

Man in the Box

by

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It's a cell where you can not stand, sit or lay. It's punishment. His knees and heels support his body for about an hour then his lower back that takes over, though not for too long because it takes a bigger toll on his knees. His arms help him for a minute or two; they soon give up and pass it on again to his knees and heels. His head is there just to hold his brain, which is the most difficult part to keep from collapsing. But he is a man; he thinks to himself, he is still a man, strong and hard to break. This can't break him, his past has hacked at him before but he closed those wounds. The only things that keep him holding on to himself are his pride and the family he has left on the outside.

The cell is hot and the only opening for air has been blocked by a rat, dead and infested with disease. He breathes as little as possible. He has to wait until it is morning, which is the only time when they take him out to have his daily portion of whatever you may call it. The current of air that hits him is almost to cry for. The rough hands of the guard, the same hands that have beaten him unconscious before, feel like clouds compared

to the stone in the cell. He's in a conformist heaven for as long as he takes to eat, he is hungry and there is a dilemma. He wants to eat fast because he's hungry, but wants to eat slowly so he can have a few minutes more of his shortsighted freedom. Either option shows weakness, which he is having a very hard time of hiding because he also needs to stretch his body, but it is too painful to stretch after being in the same position for twenty hours or so.

Back in the cell and he feels strangely comfortable, it's a familiar position. They never told him how many days he would have to spend in there. "My priest would tell me that this is a test," he thought to himself. "Well, once I get a respectable grade I'll close my hand on that diploma and knock his boy loving face out."

Outside of his cell the world is still turning, even though he doesn't feel like it is. Last time he saw it, he felt very happy, everything was changing as Rome adopted Christianity and the people were faithful to the pope. But some men began to see the power of Christianity lead to wealth; the pope was surrounded by these men and eventually turned into one. Conjuring stories about goodness while their pockets overflowed, turning them into prosperous counts rather than humble shepherds of the lord. Some opposed and were thrown in jail for being able to see this. He'd been one of them. He had been thrown into the worst torture possible, worse than the most ruthless murderer in the empire. A lot different than what he had been treated prior to that.

He had grown up along side the senate families; his family was one of the most respectable ones. Raised to join the campaigns in Gaul against the Goths, and gone up the ranks, just a few, to be a great general. He found a different Rome once he returned, he began to gather up people and speak out against the papacy. But that meant less faithful people (money) for the church, and if you interfere, that fine line between good and evil that they walk on is horribly visible. But he was happy nonetheless, with two beautiful women in his life, one he had known since his childhood and the other he was just beginning to know, for he had been gone while she was still a new born. He hadn't felt this kind of peace since his days growing up among the soon to be powerful men.

The campaigns, although victorious, were first hand reminders of what a man is

capable of doing to another. Once that ended, he was back to contribute to his land from within. Just when he thought he was doing Rome a service, he found himself in this cell, away from what is right.

The smell of blood flowing from his knees was making him hungry again. The Chinese writings he had studied as a young adult kept doing his head no good, “Man has three ways of acting wisely. First, on meditation; that is the noblest. Secondly, on imitation; that is the easiest. Thirdly, on experience; that is the bitterest.” He had naively gone for the third, but with the best intentions.

He does not have much to do but to switch from pleasing his body by relieving weight in different zones, to keeping his thoughts from destroying his fragile hope.

He has not slept in a week, enduring in this cell for three days, it is too painful to sleep so all that there is left is to think. He is intelligent enough to come up with an escape plan; he realizes that it is time to do something about this, time to use his wits. He has noticed the guard’s greed and scarce intellect. He figures he can use it to convince him of something. Those conversations with himself that had made him feel like a hopeless loner, began to turn to his favor.

“I can talk to him while he brings me my food, he will listen; he has nothing else to do”, he kept on assuring himself. ” He knows I have been somewhat part of the senate, I will tell him...”

He hears the guard’s steps and knows this is his chance. “Good evening Marcellus, how has your day been? Mine? Can’t you tell?”

He feels as if the guard was not listening to him, he even hears the footsteps going away, but a few seconds later he hears his deep rude voice, a bit different from before.

“Good morning, Cleopatra!” This man could inflict pain on the devil himself, but he is certainly not good with words.

“You like this place very much, don’t you? What made you decide that you wanted this miserable job? Because you know that all of us here are innocent, you know that.” He

begins to feel like he was getting through him.

“You know what is happening outside this courthouse, you know what is happening to Rome!” almost reminding himself.

“What about you? You are a guard here; you never go outside the courthouse. What makes your situation that different from mine? The only difference between you and me is that your treatment is less animal like, and you’re not a prisoner in the legal sense of the word.”

“I am the only prisoner you are probably going to meet who promises you a real life if we both help each other out of this rotten place.”

With that it was set; now he has to hear what the guard has to say about his frustrations. He listens to his pleas for forgiveness and that he knows a way out that would open in a few more hours when provisions come in.

Images of his wife came shooting in his head and an image of what his daughter probably looks like now. He was trying to fight these sudden bursts of happiness because if it did not work it would devastate him. So he just waits. All of a sudden he feels that his pain was the most amusing thing for him. He actually enjoys it because he knows he could overcome it, he finally lets happiness into him and pain is just a speck on his feelings.

A few hours pass and he is anxious to hear the guard’s steps. He figures the provisions would come in the morning so it was just a matter of waiting a few more hours.

Morning comes, he hears the guard’s footsteps and he is taken out and given what you could call bread pudding, then stuffed back in his cell with no word...a shot of pain and anger at himself goes through him when he realizes what he had been doing. The guard had come the day before in the evening; he remembers that the guard never shows up but in the mornings. He bursts into tears like never before, his longing for freedom had overpowered him and there was nothing he could do anymore. Giving up is such a helpful tool sometimes.

Numbness settles in and takes all his pains away. He has opened the doors of his conscience, and it roams free in a place where he has total control of what he does.

The next morning he is taken out, given a bath, massaged and set on a carriage. All this he thinks was another deception of the mind but it was not. His old friend and newly elected pope Gregory had released him and taken him back to Rome. He sees the sky after so many years; it is an average sky but looks stunning to him only. He enjoys the smell of the horses, the wheat fields and pines that surround the city; but there's something different in the air, a mixed feeling of relief and loss.

Once he regains sanity it was time to speak to Gregory, and without hesitation Gregory breaks the news to him.

“Oh, my dear old friend, we should have seen this coming. Your wife and daughter were found drowned on the river, I know and you know it was no accident, she *was* stronger than that.” The word WAS makes a bigger impact on him than drowned. “After your arrest, I had them stay in my home, but I was not able to protect them for long.” He, but not himself, leaps at Gregory with all the fury he has left, not much for a man that's been in isolation for so much time. He is held down by Gregory's bodyguards and laid on the side of the road.

He does not feel surprised, he does not feel horrible pain, all he wants is to be back at the cell where hope was the only good thing he had. Once he closes his eyes he can imagine himself there again, forever castigating himself, forever hopeful. It's a cell where you can not stand, sit or lay. It is punishment....