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“Lady sings the blues....she’s got’em bad, she feels so sad....she wants the world to know what the blues is all about; the blues is nothing but a - ” Officer Herrera walks up to my cell and waves a bag of Doritos at me. “Are you hungry?” he asks. I shake my head. “Okay,” he says. “Just let me know and I’ll bring them over to you.” When I run out of Billie Holiday songs (at least what I can remember) I move onto the first Johnny Cash song that comes to mind. It is so cliché I can’t bear to mention the title. I feel brazen and wronged. Officer Herrera comes back and unlocks my cell door. I am suddenly sheepish. My husband Brian is standing there with his uncle Kenny, who is a detective, hoping to get me out and bypass the standard procedure of seeing a judge in the morning. My voice has quieted down to a murmur and then I just stop. He has brought me jeans and sneakers, and when I see that he remembered I had just gotten my period that morning and had put a pad in the plastic bag he handed me, all the sassiness drains right out of me.

“Uncle Kenny’s trying,” he says, “but it doesn’t look like he can do all that much.”

I stare at him and take a deep breath. “I don’t know what to say,” I tell him and let my hands fall to my sides, exasperated. “I’m sorry.”

“When I picked up my phone and a cop was on the other end of the line I thought you were dead,” he says. He is referring to Officer Herrera, who had asked to use my phone to contact Brian.

Minutes later he leaves with his uncle and says to call him when I can. And minutes after that three prostitutes and a junkie are put into the cell with me. The junkie (I can only assume) is curled up on the floor with her denim jacket covering her head and she is screaming for candy. During my second year of teaching one of my students was a heroin user. “Just give me a fuckin’ chocolate bar,” she says through her gritted teeth, and when the officer raps on the bars to give it to her, a hand shoots out from the jacket and she snatches it away with a disturbing ferocity. The other three young women are talking over the commotion animatedly as if they were sitting in the laundry room waiting for the spin cycle to end. One of them stands up and bends over to pull her socks up, exposing her bare ass and more than I care to see.

“What are you in here for?” one of them asks me. She is a pudgy blonde with red claw-like fingernails.

“DUI,” I say.

“Shiiit,” she says. “But don’t worry. After this they’ll take you to the Tombs and you wait there for the judge to see you and then you have to decide how you’re going to plead.” She pauses, “What are you gonna plead?”

“I don’t know,” I say. I’m not sure.

“Well anyhow, then they’ll let you go. And you’re lucky it’s a Thursday night, because if it was a Friday night then your ass would be in jail over the weekend because there is no judge on the weekends.”

The aplomb with which she delivers this procedure would make you think she was repeating, for the third time, how to make tomato sauce from scratch.

“Thanks,” I say.

“Uh-huh.” And just before she continues talking with the others she says, “Don’t feel too bad. Today’s my birthday. I’m turning eighteen!”

Hours later they re-cuff me and the four other men they had arrested from the night before. I ask one of the officers to take my sunglasses out of my coat and put them on me. I don’t know which I am avoiding more – the white sunlight or my humiliation. We are in a van headed downtown to Central Booking. The men are talking amongst themselves and I overhear one of them repeating the same thing from the night before, “Man, I just had a glass of wine with my daughter. That’s all I did.” I don’t say anything. The officer behind the wheel is weaving through Chinatown, jostling us around in the process.

“What the fuck,” I say when he pulls over and we are escorted into Central Booking through the back entrance. We all form a line. Two feet away from me there’s a homeless-looking man sitting on the floor also in cuffs, and when the men behind me see him one of them offers to stand in front of me to save me from being harassed. I don’t care.

The man wakes up and stands weaving back and forth, staggering in front of me. I don’t step back, and tilt my head a little with slight impatience. We are face to face.

“I know your gypsy eyes,” he starts, but the cop sitting behind one of the desks yells to him. “Hey, back off and siddown.”

The drunk takes large backward steps but then runs up to me again. “I know how you taste and I know your gypsy eyes.” He is staring straight into my face and I stare back. He doesn’t know I taught special ed my first three years. He doesn’t know I’ve had students threaten to choke me to death, or kill me on the spot. One time the dean was standing between me and another student because she lunged towards me and he had to block her and physically carry her away with security guards. The men behind me are getting anxious, shifting back and forth, coughing unnecessarily.

“I said back off and siddown!” the cop yells again, and the drunk finally does. He slumps back on the floor but eyes me viciously and I look straight ahead ignoring him.

It’s the female security guards who are the most vicious. They continue with their banter and camaraderie as they strip search me, pulling the center of my bra so far out that they almost tear it off. There is a huge fan blasting as I take my clothes off and one of them is asking questions but I can’t hear her through the loud whirring. “Just answer the damn question!” she barks at me and the other two laugh.

“I can’t hear you,” I say.

She leans in and screams into my ear, “HOW MANY SHIRTS ARE YOU WEARING?”

My eyes smart from the pitch. “Three,” I say.

“Take it off and let’s see.”

They all laugh as I take off each layer. She grabs each one of out my hands and pulls at it with an inspective air as if I have cleverly hidden a gun or switchblade in the folds.

Finally one of them walks me to a cell filled with women. There are long benches running along the parameters of this very large room. A saloon-like door covers a recessed area that serves as our bathroom. In another corner there are cylindrical paper cups and a large jug of water with a spigot.

There’s another junkie in the corner. This one is an older woman and she starts wailing, “I need aspirin. I need aspirin,” until one of the security guards walks over and yells, “I ain’t given you no goddam aspirin because you’ll find some goddam way of shoving it into your arm!”

“Please!” the woman is screaming, exposing her toothless gums, “I just want an aspirin,” and although this continues on for a few minutes the entire cell is frozen with horror and sympathy. The security guard is a large black woman who decides to open the cell door and continue her tirade. “You a fucking junkie!” she keeps yelling. “That’s all you are – a wasted life, a goddam junkie!” Once she leaves a chorus of murmurs breaks the cold silence and the woman goes back to her corner sobbing.

“That just ain’t right,” one woman says. She’s a middle-aged woman with a green bandana on her head. Her name is Louise. I find out later that she was arrested for throwing her shoe at a pregnant woman.

“Why she gotta be so nasty!” another girl says. She’s a Spanish girl with kinky black hair and gold hoop earrings that display her name: Jackie. “I mean, do your job and everything like that, but you don’t need to get so nasty,” she continues, “damn,” cocking her head for emphasis.

Everyone is swapping information. What did you do to get in here? How many hours have you been waiting? Who did you call first? What are you going to plead? When is the judge coming back from lunch break? The women look so vastly different from one another that their tales of indiscretion, or the injustice that had been doled out to them are fascinating. One woman was a fashion designer who had decided to move her car to the other side of the street and because of a broken taillight she had been pulled over and then given a Breathalyzer test that she evidently failed. Another girl was arrested for allegedly refusing to pay her cab fare, and when they sifted through her bag for her wallet they found a dime bag.

The stories relayed are so upsetting that it envelops the rest of the listeners until a new more treacherous pastime preoccupies us: reality. “My mom is going to be so mad at me when I get home!” one girl says, and leans against the wall, still wearing her glitter top and stiletto heels from the previous evening. “This is my second arrest!” another one pipes up and sits with her chin in her hands looking grim. One by one, like a pack of kittens they begin crying. And each cry is different from the other; some lie down on the bench and quietly watch the ceiling as tears roll down the sides of their face, some of them actually howl with despair. I watch them passively with sympathy, and then a surge of anxiety overwhelms us all when Louise declares, “All I know is that it’s Friday and the judge don’t work on weekends. So they better get our asses into court before midnight tonight, because we gonna be in here until Monday morning

otherwise.”

We arise from our stupor of self-pity. Can this be true? We'll all be in here if we don't get tried today?

To distract myself I use the phone mounted on the wall (it's free) to check the messages on my cell phone. There is only one. "Hi Ms. Zilelian. It's Christian. We're all ready to present our Kite Runner projects and you're not here. What's up? You can call me back at this number if you want to."

I hang up the phone and sit on the edge of one of the benches. Jackie sees me. "What's up mama?" She called everybody 'mama'.

"That," I say, trying to steady my voice, "was my student Christian. I'm an AP English teacher. I have been their teacher for the past three years, and today was my second to last day with them. They were supposed to present this project...."

I am sobbing. Finally. And it doesn't help when a man appears with a clipboard asking me for all my information for my trial and says, "Do you work for the city?"

"Yes."

"What is your profession?" He is too busy filling in my information to notice the tremor in my voice. "I'm a New York City high school teacher," I say.

I call Brian. "Don't worry," I tell him. "I'm totally fine. I just don't know when I'll be seeing the judge."

He tells me he has taken the train to the courthouse twice, hoping I'll be tried soon. "I'll call you when I find something out," I say. "I'm really fine. Just don't tell my mother."

My name is called at 6 o'clock and as they swing the doors open I hear Louise call out, "Hey! That ain't fair. They gotta take us in order! I know I've been here longer than her. Anyone else?"

Their squawking fades to an echo as an officer leads me through a maze of corridors and finally into the courtroom. The court-appointed attorney takes me into a booth. I sit across from her and watch her sift through my papers with a quiet detachment.

"You do know what a serious charge this is?" she asks.

"Yes," I answer.

"I don't think you do," she says. "You could have killed someone."

"What am I supposed to plead?" I ask.

"Well, what do you think?" she replies rolling her chair back and sizing me up briefly.

"Not guilty?"

"Are you telling me or are you asking me?" she retorts.

“I’m telling you,” I say, feeling defeated.

“Well, you can plead not guilty but your BCA registered at point eleven,” she says.

“Okay,” I answer.

“Point five is the legal limit,” she says.

“Okay.”

“Look,” she says squarely and rolls her seat up to face me closely. “You have a job and you need a private lawyer. I’m a court-appointed attorney and I represent the poor people,” she says.

“Poor as in ‘poor me’? or ‘no money’ poor?” I ask. “Because if it’s ‘poor me’, I can assure you that - ”

My sarcasm is met with an icy look. Till this day I cannot account for my behavior during this interview. It was, as they say, the moment I had been waiting for. I suddenly felt like I did in the jail cell – wronged and defiant.

Later Brian tells me I looked like a renegade or protestor when I walk in front of the judge. He says for a brief moment he somehow admired me for standing there with my chin up and my hands behind my back.

“How does she plead?” Judge Clott asks my amicable attorney.

“Not guilty,” she says.

I can hardly pay attention because I feel engulfed by the enormity of the courtroom and the distractions of the stenographer, the pews in the back filled with people who have come to rescue someone, the countless courtroom workers sitting behind their desks and the stacks of papers surrounding them.

My attorney is talking to me. “That’s fair,” she says. “Trust me. Just take it. You won’t have to come back with your own lawyer later. This is good.”

“Okay,” I say. I don’t know what I’ve agreed to. I find out later that I pleaded guilty and my sentence was reduced to an infraction, which would disappear from my record in three years.

Brian and I walk to the train and I can’t feel the fatigue or hunger that I expected to plague me. I open the refrigerator. The skirt steak I had left marinating for the evening’s dinner party is still there (where would it have gone?). I make a series of phone calls, first my mother and then my sisters. They surprise me with their dismay and sympathy. I want neither because I am tired and very little seems to matter for the time being.

As we sat in front of the T.V. eating diner food I felt fortunate and indelibly tainted. I made two lists in my head: People I Can Tell and People I Can’t Tell. My license was suspended for ninety days. I would be taking the train and then walking fifteen blocks twice a day for my commute to work. Were my friends at school on the first list or the second? Would I have to lie and say my husband needed the car for work every day from now on? And what did it matter, was the bigger question. As I fall asleep I remember saying goodbye to my friend before I left the bar that night. I had tripped over my own shoes as I sauntered to my car.

The following Monday I began my fifteen-block trek from the train station to work and bumped into one of my student's parents. She was a lovely young woman who became pregnant at the age of fifteen and decided to keep the baby. That baby was currently a teenager in one of my AP classes.

We chatted for several minutes and said good-bye. As I started walking she paused for a moment and said, "You have changed my daughter's life. I just want you to know that. I know she won't be having you as a teacher next year, but please feel free to spend time with her or go out for coffee together because I won't mind. She can't say enough about you and neither can I. Thank you for everything you have done for her."

I nodded and thanked her and turned my back as quickly as possible so she wouldn't see my face. I am back in the jail cell with all the women and I can hear my student Christian's voice on the other end of the line, "Hi Ms. Zilelian. It's Christian. We're all ready to present our Kite Runner projects and you're not here..." and I wonder how my humility does not abide by the laws of that insular and dour place, but by something more innocent and unaware, something that does not judge, but rather leaves me to account for my own salvation.

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