his confinement. The books just drove him mad, taunting him, playing with words and concepts he would forever remain ignorant of. He could maybe chisel away at the glass of his cell, or make a blind dash for it when the guards led him to the bathroom. But society didn't want him, and he respected that decision. And he was too cowardly to kill himself. So he followed the rules, and waited for insanity to claim him.

About a month ago, a young woman walked past his cell, and looked directly at him. Not through him, like most people did, but at him. She'd caught him mid-sit-up, and he stopped, looking back at her. Her brown hair was pulled back into a bun. A white buttoned up shirt, brown skirt, and sensible shoes gave him the impression she had maybe stopped at the library during her lunch break. She didn't smile, or wave, and neither did he. Did he know her? It was possible he'd forgotten her; he hadn't paid much attention to the people in his life. But it seemed much more likely that this was a stranger, for though he did not know where this library was, he knew it was not somewhere he'd been before. He knew those old haunts by heart. And as he'd never seen a familiar face here before, it seemed unlikely now.

Without any gesture or change in expression, she turned and went into the stacks of books he could not see. He went back to his sit-ups, and decided the encounter was meaningless.

A few hours later, around 5 or 6 in the evening, she came back. And this time, she was holding a book.

That caught his interest. He stood up, heart beating too fast. She pressed the book's front cover to the glass for him to read. *The Sun Also Rises*. He'd read it before, and quite possibly knew it by heart. She tilted her head a little, and raised an eyebrow. His eyes widened, starting to see her plan, for though he was sharp-minded with experiments, both social and scientific, acts of kindness took him a while to grasp. They were illogical. His heart pounded too hard, it began to hurt. He couldn't take his eyes away from the book, he nodded, worried the motion might shake the tears from his eyes.

She opened the book to the very first page, and held it to the wall, letting him soak in the publishing information. His eyes flicked up to her when he was finished, but they didn't stay there long, for he returned to the pages, imagining how they must feel between her fingers. She turned the page, and he read the dedication. Then the cover page and table of contents. He began to shake. The more ink filling the page, the more he was allowed to soak in, the more he shook. Had the book been in his own hands, he would have dropped it on accident by the time the story began.

Patiently, the woman stood there, watching his eyes fly across the words, turning the pages when his eyes met hers for less than an instant. He read until the woman checked her watch, looked to her left, and quickly strode away. Devastated, the man turned to see what had happened to her left. A guard in black was arriving, holding a tray. The guard came in and waited as the man's trembling fork shoveled meatloaf and corn to his mouth. After he finished the meal, he was hooded and taken to the bathroom. At the sink, he splashed water on his face, and looked at himself like he was asking a friend, "Can you believe it?" The guard returned him to his cell, and left him alone.

As he lay in his cot, the man began to doubt himself. The book was a figment of his imagination, a sort of mirage. By the morning, he'd decided the woman didn't even exist, and chose to go back to his familiar routine and not think of it again.

But she returned. It was positively blissful to see her again, with the same book under her arm. She sat down in front of his cell right where she had stood yesterday, crossing her legs and spreading

her skirt to cover her knees. He paid no attention to her movements, there was none to spare for it was all focused on the book. He had been sitting on the floor when she arrived, and now scooted himself across the floor, like a child in grade school eager for story time. Instead of holding it up though, she scribbled a note on a piece of scrap paper and held it for him to see.

“You need to let me know when the guards are coming, ok?”

He nodded. He’d have agreed to anything to get her to open the book. She must have been satisfied, because she opened the book to a dog-eared page, and pressed it against the glass. She turned pages for hours, while he absorbed every word, sometimes reading sentences twice to be sure he would remember them.

When he knew his guards would appear soon, he looked at her, and mouthed “Thank you.” He may have actually said it, but there’s no way she could have known that. She gave a small smile, folded down the corner of the page they stopped at, stood up, and walked away. The guards took no longer than 5 minutes to appear, and he was glad he’d alerted her to the time. He did not want anything to happen to her. She was his access, his medium through which to enter thousands of words.

They went on like this for a while. She never failed him. Every day she returned to see him nervously awaiting her, his eyes raking the stacks. She would bring him books and turn their pages. After Hemingway, she brought a book of Flannery O’Connor’s. Then one on modern social injustices. A scholarly journal on North American animal species. A book of scientific findings dating back to the 1800’s. One day she brought him a time line of the past five years. He was flattered to find himself. He read all she brought him, hardly noticing the woman behind the book. He always roused himself in time to warn her of the guard, though, knowing another chapter was not worth discovery.

But yesterday, while she held up *Brave New World* for him, he failed her. He sat reading the very last chapter while she listened to something through headphones. Classical music probably, or an audiobook. He was too engrossed. Too enamored with the beautiful dark ink that curved and angled to form letters, words, ideas. He had never read it before, and it was rare for her to bring him a novel he had not experienced before. He was too in love to see the guard in black walk up behind the woman. He didn’t even notice the danger she was in until her head hit the glass and she slumped down into the

floor. Her blood smeared on the glass, next to smudged handprints of the children who used to stare of him. Her body lay on the tiled floor, a small pool of blood spread from somewhere under her tight bun. The man leaned to the side mirroring her body, heart racing. He needed that last page. It was almost over. He was so close.

But her body obscured the last page. Her blood was seeping into the beautiful pages, ruining them. The man screamed, high pitched and primal. He clutched what little hair remained on his head, nearly ripping it out. He would never know what happened. No conclusion, no closure. It didn't end, it just stopped. Everything stopped. He kept screaming as one guard picked up the woman and carried her away and the other picked up the book, stealing the damp scarlet pages away from him. He just sat there in despair, crumpled on the floor, not bothering to move to his cot.

Defeated and broken, he's still there. Still crying and scratching at the walls of his cell while I write this in front of him. I'm new, working the morning shift, so the guards on duty don't recognize me. They watch carefully, stationed at opposite corners. I asked one of them what was to be done. He told me to mind my goddamn business and keep my notebook away from the convict. The other guard, friendlier, but still stingy with information, told me two guards would be stationed at the cell 24/7. He's the reason I'm employed. He's got no hope now.

But I don't want him to hope. His greed killed a woman. He cared nothing for her. Still doesn't. That blood stain was left as a reminder to him and to anyone who walks by, but that's not what's making him scream. It's the loss of his precious books. Those words are his air, his blood, his love; everyone knows it. He won't last long without them now. He's broken. And I'm glad.