

Death By Dominoes

William Van Poyck

When the assassins come they kill everyone. That is what you must understand. Death is coming. It's at the door. Though uttered weeks earlier, on a different cellblock, I still recall leaning forward in concentration, struggling to hear the words, striving to discern the meaning, if any, conveyed by Wannamaker's frog-like voice. The old man didn't speak his words so much as he breathed them out, in a guttural rasp, as weak as a politician's promise, like a man talking reluctantly through a mouthful of marbles. Weeks later, perched on an overturned mop bucket wedged in the open doorway of my single-man cell, Wannamaker's enigmatic words were still gnawing along the margins of my mind. Those whispered words ... How was I to know they'd be so prescient?

It was on the eighteenth day after I'd arrived on the medical wing cellblock that I knew someone was going to die. I'm able to recall the number with confidence because I'd been counting each day like precious pearls, earnestly marking them off on my Salvation Army calendar, like a Chinaman working the emperor's abacus. After seventeen years in more or less maximum custody for a robbery so stupid I'm embarrassed to own up to it, I was finally on my way out.

Seventeen years! When you say it fast it doesn't sound like so long. Don't be fooled. Still, after seventeen coarse and caustic years that had sanded much of the grain off of my heart, after four presidents, five governors, and seven wardens, and almost two decades inhabiting a world of imagined threats and real danger, I couldn't think of a time I felt more alive. Finally, the end of despair was at hand for I'd telescoped down to just twenty-two days until my parole date.

Twenty-two days! When you say it fast it doesn't sound like so long. Don't be fooled. A lot can happen in twenty-two days. Wars have been fought, and lost, in less. And I was down to twenty-two days – so close that it made me scared – when life turned skinny on me. I fractured my foot on the handball court, stretching out to reach one of Peca's rocket serves. In a finger snap a Fiberglas cast was strangling not just my swollen ankle but was throttling the marrow from my nascent dreams. This joint has a lot of rules but suddenly only two of them mattered: Anyone with a cast must be transferred to the medical wing. And, nobody wearing a cast can be paroled. Yeah, I should have been on my regular cellblock, hanging out with the fellas and counting down my days in the time-honored chain gang

tradition. Shouldabeen. Instead I was squatting on a rusty mop bucket, forlornly inspecting my shiny cast, wondering which was the most pressing imperative: Cutting the cast off to make parole, then just four days away, or removing it simply to leave the wing and avoid the murder I knew was about to rock the cellblock? But, I'm getting ahead of myself.

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It was a quick, saffron sunrise and a pale champagne light angled in through my window, casting a ladder of cell bar shadows across the polished concrete floor. Outside, hemmed in by the tall double-fences topped by triple-strand concertina wire, the cooing pigeons strutted about, bobbing and weaving, cocking their heads, scratching around on the gravel-covered roofs. The maximum-security prison was a depraved place, a hermetic kingdom of the damned, haunted by its own terrible spirit. It was a hulking brute of a building, stout as a crusader fortress, whose puke-green paint miserably failed to soften its cruel edges. Constructed less of steel and stone than with ossified layers of malevolent history and vile memories, it was a marginalized slice off the bottom of society's loaf where half-made men spent their wounded lives chained to the past. I called it home.

I'd just made my first cup of coffee and stashed away my hot water bug. Staring up at my pitted steel ceiling, the mottled canvas upon which I was mentally painting my future life, my restless eyes marched back and forth, jumping, darting, to and fro, hypnotic as a metronome, compulsively counting the big, rusty rivets – sixteen up, sixteen down – parsing out my remaining days to hours to minutes to seconds. Submerged in a blissful daydream, I barely registered the shriek of the morning steam whistle signaling another round on the karmic daily grind – insightfully characterized by Keroauc as the Meet Wheel. I've learned a lot about Karmic cycles since that morning.

I was still negotiating with the buxom redheaded Mercedes-Benz saleswoman – damn, she was fine! – When a faint bustling commotion piqued my curiosity. Rising from my neatly made bunk, I reflexively yanked the skinny cord – just a long strip of torn cotton bed sheet – snapping on the naked bulb hanging from the ceiling. I slid open my solid steel door just in time to see a stranger drop his personal property onto the quarterdeck floor. He was medium height, old, lean, and angular, as spindly as one of those Giacometti sculptures I'd seen in the rolled-up *Arts and Antiques* magazine

propping open my cell window. With badger-gray hair and gingerbread skin, his lightly stubbled face was lined like the cracked mud in a dried riverbed. A ragged scar climbed like a briar from the corner of his mouth, past his temple, disappearing into white caterpillar eyebrows. An aquiline nose was silhouetted in relief, hinting at a patrician presence. His face was like a map of a leanly lived life, sketched with first-hand knowledge of suffering. Yet his lively blue eyes seemed to smile impishly. The prisoner stood with one foot resting upon a ragged, duct-taped cardboard box, while slung over his shoulder, à la Santa Claus, was a bulging bundle of property, tied up in a bed sheet. Wearing an incongruous loopy grin, he triumphantly surveyed the four-story, open-pit wing, like Christopher Columbus just disembarked from the Santa Maria to claim a new territory.

“Winky Wannamaker.” Startled, I turned to see my neighbor, Dilly, casually refilling his Harley-Davidson Zippo lighter from a small blue can of lighter fluid. “He’s a bug. Crazy as a coot,” Dilly explained, pointing his chin at the newcomer. “Been on Bug Row for years. I don’t know what the hell he’s doing in open population.” Dilly snapped his lighter closed then stared at me evenly. “He won’t last long.”

As I watched Dilly’s retreating back I considered his words. Bug Row, next to Death Row, was the given name for the wing housing the prison bugs—the terminally crazy guys—nominally a psychiatric wing, minus the psychiatrists, doctors, or nurses. Minus anyone who gave a damn. The bugs, some stripped naked, were confined in dirty, barren, burned-out cells, where they were given over to their most savage impulses, ranting, howling, and banging their bars, day and night, to the amusement of Lester Bibbs, the staggeringly amoral prisoner runaround permanently assigned to Bug Row.

A notorious informant possessing a muscular stupidity, unable to live in open pop, Lester left a wake of grief wherever he went. With hatred wafting from him like steam off a Clydesdale, Lester strutted the floors like a wannabe High Sheriff, Lester poked the bugs through the bars with sharpened broomsticks, knocking them upside their heads with brick-hard bars of lye state soap, bombarding them with crumpled up balls of flaming newspaper. Lester fed the ones he wanted to and used food to pit one bug against another, coaxing them to throw shit and piss on each other, encouraging others to give up and hang themselves. I won’t even describe what he did to the young and pretty ones. Lester’s morning ritual, conducted

under the observation of the grinning wing sergeant, was to don rubber hip boots, drag a fire hose down each floor and spray down those who grieved him most, particularly those he declared to be possessed by demons. I'd visited Bug Row several times when I worked on the plumbing squad, and I never left the wing without reflecting on how much I'd enjoy killing Lester Bibbs.

I turned back to see our wing officer point up in my direction, steering Wannamaker toward his new fourth-floor home. The only empty cell was directly across from me, off our quarterdeck, so I knew where he was headed. As I studied the sinewy old man trudging up the stairs, loaded down like a government mule, I realized that he was stronger than he looked. Though he wore a puckish expression there was a definite flintiness underlying his disheveled appearance, and he moved with a certain limberness as he crossed the fourth-floor quarterdeck he offered me a gummy smile and I nodded politely in return. When he stepped into his new cell I recalled hearing something about a Federal lawsuit, followed by some court order designed to change conditions on Bug Row. *Hell, they're just releasing the bugs out into pop*, I belatedly realized. *I hope they're medicated.*

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Imagine a small, rectangular four-story apartment building with each unit facing inwards onto an open, roofed courtyard. That's what the wings look like. There are one hundred twenty, one-man cells per wing, and fourteen wings. You do the math. Population wings have solid steel doors with small barred windows, as opposed to the barred doors on the max wings. It is fifty-two feet from the bottom floor up to the concrete ceiling spanning the open central pit. Each floor has catwalks running around the chasm, with a quarterdeck at one end. You get in a fight on the upper floors and you're always in danger of being thrown over the rail. It's something to think about.

I've seen guys tossed off the top floor with and without crimson knife slits puncturing their hides, and I've seen others voluntarily jump over the rails to avoid a knife-wielding attacker. In seventeen years I've witnessed every kind of murder: stabbed, speared, shot, strangled (manually and by garrote), poisoned, and bludgeoned. Mostly stabbed. For me, personally, the worst is by fire. Someone slips into your cell, fills your light bulb with gasoline or lighter fluid, and when you come in and yank your light cord a

vaporous, explosive fireball fills your cell, sucking the oxygen from your lungs and melting your flesh like cheap plastic. That's when you realize that someone has jammed your door closed behind you. Yeah, the fire's the worst. The inhuman screams go on and on until your failing heart reaches that point where you stop hoping that he will live and begin praying that he won't. There are things worse than death. You never forget those screams, and the smell, well, it never leaves that cell; I don't care how many times you paint it.

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I cannot explain why he began gravitating towards me. I was idly staring out through the dayroom window, mentally calculating the hours until my release date when I felt a presence behind me. Before I could fully turn I heard his gravelly voice.

"There is no being except in a mode of being."

I stared at Wannamaker, taking his measure, uncertain if he was addressing me. He stared back, smiling tightly, his cornflower-blue eyes twinkling with squirrely energy. "Huh?"

"Those birds," he replied, "are they real?"

I turned back toward the barred window. On the ground below a huddle of multi-hued pigeons were pecking at breadcrumbs thrown out by prisoners.

"They look real to me," I responded, wondering why I was even answering. I wasn't interested in making new friends. All I was thinking about was the streets.

"Don't you know?"

"They're real," I countered.

"We make our own reality," he said to my back. "You see what you expect to see. Open your eyes of perception and what is real will be limited only by your imagination."

"Really?" My skepticism was probably evident.

"All is Maya. Perception is creation."

"Maya, huh? Sounds like quantum physics to me," I remarked, turning back to face him, wondering where the conversation was going. He smiled back, a grizzled icon of Bug Row, grinning through broken teeth, and despite myself I smiled back.

"Ask and you shall receive. Knock and the door shall be opened for you. Whether you enter or not is up to you."

I nodded noncommittally. As the pigeons fed, we stood around, engaging in the type of small talk you make in the joint. At least I did. For his part the old man mostly spewed Delphic pronouncements. I did learn that he'd been in the joint for either twelve, fifteen, or twenty-one years, beginning with a two-year stretch for breaking into a church, which was extended repeatedly for a series of short-lived escapes. Now he was serving over seventy years. I also learned that he'd fought in Korea in the same Marine division as my Uncle Al. Wannamaker proved to be an endearing character, bubbling with cheerful illogic and unreason, his fevered mind conducting its own energetic symphony. But though his thinking may have been hidden behind an opaque curtain of seeming irrationality, his incessant stream of addled maxims contained just enough fragments of seemingly profound acuity as to cause a listener to hesitate, pausing to consider their possible meaning. Still, you didn't know if his words really meant anything because you had him pigeonholed in that place in your head where the crazy people are.

"Seek your own guru," he earnestly proclaimed, as he suddenly reached out towards me. I felt an odd buzz of something – energy? – When he lightly touched my shoulder.

"Invest your coin in the guru principle," he added, staring at me intently. His electric blue eyes burned strangely, shifting shades.

"I don't have any coin," I replied lamely, suddenly feeling awkward and unsure of myself.

"You must work on your Shakti."

"Shakti?"

"Power. Shakti. Shaktipat. Your power has been eroded since birth. Seek to rebuild it."

"How do I do that?" I asked, not really wanting to know.

"You need only meditate under the Wish-Fulfilling Tree."

"Why don't you just tell me," I argued, even as I wondered why I was continuing the conversation.

"You cannot learn music by worshipping at Mozart's tomb."

Not wanting to sound patronizing I chose to say nothing.

"That other bird," Wannamaker said nodding toward the window. "Is it real or not?"

Turning, I was surprised to see a handsome speckled owl standing amidst the pigeons. Amazingly, the mingling pigeons seemed oblivious to their mortal enemy. The owl slowly swiveled its ruffled head, left and right,

surveying the flock, its enormous eyes, all black and yellow, glittering like polished gems.

“Real,” I finally allowed, tiring of the old man’s dialogue. I was turning to leave when I felt his hand again touch my shoulder.

“Watch,” he suggested, directing my attention towards the ground. The feeding pigeons milled aimlessly, occasionally pausing to flap their wings or preen their feathers. Suddenly, the owl stiffened, then toppled over, as if struck dead by a hidden hand. I stared in astonishment. The owl lay on its side, motionless, as if frozen in time. The pigeons ignored the fallen owl. I stared at the owl for a full minute but it appeared to be rigor mortis dead.

“What” – I wondered aloud, turning to face Wannamaker. He inclined his head slightly, a gentle smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. My mind raced with the implications.

“Explode the secret and the truth shall rain upon your heart,” he said, squeezing my shoulder. He suddenly appeared very lucid. “Act now,” he added. “Even a saint cannot reclaim a wasted minute.” Then he pivoted and left the dayroom. It was around that time that I started taking notes.

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The next time I saw Winky Wannamaker was the following morning. He was sitting cross legged at the end of the wing, bare-chested, wearing shorts, with his back erect and eyes closed, going through some type of rapid, deep breathing routine that I figured had something to do with yoga. His breaths were long, deep and violent and a light sheen of sweat coated his lean torso. I was surprised he didn’t pass out from hyperventilation, like I used to do when I was a kid. Dilly wandered out of his cell carrying a cup of coffee and joined me at the rail.

“I told you he was a bug,” Dilly said motioning with his coffee mug. I didn’t reply.

Other prisoners were shooting Wannamaker strange looks, some smirking, others indifferent. When the old man finally stopped power breathing he began chanting a long, continuous one-syllable mantra. “Oooooommm. Oooooommm.” The chant resonated across the wing. More gawking prisoners lined the tiers, gazing up at the crazy man.

After a time Wannamaker stood up and stretched, oblivious to the curious spectators. Then, leaning forward he grabbed the top rail with both hands and with a perfect insouciance, he sprang up, quick as a cat and unfolded into a handstand. A solemn hush fell upon the wing as each of us, mouths agape,

digested the scene. Wannamaker was perched precariously on the top rail, locked into place with a white-knuckled grip, upside down, toes toward the ceiling, teetering on the edge of a four-story freefall. One errant move and he was certified dead. I watched intently, as if in a dream, as seconds ticked into minutes, and all I heard was the thump of my heart as I stood transfixed in that vertiginous moment. The old man remained perfectly perpendicular and ramrod straight, never wavering. No shake. No shimmy. No tremble. His taut skin rippled over corded muscles like braided ropes beneath old, polished leather. Everything about him exuded supreme confidence, as if he knew with absolute certainty that it was utterly impossible for him to fail. Nobody spoke the unasked question. *Who among us would dare such a feat?* It was magnificent.

“Yeah, he’s crazy,” Dilly, volunteered, draining his coffee.

But the truth, as usual, was more complicated. I didn’t see a crazy man. I saw a man who seemed mad simply because others could not hear his music.

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Over the next few days Wannamaker settled in, seemingly getting along with most everyone. My job in the library kept me off the wing most of the day, so I didn’t see him a lot. But, I got reports from others. Occasionally the old man engaged me in conversation, but usually it was just long enough to drop off a few nuggets of esoteric wisdom. “Deny the truth and you deny yourself,” he might proclaim. Or, “only power can handle power. To him who has it so shall it be given.” Once, he suddenly appeared in my doorway. “Perfect wholeness cannot be grasped,” he pontificated. “You must be grasped by it.”

“Huh?” I replied, lowering my *National Geographic*.

“To grasp you must be capable of being grasped.”

“That’s a tautology,” I countered after a moment’s consideration. But Wannamaker just grinned and skipped away.

In the space of a week, though, things got dicey. I was sitting on my bunk, flipping through a *Car and Driver*, admiring a lipstick red 1960 Ferrari 250 GT Berlinetta Lusso. I was just appreciating how the photographer’s lights emphasized the graceful swoop from stubby tail past clean flanks to the rising, powerful nose, when Dilly leaned through my open door and rapped his knuckles on the steel door frame.

“Your boy is bugging out,” he remarked, jerking his head toward the rear of the wing.

I stepped out onto the catwalk and peered over the rail to see Wannamaker, down on the bottom floor, marching back and forth in a rapid, herky-jerky cadence. He was butt-naked, except for a sheet tied around his neck, trailing behind him like Superman’s cape. I strained to make out the words that he was spitting out like machine gun bullets.

“Error-correction-error-correction-error ...”

I watched him march thirty feet, then spin around and retrace his steps, stomping and muttering like a wind-up toy.

“Error-correction-error-correction-error ...”

Several clots of scowling prisoners stood around, arms crossed, glaring at Wannamaker. “He’s been doing that for twenty minutes,” Dilly observed. “He’s off his medication.”

Later that evening I cornered Wannamaker and casually asked him what the naked marching was about.

“This place has a karmic deficit that must be balanced,” he barked. His eyes were unusually dark and glittered unnaturally. “Terra is speaking, if you will just listen. I must balance the karma.”

“Yeah, well, just be careful,” I replied, rubbing my jaw. “Parading around naked and talking shit isn’t cool. You’re going to piss people off.”

“An instrument for dispensing the fire of the gods must be a fiery instrument.” The old man turned and marched away before I could add anything.

The following afternoon after work I returned to find water streaming down the stairway, from the fourth floor to the main second-floor quarterdeck. A crew of angry housemen were mopping up the mess.

“That crazy old man barricaded himself in his cell and flooded out,” someone told me when I inquired.

“Did he go to jail?”

“Hell, no,” he snorted. Lieutenant came in and rapped with him, then told Sergeant Gates to let him be. If it’d been you or me, we woulda got our asses kicked. Stupid bastard’s still up there,” he said, jerking his thumb toward my floor.

Upstairs, my nose wrinkled at the acrid odor of burnt paper and the sour scent of urine. The quarterdeck was puddled with dirty water. I saw Wannamaker, disheveled and wild-eyed, his face smeared with soot and

blood, locked inside his darkened cell, staring out through the door's small barred window. He resembled a beast peering out of a cave. He was whimpering faintly. When I finally approached he growled ominously, then began barking in an unfriendly manner.

"Don't retard my progress!" he suddenly hissed, staring me down.

I hesitated, and then walked to my cell.

"Man, somebody's gonna kill that fool," Dilly opined. "He was stomping around the wing all day, waving a broken-off broomstick, kicking people's doors, barking at everyone. Real stupid shit." Dilly lit up a hand-rolled cigarette, then looked at me through a cloud of blue smoke. "He's paranoid. Claims everyone is plotting on him. Clown needs to go back to Bug Row. The wing officers see what's going on, but they're just letting it slide." Dilly looked around through hooded eyes. "I think they want some shit to jump off," he growled.

I looked over at Wannamaker's cell, saddened to see the dismal trajectory his life had assumed. With his splintered mind caught in a tightening vice he had two serious strikes against him for a convict – he was old *and* crazy. But his most fatal handicap was that he had no real friends. And, combined with an escalating overload of enemies there was a dreadful sense of toxic inevitability to the perilous glide path he was navigating.

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"I don't want to kill the old man," Octavio declared with grim earnestness. "Really." Those were his words, even as I watched him sitting on the white porcelain toilet, bent over in concentration as his busy hands strapped the knife to his calf with an elastic ace bandage. And I believed him, because I understood the circumstances, even as I understood why, in Octavio's mind, Wannamaker had to die. It was only two days after the old man had flooded out his cell and his delusional paranoia had metastasized into a full-blown psychotic breakdown. Incredibly, the guards had not locked him up, and the raw tension permeating the wing resonated like a plucked banjo string.

Wannamaker relentlessly stalked the fourth-floor quarterdeck like it was the Serengeti plains, sometimes armed with his broken-off broomstick, other times waving a razor blade melted on the end of a toothbrush. Muttering to himself, screaming at ghosts, he made feinting thrusts at all who walked by. No longer viewed as an amusing eccentric, he was now seen as a potential threat. Fear, like hate, tends to magnify perceptions,

and because maximum-security prisons are stocked with men who believe in preemptively eliminating threats before the threats eliminate them, Wannamaker's paranoid delusions had morphed into self-fulfilling prophecy. Now men really were plotting on him.

Moments earlier an incoherent Wannamaker, stick in one hand, razor in the other, had chased a startled Octavio out of the shower. As prickly as a strand of barbed wire, Octavio was a no-nonsense guy with a well-defined mean streak. Years before I'd seen him stab a guy in the gym over a perceived insult. When Octavio finally got out of solitary he tracked the guy down and stabbed him again. So, there I stood in Octavio's cell, propelled by a sense of urgency, desperately trying to convince him not to put Wannamaker down like a rabid dog. Octavio sat on his toilet, enveloped in sullen anger, his dark eyes snapping like semaphores.

"I'll tell you what," he finally muttered, after I'd marshaled my most persuasive arguments. "You get that son of a bitch off this wing and I'll let it slide. If I ever see him again I'm gonna cut him up."

I nodded and stepped out onto the catwalk wondering why I'd gotten involved. In twenty-two days I'd be walking out of that stinking joint a free man. But I've always been a sucker for lost causes. And the old man didn't deserve to die. I looked around, bereft of ideas. Wannamaker stood in front of his cell, staring at me oddly. Even then, in the midst of his madness, he possessed an inherent dignity, as though his disheveled, befuddled exterior concealed some fundamental cosmic truth. I wished desperately that he could read my mind and appreciate my benevolent intentions. As if on cue he bared his teeth and snarled at me, raising his stick menacingly. Suddenly, I had a quickening thought.

I strode down the catwalk to the quarterdeck, then ducked into the utility closet. Snatching a damp mop out of the rack I leaned it against the wall at an acute angle, then stomped it just above the mop head. The stout wooden handle snapped like a tree limb. I emerged with the mop handle raised overhead, swinging it like a cavalry saber. Without hesitation I charged Wannamaker, who faced me squarely. We crashed together violently, neither of us saying a word. Standing toe-to-toe we battled like gladiators. The only sound was our ragged breaths and the clattering of our swords as we beat each other relentlessly. Slowly, inexorably, strike-by-strike and blow-by-blow, I drove him backwards, until he was framed in his cell's open doorway. Then I bullrushed him, pushing him deep into his cell. When I stepped out I slid his door closed, automatically locking it. The only way

for him to get out was for a guard to come upstairs, open the panel and pull his cell's lever.

"I'm doing this for your own good," I gasped, struggling to catch my breath. Wannamaker stared at me through the door's barred window, his expression inscrutable. Then he dropped his stick and stepped forward.

"Are you worthy?" he breathed, in a hushed, gravely voice. "For the great and majestic tasks yet to come?"

"Look, you're gonna get killed."

He cut me off with a dismissive gesture. "I told you. Only power can handle power. Keep working on your Shakti; your power. Walk the path and the mighty power of Kundalini will rise and open the chakra jewels of your higher bodies."

"Look," I repeated, "You don't seem to understand. You're gonna get murdered."

Wannamaker cut me off again. His face suddenly relaxed and he smiled benignly, as though he was dealing with an especially obtuse pupil. "When the assassins come they kill everyone. That is what you must understand. Death is coming. It's at the door."

That was the last time I saw Winky Wannamaker on that wing. I turned and walked downstairs to confront the wing sergeant. "You've got to move Wannamaker off this wing," I said forcefully. "You all know he's crazy. He does not belong in pop. You are forcing someone to kill him, and he absolutely will be killed if he stays here." The sergeant didn't argue the point. "Yeah, we know. We'll take care of it," he replied, looking away.

I returned to my cell, feeling the tension drain away. Dilly was leaning on the rail. He raised his eyebrows as I passed him. "I'm going to the gym," I volunteered. "I think I'll get in a few games of handball." I was much relieved that the trouble was finally over.

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An hour later I was sprawled on the handball court clutching my broken foot. An hour after that I was wearing a cast and before the evening count I'd been transferred to the medical wing.

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It was one of those dense, vaguely unfulfilling short stories that draws attention to itself, where every erudite sentence appears written not so much

to advance a story line but rather as an exercise calculated to showcase the author's cleverness, the kind of borderline pretentious story you might expect to find in an overpriced, high brow literary journal, full of like stories, written and published by like people, a sort of self-congratulatory private club where they stand around, preening and posing, pointing at their glossy magazine, bragging that they'd been published. The kind of story you sorta wish you were clever enough to write, but were glad you didn't. When I finished reading it, I was left with the nagging impression that the writer had crafted what he believed was an exceptionally witty and well-written paragraph and had gone on from there, building outward in expanding concentric circles until he had a sufficient word count to call it a completion. Damn the plot, or even the point. It would have made a sophisticated literary editor proud.

"Well written," I offered, "but I missed the plot somewhere." I handed the pages back to Suzy Wong, the gossipy but engaging little brunette sissy living three cells down from me. Ever since I'd moved onto the medical wing, little plump-cheeked Suzy with the Ivory soap complexion had been eagerly pressing his stories upon me, seeking a measure of validation.

"Sometimes plots are a distraction," Suzy petulantly assured me, brushing his bangs from his kohl-traced eyes.

"Distraction from what?"

"The writing."

"I see."

I watched dreamy-eyed Suzy sashay away, another in the parade of sad stories and suffering souls filling the medical wing – a converted population wing of wheelchairs and walking canes serving as a dumping ground for those wounded bodies enduring the travails of modern prison health care. Now there's an oxymoron. The prison's detritus surrounded me: the blind, paralyzed, and feeble, but especially the dying. And die they did, almost daily, in wretched anonymity, from a smorgasbord of medical maladies, from full-blown AIDS, hepatitis C, cancer, Alzheimer's, and diseases I'd never heard of. They died alone and abandoned, thrashing around on their bunks, often gripped by excruciating pain – you do understand that pain medication is verboten in prisons? – infrequently attended to by indifferent med techs who seldom spoke English. They were all consigned to the bone heap. Suzy's trial by fire would soon be upon him, for he was being squeezed by the fist of Cushing's syndrome, a vexing disease that basically

makes you fat and weak, not a good thing in the joint. Moreover, he'd just been diagnosed with systemic lupus erythematosus, which, Suzy explained in layman's terms, meant that his immune system was relentlessly attacking his own body.

Settling back on my overturned mop bucket, my thoughts returned to the remaining four days separating me from freedom. I resumed the fantasy I'd been mentally playing out, before being interrupted by Suzy, visualizing a long dreamt about South Florida fishing trip, south of Chokoloskee, past the Rod & Gun Club in Everglades City, deep into the swaying expanse of emerald saw-grass prairies. I pictured the soft morning light blushing faint pink above my aluminum skiff as I meandered down a winding, tannin-stained creek, the mist-shrouded banks flanked by loblolly pines, stands of silvery cypress and, where the creek merged with the bay, tangled thickets of red mangrove, with their webs of gnarly roots and salt-crusting leaves. I saw the egret, the white ibis and green heron, and the roseate spoonbills, languidly lifting up from the shallows like ephemeral apparitions, rising puffs of strawberry and cream. I heard the buzz of summer insects, and the screech of the rare Everglades snail kite, skimming above the swamp, an elegant willowy-winged, tuxedo-black bird boasting an ivory patch above the tail. I saw the drifting alligators, the basking turtles, and the toothy gar hovering in tepid waters, and I smelled the rich, decaying muck permeating the sultry air. And out past the flats of the shallow bay, with aquamarine water glittering like crushed glass, stretching off towards the Keys, the Gulf was studded with sailboats; their pastel sails blooming like orchids from the cobalt blue sea. If I closed my eyes I could –

“Here,” Suzy commanded, handing me another sheaf of handwritten pages. “Read this one.”

I looked up ruefully. Before I could comment I absently focused on the hulking, bald-headed prisoner strolling across the bottom floor. It was Lester Bibbs. Upon moving to the medical wing I had been mildly surprised to learn that Lester, the infamous informant runaround, the cellblock tyrant and paragon of thuggery, had been transferred from Bug Row. Something about the Bug Row lawsuit. Now he was the runner on the medical wing.

“He's a beast,” Suzy announced for the hundredth time, following my gaze downstairs. Soon after meeting me Suzy had breathlessly chronicled Lester's rawest exploits. Predictably Lester was terrorizing with abandon. “You know the kid from Connecticut?” Suzy had asked me, referring to a

young, retarded guy on the bottom floor dying from Huntington's disease. "He goes in his cell and rapes him every night."

Before I could read Suzy's latest literary opus I heard the big, steel king door swing open and a prisoner toting a tattered, taped-up cardboard box of personal property stepped spryly onto the quarterdeck. To say I was surprised to see Winky Wannamaker would be a severe understatement. But there he was, as ragged and enigmatic as ever. He looked up to the third floor and we briefly locked eyes. When he offered up a spontaneous smile I reciprocated with honest affection. Not for the first time I vaguely sensed that somehow our lives were braided together. I watched silently as Wannamaker made his way to his new second-floor cell.

"Do you know him?" Suzy asked, his eyes narrowed.

"Yes," I replied, without elaboration.

"He lacks huggability," Suzy decided.

"He's a good man," I countered.

"I'm going to meet him," Suzy announced, plucking his story out of my hands. "I hope he's nice."

I sat on my overturned mop bucket, inspecting my cast – I had four days to lose it one way or another – lost in idle moments of reflection. When I looked up again Suzy was standing before me.

"He's in his cell doing yoga exercises, and chanting. He said he was raising the vibrations in the ethers around the earth." Suzy waved a sheet of paper. "I wrote it down," he added. "He said he's channeling spiritual energy into Mother Earth's psychic centers, into her chakras," he continued, consulting the paper. "He says he's here addressing Mother Earth's spiritual crisis. It has nothing to do with oil or gas or petroleum products." Suzy paused, cutting his eyes toward me, then continued reading. "He claims he's here to perform a crucial karmic manipulation and maintain the terrestrial balance." Suzy looked up skeptically. "What do you think?" he asked, chewing on his lower lip.

"Sounds like it would make a good short story," I replied without thinking. Just then Wannamaker stepped out of his cell. He was butt naked, wearing his cape, and holding something in his hand. Standing at the rail rigidly, his face contorted into an inscrutable mask, he began breathing deep and rhythmically – that yogic *Pranayama* stuff he'd once showed me – while intently staring down at the bottom floor. I searched his face, trying to discern his intentions. What I recognized was a volcano of rage, and with

laser-like intensity it was locked and focused upon a singular object: Lester Bibbs.

Things happened very quickly after that. With calm deliberateness Wannamaker reared back like a major league pitcher and slung a small black object downstairs. The whistling domino caught Lester on the side of his face with the suddenness of a pistol shot and surprisingly, lifted him up off his feet. He rose and pirouetted, like a cat stung by a bee, and came down shaking his head, a howl escaping through his clenched teeth, a hand pressed to his bleeding temple, his hooded eyes scanning the tiers. Their eyes met and locked. Lester dodged the second domino, but the third one smacked him on the bridge of the nose and a diaphanous curtain of crimson misted the air. The next one shattered a front tooth and Lester yelped like a kicked dog. Who knew dominoes could be so hazardous?

Lester ducked into his cell, emerging moments later with a shank in his hand and murder in his heart. He bounded up the stairs two at a time, a lion charging a lamb. Wannamaker turned and resolutely stood his ground, rock solid and utterly fearless, his cape hanging limply behind him. His profile, limned by a strange, luminous light, manifested an unmistakable aura of power, and suddenly I understood the meaning of *Shakti*. As Lester rushed down the catwalk everyone held his breath, and I offered up a silent, heartfelt Angelus for my odd and valiant friend.

At the last possible moment Wannamaker backed up, retreating into his cell. Without hesitation Lester barreled in, with the reckless confidence of Custer at the Little Bighorn. And it was in that brief nanosecond, that half a heartbeat between seeing and comprehending, just as Lester crashed into the old man in the rear of the cell, that I saw Wannamaker reach up and yank down on his light cord.

The sudden radiance, bright as a solar flare, momentarily blinded me. A deep, low *woooooomp* shook the air as an incandescent fireball filled Wannamaker's cell. I was standing now, seemingly outside of time, my heart caught on the steel hooks of reality. Shielding my face with my hand I strained to see through the billowing orange flames and roiling black smoke. I recognized Lester's blood-curdling screams even as the fug of lighter fluid and burnt flesh washed my face. Eventually the screams died away. The fire seemed to burn forever. Wannamaker never uttered a sound.

They found the bodies melted together with Lester wrapped up in Wannamaker's death grip. Now, sitting here on my mop bucket, I struggle

to make sense of it all. But the penitentiary is guided by its own peculiar values. Wannamaker was his own man, possessed of a many-sided courage, stubbornly persisting against the inevitable tides of fate. His was a life that had known suffering on a biblical scale, yet he was destined to never be free. Maybe it was really dirt simple. In a violent, structured realm devoid of choices a man can still select the manner of his death. And perhaps Suzy Wong had it right after all. Not every story has a clear plot or moral in its weave and sometimes the tale is simply in the telling.

William Van Poyck was transferred to Virginia's death row in 1999, following the death row murder of his co-defendant, Frank Valdes, allegedly by a group of prison guards. The guards were found not guilty. William (#274949) can be contacted at Sussex I State Prison, 24414 Musselwhite Drive, Waverly, VA 23891.