

Looking at Me Through the Glass

I arrive at the Marion County Jail on a Saturday morning in late September. I come early, at least a half an hour before the regular visiting hours are scheduled to begin. The jail is a place that I'm familiar with, though it's been decades since I last set foot inside. On most days, I would say that this isn't long enough. But not today. Today I know this is exactly where I need to be.

I've come to the jail to see a seventeen-year-old boy accused of murder. Ever since his arrest, it's been on my mind to tell him exactly how I feel. I want to be blunt with him, explaining what's going to happen to him as a result of the crime he has committed. I don't have all the words completely prepared yet, but as I pace back and forth in the jail's lobby, I find myself thinking hard about the message I intend to convey. There's a sense of hesitation inside of me, and also a bit of fear. I worry that the things I want to articulate will be lost when I come face to face with him, and I'm concerned that coming here at all may have been a poor choice on my part. I try to tell myself I'm doing the right thing, but how can I be certain? I take a deep breath. Then another. I pull air into my lungs as if filling them to capacity will push away the things that are causing me to second guess my presence here.

"Excuse me, sir?" the elderly jail receptionist says from behind her desk. "You look familiar, have I seen you here before?"

"You may have," I tell her. "But it would have been a long, long time ago."

"Well, the Lord knows I've been here long enough. I rarely forget a face, and for whatever reason, yours definitely looks familiar. Anyway, visiting hours are open now, and it looks like you're the only one here. The officer will escort you in."

"Thank you, ma'am. It's much appreciated."

I'm escorted down a long hall by an officer in his late twenties, and just before opening the door to the visiting room, he places his hand on my shoulder and says, "I don't know why anyone would come to see this boy"

This is one of the saddest things I've ever heard, and it hits me hard.

"I understand how you feel," I tell him. "But let me ask you something. If everyone knew about the worst thing you've ever done, would you still hope that at least one person cared enough to reach out to you?"

"I guess you have a point there, don't ya'?" He opens the door for me.

"I believe I do," I say as I walk through. "I also know that this boy has a long road ahead of him, and not a single moment of it is going to be easy. He's going to be lonelier than you could ever imagine." I give the guard a respectful nod as he closes the door behind me.

Inside the visiting room, I take several more deep breaths. The room is separated into two sides; one for visitors, and the other for prisoners. I have my choice of eight cubicles. Each one consists of a metal bench, a telephone, and a plexiglass window that is scratched and in need of a good cleaning. I enter the cubicle in the middle of the room, choosing this one because of its unobstructed view of the door that he'll walk through. After a few minutes, I hear the sound of chains dragging along a floor somewhere in the distance. It's an eerie, echoing sound and it makes me appreciate the freedom I am blessed to have.

When the door opens, the boy shuffles through looking lost and confused. His hands are cuffed in front of him, and as he shuffles past the officer holding the door, I notice the ankle chains that drag loosely at his heels. He's wearing blue hospital-style scrubs that are too big for his slim frame. His blonde hair, usually short and styled with gel, looks messy. His face is smooth, still years away from

needing its first shave. He walks with his head down, confirming what I already know; he's too ashamed to face what lies ahead.

He doesn't know who's here, only that someone has arrived and requested to see him. I know that he won't recognize me. There's no way that he possibly could. It's something that I've given a lot of thought to prior to coming, yet it didn't dissuade me. I told myself that even though he won't recognize me, he'll still hear the truth in the things I have to say. I know this boy better than he knows himself, and I have no doubt that he'll spend long hours reflecting on our talk after I leave.

As he shuffles past the officer at the door, I catch a glimpse of his eyes. He's scared out of his mind. His eyes are puffy and his cheeks are flushed. This always happens to him when he's been crying. It doesn't surprise me to see him this way, especially after everything that's happened during the previous month and a half. He's someone that's driven by emotion first, and reason a distant second. It's always been this way. He wears his heart on his sleeve. This is a characteristic that people usually find endearing, but today, under these circumstances; it's proving to be devastatingly tragic.

While my heart is broken for the person he has harmed, it hurts for this boy as well, and I hate seeing him like this. He's had a tough life; parents who used him as a pawn in the back-and-forth gripes they waged against each other, a sister that always treated him as if he didn't exist, sexual abuse at the hands of a family friend, which lasted for years, and an endless line of bullies who tormented him and made his life miserable. I know that his self-esteem was shattered at an early age, and that confidence isn't something he feels. These things don't excuse what he did, but he didn't grow up wanting to be a criminal, and he never set out to let anyone down. All he ever wanted was to fit in; to feel as though he belonged.

Like most young kids, he didn't always weigh the consequences of the choices he made, and as he tried to swallow the pains of life, he turned to stealing, skipping school, and smoking weed. These

were his bandaids. He tried LSD for the first and *only* time less than a month before this visit, and tragedy struck.

I know things about this boy that no one else does, and yet as I look at him, I find myself overwhelmed with disappointment at the terrible thing he's done. He stops about 10 feet from me, confusion enveloping him. My emotions well up, and in that moment I want to scream at him.

How could he have done such a thing?

He should have known better!

He did know better, so what happened?

I want answers, though at this stage of his developmental maturity, I know all too well that he doesn't have them. Not yet anyway.

He looks at me, then back at the doorway through which he came. The door is closed, and the officer's footsteps are growing more distant with each second we're alone. He realizes that I'm the only one behind the glass, and I nod my head and motion for him to have a seat. When I pick up the phone and put the receiver to my ear, he does the same.

"You're not a cop are you?" he asks me, the suspicion in his voice clear. "Or that reporter that keeps asking to see me?"

"No kid, I'm neither," I begin. "I just stopped by to have a talk, that's all. I figured you'd want to get out of your cell for a while. Listen, I know you're hurting right now," the tears well up in my eyes as I clutch the phone tightly against my ear.

"I know you're trying to make sense of this in your mind, and I know that you're wrestling with an immense burden of shame for what you've done. Seeing you like this is harder than I thought it would be. It's hard because I know exactly what you're going through. I know what you're thinking,

and I know how you're feeling. I wish that I could sit here and tell you that things are going to get better for you. Of course they will get better, with time, but I'd be lying if I said that things aren't going to get a lot more difficult for you first."

He begins to cry. I knew it would happen like this.

"What do you mean?" he pleads. "What could be worse than what I've done?" Overcome with raw emotion, he puts his head in his hands and cries even harder.

"Shame and guilt will make it worse for you. It'll make it worse because you're the type of person who'll think about what you've done non-stop. Trust me on that. I need you to listen to me for a few minutes. I'm going to say some things that are going to be very painful, and very hard for you to hear. I'm going to say them knowing that they'll destroy you in this moment, but I think that hearing them will go a long way towards preparing you for what lies ahead."

"I'll start with your crime. I know what you did that night, and I know how much differently it turned out than you expected. But it happened, and no matter how badly you wish you could go back and change it, you can't. This thing you've done is permanent. It's permanent in a way that you can't even make sense of right now. It's too big and too painful to wrap your teenaged mind around. That's normal, it's a prefrontal lobe thing that you won't be able to grasp until later in life, but that doesn't mean that it won't hurt all the more as you search your soul for answers along the way. Just trust me when I say that those answers will eventually come."

"Your punishment is going to feel overwhelming. It's going to be rough. You're going to be sentenced to life in prison and you won't get the chance to taste freedom again for decades. On the inside, you're going to have to fight a man countless times to avoid being sexually assaulted. You'll lose all of these fights, and because you stand up for yourself, you'll spend a considerable amount of time in disciplinary segregation. At least initially, you're going to be surrounded by people who won't take the time to help you. You'll think of suicide. Sometimes, it'll be the only thing you think about.

You'll think of it because more and more you'll come to hate yourself as you're consumed by guilt for the life you've taken, but in the end, and listen to me closely on this, you'll never follow through with it because you believe in God. Remember that.

"You're going to struggle mightily in prison kid," I tell him. "I'm just being honest with you. Your few childhood friends will never contact you. They'll move on as if you never existed. Your little brother will grow up without you, and as you watch him struggle with the same problems you struggled with, you'll blame yourself for not being there to guide him. You'll think of the person you harmed constantly. The shame you feel is going to eat at you from the inside out, because you won't know how to forgive yourself. You won't know how to accept that there's no taking it back. You'll ache to apologize and to admit how wrong you were, but these opportunities will not come. Not in the way you'd like anyway."

"You're going to hang your hopes on the constant rumors that laws will change, that your sentence will be shortened as a result of these changes. You'll hope that you will get out and be able to start a family of your own. None of those things will happen. None of them."

"Now here comes the hard part, and you need to be strong when I tell you this. During the decades you spend in prison, you're going to hang the moon and the stars on your love for your mom. You'll do it because she's an incredible woman. Her words will lift your spirits and her visits will give you hope. Her presence will help you become the man you're destined to be. She'll become the best friend you've ever had. It's beautiful how she'll love you and guide you through the storm, but it comes with a toll: a heartbreak that you'll never fathom."

"You're going to sit in prison helplessly when she gets ill. She'll spend years going in and out of hospitals for healing that never takes root within her. You'll sit in your prison cell through all of this, crying, praying that God will spare her and instead shoulder you with all the pain that she doesn't deserve to feel. It's a prayer He will not answer. Instead, she'll wither away slowly, painfully, until

finally one rainy morning prison guards will shackle you up and rush you to your childhood home for a quick beside goodbye before she dies. It's the only time you'll see her alive outside the prison walls you'll live behind, and it'll only be for a few short moments. It is going to be the hardest thing you face, but you'll get through it. Remember that."

"Like anyone doing a lot of time, you're going to change in there. You're going to become much different than the boy you are when you go in. You're going to grow old in there. Your hair will turn gray, your face will become lined with wrinkles, and your bones will constantly scream out in pain. You'll feel as if each year that passes lasts a decade. You'll feel alone, forgotten, and the footprints you've left on the outside world will slowly erode and disappear with time. You can't imagine it right now, but it's going to happen."

"How do you know all of these things?" he asks me, tears streaming down his flushed face. I can tell that he doesn't grasp the totality of why he's here. His situation is more serious than his mind can comprehend, and I worry about him. As I look at him, I can't help but remember that his seventeenth birthday was just a few months before this.

"Just keep listening to me," I continue. "You'll understand when I'm done. It seems like too much to handle right now, but you're going to end up doing some good in this life too. You're going to change based on the strength of your faith, and also because of the patient love that your mom surrounds you with. While in prison, you're going to sit down with hundreds of troubled youth from various high schools. You're going to explain the importance of their education and life choices. You're going to cry in front of them, all of them, because each time you talk about the terrible thing you've done it'll leave you feeling broken. But you'll do it anyway, knowing that you might be able to help a young person who's struggling just as you did."

“You’re going to earn college degrees, studying fervently and making countless people proud along the way. You’re going to lead men in efforts toward gaining insight into the horrible things they’ve done, again, often using yourself as an example to help them feel more comfortable about opening up. You’re going to find talents within yourself, such as; artwork, playing guitar, and crafting poetry. You’re going to be an award winning, published writer. Because of the things you write, you’ll receive letters from people across the country encouraging you to keep hope alive within your heart.”

“You’re going to meet some incredibly amazing people while doing your time. They’ll include fellow prisoners, noted authors, college professors and students, famous sports players, counselors, correctional officers, and community members who dedicate their lives to enacting change. You’ll go to church. You’ll sit next to a chief of police, who comes in to see what happens to folks after sentencing. You won’t know it beforehand, of course, but you’ll talk to him for a long while. In the end, he’ll tell you that you’re ready to come home, and when he tells you who he is, you’ll cry because it’s another in a long line of moments that will leave you speechless.”

“There will be many others as well. These people will get to know you. They’ll come to believe in you. They’ll help you understand that hope isn’t lost, and instill within you the message that you’ll still be able to make a difference. And you will. I know you will.”

“How do you know that I’ll go through all of these things?” he asks again.

“Trust me,” I say. “You will.”

“But how do you know?”

“From personal experience. I’m you.”