

GRACE IN SUFFERING

by Eric Boyd

What I did I wouldn't call criminal, just stupid. Even my judge, after so many court appointments, didn't understand what had happened. And there's a reason I got out on illegal sentencing but, either way, I paid the better part of a year for it all. I don't want to tell you about that that, though. I want to talk about what it means to write from jail, get rewarded for it, and end up better off than than before any it ever happened. I'll tell you about that now.

Starting out. The end of 2008. I was homeless for a couple weeks, sleeping in the crawl-space of an art gallery, working six days a week at a multiplex where I often washed my hair in a utility sink. Eventually I got my own place, with a roommate, and that didn't work out so well, which is why I ended up in the Allegheny County Jail from May of 2010 to February of '11. That last part was hell. But let's be honest, things weren't so hot before that anyhow.

A few months into my stint I joined a writing program that met once a week, Friday mornings. A few classes in, it became obvious there was a knack. I hadn't written that many stories, but the men seemed to sit up when I shared my work. This wasn't in my head, either—my teacher, the incomparable Sandra Ford, had actually alerted me to this.

“Eric,” she'd said, “you're a born writer.”

And I think I had some smartass remark to that, but her point was made. If I could write stories which gripped some of the meanest, toughest, kindest bastards I'd ever met, then I could write. I would write.

Before jail, I'd let myself slip. I paid my rent and sat around and didn't do much of anything. Life had beat me. After I was initially arrested I tried to get back into it, but found myself lacking. The worries pile on. Rent, bills, work, food, laundry, school loans. I had resigned myself to a series of banal risks—drinking on the job and watching porn at the local library—and my existence was as pointless as a greased door jamb.

But writing at the jail, I was free. It felt good, and easy, and seemed like something I could keep doing. For me, the kicker came when Mary Karr visited the ACJ. It was a well-publicized event: she had a lecture at the Carnegie Library Hall, over \$100 a head for the better tickets, but the morning before, she was at the local jail for nothing. A lot of us laughed over that, especially me because I listened to the classical station on my radio and heard them, for a week, hocking VIP tickets to her lecture for high-price donations.

After Mary's talk with us, which wasn't bad but did find her grasping for more connection between us than there really was ('I spent a couple days in a mental institution' was the gist of her most egregious reach), a lot of the men and ladies lined up to speak to Mary personally. I made sure to be the last in line. Once I got to her, I introduced myself and asked if I could recite a short poem. She said sure, and I did. It wasn't much, but she smiled and told me "I had it" and to "keep going." Less than thirty minutes earlier she'd been telling us how she got a \$1,000,000 advance for her latest book, and she was telling me to keep going. It's easy to romanticize these things and it is even easier to dismiss them, but when I actually recall that day factually, it still amazes me.

One day Sandra was teaching us about formatting, a weak point for me, and she showed us a book. The PEN Prison-writing handguide. A lot of us didn't even have the slightest idea of where to place, commas. Sandra had us all copy down an address to write for a free copy of the handguide. The price was right, so I hurried and sent off for my copy right away. Plus, at the time, I wanted to get the handguide as soon as possible because it seemed useful, but I knew I would be getting out of jail almost any day. A couple months later I received the handguide and used it for a few more. On the back of the book there was information about PEN's annual Prison-writing contest. It said that anyone could submit work within the year of their incarceration. I began working straight away; I dedicated so much time to my pieces that I ended up getting out of jail before I could mail them.

Just before the PEN contest's deadline, in August or so, I sent my pieces in. I promptly received a rejection letter from them saying that, because I was not currently in jail, I could not submit. My heart was broken. That is barely a metaphor. I believe I felt something in my chest bend and crack when I read that letter. Then something else happened inside. Something which happens to every inmate, I'm sure. I got angry. For PEN, I had sent stories and poetry which revealed something. I had undressed my soul for them, and they flat-out said no to me. That pissed me off beyond belief. I knew what I and my work were worth.

An inmate learns to put their guard up at moments like this. In the 'real world' it would perhaps be closest to a You can't fire me because I quit situation. I worked myself up for days. I had pined over my submissions. Even just the actual act of sending them off was a task. I bought a manilla envelope, spent over twenty dollars printing everything out at the local library, attached the sheets with paper clips because I'd read a lot of folks didn't like staples; I went to the post office to mail them. I took no chances. In my head I stewed over all this. Should I write them back? Why? Why bother? Because they were wrong, that's why.

I read the back of that handguide a hundred times. I could submit within the year of my incarceration. I had done just that. I'd been in jail for two months of 2011, and I was submitting my work that Fall. I waited, sure. Tinkered and edited to the best of my abilities at the time. I tried. Really hard. Finally, I rejected their rejection.

I wrote back, quoting their handguide and really fighting the good fight because, shit, who else was going to? Nobody else was gonna speak up for the merits of some loser jailbird's ramblings. I sent my letter and waited.

A week later I got a response saying that I was correct, that my work could still be considered for the contest. The response then said, in no uncertain terms, that I did not have to resend my work. They still had it, no worries.

“Bullshit,” I remember saying out loud at that one. I was instantly cynical to the whole thing. I didn't need to resend my work because they'd already made up their minds and thrown it away. That was obvious to me. It was rotting in a landfill. What could I say about it? Nothing. If they never got back to me about my pieces, they'd just say it was because I hadn't won. Easy. I crumpled up that response and had enough fire in my belly to start writing even more.

I have always been a person who enjoys pressure. I thrive in it. I like arguments, deadlines, and challenges. In jail I was only in one scrap. I remember my cellmate at the time (great guy, read a lot of Rimbaud) asking me where I had been when the fight started. I said I was in the cell, against the bunks.

He smiled. “So you weren't standing by the door?”

“No.”

“That says a lot. You weren't afraid. You wanted to fight.”

“Well I didn't start it.”

“But you weren't scared of it either.”

I think about that a lot. Being an ex-con is the most impossible challenge imaginable. The 're-entry' programs. The drug tests and mental exams. The probation officers who oversee it all and pile on more whenever they're having a bad day. It took me over a year, after being released from jail, to find a job (which didn't run background checks, of course). I remember having an interview with a uniform wholesaler. He ran one of the most successful private uniform sales businesses in the country and that meant something to him for whatever reason. He was a big man with wide shoulders. During our interview he was wearing a collared shirt half unbuttoned, revealing gray chesthairs and a gold chain. The entire time we spoke I tried as hard as possible not to look into his glistening, proud ape eyes.

“Well everything seems alright. You'll pass a background check, right?”

I told him everything. He put his head down, then looked at me and grinned.

“So you really need this job, huh?”

I nodded. "Yes, sir."

"I mean, not a lot of places are going to hire you. Probably nobody, really. You're a *felon*." He said the word as if there was scum stuck on his tongue and he needed to remove it. I explained that I wouldn't be any trouble, that he could even make some money by hiring me, with those federal bonds the government gives out as insurance protection when employing ex-cons. He waved his hand off at that.

"Oh yeah, the insurance. That's a good point. It'd be through the roof!" He laughed. "But maybe it'd be worth it because, let's face it, you'd be a good worker. A great worker."

I began to feel red.

"I mean, you'd do anything I said. You just applied to work in my warehouse, but I'm sure you'd do anything like, for instance, if I told you to scrub my toilets. You'd do it! You'd have to!"

I thought of many things and finally settled my mind on my rent. "Yes... I can do whatever you need."

"Well, I don't need you. Sorry. Too much hassle."

That night, I did not sleep. I felt sick because he really thought he was right. And he had no reason not to feel that way. In jail I was a Doc number and out of jail, now, I was an insurance risk. Numbers. They always took your soul away with numbers first. He became one of many people I decided to prove wrong. But I still needed a job. The next morning I called the man back. I told him that he was right about everything he'd said, that I really needed the break and that I could do anything he asked. He hung up on me.

Eventually I'd find a job, at a little Thai restaurant, but I still wasn't fulfilled. Something was still missing; it was the writing that I needed. I'd started sending work out like mad, but got nowhere. Almost as long as it took to get the day job, it was several months before I had any stories accepted into even the smallest blog zines. But I stuck with it. I kept on. By the end of 2011 I had pieces in about a dozen places. It was great.

One day the next March, a letter came from PEN. I tore into the thing and it was there: the forgotten dream, the thing I'd left behind.

“Congratulations!” Second place, fiction. A check for \$100 would be received shortly after. Unbelievable.

A few months later I was reading my winning work at the Strand Bookstore in Manhattan, the first time I'd ever been to the city. I had been informed, by newsletter, that PEN was having a reading of the contest's winning works, but I was not a part of the program. I immediately began nagging various people until it was agreed that I could travel up from Pittsburgh and read my own story. The piece, originally over 3000 words, was trimmed down to a few hundred, and while everyone else on the program was reading several pieces, I was only responsible for my own. I understood. I was nobody and I would likely make a fool of myself. But the pressure of the evening took its usual toll on me and I gave a good reading. I was asked to read the final selection of the night.

Encouraged by the response of the reading (Nick Flynn gave me a piece of gum and asked me how long I'd been writing, because 'it took longer than a few months to do that...'), I went back to New York a week later for an unrelated PEN event. There, a slew of people remembered me and I got handshakes, cards, etc. One person in particular, a man named Jackson Taylor, was insistent on speaking with me, but I had to leave the event early. A buddy of mine had helped me get to the place, and they were leaving. I knew nothing of the subway system and had no choice but to go.

That night, waiting for our train, Taylor came down the steps, I think with a woman in an eyepatch, and into the station.

“Eric, we meet again!” He said excitedly. “Where are you going?”

“Greyhound.”

“When's your bus?”

“3.” AM. It wasn't even 10pm yet.

“Well, I'll get you there, if that's okay? I really did want to talk to you.”

We ended up at a diner in Chelsea. Jackson introduced me to the host at the joint, a small latin man. “This is Eric Boyd, from Pittsburgh.”

“Oh! *Steeelers*, right?”

We talked about writing. Jackson seemed to see something. I still don't know what. Finally he told me he was starting an MFA program, that the first wave of students were currently applying and that classes would be starting the next Fall. He told me to consider applying. I informed him that I didn't have an undergrad degree; he said he'd talk to the dean at the college and get me in. We took a cab to the Greyhound station and I was dropped off without even knowing that Jackson was the head of the PEN Prison Writing program.

So now I'm in school at the Writer's Foundry MFA in Brooklyn. I have a life going in Pittsburgh and, anyway, most of my stories are set in and around this town; I like it. However, that's meant I have to travel in and out of NYC every week. I take the Megabus into Manhattan on Tuesday morning and leave on Wednesday night. If I get tickets far enough in advance, it's pretty cheap. People ask me how I deal with such a commute. I say that I'll let them know when I start to deal with it: I pop Zzzquils like they're tic-tacs. It's not so bad. Plus, it means a lot to me to make the trip up to the city, attend the classes. With that and the writing and everything else, I have been trying to prove the fuckers wrong—the ones that wrote me off, called me a loser. The ones that said my life was over. To hell with that. As I fought for my stories in the PEN contest, I now fight for my soul's worth. School has helped in that regard.

I have no interest in retreating from my past. I want to hold it in my fists and move forward with it. I want to help the men and the ladies as much as I can. I want to be back there because, before jail, I was a college dropout without any hopes, making \$7.25 an hour at a shit job. Now I make \$8.25 at a different shit job, but I'm on my way to a graduate degree, possibly to teach at the very jail I was housed in, while writing short stories that mean something to me. There are no words to express that mix of humbling awe and terrified excitement. Sometimes I think about all of that and it melts down over me like some great majestic light.

A lot of this probably sounded boastful. Truthfully, I left many things out where it would just sound like I was bragging. And it's easy for me to talk about this now. It's easy to act like a tough guy who's had more luck than most. But remember, an inmate always puts their guard up. My girl, she says I put a few years on my face while I was in jail; she jokes that she misses the old me, but it is only half-joking. I know she is telling the truth because, like any other inmate, I always have my guard up, even when I don't need to. So I'll say now that I've spent more nights weeping in the dark than I care to count off. I have nearly broken both of my hands while bashing them against the walls (so badly, in fact, that I had to buy myself a punching bag). And I have hidden so much away that sometimes I barely remember who I was before any of this happened. There are question marks branded into my soul; I look in the mirror and see someone else. Can you possibly understand that? Maybe I could explain it better. I don't know. Maybe I'll tell you about it someday.

