

Remora, IL

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We were desperate, it's true. That doesn't excuse what happened, but we don't know what we could have done differently. As soon as the last car rolled off the line, the owners shuttered the plant, sold the machinery, and returned to Europe. To this day, the mention of it turns a heart to lead. The kids weren't scared, though. The night the plant closed, a handful of them drove to the property's edge with cases of beer. Girls danced in headlights while the radio blared from open doors. Boys carved doughnuts in the Blooms' nearby cornfield until Kyle Rouse's pickup got stuck in mud. They laughed it off. All their lives they'd been told the plant would be waiting for them with a good job once they turned eighteen. Now, they'd be spared the fates of their parents, who had built boxy, affordable sedans and carried a vague unease in the lines around their eyes.

But to everyone else, it seemed like a bomb had gone off in the center of town – the shockwave knocking down stores all through the summer. Hal's Bakery went first, followed by the record shop and the Bailey Café. By the time the leaves changed colors, even the grand old Cineplex was hollowed out, its marquee denuded of the letters we sometimes found rearranged into profanities. Sheets of plywood with spray-painted Xs blinded its windows, and tufts of crabgrass reclaimed its parkway. The town manager shifted public workers to a four-day week, and promised to do everything he could to attract business.

We all hoped things would return to normal and tried to get by. We flushed our cars' engines and scoured the sediment from our hot water heaters, hoping both would last another winter. We bought dry beans instead of canned, and canned vegetables instead of fresh. Our wallets grew fat with coupons.

It would not be a stretch to say those first hard months made us closer, as a town. We stopped feeling sorry for ourselves, and lingered in the church basement after services for crumb cake and coffee. Helen Bree, whose late husband had worked at the plant for thirty-eight years, organized a clothing drive. Parents tutored each others' children when the schools

closed on Fridays. People invited out-of-work friends to dinner, and they pretended not to notice their gratitude, or their envy. And when they left, the hosts lay in bed and prayed that the spirit that had claimed their guests would pass over them.

No one remembers who suggested the prison. It might have been Herman Floss, who had sold life, car and homeowner's insurance to nearly the whole town, and who was given to making uncomfortably deep and probing eye contact with each of us at town meetings. It could have been Deputy Ken Dufresne, who muttered to anyone who would listen that the uptick in unemployment meant a looming epidemic of bar fights, drunk-and-disorderlies, and what-have-you. In any case, around the first of the year the Council invited a consultant from a private prison company to lay out our options.

Not that there weren't objections. At the town meeting, the Bloom family, who came from Quakers, spoke against it right in front of the consultant, who sat behind the dais at the front of the hall with the selectmen and manager. Herman Floss said that the Blooms had farm subsidies to fall back on, so why didn't they tend to their soybeans and keep out of it? Helen Bree stood and declared it "unseemly." We loved Helen Bree, and we had nothing against the Blooms, but by then the town was so deeply in debt that we cancelled the Christmas parade and cut our trash collection to twice monthly. All winter the town lay dormant, the trees along the main thoroughfare naked – no lights, no foil Santas or candy canes. Parents bought dollar-store toys for their children and baked gingerbread for relatives. Husbands and wives surprised each other with nothing, and they were disappointed and glad in equal measure. Even the weather was stingy. Though the ground was packed hard with frost, little snow fell, and rows of desiccated corn stalks, ordinarily invisible under a blanket of white, thrust up from the Blooms' fields like grave markers.

"There's real opportunity here," said the prison consultant. "This would mean jobs not only in the facility, but for the shops that serve visitors."

Ed McConnell, who owned a ranch not far from the abandoned plant, stood to speak. “The plant bought meat from me for twenty years. What kind of guarantees can you give us that you’ll do likewise?”

We hated McConnell for asking that, as if the wrong question might blow our chances. We’d become shy about making demands. But the consultant nodded and said, “I don’t think that’ll be a problem. We usually make use of local producers.” He gestured to the screen on the stage, where a chart was projected from a device he’d hooked to his laptop. “There are ancillary benefits, too,” he said, scanning our faces. “Each prisoner counts as a resident. That means more dollars for your district.”

Most of us didn’t need persuading. We were using one credit card to pay off another. We ransacked our filing cabinets and dresser drawers for half-remembered savings bonds. People looted their pensions and college funds, and spent the inheritances they’d hoped to leave their children. Young couples postponed their weddings. Though we weren’t supposed to know, we heard whispers that Grace Chilton, the kindergarten teacher whose unemployed husband Robert once worked double shifts between the record shop and the Cineplex, had stopped her fertility treatments. We were ready for something good to happen, and we hoped this was it.

Corvus Correctional won the bid, with construction to begin after the first thaw.

On a cold March morning we watched a wrecking ball punch through the plant’s façade. The structure collapsed on the fourth swing, coughing up plumes of dust we could taste from a quarter mile away. It fell so easily – we had no idea how frail it was. For a while a great number of us worked as unskilled laborers, heaving broken pieces of the building into dumpsters. Rumor had it that Kyle Rouse smuggled out all the copper pipes that first night and sold them for scrap two towns over, but nothing came of it. Who could blame him? We would have done the same, if we’d thought of it. Those first paychecks were intoxicating. We’d forgotten the feel of having money and were starving for it.

After work we were exhausted but happy. There was pleasure in our aching shoulders, in the newfound roughness of our hands. On paydays some went to Barry’s Tap to drink. Those who’d worked at the plant confessed to feeling funny about Corvus using that space. They’d be loading a wheelbarrow with cinderblock when a remnant of floor tile signaled they were standing in the old break room, where Bill Bree had hustled them and many of their fathers in penny-ante poker. The banks of lockers they hauled away were the same ones in which they’d hung their coveralls and filter masks, glittering with metallic dust, at the end of a shift. It wasn’t that the plant had been problem-free. There’d been strikes and wage freezes and, every so often, an accident that claimed a limb. But day by day, as they dismantled what was left of their old workplace, they marveled that anyone had looked at that site and imagined a prison.

Then there came a need for construction workers and tradesmen – welders, pipefitters, laborers, and the like. But only the skilled among us could do that work, and a fresh wave of discord passed through as we were sorted yet again into those with jobs and those without. From the ground rose a fortress of towers joined by ramparts, its perimeter enclosed by a cursive scrawl of razor wire fence. Inside, men slotted together racks of iron bars. They partitioned the floor into 6’ x 8’ cells, which everyone deemed both too small and entirely appropriate. They studded common areas with concrete embankments to disrupt foot traffic and minimize opportunities for mayhem. They painted lines that prisoners would not be allowed to cross.

With thousands of inmates arriving in a year, we expected a boon from the prisoners’ relatives and police who would eat in our restaurants, gas up at our filling stations, and shop in our stores. The Council rezoned everything, which would allow us to rent out unused bedrooms to overnight visitors. Real estate speculators from upstate bought foreclosed businesses and leased them out. The Baileys reopened their café, though they rented the space they once owned. Robert Chilton, Grace’s husband, found occasional work.

The Sunday after the grand reopening of the Bailey Café, only three people stayed after church for Helen Bree’s crumb cake social. As if relieved of a great burden, her heart stopped until Pastor Kimble shocked it back to life with the portable defibrillator the church had bought during fatter times. Few of us visited her in the hospital, we’re embarrassed to say, though once she returned home the Bloom boy trekked over from the farm twice a week to deliver groceries, remove her trash, and sit on her couch watching the Nature Channel, which she was immensely fond of.

As the third Christmas since the plant closing approached, workers put the finishing touches on the prison. In each cell they installed steel toilets that were, strangely, also sinks. They wired up a network of cameras and reinforced the doors with metal plates. In the hallways they passed burly men in shirts embroidered with the Corvus Correctional logo, who stocked the armory with shotguns, rifles, batons, teargas, and pepper spray. On their belts the Corvus people wore plastic zipcuffs resembling the six-pack rings that poisoned sea turtles or ensnared gulls, and which Helen Bree had once led a campaign to ban. Corvus was hiring soon, was the word.

“You have no idea what you’re in for,” said Ken Dufresne to a group of young men at Barry’s. They’d applied to be guards. “*Corrections officers*,” he said, and looked away with a slow shake of his head. The group left soon afterward. Our town hadn’t had a murder in eight years, not since Gene Shipy, Dufresne’s old fishing buddy, shot his wife and her lover dead in the Shipy’s bedroom. He then put the pistol to his own temple and pulled the trigger. Ken had been first on the scene.

There was no horsing around during guard training. The new hires knew what they were up against. They learned the basics of the daily prison routine, the rules for visitors, and

how to search a cell for contraband. They had a classroom refresher on the criminal justice system. None of them could exactly remember what the Fourth Amendment was. They wrestled each other until the veins in their necks threatened to burst. Kyle Rouse volunteered to be shocked for the taser demonstration, but then again, Kyle always had been a crazy son of a bitch. They learned how to club an aggressive prisoner – on the bicep, on the legs, but never the skull, which lawyers would eat them for. They were divided on their preferences for straight or side-handled batons. The weapon's weight on their belts was strange, at first. But they got used to it.

One winter morning, a caravan of buses with waffled grating over their windows came plowing down the highway. Those of us who lived within sight of the road watched from our windows as the chain of buses carved a trench in the gray slush, carrying their freight of human cargo to the prison, where so many of our husbands and sons, our friends and neighbors waited to receive them. The buses were only the beginning – soon retail stores and good service jobs would follow. To the extent that we thought about the men in those buses, we imagined them as one type, multiplied: sullen, dangerous, and deserving of punishment, but potentially redeemable, through faith and good works. Even from afar, they radiated menace. We were thrilled and terrified to see them.

Slowly, money began to circulate. We drew paychecks instead of unemployment. To our children's dismay, the town could afford teachers on Fridays again. Ed McConnell's ranch did well enough that he had to hire a dozen more people. Perhaps best of all, Grace and Robert Chilton were finally expecting a baby. We splurged on \$20 bottles of Zinfandel to celebrate our good fortunes, but we still clipped coupons.

A number of Corvus people moved into town, and while we were friendly with them, we couldn't say we were friends. The men had a stiffness to them; the women, brittle smiles. We asked them how they were, and they always seemed miffed by the question, hiding the answers in their cheeks before spitting them out. Some guessed privately what they thought of us: bumpkins, hicks, rednecks. We chafed at that. We were a distinguished enough bunch. Joshua Bloom, not even in high school yet, was a state fair prizewinner in canning and preserving. We had an active community theater and a two-wing library. Many of us had been to college. To the extent that we had an idea of ourselves as a town, it was as families and good neighbors. The newcomers had pronounced a silent judgment upon us, made sharper by the fact that many of them were our bosses. It almost made us miss the light touch of the German plant owners who ruled our parents and grandparents.

If we were unprepared for anything, it was the number of visitors. They trickled in at first, women and the occasional child, mostly, until it seemed they were everywhere. A group of us would be holding a book club at the Bailey Café and a red-eyed stranger would order a coffee and sit at the window

for an hour, steeling herself for whomever she was about to see. Three blocks and one diner booth away, an unfamiliar mother and her teenage son chewed sandwiches in silence, then departed in a car with Kentucky plates. We saw couples at the gas station on the outskirts of town, buying trail mix for the squalling children on their hips as we stood in line for cigarettes, their faces washed free of any emotion but a trace of shame.

On the street, we snuck glances at the young women coming to visit their husbands and boyfriends. They wore painted-on jeans and shirts with plunging necklines, and if a group of us happened to catch an eyeful, we weren't above a murmured joke about conjugal visits. Other times we saw older women, who we guessed were the mothers of inmates, in floral-print dresses and hats piled with elaborate confections of silk, wool and felt. Sometimes we saw strangers in sweatpants and T-shirts, and we imagined that they dressed modestly so as not to make the prisoners feel shabby.

On summer weekends, we hosted a parade of cars with license plates from Missouri, Indiana, Kentucky, and as far away as Wisconsin. We were grateful for the business, but we weren't prepared to handle the busload of suited and gowned seniors from a Charismatic Church in Missouri, who arrived without fanfare and stayed for three days to minister in the prison. Nor were we prepared for the hundred-odd carousing attendees of the Corrections Officers Convention, whose location was changed to our town with little notice. We were not prepared for the mothers and wives who lodged in our attics and spare bedrooms, whose footsteps creaked above our heads when they were unable to sleep, who sobbed into our guest pillows, who filled our houses with their grief.

Oh, to hell with that, some of us said. We were decent people, faithful to our wives and husbands. We tithed and donated sweaters and jeans to the Salvation Army. We flew the flag from our porches and took it inside when it rained. We visited Helen Bree, whose heart was failing, which marooned her indoors most of the time. Were these things not proof of our largesse, our essential goodness?

On a trip to Helen Bree's house, Pastor Kimble and the church vocal quartet sat with her to watch a nature documentary. It concerned a fish that attached itself to a shark's skin and lived off scraps by cleaning the shark's teeth. They left after the first commercial break, which in retrospect was a shame. Some of us would have liked to learn how those fish managed to avoid being eaten.

When Grace Chilton gave birth to a boy three months prematurely, Pastor Kimble collected donations to help with the family's hospital bills. By that time, most of the town had reconnected their satellite TVs, so it was no great burden to pitch in a twenty for little Anthony's medical fund. During those months, it wasn't uncommon to see Robert Chilton walking around ashen-faced with worry, until he took a job as a prison guard.

Those of us who worked as guards wondered whether

he had it in him. We'd developed something of an edge, a hyperalertness that was lacking in gentle Robert. Corvus paid well enough, we couldn't complain there. But just being in that place chiseled away at our composure. The smell of sweat permeated the building. It was worse after lights-out, as if the concrete walls and floor had absorbed the stench all day only to release it all night long. Sometimes we'd catch a group of prisoners staring at us, and flowers of ice would bloom in our chests. Never for a second could we forget they would kill us, given the chance.

That was a hard notion to shed after work, when the same dozen or so of us gathered at Barry's for drinks before going home to our families. We made overtures to the Corvus people, the more senior guards, but they never joined us. You could tell by looking that they never would. We became body language experts, sizing up everyone we met. We instinctively looked for the half-closed fist hanging at someone's side, a slight bunch in the shoulders, tense little pulses in the jaw and temple. Even a clean-cut prisoner like Howard Albright – White Bright, other inmates called him – all downcast eyes and mumbled Yessirs, set our hearts racing if he shuffled by too close or approached from behind. We couldn't turn it off, that hypervigilance. The best we could do was manage it.

There was another issue brewing, one that we mostly didn't talk about: the town was nearly all white, and the inmates were nearly all not. Likewise, many of the visitors were black or Hispanic, and their skin announced them as citizens of Chicago, or Joliet, or Plano, or any of the other towns up north from which we siphoned and warehoused young men. It was Isaiah Bloom who first spoke about it, at a town meeting where a revitalization of the town square was under debate.

Bloom was tall and rangy, perpetually sunburned, with sandy blonde hair and a chinstrap beard. "You know how I feel about this prison," he said, quietly enough so that we had to strain to hear him from the back of the hall. He put his hands – large, gnarled mitts – on the podium, his pale eyes casting about for a sympathetic face. "And I know a lot of you don't feel the same. But this money – it's not rightly ours."

It turned out that the census counted every prisoner as one of us – two thousand extra unemployed men. Our swollen ranks earned us more federal dollars. To hear Isaiah Bloom explain it, we were the beneficiaries of a cruel trick played on poor blacks and Latinos. It was true that, among many of us, a mental shorthand had developed: if we saw a white stranger, we assumed they were police, or a lawyer, or with Corvus. If they weren't white, we assumed they were visiting an incarcerated friend or family member. This mental rou-

ing, this either/or, was so fast and seemed so natural that its profound weirdness didn't really register with us until Bloom went on to point it out. It wasn't clear whether these kinds of thoughts had always been with us, or if we'd been tainted by the prison's arrival.

The prison was segregated, too. Out in the yard, surrounded by towers with riflemen silhouetted against the sky, inmates broke into racialized clusters. Gang fights erupted in brief but frequent bursts, like chamber musicians tuning their instruments before the commencement of some terrible overture. Even unaffiliated prisoners got caught up. During one of these fights, another inmate punctured Howard Albright's thigh with a sharpened toothbrush before we pulled him to safety.

"I mean, Christ," said Kyle Rouse, three beers deep at Barry's. "Puerto Rican, Mexican, what's the difference?"

Robert Chilton looked as uncomfortable as some of us felt, but with Kyle paying for round after round, we said nothing. With his clear, open face and Cupid's bow mouth, Robert looked much younger than the dozen or so of us, despite being a few years older. We could only imagine how he must have looked to the prisoners.

"I heard that Corvus is looking to build another facility," said Kyle, who labored under the impression that he'd purchased our ears along with our drinks. "They're closing some place in Indiana and shipping everyone here."

"Eh," said Herman Floss, curled over his drink at the next table over, "Put a bullet in each of their heads and be done with it."

There were times when we all came to feel that way. A few weeks

later, a prisoner known as Skinny Charles flung a slurry of fluids at Kyle, who ducked the missile but still wound up with foul-smelling flecks spattered across his shoulder. It took three of us to hold Kyle back – carefully, so as not to get any stains on us – while all of C Block laughed and hollered.

We roused everyone after that. We shoved inmates against the walls chest first, kicked their legs apart, and patted them down. Flicked open personal switchblades and Leathermen and ripped through mattresses. We left boot prints on pictures of their families. We tore apart their cells, looking for contraband, and boy, did we find it: razor blades, screwdrivers, shivs. Plastic bottles of pruno fermenting in toilet bowls. An exquisitely detailed portfolio of hand-drawn pornography. A tattoo gun cobbled from a Bic pen, an eraser, the motor from an electric toothbrush, and a length of guitar string for the needle. In Howard Albright's cell, shears and actual needles. We marveled at their stupidity: how could they have imagined they could keep anything from us, some of whom had built those very cells? So, no – whatever it might have meant

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for the town, we guards were not looking forward to another thousand Skinny Charles's coming in.

"He knows what he did," said Skinny, when questioned about the attempted sliming of Kyle Rouse. "That mother-fucker's gonna get got."

In three cells on C block, we found knotted condoms filled with brittle rocks. In Skinny's cell we discovered an empty condom with traces of powder, which the lab confirmed was cocaine. As soon as that news came through, he couldn't stop talking.

"What the fuck?" said Kyle, when he happened into the changing room as two guards rummaged through his locker.

There was nothing in his locker, but word went out that Kyle was being watched. He stopped going to Barry's for a few months. When we patrolled the upper tier of cellblocks with him, we could feel CentCom watching us through the compound eye of cameras, noting whose cells we lingered at, how long it took us to complete a loop. We'd always watched out for each other – maintaining sight lines with fellow guards was crucial to making sure you were covered – but now we watched each other.

Early one morning, while the prison slept, our supervisor tacked the following month's schedule to the locker room's corkboard and announced extra shifts. We didn't know it at the time, but Kyle had been in custody for hours, and his pickup – one of the models built at the plant, a lifetime ago – had been impounded by Corvus' investigators, after they'd found a dozen condoms filled with rock cocaine in its glove box. But we didn't know that yet. We finished dressing and signed our names in the empty boxes, grateful for the overtime. Once we'd divided up Kyle's hours, we secured our batons to our belts, stepped out onto the tier and threw the power switch, flooding the prison with light.

While it was probably no comfort to his wife and young son, it was a small mercy that Kyle got sent to a facility a few hours north. In the months he'd been selling drugs in the prison, passing them between a visiting gang contact and a crew inside, he'd begun to adulterate the shipments, diluting them so much that he'd earned the enmity of casual users and addicts alike. It wasn't hard to find inmates willing to testify against Kyle, and he wound up pleading out for eight years. Some of us heard rumors that

Sheila knew about his dealing the whole time, but we were in no mood to cast aspersions.

In hindsight, we'd felt it building all through the end of that year. The genpop had been on edge since the drugs dried up, though the occasional shipment managed to slip in. All it took was one signal of disrespect – cutting in line; a walk-by shoulder-check – and though none of us knew what the exact offense was, the prison cafeteria exploded around six o'clock on the 30th of November. A scrum of men tackled two lone prisoners, bringing them to the ground with a flurry of little jabs. They dispersed, leaving growing blots of red on the chest of each twitching victim.

At that, the cafeteria broke into waves of scrambling bodies. Most of the inmates flattened themselves against the wall. Others bellowed as they kicked and punched and choked each other. Skinny Charles took a tray to the jaw and went sprawling. Howard Albright fell backwards and skittered into a corner, arms braced over his head. Prisoners pinned one another to the ground and pummeled away.

The adrenaline hit like a shockwave, made our eyeballs throb. Someone's teargas canister struck the floor with a dull metallic *thunk*. We shouted and swore as we rushed to seal our helmets, the canister belching smoke. Prisoners stopped fighting and fell to their knees, wheezing. We waded into the thick of it, bleary-eyed, the sound of our own rasping breath deafening in our helmets. Images swam through the haze – an outstretched hand, a face twisted in pain. Fear deformed every

thought in our heads. We unsheathed our batons and laid waste to anything in a blue jumpsuit. We let the full force of our rage find expression at the end of those clubs. We split open scalps, made men spit teeth.

A quarter hour later, when the last inmate had been carted off to the medical wing, we received word that both stabbing victims would live. Robert Chilton was in the infirmary, being scrubbed with nonoxyl-9 after getting blood on him. A trace of gas lingered in the air, sour in our throats. Our hands trembled. But there was no time to consider what had happened. A caged light bulb above the cafeteria door flashed red, and the lockdown alarm rang.

One of the inmates lapsed into a coma and stayed under for weeks. When he awoke, he couldn't walk or talk, and the right side of his face was slack. Robert Chilton quit that day.

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By then, he looked as if he hadn't slept in forever. The inmate was transferred to a state hospital soon afterward, where someone could help him eat and bathe.

After that, a parade of lawyers came through. Groups of them came and went in shifts, day after day, men in discount suits carrying thick file folders, conferring with inmates in low voices so we couldn't overhear. A kind of submarine pressure began to fill the prison walls. We felt fragile and exposed, ignorant of what was happening up on the surface, afraid that depth charges could detonate at any moment.

No one remembers which guard announced we were one inmate short. But we all remember the jolt at finding out it was Howard Albright. His cell empty, except for the scraps of prisoner's blues tucked beneath his mattress. Later on, it came out that he'd stitched together a jacket and slacks from chalk-dyed jumpsuits and walked out the front gates with a forged lanyard. We watched it over and over on video, Albright passing through the checkpoint with four other men in suits. Just another lawyer. The State Police had set up roadblocks as far north as Bloomington. They needn't have bothered. Deputy Ken Dufresne followed Albright's footprints in the new snow. Footprints that led, with almost comical traceability, to the Blooms' neighboring farm.

Over the next two weeks, a clique of professionally coiffed men and women descended upon our town. They shot bleak snowscapes that framed the prison building and the Bloom farmhouse, which was quarantined by yellow tape, and they said grave things into cameras: how Albright had broken into the Blooms' garage, how young Joshua Bloom had interrupted Albright as he tried to hotwire the Blooms' truck. In somber tones they recounted the struggle in which Albright fatally stabbed Joshua, only to be killed moments later by a blast from Isaiah Bloom's shotgun. We turned off our televisions and let our newspapers molder on our porches. We didn't need to be told who the Blooms were, or who we were, for that matter.

The week before Christmas, we held a memorial service at church. Neither Isaiah nor Annalee Bloom attended. Pastor Kimble did his best, but most of us barely heard a word. We were sick with grief for the two of them, but they wanted nothing to do with us. They'd spoken to no one, refused every interview, rebuffed even the pastor. They made private arrangements for their son's body, and some months later, left for Pennsylvania.

It was those killings that put us on the map, but not in the way we'd expected. For years afterward, our town couldn't be mentioned without them. When people moved away, their new neighbors would bring it up as soon as they found out where the movers had come from. When we traveled across the state for our children's cross-country meets and wrestling championships, fellow parents would squint through pained smiles when we told them where we lived. Huh, they'd say.

That's the prison town, isn't it? The shopping malls and processing plants we'd hoped for never materialized. Instead, once a respectful amount of time had passed, Corvus quietly purchased the Blooms' farm, and started building an expansion.

The cohort of guards who survived the cafeteria melee began drinking nightly at Barry's. They didn't talk about it, but they'd all been changed by what happened. Certain vivid thoughts boiled up with greater and greater frequency. They'd be sitting at dinner with their families when the images surfaced, uninvited. They couldn't look at their children without flashing on batons striking their skulls, the *thwock* they'd make ringing out in their own heads. That summer, the group of them took turns building decks around the pools in each other's yards. Amidst the camaraderie and coolers of beer on those long weekend afternoons, it occurred to more than one that his hammer had the same heft as his club.

Everyone thought the warden would resign after the killings, but instead he gave a pep talk and promised to support the guards, whether that meant more training, more staff, or better weapons. There was a new generation of tasers coming to market that promised to "revolutionize compliance management." Another flurry of media attention fell on us during the DOC inquiry, once a dozen inmates' lawyers raised hell. But after a few days of anemic coverage, the story disappeared. The inquiry faded, too. All eyes turned overseas, where news had leaked that American forces were operating a vast network of secret prisons across the globe. To the town's great relief, we were forgotten.

From the looks of things, the town is back to normal. The Cineplex has reopened, and the manicured lawns and flower boxes along the thoroughfare are flush with color. The smell of fresh asphalt cuts the air. Not a single building in our modest downtown remains empty. And all the while, everything outside of town decays. The state teeters on the edge of bankruptcy. We hear rumors of cutbacks and shutdowns – schools, hospitals, fire departments, police. Everything but the prisons, those marvelous engines that run on damaged men. We should feel lucky.

Our parents' faces have become our own. Maybe, for all their talk about the permanence of the plant, they knew all along just how precarious our arrangement was. The plant offered a good job, but there was risk there, too. Every so often, someone got caught in the gears.

Over drinks at Barry's, Ed McConnell brought news of the Chiltons, who had moved away after Robert quit. Little Anthony – healthy and strong, according to McConnell – had started school, and Grace had found work as a teacher again. Robert was working as an undertaker's assistant after being unemployed for the better part of a year. "Hell of a way to earn a living," said McConnell.

Yeah, we said. But then again, what isn't?