

PASSAGE
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Short Fiction
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Today they brought in a lot of new prisoners. For the next week we'll have to listen to these guys go on and on about how someone's going to straighten everything out. That this has all been a terrible mistake.

Those of us who've been here a while will listen, but we won't say anything to contradict them. That would be unnecessarily cruel.

After the first week or so the new prisoners will realize they aren't going anywhere. Their eyes will glaze over with despair as it dawns on them—*this* is it.

Their lawyers aren't going to get them out. Their families aren't going to get them out. Their friends aren't going to get them out.

Today is the beginning of the end of all hope and they don't even know it.

I think our rations have been permanently reduced, although nothing official was said—not that you get any explanations here. Now our meals are:

1. Breakfast: Something that resembles oatmeal, and water
2. Lunch: A sandwich with ham/bologna (not sure which—too bad if you're vegetarian), and water

3. Dinner: A tiny piece of some kind of meat in a very sweet bbq type sauce (again, tough if you're vegetarian), frozen peas and carrots, and watered down fruit punch. We used to get a small bag of chips with the ham/bologna sandwich. Not any more.

I've lost about forty pounds. If I were home I could easily fit into my linen pants with the thirty-two inch waist.

The guys who were already skinny to begin resort to eating bugs and weeds. I suppose crickets and grasshoppers aren't bad for you, but I worry about what some of the weeds are doing to them.

It seems like a waste of time to worry though.

Almost all of the prisoners work in the gypsum plant. The prisoners who aren't strong enough to lift fifty pound sacks, like the guys with AIDS, have to work in the garden. Only the soldiers and commanders get to eat the produce from the garden, but every once in a while one of the prisoners will smuggle out strawberries or tomatoes. It's like Christmas around here when that happens.

The gypsum plant is next to the camp, so we just march there in the morning after breakfast. There are some Mexican civilians who work at the plant too. I've never talked to any of them. It used to annoy me that the Mexican civilians looked at us with pity, but now I don't mind. It's a harmless bit of human kindness and I'll take any I can get these days.

There are about eighty soldiers total. It's hard to tell because they're never all in the same place at the same time. They live at the camp too, but they stay in air-conditioned dormitories and they get to shower every day.

The prisoners sleep in permanent tents that are always filled with dust. The prisoners only get to bathe once a week, less frequent in the summer when water's scarce. They line us up naked in front of one of the water towers and we each get one minute under the makeshift shower. They don't give us soap, so basically you're just rinsing off the dust. The water is

always cold, even in the summer.

It will only get colder now that winter's coming.

I tell the new guys they have to be careful not to provoke the soldiers. You can tell who the short fuses are. Their dead, bloodshot eyes and the way they chomp on their gum like they're trying to kill it—these are the things that give them away. The analogy I use it this: it's like when we were in junior high and high school and the bullies teased us about being fags. I try to get the new guys to remember walking through the hallways, the way you had to avoid any eye contact, because if you returned a bully's stare it only provoked violence.

I tell the new guys that the bullies are running the show now. Not only that, the bullies have machine guns and hunting knives and they don't mind using them.

There's a really nice kid in my tent named Jason. He's been at the camp about six months. He was sent here at the same time as his boyfriend Kyle, although the two of them were careful not to say anything about their relationship. That was smart. If the soldiers find out you've had a relationship with one of the other prisoners they go out of their way to make your life miserable.

Kyle was assigned to one of the other tents. Every day when we marched to the gypsum plant, Jason would wave at Kyle when the soldiers weren't looking.

About two weeks ago we woke up in the middle of the night because there was yelling. You could hear feet running on the gravel outside our tent and then the dogs started barking. We heard the dogs running, faster and faster, chasing something. Someone said "please"—just that one word. After that all you could hear were the dogs tearing something apart.

Next day it turned out the something had been Kyle.

It used to be when someone tried to escape you would hear his screams when the dogs attacked him. Someone said they've trained the dogs to tear out a guy's throat first, so the soldiers don't have to listen to a bunch of screaming.

That wouldn't surprise me at all.

We have to force Jason to get out of his cot in the morning. He just shuffles along with a dead look on his face, like he's sleepwalking. I've been covering for him at the gypsum plant. I don't want the soldiers to notice he's falling behind, otherwise they'll do something awful to him, like make him crawl on his bare belly through the desert, or force him to eat their used toilet paper.

I worry about Jason even though I know I should only worry about myself.

It rained all day—at one point the dirt floor of our tent was an inch deep with mud. The only good thing about the rain is you can get a little cleaned up, especially from a downpour like we had today. If it's just a light shower you end up smelling like a wet dog and there's nothing you can do about it.

Jason's getting worse. He has nightmares and sometimes he wakes up screaming. Those of us who sleep nearby quiet him the second he starts screaming—the last thing we need is the soldiers paying a visit after dark.

One time when I quieted Jason down, I asked him if there was anything I could do to help. He said there was nothing, so I just held him. After a couple of minutes he told me a cold beer would really help.

For some reason we all found this funny, until even Jason was laughing. One of the soldiers yelled at us from outside, saying if we didn't stop laughing he'd give us plenty of reasons to stop laughing.

Then we heard him cock his rifle, so we knew he meant business.

There is a way I could get Jason a beer.

I'm not sure when Passage started, it already existed when I got here. Passage is when some of the soldiers let a prisoner leave camp for Vegas. The reason they do this is because the soldiers can't ever leave this place until they get dispatched somewhere else. The usual tour of duty seems to last about two months, so there are more than a few of them who start missing

their cigarettes and pot and booze. With Passage, a prisoner procures these things in Vegas without the soldiers getting in trouble.

It's dangerous. If you're caught on the outside and the police find the ID tattoo on your neck they'll shoot you on the spot. The other thing is, if you don't come back to camp the soldiers start killing your friends, torturing them one by one. The last time some guy didn't come back they nailed his friends to the base of the water tower. We had to listen to them scream while we took our showers.

The soldiers who do Passage are smart—they only pick the kind of guys who wouldn't be able to do that to their friends. Guys like me.

I approached the only decent soldier at the plant, a blond kid named Gary. I had a feeling he might be in on Passage from the way he marches—his face always says he's not too impressed with the military.

I walked next to Gary when we were coming back to camp for lunch. I asked him in a low voice if he had any interest in setting up Passage.

“You know where to get pot?” he whispered.

I nodded and we didn't say anything more.

During lunch I noticed Gary talking to one of the other soldiers and the two of them kept looking at me. I tried to act like nothing was going on, but inside I was terrified. For all I knew they might be setting me up—then God only knows what they'd do to me after dark.

But it turned out I'd been right about Gary. When we were going back to work, he slipped me a note that I read during a bathroom break. The note had a list of what the soldiers want me to get. It said I'd be given a backpack and my civilian clothes, but I was supposed to wait to put on my civilian clothes until I got to Vegas. At the bottom it read:

Be ready tonight.

Gary opened the front of the tent just a crack so the others wouldn't wake up. When I went

outside I noticed they'd turned off the floodlight next to our tent. I also didn't see the dogs anywhere.

Gary was silent as we walked to the gypsum plant, where one of the Mexican civilians was standing by a beat-up truck with Baja plates. Gary said something in Spanish to the guy before he told me I had to be back by nightfall. I said that wasn't very much time, but Gary said I wasn't in much of a position to negotiate. He told me I was to meet Emilio, the Mexican civilian who was driving me to Vegas, by four in the afternoon in the back parking lot of the Excalibur. He asked me if I knew where that was—I told him I did because I lived in Vegas my whole life.

Emilio had a picture of his wife on the dashboard and pictures of his three girls on the inside of the sun visor. They all looked very happy. I assumed Emilio was trying to earn enough money to buy his way back to Mexico.

There wasn't much traffic on I-15, which was strange. Usually there are lots of people heading to or from Vegas, even at the crack of dawn. Every once in a while we came upon military cargo trucks loaded down with equipment.

In a way I was glad Emilio didn't speak much English. I'm not sure I would have remembered how to have a conversation.

We stopped to get gas at the Terrible's off Blue Diamond. I used the outside restroom to clean up. After I was done I put on my civilian clothes, the ones I was wearing when I first came to camp. I had to laugh because my jeans hung past my butt. Emilio lent me his belt because I didn't have one and then he made sure my collar was hiding the ID tattoo.

The soldiers who went in on my Passage put together about \$500. Not that much money. Still, I thought it was only fair to get Emilio a cup of coffee and a doughnut. The clerk inside the convenience store was a greaser/loser type who must have been too stupid even for the draft. He stared at Emilio and me the whole time, like he was going to pull out a baseball bat and bash our heads in.

No one trusts anyone anymore. Not that I'm saying people should.

Emilio dropped me off in Henderson. My mom was up fixing coffee. After she hugged me she said I stunk to high heaven. I told her I hadn't had time for a decent shower.

She made a big deal out of getting me a towel and a washcloth. I stood under the hot water so long my mom knocked on the bathroom door and asked if I was okay.

Afterwards she fixed me breakfast. At first I wolfed everything down like a starving man. But then I paced myself, because I wanted to savor every bite. Raspberry jam and toast. Scrambled eggs with a little bit of salt and pepper. Fresh coffee.

The whole time my mom didn't mention the camps, so I figured she didn't know anything. Not that I expected her to. At one point she asked me how I liked living in France, and I asked what made her think I was living there. My mom acted like I'd lost my mind. She brought out some postcards, all from me. Mailed from France.

I held them in my hands and it was like I was reading my own obituary.

I wanted to tell her she was being deceived, that those cards weren't from me, that if she looked carefully she'd see that the person writing for me wasn't even doing that good a forgery.

But that would accomplish nothing. There would be nothing she could do to help me and that would cause her incredible pain.

Instead, I told I was glad she liked the postcards. She said she shows them to all her friends. She asked if I wouldn't mind sending her some French lace—ever since she was a girl she always wanted some fancy French lace. I said I'd try.

I asked her if she had any liquor in the house—one of the soldiers wanted bourbon and my mom used to drink a lot of bourbon. She said it was impossible to get rations for alcohol anymore and she certainly didn't have money for the black market. She said it seemed a little early to be drinking anyway. She asked me if that was a bad habit I'd picked up on the Continent—drinking before noon.

She laughed. She laughed like she was proud I had a glamorous life, like she couldn't wait to brag to her friends about her son who was going to send her French lace.

That was the hardest part.

My mom said she knew I'd probably be busy catching up with all my friends, but she asked if she could fix me a nice dinner. I told her it wouldn't work out, but I'd try another time. When I kissed her goodbye she said I smelled a whole lot better.

Then she told me to lay off the diet already, I was getting too skinny.

Gordon was my boyfriend for five years, right up until everything went to hell, when he moved out of our apartment and wouldn't return my calls. I figured if anyone knew how to get pot it would be him.

I hired a cab after I found Gordon's address in my mom's white pages. We pulled up to an old tract house with a dead patch of lawn in the front. The color of the house was like one big water stain. Uncollected garbage was piled up by the curb.

The place reeked of despair.

Call me an asshole, but I was thrilled to death Gordon was living in this dump.

When I knocked on the door a woman answered. She was in her early 30s, fat, wearing an MGM Grand uniform and nurses' shoes. I told her I was a friend of Gordon's.

A little boy, just barely walking, stumbled out and gawked at me from behind the woman's legs. He had Gordon's eyes.

Gordon came out and I almost didn't recognize him, he'd aged that much. He was polite enough at first. He shook my hand and said it had been a long time, while the woman stared at me with a suspicious look on her face.

She finally interrupted us, saying she had to get Bobby (the boy) to day care and she was late for work. It was definitely an awkward moment, because I think she expected him to leave with her. Gordon kissed her on the lips (not much enthusiasm). She left in a huff with the baby, driving off in their minivan.

I stood there waiting to be invited inside. The smell of Gordon's house reminded me of my mom's. I don't know why but that made me sad.

Gordon's mood changed the minute the woman left. He said he couldn't let me inside, that he didn't want the neighbors thinking he let homosexuals visit him. "It would be a disaster," were the exact words he used.

I told him it looked like his life was pretty much a disaster already. He asked me what I wanted anyway and I said I wouldn't waste any more of his precious time if he would just put me in touch with a dealer. He got a condescending look on his face and said that obviously nothing had changed—I was still just a party boy. I told him the pot wasn't for me, it was for the soldiers back at the prison camp.

Gordon said I had to go, but not before he told me how glad he was that he now had a normal life.

I pushed my way into the house and slammed the door behind us. These are the exact words I screamed at him: "Do you have any idea what's going on or are you the dumbest fucking faggot who ever lived?" Then I tried to calm down. I asked him if he didn't know what had been happening to all of our friends, including me.

Gordon just stared at me the whole time. When I finished talking he got this weird smile on his face and said he knew what was going on. Not only did he know, he approved.

I started punching him and there was no way he could stop me, not after two years of lifting fifty pound sacks of gypsum. He yelled and cried and I just kept punching him. When he fell on his knees and begged me to stop, something broke inside of me. There we were on the floor, both of us crying and hugging, when all of a sudden Gordon grabbed a lamp and bashed me over the head.

I fell flat on my face but I didn't pass out. Gordon ran to the phone. I got up and told him to put the phone down. He said he was calling the police, that it was going to be a pleasure to watch them kill me.

If didn't show up back at the camp, Gary and his buddies would start torturing Jason in ways I couldn't even begin to imagine. And it would be my fault.

I'm sorry his wife will have to find his body. I really am. I left a note taped to the front

door:

If you have the boy with you leave him outside before you go in the house.

I stole someone's bike and raced to the Mirage. It was after noon and I only had one other option: Vic, my very first boyfriend. He was a partner in the Mirage, a real bigwig in town. Tons of money and a chauffeur. Always taking trips.

To be honest, when I was with him I never loved Vic. He was my sugar daddy. I used to laugh with my friends because he was older than my mom. Vic loved me though. I was everything to him but I just took his heart and cut it up, because I was young and stupid.

I never talked to Vic after I broke up with him. When I saw him out on the town I could tell it hurt him to see me. I could tell he hated me for the way I'd treated him.

I can't say I blame him either.

Vic looked like a million bucks in his Italian suit. What was left of his gray hair was perfectly styled. His eyes lit up when he saw me and I was relieved. While we were hugging he whispered that we had to go to his house because it wasn't safe to talk at the hotel.

We didn't say much during the drive. Vic finally closed the window between us and the driver. I told him I'd just killed Gordon. He fixed me a stiff drink.

When we got to Vic's house he gave the housekeeper the rest of the day off. After she left I told Vic everything. The camp. The fake postcards to my mom.

Passage.

Vic listened without saying anything. When I was done he called a friend of his and told her he needed to get some pot. Then he called a guy at the Mirage who worked in one of the bars and told him to bring a few bottles of liquor to the house.

He brought out a couple of cartons of Marlboro Lights from his office. He opened a pack and we both had a cigarette. It was my first one in two years and I nearly passed out.

I told Vic I was deeply sorry about the way I'd treated him. He tried to stop me, but I

made him listen. I told him I'd been heartless. I said I wouldn't blame him if he hated me, but I still had to ask him to forgive me.

Vic told me his one hope these past two years had been that I'd managed to escape to Canada or Mexico. He knew about the camps—he'd been using his money to keep himself out of them. He knew it was only a matter of time before the money didn't work anymore.

I asked him why he didn't take off to Canada or Europe. He said the government cancelled everyone's passport because of the war. International travel was impossible.

I felt bad for Vic. I could see the fear in his eyes even though he was trying to act like he wasn't scared.

Later we lay down on his bed, with the windows open and the curtains blowing in the breeze. Vic stroked my hair. He told me he'd heard rumors about what was coming down the pike. He said things were going to get even more ugly at the camps.

I just stared at the curtains—the way they seemed to be waving goodbye. Vic got up and opened his safe. He pulled out a small box filled with gold coins.

He said I could use the gold to hire a runner to take me to Mexico. I told him he should use the money for himself, but he said he didn't have it in him. He said he'd had a long life with no regrets, but I was still relatively young. He told me he could make the arrangements in one phone call.

"I want to do this because I still love you," he said.

"I love you too." I kissed him on the forehead. "But I can't."

I waited in the parking lot of the Excalibur until the sun started to dip behind the mountains—that's when I started to freak out. I decided to take a sip from the vodka.

When I pulled the bottle out of my backpack I discovered why it had seemed so heavy. Vic had hidden a baggie full of gold coins inside.

I watched some military vehicles go up I-15. All the windows were black with heavy tinting, so you couldn't see any of the soldiers inside. It made it seem like the vehicles were

driving themselves.

Emilio showed up and we started driving back to the camp. Because we were both pretty stressed, I opened one of the beers to share with him. I'd decided when we got closer to the camp I would try my best to make Emilio understand why I was giving him the coins and the Passage money, that he's to use them to buy his way back to Mexico. Maybe he'll have enough to save someone else too. That would be nice.

I hoped Jason would like his beer. Maybe it would cheer him up, even if it was just for a few moments.

A military jet flew overhead and the inside of the truck rumbled. I looked up in the sky, but in the fading twilight I couldn't make out which way it was going.