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They Said...

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he was in the infirmary bein' treated for a real bad heroin addiction.

he was gettin' the best care that they could ever give him.

he was secure the last time the guard made his rounds.

he was well when the nurse made her last rounds.

he was sure his woman didn't want him anyhow.

he was throwin' his meds down the toilet.

he was givin' everyone a hard time.

he was sentenced one to two.

he was in his twenties.

he was doin' alright.

he was fine.

he was.

not.

Recently something happened that made me think about this guy John (not his real name) who I used to know when I was celling on D-block. This was about 15 years back, when the jail was still wide open. Drugs, wine, extortion, rape, robbery and the occasional murder were a big part of life then, and D-block was where the action was. All the lights would be knocked out in the back of the block and the guards wouldn't even go back there at night, unless they were forced to. The electricians would replace the bulbs by day and the guys would knock them back out, by night. Anything might happen then, and it often did.

I was still shooting drugs back then and was always up to some kind of scam, trying to get enough money together so I could cop a bag of dope. Cooking and selling wine was a regular hustle for me, and for a while, John was one of my best customers. The wine I used to cook was good and strong. I didn't cut it with water or juice, like a lot of guys, and John used to buy plenty from me. I used to come off with a batch once or twice a week, and if he had the cigarettes, John would be the first one trying to cop some from me. A quart and a joint would light you up decent, but if he had the funds John would drink up a gallon, all by himself.

John was short, pudgy, and I think, in his late forties. It was kind of hard to tell for sure, 'cause life had beat him down, so he might have been younger. He had that pale, blotchy skin a lot of Irish guys get. His hair, which was still full, was reddish-brown but going gray. He had a lot of creases around his eyes and a thick broom of mustache. What stood out the most were his eyes. They were a deep green that you rarely see. There were puffy bags under them (John always seemed sad and tired), but if you caught him right, there was a sparkle in his eyes that would make you think they had seen better times.

John was one of those guys who always looked dirty. Anytime I stopped by his cell, he was either asleep or sitting on his rack. He had a beat-up black and white TV that was usually on, but he wouldn't be watching it. He would just be sitting there, arms hanging limp, head down and staring at the floor.

John didn't get any visits, didn't use the phone, never played cards, nothing. The only sure way to get him off his rack was with some wine. Chasing booze was the closest thing he had to a passion. I can't really say I was tight with him or anything, he didn't seem to have any real homies. He was getting some kind of disability checks or something and guys would try to work him out of his commissary and shit like that. No, I don't think he had any real friends. I didn't want to see anything bad happen to him, he wasn't a bad guy, but we had mostly a business type relationship. You know?

Sometimes I would wonder what he got out of drinking so much. It didn't seem to do him any good. He was down when he wasn't drinking and down when he was. I mean, when I shot heroin, at least it made me feel good. With John, the only difference I could tell was that when he was drunk, he might piss his pants or something, I don't know, maybe it was all he could figure out to do.

John seemed to move in slow motion, like he was meeting some kind of resistance or something. Even when he wasn't drinking he wasn't too coherent. He was always mumbling some shit and I never knew what he was trying to say. Somebody told me he had served in 'Nam and had seen action over there. Although he never said anything about it, John gave me the feeling that some part of him never really made it back home. I never found out why he did get to prison. He didn't come across as the criminal type, more like the town drunk,

I guess. My understanding was that he didn't have a whole lot of time to do, but I guess that don't matter much, sometimes.

One morning I stopped by this guy Jimmy's cell, so we could go eat breakfast together. On the way to the chow hall we stopped by John's cell to check in on him. He was blind-drunk the night before so I was surprised to see him sitting up, with the light on. His cell was the usual shambles and even though the door was closed, I could smell a heck of a stink. I think he had shit himself. Jimmy hollered in; "Yo, John, you all right?" and without looking up, John grunted something back. As usual, we didn't know what the hell he had said, so we looked at each other and headed down to chow.

We wound up sitting with a couple of homies, and began to eat whatever slop they were feeding that day, as usual lying to each other, even cracking a joke or two about John shitting himself. After awhile, we got up, dumped our trays, and headed back down the block. One of the homies peeled off and the other three of us approached John's cell.

One thing that I can't stand about prison, is people peeping in my cell at me. I mean, it's like I'm in a fucking fish tank or something. What the fuck are they looking for? Anyway, before they put in the narrow, security windows we have now, there used to be large, wide windows that let a lot of sun into the cells. Most guys would put paper, cardboard or even paint over the windows, so it would be dark and harder to peep in at you.

As we got closer I could see John's cell was dark and I figured he was finally getting some rest. A little light from the block struggled into the darkness of the cell, and my eyes followed the light to the radiator up by the ceiling. John was hanging from it.

One of the guys ran to get a guard, but I could no more move than John could. I was stuck in place. For what seemed like a long time I just stood there looking at him. People were hollering something, but I couldn't tell what they were trying to say. Sounds were muffled, like I was under water or something. It was like years had passed since we had looked in John before breakfast. It didn't seem possible that things could change that much that fast.

I can never describe how I actually felt at the time. It was a deep sadness, anger and fear, and it was an absence of those feelings at the same time. The intensity of emotion I was feeling was opening up some kind of dark emptiness in me that was pulling me down into it. I had to get out of there. I pushed my way through the people who had gathered around the cell and went up into my own. John, what the fuck happened? Maybe the wine wasn't working anymore and that was all you could figure to do.

By the time they had him cut down and carted off, I was stoned. I had poured enough dope in my veins to kill a small flock of sheep...and almost enough for me to stop thinking about John.

According to the Department of Corrections (DOC), in 2000 there were 143 suicide attempts, of which five were successful, and in 2001 there were 146 suicide attempts, of which four were successful. As best I can figure, over 2500 people in D.O.C. custody have tried to end their lives in the years I've been in prison. About 90 have succeeded.

A few Thursdays ago a young man was found dead in the infirmary here at Graterford. He was on the floor, in a semi-sitting position, with the cord that's used to call the nurse wrapped around his neck. They said it was suicide.

I didn't know him and couldn't find anyone who did. I couldn't even find out his name or where he was from. I didn't want to ask too many questions or I might be accused of...asking too many questions. It really bothers me that his death went largely unnoticed here. In the daily roar of prison life, his passing was barely a whisper.

I just want someone to know this guy died here, that's all, and so I put what scant information I had into the poem on the first page of this essay. My brother, you surely deserved a better elegy that I could provide, but I did the best I could do.

In memory of John and all those unfortunates who have died behind prison walls.