

The van

Short story

April 2019

Hey! I know what you did. You had a long day at work. You stopped at Walmart to get some instant noodles or whatever you like. You joined the queue at the cash desk. You got bored. You peaked an eye on the little extra stuff you could buy as if your purse wasn't light enough already. You saw that sexy new novella of mine on the shelf and thought to yourself: “*insert your name* you oughta read more.” It's a SALE! Only five bucks. You tossed it on the conveyer belt. Your need for basic intellectual pride, a very vital urge in the 21st century American middle-class, is now satisfied.

Welcome then! I'm currently in jail. Uncle Sam seems to wish to keep me in his company for a while. I wake up at eight, have breakfast at eight thirty and lunch at noon. Add to that two thirty-minute breaks in the yard, when it's not raining. But apart from that, I have quite a lot of spare time on my hands. Let me tell you my story. Brace yourselves.



There was this ever so recognizable “click” as the handcuffs were tightened around my wrists. The next time I would have my hands free would be in a new cell. Probably sentenced to life without parole. By the book, I still could get death penalty, but it wasn't enforced anymore in Pennsylvania. Lawyers called this a “formal hiatus” in the law. It meant most people with common sense agreed it was a somewhat outdated punishment. And another few vetoed the change to satisfy the common folk's idea of morality. I chuckled in disgust.

Leaving that temporary prison center actually felt like salvation. To be fair, that was some irrational thinking. Our mighty country bears a reputation of being tough on criminals. They are therefore sent to rather unwelcoming jails where they shall repent from their sins. Considering I was fairly new to prison biomes, I probably had not been sent to the worst one for my first spell. Perhaps my next cell would be unbearable. I winced at the colourful perspective of mold developing inside my lungs and my body rotting off from the inside. I pictured clandestine rats and iguanas crossing my cell. I would trap, skin and roast them in a corner to cope with the prison's inedible grub.

The alarm buzzed, the orange light swirled and flashed as the gate was opened to belch out the filthy convict that I was. I hoped we would be in for a stroll in a different environment, a bit like

these charity initiatives where underprivileged people get to the seashore for the first time of their lives. Unfortunately, our destination was an armoured Ford Transit police van. You probably know these cars as placid, plastic-walled childlike trucks that supply your local grocery. But you don't know the pimped version. Huge in-your-face black and white paint rectangles, cause yeah, it ain't your uncle's lame-ass Chevrolet. Massive carrier bars on top of the roof, in case a mountain pops up in Philly and you're in for skiing with the prisoner, you never know. And on top of that, a bombastic "POLICE PRISONER TRANSPORT" written in an outdated font. It ironically looked very much like the Hotwheels toy car logo. For cruel adult readers who deprived their kids of such treats for Christmas, these toys teach your toddlers to enjoy speeding like their elders.

I was kicked inside the van with an indelicate submachine gun blow onto my spine. Dismayed by the unfriendliness of my ride mates, I buckled my security belt hastily. "Why is all that extra human security for, given that this precious piece of fabric already provides for my safety?" I asked my fellow passagers. I failed to understand all their annoyed replies. Mostly some rather hateful invectives that had to do with me enjoying other males' genitals. Discouraged, I gave up any attempt at socializing.

I hadn't killed that guy. It was a setup. As a matter of fact, I *did* have bad intentions that night, as well as many other nights before. The client had asked me for a meeting place, he had given the address of a random café, just like in the movies. In five minutes, I was given the target's name and the place to hit. It was just about beating him up, in retaliation for his foe dating the girl he could not forget about. That fool did not want to confront the guy in person. "Way over six feet, 15 stones, ya know... I want things done neatly". But my client insisted on being inside the bar to witness the contract being executed.

Staying professional, I pretended to understand the guy's desire of vengeance, said it was a doable thing and listened to him emphasise the offense he felt. Not that I *genuinely* cared about this man's life at all. But I knew from experience it was always good to know who you were working for. Junkies, psychos, cops... One can never be too cautious. People don't know there is such a psychological aspect in my job. Now, don't get me wrong, I do not *blame* them for that. I don't expect people to revise their opinion about the morality of my job. I do steal, hit or kill for a living, I am what is commonly called a *criminal*. It forbids me from accessing social recognition, or declaring my income as an honest citizen. But I chose this life. My clients complain to me, not the other way round. But this time *I* wanted to complain. I had not done this. Something wasn't right.

My life had not always been like this. Back in the day, I went to college, and actually got a PhD in Humanities. Oh yes, I am an avid reader too. Psychology, Roman poetry, *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, *Rolling Stone*, and, at times, *sigh*, *Playboy*. Now, fellow readers, there is a natural question that should pop up in your mind. How on Earth could this knowledgeable man end up earning his bread so thuggishly? Well, the reason may be disappointing: money. I like nice wine, nice clothes, nice cars. Call me a *nouveau riche* if you like, but as a matter of fact, I wasn't rich before. I was raised by my father as an only child. My father had a lifelong career as a maintenance worker in power plants, a coal-fueled plant at first, then a nuclear one. Although it is a highly unisex professional environment, he did have an affair with a girl he met at the bar after work. Nine years later, with the douchebagginess proper to his youth, he refused to acknowledge his fatherhood. The next day, my mother dropped me in front of his doorstep, wrapped up in a very Jesus-like fashion, and left town. Never got to know her. I would've liked to, honestly.

So I've always dreamt of money, and my job as a lecturer in classics never brought enough dough to my bank account. That's why I decided to start serving civilians in an alternative way. Well, not all of them. Those who had the coin. With all that said, I am a peculiar specimen of the *white collar criminal*. It may not seem logical to you CNN or gangsta-rap lovers. But don't forget that pigs wear baby blue shirts in this country. Therefore, their collars are blue. Mine is white. I am no pig.

The car braked down. I came out of my existential meditation. This *had been* my life, but the pursuit of my career was now arguably jeopardised. I gazed at the prairies of Pennsylvania. Then appeared the two chimneys of the Limerick nuclear plant. That was the place where my father used to work. He had retired a few years before. He used to take the same highway to go to work. Only in the opposite direction.

This whole thing was such a scam... I had for once been overconfident. I had botched the preliminary investigation... Routine is bad, kids. There is a rule when you are about to do something bad somewhere. Just make sure something else as bad as yours is not scheduled at the same time. Aaaand this was my lucky day. My designated target had had an affair with the daughter of the head of the local Puerto Rican cartel. His *de facto* father-in-law had sent his own squad of thugs with a shaved head. It had ended badly. As far as I can remember, I saw my own client with a bullet in the head.

I looked to my right, my forehead touching the glass of the window. It mirrored my face, which suddenly replaced the prairies in the background.

“I saw my reflection in a window and didn't know my own face”.¹

That song had accompanied my thoughts ever since I had woken up in the morning. It was as if The Boss had tried to encapsulate my state of my mind on that cut, although I am by no means a brilliant lawyer as in the movie. There were no buzzing guitars -I wasn't exactly in a very rock'n'roll situation anyway. A simple drum beat without cymbals. Ethereal synths that I always thought blended perfectly with a sunset landscape on a late summer evening. And finally, that melancholic voice. It was Springsteen's vocal signature, a slightly raspy, mumbling voice. I suddenly realized I had been mumbling out my own thoughts ever since I had entered the van. Fortunately no one could have heard me, as I was alone in the back side of the van, separated from the cops and the driver by a shatterproof glass panel. Soliloquising is a common disorder among convicts, studies have shown. Emboldened by this relative freedom I now had, I indulged in a concerto of farts.

Then a flash of green and white paint paced before my eyes. Walnut Street. The restaurant in which the crime had been committed was only half a mile away from here, just behind the highway bridge.

I walked the avenue, 'til my legs felt like stone,

I heard the voices of friends, vanished and gone.

Oh yes, I had walked that night, straight ahead, in a robotic way. I can hardly estimate how long this walk had been. Walnut Street is one of these American main streets with restaurants and shops lining up with massive parking lots in front. The original plan was to do the job clinically, easy peasy, and escape with my car. The Puerto Ricans had not planned their own business that cautiously, and had attracted the police on the crime scene from the beginning. There was a gunfight, rythmed by groans of pain and ugly words like “*pendejo*” or things that meant “I think you practice Oedipus-like incest on a regular basis.” I thus had no choice but to blend into the panic-stricken crowd that was rushing out of the building and on the streets. I ran aimlessly in the same direction as everyone.

I came in front a police roadblock. “There he is! Freeze!” a cop yelled, and I was busted.

¹ This quote and the following are lyrics from the song *Streets of Philadelphia*, by American singer-songwriter Bruce Springsteen

Oh dear... It's really no such fun to watch as in the movies. I was kicked in the back of the knees and forced to bend over the hood of the car, while I was handcuffed for the first time of my life, grimacing. Good old Bruce wouldn't have been proud of me.

The van suddenly made a sharp right turn. Hah! There it was! That was the local police station at the corner of the street, where I had been put under custody and interrogated. As astounding as it may sound, police custody is not the finest accommodation option, and I quickly understood why the police station was so poorly rated on the Google Maps star-rating system. Some convicted people actually do leave a remark about their stay, don't go there people, bad food, they don't change sheets, rude employees. All of this is true, though. My remarks about the soggianness of the mashed peas dish I was given were not met with gratitude.

And then there was the interrogation itself. Two bald ogres who looked much more like thugs than me, it must be said. "Who are you?" they asked. "Well, usually the first person to speak introduces himself first, where are your manners?" I enquired, only to be shown that a truncheon blow in my guts was all the manners they had. I was "*bruised and battered*", as Old Brucie said. The rest of our little chat was much more conventional, by their standards. I was forced to state my name, usual whereabouts, plans on that particular evening, as if downing pints on a sunny summer evening had become something suspicious in our messed up times. I was put back into custody with the same rudeness they had thrown me in the first time. None of the two brutes seemed to doubt my guilt, nor to have any clue of what they would have done otherwise. After the legal duration of police custody was reached, I was notified I was the "*main and only suspect left*" on that case. It was added that, owing to the supposedly critical social danger I embodied, I was to spend the time prior to my trial in a high security jail. It was a scarcely fancier cell, but a single-person one. And they added salt to the mashed peas.

Screeech. That cop had definitely got his driver's license in a corn flakes box. There is, ironically, a *race to the bottom* when it comes to driving proficiency in our modern societies. Cars have undoubtedly become safer and easier to use, thanks to power steering. They are now loaded with all kinds of electronics, such as cameras that prevent you from hitting your neighbour's ride or his innocent nan. Drunk driving is a less common institution. But all this progress is thoroughly undermined by incautious drivers, numbed by the monotony of the driving experience in America. And then comes that massive truck brushing against your rear mirror at full speed, eager to finish the day. But I digress. Our beloved driver forgot he was even driving. What do you find in towns? Traffic lights. *Screeech.*

The van came to a stop. There stood a massive yet odd building. Imagine the Empire state Building and your in-laws' house had done some naughty business together. Also, imagine that poor hybrid had strived to keep an obesity-prone diet. The result was an awkwardly-designed brick megalith with a column of glass panels to get some natural light in there. My eyes stopped on a script in golden letters on the wall. James A. Byrne United States House Court. A nice bud, so I've heard. Unlike me. It is a kind of double punishment, in a way. "In this place named after a good man, I hereby declare you a human scum". Amen.

So here it was. This building, the outside of which reeked with the boredom inside its walls, was to become the mausoleum of my freedom. Of course, I could lodge in an appeal, and a last resort, and a wait-I-really-didn't-do-it trial. But I was kind of fed up with these procedures before they had even started. I had taken the cheapest lawyer available, who had to visit me in the provisional detention center. Hardly had he even shut the door that I was filled with an everlasting distaste for his person. He was, to begin with, ugly. I take full responsibility for this socially incorrect statement, but it is a major flaw. Especially for professions like attorneys. Who cares how the court clerk, or any office worker looks like? But lawyers are meant to be seen. They must get up, parade, exchange confrontational looks with their fellow on the opposing side. If the case you must defend already has ugly features, yours just cannot be as ugly. That's like visually assaulting the judge in addition to the charge of physical assault already on your name.

His non visual aesthetic skills were nothing more to be proud of. There is a highly sexist phrase according to which girls are meant to be seen, not heard. This man was not made to stimulate any of the five human senses. His voice was raspy, his breath cheesy, his hand moisty. And, God forbid, I had no intention to have any taste of him. As I entered the hall to meet my unlikely savior, I realized I could not remember his name.

I walked inside the court room, walking slowly. My mind was surprisingly empty. It felt like waking up and opening the fridge to get some orange juice in the morning. Anaesthetised, so to speak. As I said earlier, I did not have much esteem for my client. I was quite upset to notice the court room was teeming with people. Either my client was a latter-day Saint, and those folks were only his siblings. Or some people really had a crappy social taste. I sat at my bench, and looked right towards the witnesses. Then it came again:

Saw my reflection in a window and didn't know my own face.

Oh brother are you gonna leave me wastin' away

A man with the exact same features my client had. His twin brother, no doubt about it

Well. After all, I did have something to do with our friend's passing. Amidst the aforementioned little frenzy, I did perform a fast-forward move on my own client's life. The first reason to do so was an idiotic mistake of his. When hiring someone, it is generally a kind attention to grant your executioner with some cash in advance. But if you give me more dough before the job than afterwards as our friend did, the incentive to do the job is dramatically lessened. In the confusion, I saw a favorable opportunity to get rid of a boastful client who would have jeopardized my secrecy. Anyway, with such a lookalike brother, I still left one copy on the bookshelf. Ha-ha.

As stated before, I read a lot. Although cars, guitar and women magazines remain my main source of reading, I do take an interest in more serious topics. I was given the "Most-learned-inmate-ever-had" award by the psychiatrist who examined me in my first prison dwelling. With the years, I have in fact become sensitive to environmental issues. I also read a lot of moral philosophy. This erudition led me to deem some people more worthy of staying on Earth than others. Take my client. He came to our professional meeting in an oversized Hummer. He had a red face and a stomach that betrayed his abusive consumption of meat and his loathing of vegetables. But above all, there is one special grudge I hold against him. After a long period of meditation, I drew the conclusion that man had nothing to bring to the intellectual elevation of the human race. If this man was cloned to death to replace every other human being, we would be doomed. There would be no foreseeable future. Now, do not be afraid. I am not wishing your death if you do not possess particular intellectual proficiency. Besides, I am presently in a very uncomfortable position to cause you any harm right now. And I am not calling for a semi-Platonic society led by half-naked scholars who talk about the essence of life and drink wine. It takes all kinds to make a world. I like to think of myself as a post-modern Don Quixote. But this client of mine was precisely lacking relevance in a morally acceptable world. I despise death penalty. But I think I have developed a skill in evaluating whether someone's life is valuable or not.

Of course, I am envisioning the future, and the eventuality of my sacrifice being replicated. I am probably not going to commit any extra misdeeds in my life. I do not belong to any obscure sect that would aim at reducing the world population. I hate associations, clubs, unions and whatnot. Gathering and being forced to listen to people bores me to tears. But I have readers. This is my

community. And you, fellow readers, are free. Who knows what you will do. I am not responsible in any way.

So that is it people. My little tale is over. Perhaps you will take it as a tale. Or a fable for the modern age. As for me, dinner time is in ten minutes. Hopefully not mashed peas again.