

ANYTHING FOR JOHNNY

by Eric Boyd

After nine months, I was granted early parole. I packed everything I had saved and said goodbye to everybody I had known in jail. The entire day many people became my friends, people I had never spoken to before.

I gave away most of my clothes, my extra pillow, some pens, a pair of good shoes taken from the dumpster while I was working, some books I didn't like, nudie pictures, and my radio.

I kept a shaving razor, my notebooks, letters from my girl Lucy, a heart I had made from an orange rind, some books I liked, a highlighter from the old county morgue, and the glasses the clinic gave me.

My name wasn't called for release until nearly ten o'clock—the latest a person can be released— but finally I heard 'FREDRICK ANDERSON' and I strutted toward the door like a disco dancer, my laundry bag of stuff flung over my shoulder. The cell-block guard gave me my yellow inmate information card. I took it, left the cell-block, and met a guard who escorted me onto an elevator. We went down to the outtake processing area. I gave the guard my yellow card. He gave it to someone else, who drew a black line through my photograph and name. I was told to go to the changing booth. My clothes were waiting. The jail food wasn't very good; I had lost over sixty pounds and my suit nearly swallowed me. But I looked alright. My glasses were on while I was in the waiting tank. I looked very good. A Jamaican guy with long dreads and baggy jeans asked me if I was a movie star. I said no, I was not. He said I looked like someone. I said I wish I was that guy, not me; that guy probably wasn't in jail. The Jamaican laughed, then turned to look at some hookers that were bailed out by whoever. One of them joked that

they'd have to do overtime tonight. "Slide down the black fire pole." The other girls laughed. None of them were very pretty.

"Johnny Depp!" the Jamaican exclaimed. He said I looked like Johnny Depp.

I had ten dollars left in my commissary funds. Nobody mentioned how I could get that back and I didn't feel like bringing it up, either. Nine months. I just wanted to sign whatever I had to sign, wait for the door to be unlocked, and go. In the lobby, people were waiting for everyone being released. Some of them were waiting for people who weren't even getting out, arguing with guards who didn't know them, didn't care about them, and (they thought) didn't get paid enough to deal with them. I didn't recognize anybody in the lobby. I should have called someone, I thought, instead of assuming someone would be there. I was told of my release earlier in the day, around noon. It was almost eleven at night. Nobody would be waiting for me, they didn't even know if I'd be getting out that day. I had no cash, and the jail's pay phones shut off at eight anyway. I walked outside. The past few days had been surprisingly warm for February, with temperatures in the sixties, and sunny. They were beautiful.

But the good weather had passed. It was cold and windy. I tried to go back inside the jail's waiting area, but the guard forced me back out. It was my time to get out, and I had better stay out, he said. I had wanted to walk to my parents' house, where I'd be staying now, but it was just too cold and too windy and I was too tired. In the summer, there was a beautiful display of tall flowers in a concrete circle in front of the jail complex's gates. Now, in the winter, it was brown and dead. I sat on the concrete and watched the sky for a while.

It was there.

That was difficult for me to believe at first.

Still there. The sky.

I looked at three flag poles by the curb, swaying slightly in the hard wind. One had the American flag, another the state flag, and the third had the jail's flag. I looked down at my laundry bag and remembered that I had a shaving razor in it. I wanted to cut my armband off but decided to wait until later. Brandishing a razorblade in front of a county penitentiary would not be wise.

I saw the Jamaican talking to one of the hookers, the only one who didn't have anyone waiting for her. She looked like she had just gotten out of the shower, but her hair was still greasy. Her toes were black and stuck out of heels a size too small. Short breaths puffed out of her tight lips, but she didn't seem bothered by the cold. Everything about her looked lonely. I thought she was very ugly. I preferred the nudie pictures I had inside.

The Jamaican offered her a ride. She said that'd be great, she was worried she'd have to wait for a guard getting off work to give her a lift. They was worse than jitneys, she said, and guards usually made her blow 'em. They was so rough, always coming down your throat and laughin' when ya gag. They could nice, though, she said. Sometimes, after, they would buy her a cheeseburger from McDonalds.

The Jamaican grinned and pulled out a cell phone. He said he'd call his friend to give her a ride whereeeever she needed to go. She said she didn't have to go far, the YMCA was close. I walked over to the Jamaican and asked if I could borrow his phone. He said, "That's fine! Anything for Johnny Depp." I thanked him and called Lucy. She sounded upset and asked why I didn't call anyone. I didn't have an answer. She hung up quickly.

The Jamaican's friend arrived in a blue sports car. The hooker got in first; the Jamaican followed, but tripped over his baggy jeans and fell onto the street. A car in the opposite lane swerved around him and honked. The Jamaican got up, dusted off his jeans, waved to me, and went into the backseat with the hooker. The car sped off playing bad music, something with a lot of bass. I wished I had brought my radio with me. The classical station was supposed to have two full hours of Aaron Copland. That would have been nice to listen to, I thought.

The jail had a parking garage next to it. I decided to go there and wait for Lucy. The garage had a trolley station and I used to watch, from my cell, as the trolleys passed through during the day. I stood with the parked cars, eyes squinted from the lights above me, and people leaving the garage drove by. Every time a car would pass, it would slow down and the people inside would stare at me and my laundry bag, knowing exactly where I had come from. There's some loser, another criminal to look out for on the streets, at the pawnshop, in the line at the grocery store. Just another bum, they must have thought.

I looked at my reflection in the window of one of the parked vehicles. Fuck those people, I thought. I looked like a person again. I looked like I wasn't in jail, aside from the armband, which was hidden under my suit jacket. I was a person who wasn't in jail. I looked like that and I was that and I was shocked by that. Was this real? Jesus. I looked toward the jail. I could see my cell, and the lights were off.

My mother's car pulled up by the parking garage; she was inside, alone, looking around for me. She was the first person I recognized, now that I was out. I walked out of the parking garage and got into the car, tossing my bag on the backseat. My mother told me Lucy would meet us somewhere, that she was going to get ready to see me. I didn't say anything. My mother said I looked different,

like a different person. Having only seen me through plexiglass visits, she said she didn't expect me to look like I did. I took my glasses off.

I reached back into my bag and pulled the shaving razor out. I broke the plastic head off from the handle, bent the blade out and forward. My mother watched me, shocked. Cutting the armband off wasn't easy, going back and forth, like a saw. I nicked my wrist a few times. When I was done, I threw the armband under the car seat. I didn't want to see it again, didn't want to be connected to that place anymore. After nine months, I was finally on my own.

I turned the radio on. Copland was still playing; it was something from a film score. Slow strings and low horns. I think it was called the Death of Mae. It was good.

We drove through the city, going home. It started raining and the wind was blowing, rocking the car as we went along. The rocking made me sleepy. With my eyes half-closed, every streetlamp was very bright, yellow. More yellow than my information card was. Brighter, deeper. And every car, motorcycle, bike was very fast. Anybody walking on the sidewalks or the streets blurred by. Everything blurred.

It felt like being born.

This story was published in issue nine of The Fourth River. It was nominated for the 2013 Pushcart Prize.

