

## Errors Allowed

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I've slept more than seven thousand three hundred times on this bed. Not counting the naps. And no one has ever come to check the state of the mattress. I guess I've never really complained. I've spent as much time between these four walls as everywhere else during the first half of my life. Spent. That's all time does here. Slowly. People too. Noiselessly.

The math is simple: I'm forty and I've been here for twenty years. Result: two decades gutted, emptied, wasted for a hold-up that went wrong. Especially for the cashier. Poor girl... And for the cop too. He shot at me; he had coming it. He was just doing his job... What a waste. All of that for a couple thousand bugs. What would I have done with it? I always wonder. There was just enough to buy a secondhand BMW; it really wasn't worth it. But I couldn't have known. I had been told the van came by on Fridays. Had it gotten away with it, would I have lived holed up, like some rapid animal, just waiting to start over? All of my acts would have brought me here in the end. As if I only ever existed for this. How could I have been so stupid?

Twenty years of prison is, above all, twenty years of solitude. And believe me, time seems very long when it's not shared. Of course, I had contact with some of the inmates, but most of them were just stopping through and were not very talkative. In here, feelings swallow themselves before being perceived and words quickly fall into line. The masonry teacher was nice to me, but the training was stopped the day some guy tried stabbing a trowel into his head. We never saw him since. My mother is the only one who visits. Every first Sunday of the month between ten and eleven o'clock we meet in the parlor. It's sort of like mass for us. Or perhaps our confessional. My mother leaves her house early, walks to the train station, in the summer or winter, where she takes a train into town before getting into the bus that drops her across the street from the prison. Four hours one way to talk to me one hour. Who else would do that every month for twenty years? She was forty seven when I was locked up and today, although she's never said so, this all becoming painful for her. I've always welcomed her visits, even if I never have much to tell her. What could I confide to her? My semblance of a life, my nothingness, my boredom? You don't speak about such things. So, instead of talking about my slender hopes, I listen: one of her cats was run over in front of her house, she left flowers on my father's grave, she adopted a new cat, but doesn't dare give it a name for fear of losing it, a cancer is growing in the neighbor's throat, ivy is spreading around the house and nobody is there to trim it... None of this really interests me. But I drink up her words, taking in everything that can help pass the time. Every second is a victory. Against what? One essential difference separates free people from the rest: while the former dream of time slowing down, the latter desire its acceleration. Besides mom, no one has ever come. At first there had been a few friends or members of the family. They seemed awkward seeing me there. It had been too long. Nothing was foreseeable. I suspect some took advantage of me being here to see what reality was like on the other side. They never looked me in the eyes.

Sometimes I find myself talking to John, the warden who brings me my lunch on weekdays. I've often caught myself waiting for him. My stomach is like clockwork. He always knocks between 12:23 and 12:29 and asks me through the peephole if everything is right.

–It could be better... – I answer artlessly as the empty tray from the morning is exchanged with the new one, never full enough to my taste. John always call me by my name. Sometimes we talk about the weather, a modification about the internal regulations or football results.

Twenty years ago, I naively thought that money would make me endlessly happy. It turned out otherwise. Twenty years, that was also the age of the cashier. The first shot went off by itself, but nobody believed me. As for the next shots, I wasn't really myself anymore. Twenty years is short. It's long too. It depends which side you're on. As always.

My cell is my only horizon. Eight square meters with a narrow view onto the yard, a bed, a table, a chair, a shelf, a toilet, a sink, a mirror and a television. While the mirror is the best way to observe the passing of time, the TV has become the most comfortable way to endure its passing; I watched it quite a bit the first few years, when the mess of time facing me seemed insurmountable, but I gradually lost interest. Those people, beautiful, rich and free, consuming without concern for the future or for me, complaining of everything and nothing, oblivious to their fortune and happiness – this profoundly disgusted me. Whether they are real or fiction doesn't change much. I was suffocated by those cities, those bodies, those seas that I could neither touch nor feel. Do the program creators consider the poor, the insane and the convicts who watch them? Perhaps they think only of us. But why then do they feel no guilt? Money questions, money answers. Integrating television into prison cells is a constitutive element of the punitive system, aiming to ceaselessly remind us of our past and our condition. Why would I have punished myself? One sentence is enough.

In my absence, so many things must have happened in the world, as I spent every day watching the same square of sky, blue, now gray, often black. I know nothing of the world that awaits me and I would be a poor contender on “Who wants to be a millionaire”. When I was twenty I was very educated, but since then I've become an ignorant champion. In all categories. Prison sort of works like an artificial coma. What was the quizmaster's name? Mom, who watched it every day, liked him. I'll ask her. Maybe one day we'll watch it together. Although it would be surprising that after all this time the show still existed.

It is difficult to be interested in a world that excludes us. As soon as I am part of it again I will have to adapt. And fast. Is it ever possible to catch up?

Eight years ago, they opened a library in wing D. To have access you had to be in Category I – which means “inmate with low aggressiveness potential” – then make a written request to the director and wait patiently for the answer that would eventually arrive. I've always wondered what the director does with his time. If the answer is positive, a warden accompanies you at your given time slot. Most of them only go once, borrow a book they don't read and never go back. I made my written request a few months after it opened and a couple of weeks later I've got my pass. Being surrounded by those imposing piles of books that all looked the same to me was disarming at first; having

never finished one, it was quite hard for me to choose. Since the warden exhibited tangible signs of impatience, I picked three or four of the thinnest ones at random. I don't remember the two or three I only read half-way, but I clearly recall the last one. It took place in Miami and it was the story of a cop, a good guy who was only a little crooked, in charge of finding a missing person. The least you could say was that his investigation was floundering. After some incredible suspense you find out that the man he's looking for didn't even exist; I read it until the very last sentence in almost a single sitting. I experience a pleasure unknown to me. As soon as I closed the book I wrote another request to the director, hoping that his reply would be faster this time. After a few months, I was reading faster and I threw myself into detective and adventure novels. Since the library didn't renew its stock very much, I often re-read the ones I liked most. Never mind the book, the hero, the author, the time and the place. One day I was lost at sea with an old man and a swordfish, the next I was travelling on a train with a detective, later I was shipwrecked on island with natives... I felt free with them. Perhaps I had never been free. Still, my condition always overtook me and I always ended up closing the book. How many times could I have circled the earth in twenty years?

We aren't put here for that, but nobody can stop us from dreaming. It's our ultimate freedom. So we shut our eyes. And we wait for it to come. Why are we put here? Twenty years of detention have not given an answer.

I'll have to find a job. Anything. As long as it is legit. I've lost enough time. I'll have to move about and earn my way. But what could I possibly do, me, who's never done anything, who's too old to do things I would still have to learn? Four years ago I took a masonry class, but I can't deal with walls anymore, I've had enough of them. I could be a bus driver. Or a trucker. Crossing Europe by track; I could see the world. I'm forty years old and I've never crossed the border. I wonder what it's like on the other side. I have such a thirst for freedom. With my first salary, I'll buy myself an encyclopedia. Or a dictionary. Something big with lots of volumes; I could read them lying in the sun.

How will I find my friends? In twenty years time, everything must have changed for them. Are they still in town? Most of them will have a career, will have built a family, a house. Without ever finding time to think of me. The only certainty: my mother still lives in the same place. It will be a starting point. I'll need a phone book; I hope she has one. I'll need to remember their names. I'll contact the ones whose names I remember first. Maybe they will help me find the others. They probably won't welcome me with open arms. Will they let me come near their children? Will they see an old friend, the twenty-year-old kid they knew or an ex-convict? Maybe at first I will be alone.

The strangest part of a long wait is that once it's over, you sort of forget how long it lasted.

Who knows what it's like to wait twenty years for deliverance? How long does it take to get impatient on the other side? Fifteen minutes?

I'm forty and I don't know the world anymore than a twenty-year-old kid does. You only have one life; it would be stupid to die an idiot. Where will I be in twenty years?

My freedom starts on the other side of the door. But where does it stop? These past years, travelling through books has satisfied my needs. I didn't really have any choice. In truth, I would have been happy to get out, if only for few hours. But my requests were always denied. Soon, if I want to, I'll be able to buy a plane ticket to any destination and fly away. Far. This simply possibility moves me. Wouldn't it be remarkable to roam across India, Australia or the United States? It would be a beautiful revenge. I have the right to a second life.

As for the first sunrays reach my cell, sleep overwhelms me. I am entering the liberation phase. There is a knock at the door:

–George, get your things ready. Here are a few bags. We'll be back for you in a half hour. Be ready.

I didn't sleep much and I need some time to understand what is happening. I don't have many things. I only need a few minutes to stuff them into some bags. After twenty years of doing nothing I am suddenly struck with the anxiety of having to wait a couple of minutes. I open the window and light a cigarette. The sun is now above the women's quarters, while a fly passes before me. My gaze follows its flight. At eight o'clock sharp, the sound of keys in the lock is followed by the door opening. I am happy to see John. In the hall, I try speaking to him, but nothing comes out. He takes me to the secretariat where an employee has me sign a few papers and returns my personal things: some coins, three keys, a lighter and my ID card bearing my juvenile portrait. I say:

–Not twenty anymore...

The employee, not so talkative, answers with an understanding smile. I stuff everything into my pockets, go out to the hall and walks towards the door. John is gone. I would have like to shake his hand. The automatic unlocking is triggered. All I have to do is push. On the other side, life does not wait.