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NOTES ON AN EXECUTION



A Novel

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BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *GIRL IN SNOW*

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a novel

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Dedication

For Dana Murphy

Epigraph

I am awake in the place where women die.

—Jenny Holzer (1993)

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12 Hours

You are a fingerprint.

When you open your eyes on the last day of your life, you see your own thumb. In the jaundiced prison light, the lines on the pad of your thumb look like a dried-out riverbed, like sand washed into twirling patterns by water, once there and now gone.

The nail is too long. You remember that old childhood myth—how after you die, your nails keep growing until they curl around your bones.

* * *

Inmate, state your name and number.

Ansel Packer, you call out. 999631.

You roll over in your cot. The ceiling forms its usual picture, a pattern of water stains. If you tilt your head just right, the damp patch near the corner blooms in the shape of an elephant. Today is the day, you think, to the fleck of lumped paint that forms the elephant's trunk. Today is the day. The elephant smiles like it knows a desperate secret. You have spent many hours replicating this exact expression, matching the elephant on the ceiling grin for grin—today, it comes genuine. You and the elephant smile at each other until the fact of this morning blooms into an excited understanding, until you both look like maniacs.

You swing your legs over the edge of the bed, heave your body from the mattress. You pull on your prison-issue shoes, black slippers that leave an inch for your feet to slide around. You run water from the metal faucet over your toothbrush, squeeze out a gritty trail of toothpaste powder, then wet

your hair in front of the small mirror, in which the glass is not actually glass, instead a pitted, scarring aluminum that would not shatter if it broke. In it, your reflection is blurry and warped. You bite each of your fingernails over the sink, one by one, ripping off the white carefully, evenly, until they are uniformly and raggedly short.

The countdown is often the hardest part, the chaplain told you, when he visited last night. Usually you like the chaplain, a balding man hunched with something like shame. The chaplain is new to Polunsky Unit—his face is soft and malleable, wide open, like you could reach right in. The chaplain spoke about forgiveness and relieving the burden, and accepting what we cannot change. Then, the question.

Your witness, the chaplain said through the visitation window. Is she coming?

You pictured the letter on your shelf, in that cramped little cell. The cream envelope, beckoning. The chaplain watched you with a stark sort of pity—you have always believed that pity is the most offensive of feelings. Pity is destruction wearing a mask of sympathy. Pity strips you bare. Pity shrinks.

She's coming, you said. Then: You have something in your teeth. You watched the man's hand rush anxious to his mouth.

In truth, you have not given much thought to tonight. It is too abstract, too easy to bend. The rumors on 12 Building are never worth listening to—one guy came back, pardoned only ten minutes before the injection, already strapped onto the gurney, and said he'd been tortured for hours, bamboo stuck up his fingernails like he was a hero in an action movie. Another inmate claimed they gave him donuts. You prefer not to wonder. It's okay to be afraid, the chaplain said. But you are not afraid. Instead, you feel a nauseous sense of marvel—lately, you dream you are flying through clear blue sky, soaring over wide swaths of crop circles. Your ears pop with altitude.

* * *

The wristwatch you inherited back on C-Pod is set five minutes ahead. You like to be prepared. It claims you have eleven hours, twenty-three minutes left.

They have promised it won't hurt. They have promised you won't feel anything at all. There was a psychiatrist once, who sat across from you in the visitation room in a crisp suit and expensive glasses. She told you things you have always suspected and cannot forget, things you wish you had never heard spoken aloud. By your usual calculations, the psychiatrist's face should have given you more—usually, you can gauge the proper level of sad or sorry this way. But the psychiatrist was blank, purposefully so, and you hated her for this. What do you feel? she asked. The question was pointless. Feeling held so little currency. So you shrugged and told the truth: I don't know. Nothing.

* * *

By 6:07 a.m., your supplies are arranged.

You mixed the paints last night—Froggy taught you how, back on C-Pod. You used the spine of a heavy book to crush down a set of colored pencils, then mixed the powder with a pot of Vaseline from commissary. You soaked three Popsicle sticks in water, saved from the ice cream bars you traded dozens of ramen noodle flavor packets to afford, and worked the wood until it frayed, fanning like the bristles of a paintbrush.

Now, you set up on the floor by the door of your cell. You are careful to ensure that the edge of your cardboard canvas nestles directly inside the strip of light that beams in from the hall. You ignore the breakfast tray on the floor, untouched since it was served at 3:00 a.m., the gravy filmed over, canned fruit already swarming with carpenter ants. It is April, but it feels like July; the heaters often run in the summer, and the pat of butter has melted to a little pool of fat.

You are allowed a single electronic device—you have chosen a radio. You reach for the knob, a screech of static noise. The men in the surrounding cells often holler their requests, R&B or classic rock, but they know what will happen today. They do not protest when you tune to your favorite station. Classical. The symphony is sudden and shocking, filling every corner of the concrete space. Symphony in F Major. You adjust to the existence of sound, settle it in.

What are you painting? Shawna asked once, as she slid your lunch tray through the slot in the door. She tilted her head to squint at your canvas.

A lake, you told her. A place I used to love.

She was not Shawna then, not yet—she was still Officer Billings, with her hair pulled back in its tight low bun, uniform pants scrunched around the bulge of her hip. She was not Shawna until six weeks later, when she pressed her flattened palm up to your window. You recognized the look in Shawna’s eyes from other girls in different lives. A startle. She reminded you of Jenny—it was something in her wanting, so vulnerable and unruly. Tell me your name, Officer, you asked, and she flushed a harsh red. Shawna. You repeated it, reverent like a prayer. You imagined the nervous leap of her pulse, fluttering blue-veined from her thin white neck, and you became something bigger, a new version of yourself already stretching across your face. Shawna smiled, revealing the gap between her teeth. Sheepish, mawing.

When Shawna had gone, Jackson hooted his approval from the next cell over, teasing belligerent. You unraveled the fraying strings from your bedsheets, tied a miniature Snickers bar to the end, and shot it under Jackson’s door to shut him up.

You tried to paint something different, for Shawna. You found a photo of a rose, tucked into one of the philosophy textbooks you requested from the library. You mixed the colors perfectly, but the petals wouldn’t sit right. The rose was a blur of searing red, the angles all wrong, and you threw the whole thing away before Shawna could see. The next time she unlocked your cell to walk you down the long gray hall for a shower, it was like Shawna knew—she reached for the metal of your handcuffs and pressed her thumb to the inside of your wrist, testing. The officer on your other side breathed heavily through his nose, oblivious, as you shuddered. It had been so long since you’d felt anything other than gruff arms pulling you through cages, the cool ridges of a plastic fork, the boring pleasure of your own hand in the dark. It was electric, the thrill of Shawna’s touch.

Since then, you have perfected the exchange.

Notes, tucked beneath lunch trays. Moments, stolen between your cell and the recreation cage. Just last week, Shawna slipped a treasure through the slot in your cell door: a little black hairpin, the kind that peppered her slick bun.

Now, you dip the Popsicle stick into a smear of blue while you wait for her footsteps. Your canvas is arranged patiently at the edge of the door, corners aligned. This morning, Shawna will have an answer. Yes or no. After your conversation yesterday, it could go either way. You are good at

ignoring doubt, at focusing instead on anticipation, which feels like a physical creature resting in your lap. A new symphony begins, quiet at first, before tightening and deepening—you linger in the rush of cello, thinking how things tend to accelerate, building on themselves, leading always to some spectacular crescendo.

* * *

You study the form while you paint. Offender Property Inventory. No matter Shawna's answer, you will have to pack. Three red mesh bags lie at the foot of your cot—they will transfer your most essential belongings to the Walls Unit, where you'll have another few hours with your earthly possessions before everything is taken away. You stuff them lazily full of the things you have hoarded these past seven years at Polunsky: the Funyuns and the hot sauce and the extra tubes of toothpaste. All meaningless now. You will leave it all to Froggy back on C-Pod—the only inmate ever to beat you in a game of chess.

You will leave your Theory here. All five notebooks. What happens to the Theory will depend on Shawna's answer.

And still, there is the matter of the letter. There is the matter of the photograph.

You have vowed not to read it again. You have mostly memorized it anyway. But Shawna is late. So when you are certain your hands are dry and clean, you stagger to your feet, reach to the top shelf, and pull the envelope down.

Blue Harrison's letter is short, concise. A single sheet of notebook paper. She has printed your address in slanting script: Ansel Packer, P.U., 12 Bldg, A-Pod, Death Row. A long sigh. You place the envelope gently on your pillow, before moving aside a stack of books to find the photograph, taped and hidden between the shelf and the wall.

This is your favorite part of your cell, partially because it never gets searched and partially because of the graffiti. You have been in this cell on A-Pod since you got your official date, and sometime before that, another inmate etched the words painstakingly into the concrete: We Are All Rabid. You smile every time you see it—it is so bizarre, so nonsensical, so unlike the other prison graffiti (mostly scripture and genitalia). There is a quiet truth to it that you would almost call hilarious, given the context.

You peel the tape from the corner of the photograph, careful not to rip. You sit on the bed, holding the photograph and the letter in your lap. Yes, you think. We Are All Rabid.

* * *

Until the letter from Blue Harrison arrived a few weeks ago, the photo was the only thing you kept for yourself. Back before the sentencing—when your lawyer still believed in the coerced confession—she offered you a favor. It took a few phone calls, but eventually she had the photograph mailed from the sheriff’s office in Tupper Lake.

In the photo, the Blue House looks small. Shabby. The camera’s angle cuts out the shutters on the left side, but you remember how they bloomed with hydrangea. It would be easy to look at the photograph and see only a house, bright blue, paint peeling. The signs of the restaurant are subtle. A flag waves from the porch: OPEN. The gravel driveway has been plowed to create a makeshift parking lot for customers. The curtains look plain white from the outside, but you know that inside they are checkered with little red squares. You remember the smell. French fries, Lysol, apple pie. How the kitchen doors clanged. Steam, broken glass. On the day the photo was taken, the sky was tinged with rain. Looking, you can almost smell the sharp tang of sulfur.

Your favorite part of the photograph is the upstairs window. The curtain is split just slightly open, and if you look closely, you can see the shadow of a single arm, shoulder to elbow. The bare arm of a teenage girl. You like to imagine what she was doing at the exact moment the photo was taken—she must have been standing near her bedroom door, talking to someone or looking in the mirror.

She signed the letter Blue. Her real name is Beatrice, but she was never Beatrice to you or anyone who knew her then. She was always Blue: Blue, with her hair braided and flung over one shoulder. Blue, in that Tupper Lake Track & Field sweatshirt, sleeves stretched anxious at the wrists. When you remember Blue Harrison, and your time in the Blue House, you recall how she could never walk by the surface of a window without glancing nervous at her own reflection.

You do not know what the feeling is, when you look at the photograph. It cannot be love, because you have been tested—you don’t laugh at the right

moments or flinch at the wrong ones. There are statistics. Something about emotional recognition, sympathy, pain. You don't understand the kind of love you read about in books, and you like movies mostly for the study of them, the mastery of faces twisting into other faces. Anyway, no matter what they say you are capable of—it cannot be love, that would be neurologically impossible—looking at the photograph of the Blue House brings you there. To the place where the shrieking stops. The quiet is delicious, a gasping relief.

* * *

An echo, finally, from the long hall. The familiar shuffle of Shawna's footsteps.

You drop back to the floor, resume a stilted motion with your paintbrush: you are dotting the grass with tiny flowers, blooming red. You try to focus on the pinpoint bristle, the waxy smell of crushed pencil.

Inmate, state your name and number.

Shawna's voice sounds always on the verge of collapse—today, an officer will come by every fifteen minutes to check that you are still breathing. You do not dare look up from your painting, though you know she will be wearing that same naked face, her desire plain and unhidden, mixed now with excitement, or maybe sadness, depending on her answer.

There are things Shawna loves about you, but none of them have much to do with you. It is your position that entralls her—your power caged while she holds the literal key. Shawna is the type of woman who does not break rules. She turns dutifully away while the male officers perform their strip searches, before every shower and every recreation hour. You spend twenty-two hours a day in this six-by-nine cell, where you cannot physically see another human being, and Shawna knows this. She is the type of woman who reads romance novels with hulking men on their covers. You can smell her laundry detergent, the egg salad sandwich she brings from home for lunch. Shawna loves you because you cannot get much closer, for the fact of the steel door between you, promising both passion and safety. In this sense, she is nothing like Jenny. Jenny was always prodding, trying to see inside. Tell me what you're feeling, Jenny would say. Give me your whole. But Shawna revels in the distance, the intoxicating unknown that sits always between two people. And now, she perches at the edge of the gap. It

takes every ounce of self-control not to look up and confirm what you know: Shawna belongs to you.

Ansel Packer, you repeat calmly. 999631.

Shawna's uniform creaks as she bends to tie her shoe. The camera in the corner of your cell does not reach to the hall, and your painting is positioned perfectly. It comes in the slightest flash of white, nearly nonexistent: the flicker of paper, as Shawna's note slips beneath the crack in your door, hiding seamlessly under the edge of your canvas.

* * *

Shawna believes in your innocence.

You could never do that, she whispered once, paused outside your cell on a long evening shift, shadows razoring across her cheeks. You could never.

* * *

She knows, of course, what they call you on 12 Building.

The Girly Killer.

The newspaper article was generous with the details: it ran after your first appeal, spreading the nickname across 12 Building like wildfire. The writer had lumped them all together, as though they were intentional, related. The Girls. The article used that word, the one you hate. Serial is something different—a label meant for men unlike you.

You could never. Shawna is certain, though you have never once claimed this for yourself. You prefer to let her talk in circles, to let the outrage take over: this is immeasurably easier than the questions. Do you feel bad? Are you sorry? You are never quite sure what this means. You feel bad, sure. More accurately, you wish you were not here. You don't see how guilt helps anyone, but it has been the question for years now, all through your trial and your many fruitless appeals. Are you capable? they ask. Are you physically capable of feeling empathy?

You tuck Shawna's note into the waistband of your pants and gaze up at the elephant on the ceiling. The elephant has a psychopath smile, alive in one moment, just an impression in the next. The whole question is absurd, nearly lunatic—there is no line you cross over, no alarm you set off, no scale to weigh. The question, you have finally deduced, is not really about empathy. The question is how you can possibly be human.

And yet. You lift your thumb to the light, examine it close. In that same fingerprint, it is inarguable and insistent: the faint, mouse-like tick of your own pulse.

* * *

There is the story you know about yourself. There is the story everyone knows. As you pull Shawna's note from your waistband, you wonder how that story became so distorted—how only your weakest moments matter now, how they expanded to devour everything else.

You hunch over, so the camera placed in the corner of your cell cannot catch the note. There, in Shawna's trembly handwriting. Three words:

I did it.

Hope rushes in, a blinding white. It sears through every inch of you as the world cracks open, bleeds. You have eleven hours and sixteen minutes left, or maybe, with Shawna's promise, you have a lifetime.

* * *

There must have been a time, a reporter said to you once. A time before you were like this.

If there ever was a time, you would like to remember it.