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Interim Inmates

Parker Stenseth

I arrived in St. Louis toward the end of spring to meet with a couple of close friends. We convened there because of the metaphor of the city and because it was located evenly between the three of us. Life was returning to the area, but the air remained chilled. It mattered little. We weren't coming for the air. The purpose of the trip was to give three friends who had gone their separate ways a chance at the lives we wanted. Our time in college was winding down. We were on the closing stretch of our final semesters and were beginning to feel the demands of what came next, even if we didn't know what that was exactly. Lackluster majors forced an identity on us and lined us up for a war that wasn't ours to fight. The trip was our escape rope to draft dodge desk jobs and graduate school. It was our ticket out. We were going to finish our television series pitch and follow in its wake to our ascendancy.

We gathered on the street between the Arch and the old courthouse, positioned between the past and a path to the future. The sun was bright, and we were very concerned with symbols and omens. I was twenty minutes early and sat on my hard-shell suitcase as scooters and Ubers whipped by. A black car pulled before me, and Will got out. He looked weary as we shook hands. It'd been months since we'd seen each other, and I felt better in his presence. Beneath his exhaustion, a perpetual occurrence, his sensibilities were shockingly aligned with popular taste. He was our barometer for progress.

Moments later, Easton sputtered to a halt beside us, riding one of the electric scooters littering the city streets. He had a duffle bag slung over his shoulder and his scarf flapped behind him. He was amusing and well put-together; the only one of us who came across as fully

assembled. I imagined this also meant he had the least at stake. It's probable that under most circumstances he could find himself happy, which made him better equipped for the world.

Together, in near silence, we traversed a few blocks to the loft we'd rented for the next five days. The elevator pushed us to the fifth floor, and we felt that our gestation was nearing its end. Our door swung open and we filed into the cavernous room. It was as we'd expected—as we had needed—a space to float ideas to see if they could fly. The ceilings were high, and the walls were exposed brick broken up by tall windows. The concrete floor was a foundation on which we could bounce without fearing it would crack. There was a single table, couch, and chair surrounded by great volumes of open air.

We threw our bags in a corner. Soon they'd burst open and leak clothes across the floor. This would be a byproduct of our focus. Everything that wasn't the work was at the wayside. We balanced a collection of computers, notebooks, and pens across the table and reviewed our material. Our pitch was for a reality show—but it wasn't like the others, all that dreck. Ours would be real.

The logline was all we had, but it was brilliant: a show in which regular citizens are temporarily thrown into maximum security prisons. The working title was *Interim Inmates*. We were aware of how good this was because of how well it went over at parties. It's true that everyone has a television show idea, but what's not true is that everyone has a brilliant television show idea, and this is what set us apart.

Over the ensuing days we planned to place our idea into writing—which we figured would be easy since we'd spoken of it so many times—and allow the finer details to fall in place. I had one idea that I was particularly proud of and shared it as soon as we had assembled.

"Here's the twist," I said. "Our contestants don't know they're contestants until it's already started."

"How does that make sense?"

"They don't know they're in the show until they're already in prison, and maybe even then we don't tell them. They just have to figure it out, being in prison, what the hell happened to them. It ups the drama

and becomes part of our charm.”

I grinned ear to ear. I couldn't help it. We were dealing with the idea of the century. They seemed hesitant.

“How could that work?”

“Do you mean kidnapping people? Are you asking us to kidnap people for television?”

“Of course not,” I said. “That’s part B of my idea. You’re going to love this. We get a corporate sponsor—I’m thinking Progressive, Marriot, or Enterprise—a company with a contract no one cares about. They become our primary sponsor, ‘*Interim Inmates* brought to you by...’ type of deal, and the exchange is that once a week they throw a clause into one of their contracts that’s essentially a waiver for whatever we’re going to do to our newest contestant. Talking this through out loud, Marriot would probably work best since we’ll know the contestants’ location, but legally we’ll be scotch free.”

“Scot free.”

“Whatever. The main thing is, congratulations, I just made us rich.”

“People couldn't help but watch it,” Will said. He shrugged.

“I don't know,” Easton said. He was on the couch next to Will. I was in the chair. “It might be difficult to pull off. That feels like a risk on the company’s end. And we’d have to pitch this to executives. They might not like the idea of a kidnapping.”

“If they sign a waiver, it’s not a kidnapping.”

“It’s still kind of a kidnapping,” Will said.

“What the hell is going on?” I said. “We just started, and I’m throwing you guys touchdown passes, corner of the endzone, perfect spirals, and you’re watching them fall to the turf like it’s fun for you. The draft is coming up, so what are we doing?”

“It’s probably not viable,” Easton said, “but knock yourself out. Call Geico—”

“Progressive.”

—And see what they have to say.”

“Fine,” I said, and we left the matter undecided.

Very quickly we realized that none of us were familiar with the

specifics of pitching a reality series. We knew that for a sitcom, one would write a pilot script, and since that wasn't possible for our project, we decided to outline how the first few episodes might be expected to go, highlighting the texture we were after. I lost an early vote and we opted not to include my corporate sponsored "kidnapping" premise into these early outlines.

We spent the remainder of the day in this manner: brainstorming, pacing, and jotting notes. Each of us was to compose a loose outline and present it to the others. We'd then tweak and hone the results until we had a satisfactory showcase. The room darkened, and the three of us moved to our own corners, bent over loose-leaf paper with scratching noises pulled from our pens. An occasional laugh, a sharp exhale, would punch the silence. The air was thick with brains working furiously. We skipped dinner. Greatness doesn't come without sacrifice.

My pages were filled effortlessly. I would glance up to see Easton and Will's twisted faces and knew that I would carry us through this. They were still working at four in the morning when I fell asleep on the couch.

When I woke, I recognized my surroundings at once, and I felt at home. Some people only live in a space; we had taken possession of it. Our energy, our creativity, wafted over every surface. It would linger after we left, impossible to get rid of, like the smell of cat urine. Easton and Will were still asleep, so I crept out and down the street to a coffee shop. When they woke up, we would share our episode outlines. I bought coffee so we would be properly awake. I bought six cups and a dozen bagels, so we wouldn't need to leave the loft again.

I let the door slam behind me as I reentered. They were already up, but I hadn't known this. Their faces were groggy, disheveled, and I wondered if they understood the mountain that lay before us. We sucked down coffee and ate dry bagels before discussing the mountain.

Easton presented his episode first. It was unspoken, but we figured this would allow the momentum to build as we went along. His imagined subject was the variety of man you'd think would do well in prison: big, burly, preferably tattooed. I was nonplussed, but Will

seemed intrigued. It was explained to me that the tension would come from finding out whether the man could perform as expected. If he was as tough as he appeared, or if he was as small and insecure on the inside—like the rest of us.

I offered that we place the macho man in an all-female prison. This seemed more interesting to me. It was unanimously rejected. For the amount of scribbling and brow crunching he'd done, Easton had created very little. This was the extent of his pitch. He used many words to say it, an hour's worth, but this was it: a vague character in an expected situation. Mine was both specific and unpredictable, but Will preceded me, and I held great hopes.

His episode centered around placing a television executive behind bars. It was meta, indulgent, and thumbed its nose at authority. I loved it. Easton raised a valid concern: we'd have to pitch this to the executive we'd be imprisoning. Will reasoned that this was the point, that their solipsistic tendencies—a documented trait of executives—would be so enamored by being mentioned that the context wouldn't matter. We were above the law. Ideally, Will's concept would result as a series of episodes in which several different executives would compete against each other to see who could manage the best or last the longest. Along the way, we'd throw different obstacles at them. We could bunk them with former employees arrested for embezzlement, or simply reveal to the prisoners in the yard which embarrassing pieces of content the soft-bellied executives were responsible for—although we planned to be less than forthcoming on this portion when pitching to the executives themselves. In entertainment as in life, it's often better for one hand not to know what the other hand is up to. I gave Will's episode my seal of approval.

My moment arrived. I stood before the couch without notes and basked in their anticipation. It was mid-afternoon, and I figured after my pitch we'd pass the rest of the day lauding my idea and how successful we were going to be. I looked from Easton to Will to Easton and proceeded to pitch that we send Will's grandmother to prison, which is shocking at first, but, in my defense, is better once you know

that Will's grandmother is blind. I'd hardly finished this sentence—minus the clarification, because Will was very aware that his grandmother was blind—before being met with resistance.

"No," Will said. "Absolutely not."

How could he not see the genius?

"Take it easy," Easton said, and after a moment I realized he was talking to me.

"What's the problem? That's just my first sentence." I had several more of them prepared, some of which likely wouldn't go over well now.

"You're not sending my grandmother to prison."

"It wouldn't be me. It'd be all of us, together."

"We can't do it."

"Of course we can. Do you know how easy it would be to get her to sign the release?"

"I love my grandma."

"As you should. She's a wonderful lady who's made it through a lot, which is why our viewing audience will love her too, and love that she can, hopefully, persevere through this final obstacle."

"Final?"

"Easton, back me up."

"This feels wrong."

"Do you want a television show or not? Do you honestly think we're special for having the idea to lock up innocent people? The actual police do that every day. Where's their show?"

"Cops."

"That's different. The point is we need to differentiate our product. There are nine hundred television channels and eighty streaming services. We're not special. You're not special. If we're not imprisoning unaware grandmothers, do you think anyone will notice? No. Easton, has anyone ever noticed you? Will, why should anyone notice us as we are? The answers are no and no reason. Listen carefully, we will never become successful by writing the words 'Send a guy who looks like he'd fit in prison to prison and see if he actually fits in prison.' I became bored of that sentence three words in. We need to shock, be absurd.

The public has built a tolerance for absurdity. Let's cut through."

I was still standing. They were sitting on the couch. I felt charged, ready to run through the wall, grab a camera, film the whole series then and there. Will rubbed his head. Easton checked his nails.

"I don't think this is quite what I had envisioned," Easton said.

"Then what you had envisioned was boring."

"The ethics of your direction might be kind of hazy," Will said.

"Nothing is more unethical than being boring."

"We might disagree there."

Our loft fell into darkness. The sun set an hour earlier in the city, settling beneath a skyscraper horizon. We had hit a crossroad less than a day after our journey began. They questioned my vision, and I questioned their commitment. None of us could call off our aspirations, so, confined to a single room, we continued to work. It felt as though we were in a closet, butting against each other's presence. We were in a free fall, surrounded by the debris of our discontent. This was fine with me; I would dig my design from the rubble.

Night took hold, and my stack of notes grew. Without interference, I had given over to my whims and followed each to its conclusion. At a certain point—around three in the morning—the ideas ceased to be mine, and I began translating the world as it existed around me in all its absurdity. At four in the morning, I burned Easton and Will's notes. Smoke trailed over the edge of the trash can as I fed it more and more until there was nothing. Destruction was a necessary part of my translation. I left the ashes for them to discover.

In the morning they were furious, and I was almost finished. The work went much faster without their tiresome deliberating. By noon I had every angle charted. My documents were comprehensive and so was my excitement. I still hadn't slept. What use was sleep when something so much larger had been placed at my feet. I needed to work now, take action now. There must be an urgency to creation because we could all die tomorrow. I couldn't wait for the same reason that I couldn't dampen my expression; it would have been a disservice to the idea of life.

Easton and Will had been whispering across the room, their pens still, their brains idle. I asked them to retrieve coffee. They left. The emptiness did me well. It allowed me to expand. I tested my power and made phone calls. With all my talking, days or even years might have passed, but it was only seven hours before Easton and Will returned with a single latte. They made no mention of the line at the café, and I didn't inquire. I had made headway. My mood was inflated, and I tried to force it on them. For whatever reason, they were resistant. I insisted we go out for dinner and drinks, imagining it was around that time. It was.

There was a Peruvian restaurant a block away. Our waitress was German. We ate plantains with Salsa Verde until Johanna stopped bringing them to our table. I thought plantains would diffuse the tension. Delicious as they were, they did not diffuse the tension, and so I talked and talked, hoping that might work instead.

"The key is going to be having familiar sections of the show, segments if you will, and that way each new episode has a feeling of familiarity for returning viewers. They want to be excited by content but not challenged by form. So, I've broken episodes into seven segments, sort of a seven-act structure, and—"

They stopped me mid-sentence, plantain flecks flying from my mouth.

"We're leaving," Easton said.

"We haven't paid yet."

"We're leaving St. Louis."

The two looked solemn but not incredibly so. Sharing one side of the table, they were poised against me. Their expressions were iron. They had nothing more to add. I couldn't understand and didn't much want to.

"Well," I said. "That complicates how we're going to finish the project. It's possible that—"

"Stop. The pitch is off."

"We're making breakthroughs every second. It's going to be the greatest thing anyone's ever seen."

"You started a fire and burnt our notes."

"Yeah, but only because they were bad."

"Your ideas are violent and intrusive. No executive will like them, and nobody will want to watch them."

"People will watch because they're violent and intrusive."

"Easton and I are flying out in the morning."

"What? Do you want me to apologize for pushing you a little bit, for trying to work toward the best product? You should be thanking me. I've been steering this boat the whole trip. You were handling the wheel like children, heading straight for the icebergs, so I'm sorry if I stopped you. I am the Titanic. Do you hear me?"

"I thought you were the captain?"

"Shut up. I am the Titanic, and you, you're the stupid little lifeboats. As long as you don't steer us into the iceberg, you can just tag along, but instead, you want to sink us all."

"The lifeboats didn't sink after the Titanic hit the iceberg."

"Do you think metaphors are easy? Did you think the entertainment business was going to be easy? They're both difficult. It's not going to be fun. It's not supposed to be fun. It's about learning how to get punched in the face and spitting out the bloody teeth before asking to be punched again."

"I don't think it should have to be."

"Then maybe this isn't the business for you."

"We're starting to see that."

"Johanna, the check," I shouted across the room. They flinched, and I made a decision to salvage what had been lost. "Have you bought your tickets yet?" I asked.

"No."

"Allow me to comp them. I have miles. Consider it a token of our friendship despite this."

They didn't protest. We agreed to organize it as soon as we returned to the loft. Johanna brought the check, and I covered that as well. I wasn't wealthier than they were, but this was the cost of something greater.

I booked their flights, splurging and signing them up for the

premium pass through security. They were pleased, so the night had a fine mood for such a falling out. We drank wine and talked about movies and how it had been when we enjoyed these things.

Easton and Will's eyes grew heavy, sedated from the drink. A streetlight buzzed through the window, flickering orange. Our conversation slowed and stalled. They fell asleep against each other on the couch. I was alone in the loft with my television pitch.

I watched the camera monitor, safely distanced from the scene, when they woke up in their cells. The long-term sedatives had left them groggy, so it was several minutes before they noticed their surroundings: a prison cell, cold and grey with stiff bars. Their panic was visceral, even more so when Will noticed his grandmother in the opposite cell, still thoroughly drugged. They rattled at the door and yelled for help, but no one at the St. Louis Correctional Facility came to heed their calls. The Delta Airlines rep stood next to me and was pleased with this early footage. They'd taken a chance on me, on my ideas, but our unique arrangement was just another marketing angle, another reason why the brashness of *Interim Inmates* couldn't help but succeed.

Parker Stenseth is an undergraduate student studying English, economics, and French. He has a special interest in film, particularly the silent comedians and French cinema, and will be pursuing graduate studies after this academic year.