



the
PRISONER
and the
CHAPLAIN

• MICHELLE BERRY

The Prisoner and the Chaplain

MICHELLE BERRY



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For Stu, Abby, Zoe, Mom and Dad

*“My guiding principle is this:
Guilt is never to be doubted.”*

– Franz Kafka

The Road

There is a road that leads through two cornfields to a prison on the outskirts of a town. There are concrete walls thirty feet high. There are motion sensors and dogs. There are trenches dug into the earth. There are rolls of barbed wire, doubled, tripled. Steel doors that clang shut. Correctional officers in dark blue uniforms with numbers on their chests. Prisoners in orange jumpsuits and slip-on shoes. There are cells, ten by ten feet, with furniture anchored to the walls and floor. There are common areas – the day room, the medical centre, the chapel, the yard.

And there is death row. In death row, there are heavy, closed doors. There are no views to the outside. There is a slot through each door for food delivery and a small window that can be opened from the hallway for monitoring. There are no common areas. No socialization. On death row, the prisoner wears a white jumpsuit with the letters *DR* on the back. The prisoner is allowed two supervised showers a week and one hour a day alone in a cage in the empty yard.

And then there is the death chamber, painted green. There

Michelle Berry

is a digital clock on the wall, counting down the minutes and seconds until execution. There is a cot with a mattress on it. No pillow. There is a sink. Chairs can be brought in for the prisoner's chaplain or support worker. There is a door with a window in it. Five correctional officers sit and stand outside the door. This is the death squad.

And then there is the execution room. It is right next door to the death chamber. It is steel-walled and heavily sound-proofed. It is also painted green. There is sometimes a gurney, sometimes a chair, depending on what type of execution the prisoner has requested, depending on what is available to the executioner. There is a curtained, bulletproof glass window that, when the curtains are pulled back, reveals a gallery of seats. No more than twenty places to sit and watch the execution. There is a closet off the execution room with two doors for the executioner. He or she comes and goes anonymously; pulls levers, presses buttons, controls the execution.

If you walk away from the execution room, past the death chamber, down the hallway through death row, through the less constrictive regular cells, past the warden's office, out the front doors of the prison, through the armed gates, past the wall, down the road between the cornfields and turn left, you will come across the rest of the world. You will come across families sitting down to evening meals, a baseball game on the screen, the dog keeping one eye open for squirrels. If you keep walking, you will end up somewhere else, far from the prison, far from death row. You will be on the road.

The Woods

We are in the woods. A cabin somewhere. Sometimes it is made of wood. Sometimes it is made of glass. Or brick. Or steel. We are standing and sitting on a deck, or a porch, or sometimes on the ground, looking out into a forest, or looking out at a river, or a lake, or an ocean, as it rapidly churns and moves and sways. We are holding things – mugs of coffee, cans of beans, umbrellas. One time someone is holding a flamingo by a leash. It is mid-afternoon, the light in the sky is bright but low beyond the branches of the trees. A small boy drinks milk out of a sippy cup. There are children running around and splashing and jumping in the fast-flowing water, and there are dogs I've never seen before wandering around, roughhousing, snapping. A basset hound baying, a pug snuffling. A cat in a cage once. And a donkey grazing. Nothing makes sense, but everything makes sense. We are comfortable and the sun is hot and warm. The air feels thick, like the milk the boy is drinking. Our hands are sweaty. Someone drops a glass and it shatters and then reappears whole. We are in bathing suits. Some of us have towels wrapped around our waists as if we have just been swimming,

which is odd considering the turbulent rapids below. Where would we swim? A woman's hair is wet and hangs in long tendrils down her neck.

Although it's a beautiful day, I can't shake the feeling that something is going to happen. There is an electric current running through the scene, amplified, turned up, made brighter and more colourful than real life. The donkey brays. The dogs bark. The forest is darker, greener, blacker. The water is violent, foamy, white. The tide goes out and in. The swimsuits are sleek and shiny. I am holding something in my hand. I look down but can't see what it is. A mug of coffee? A can of beans? An umbrella? I'm watching the small boy as he sips his milk. I'm watching the woman's hair as it drips on her shoulders. I'm watching the children as they tempt fate at the water's edge.

Suddenly mouths are open, but I can't hear what anyone is saying. I shake my head as if there is water in my ears, but there's no sound. Not even the low rumble of the water. No talking, not even muted humming. The dogs move silently close to the ground. The fur on their backs bristles.

And this is when it always happens. The familiar cry of a seagull comes into the scene, and everyone – even the small boy with his milk, even the children at the water – suddenly stops and looks towards the sound. The cry gets louder and louder, but no one can see it through the trees.

The cry becomes stronger, frantic. It is not the usual sound a seagull makes. I know, quickly, that this is the thing we've all been waiting for, the thing that made the day thick and hazy and silent. This is what made the trees still, the water wild, the people gather. This is that thing that was going to happen.

We watch the seagull fly. It doesn't look natural. It's much larger than a regular seagull, and it's veering towards us. Wings flapping quickly. Head straight. Closer and closer until it's

The Prisoner and the Chaplain

almost at eye level. Everyone is frozen. The adults in their chairs, the children on the shore clutching the sticks they poke into the water. The gull is the only object in motion. There is no wind. The trees are still. The water is suddenly glass, and even the foam in the current has calmed. As it comes closer, we all see what we are meant to see.

Through the seagull – from back to belly, through feather and hide and blood and bone – is an arrow. We can see the fletching at the gull's back and the arrowhead at its breast. There is no blood. No other injury. Merely an arrow. Almost a joke, like those arrow-through-the-head hats. Or like the horses on a carousel with the poles that go straight through.

How can the gull possibly fly?

But the gull flies past us and continues through the trees, crying steadily. It continues on towards its death, flying until it collapses and dies with an arrow straight through its body.

We turn then, all of us, and look to the person next to us. We all look carefully and quietly at our neighbours, making sure what we saw was real.

No one says a thing. The wind picks up again, and I can hear the sound of the rushing water.

And that's when I always wake up.

PART ONE

12:01 a.m.

The Chaplain thinks the inmates seem strangely awake and alert, not a tired bone in their bodies. He walks beside the Prisoner. Corrections Officer 1 and Corrections Officer 2, their numbers blazing on their shirts, walk behind them. CO1 has removed the Prisoner's handcuffs, a small act of mercy, but he keeps his hand on his gun. The Prisoner walks at a leisurely pace, as if he's got all the time in the world. The Chaplain keeps pace with him, but the COs shuffle awkwardly, not used to moving so slowly.

No one on death row is allowed a name. Not the Warden, the Chaplain, the Prisoner or the corrections officers.

Take away your name, the Chaplain thinks, and you are nothing. You are no one.

The Prisoner is wearing regular clothes – work pants, a plain black T-shirt, canvas shoes. He is allowed work clothes for the occasion. No more white jumpsuit. Before the Chaplain arrived, the Prisoner was fingerprinted and allowed a shower. His hair is damp. He did not shave, and the Chaplain notes the stubble on his face.

Michelle Berry

The other inmates, hundreds of them, rows upon rows of caged men, shout as the group walks past. War cries. Wailing. Howling anger. They bang their bars with whatever they have handy, and the noise rains down upon them – the Chaplain and the Prisoner and the COs – like a sudden hurricane. It swirls around them. The Prisoner looks up at the chaos, and he lifts his hand slightly as if to wave goodbye. CO1 shouts, “Hands at your sides, Prisoner!”

He has been segregated from the general prison population for his entire stay here, for the ten years since he was sentenced to death, the ten years of appeal after appeal, and yet these other men, these strangers – these banging, shouting men – feel a solidarity with him tonight. The Chaplain marvels. Even caged, they perform a ritual to show support for their fellow man.

The COs brought him out at midnight hoping to avoid this. Hoping most of the other inmates would be asleep. But word travels fast – an execution is coming – and they wait to see the last of the Prisoner, bursting at the seams. Furious at the system. Adrenalin junkies high with excitement. The Chaplain can feel them. He can smell them, and it’s not the smell of sweat or body odour. It’s the smell of fear and rage. A sour, sickly smell.

The noise reminds the Chaplain of the soccer stadium, the games he watched in university, the gleeful anger of the masses, howling and chanting and sharing in the sport. He remembers Tracy then, as well. Of course he does. Before everything he did to her, when they were happy. Whenever he thinks of the past, he can’t get away from thinking about Tracy. He remembers the way she was before he did what he did. Before he hurt her. And then he remembers her after. What happened between them is getting farther away now, getting more and more distant. But it’s still there. At those soccer games, he remembers not paying attention to her. He was mesmerized by the sound

The Prisoner and the Chaplain

around him, focused on everything else. As usual. She always tried to get his attention, talking, smiling, pointing things out, but inevitably left the game and went home by herself, back to their shared apartment to read a book. Whenever he thinks back to his time with Tracy, the Chaplain recalls not paying attention.

And he's doing this now. His focus on the Prisoner is shifting quickly. Has he not learned anything from before, from losing Tracy? Today, he wants to pay attention. He has promised himself he will. To the Prisoner. To the moment. To the last few hours of this man's life. The other inmates shout and rattle their bars as the Prisoner walks towards the death chamber. His last walk. The Chaplain reminds himself to pay attention. Even after his promise to stay present in the moment, he has failed already. Thinking of soccer, of Tracy.

Pay attention.

He figured it out yesterday after he met the Prisoner for the first time. How many minutes, how many seconds. There are 720 minutes in twelve hours and 43,200 seconds. He looks at his watch. It is 12:06. Six minutes gone already, 360 seconds.

The Prisoner is to be executed at noon.

On his way to the prison, before the Warden gave his lecture on not trying to "save" the Prisoner, the Chaplain stopped and bought a coffee at the all-night variety store. The clerk was startled to see him there so late at night. There were three other men in the store. One customer was buying a lottery ticket and cigarettes. Another was buying milk and diapers, and the third was looking at the antique adult magazines, pulling out the centre-folds from back when people dealt mainly with paper for their porn. The Chaplain bought his coffee and thought about how many seconds people waste shopping for diapers and milk and cigarettes and lottery tickets and porn. How many seconds

does it take to stir his coffee and then throw out the stir stick and get back in his car and turn on the engine? How many seconds does it take to drive to the prison, the windshield wipers slapping, a summer storm hailing down upon him, the Chaplain cold and distracted from his dream of the seagull and the arrow. The black feeling that lasted until he stepped into the Warden's office. How many minutes wasted on a dark feeling? On a dream?

"Don't let him talk you into saving him," the Warden had said. "I mean, shit, you're supposed to 'save' him." The Warden used air quotes as he said it. "Like religiously and all. You're the chaplain, but I mean, don't think you can save him in the real way. You know what I mean? It's not possible. You know that, right? The execution is going ahead."

The Warden is aware of his past, the Chaplain knows this. He had to be made aware of it in order to hire him. The Chaplain still cringes at the memory of meeting the Warden for the first time. He had said, "Funny that you'd end up in prison anyway, even when the judge let you off." The Warden has never mentioned any details, never really come out with what he might know, but the Chaplain feels it lingering there in everything he says. The Warden toys with him, plays with his feelings, makes him ashamed and provokes the anger still within him. The Chaplain has worked hard the last several years to rid himself of all these feelings, to tone down the surging swell, to make himself worthier of what he has become, of his calling, yet the Warden has a way of making the hair on his arms bristle. It's almost as if the Warden wants him to fail, to satisfy his ridiculous certainty that everyone in prison is here for a good reason. That no one could make a mistake, or no one's circumstances could put them here. Or that someone

The Prisoner and the Chaplain

could take the blame for someone else. The Warden is convinced that once guilty, you are always guilty. Because the Chaplain destroyed Tracy, because he let his anger get the better of him, the Warden thinks he deserves to be locked up.

“I will save him,” the Chaplain had said, fingers up. “But I won’t ‘save’ him.”

Soon they have walked through too many heavy, metal doors to hear the shouting of the inmates, and now the only sound is the footsteps of the COs and the Chaplain and the Prisoner. Heavy footsteps. Two in boots, one in slip-on dress shoes and the Prisoner in slip-on canvas running shoes. No laces. The Prisoner swings his arms casually, freely. The Chaplain can feel CO1 and CO2 tense behind them, ready for trouble. But the Prisoner acts as if he’s heading out to a club, going for a late-night drink with friends. He even has a shy, sly smile on his boyish face. But the Prisoner’s eyes are deeply circled black holes. This is a man who doesn’t sleep, no matter how much he smiles. The Chaplain wonders about Death Row Phenomenon. Men go crazy from years in solitary. Perhaps the Prisoner has already broken through this reality and is there now, on the other side. The Chaplain’s primary job, he thinks, is to keep the Prisoner here, in the real world, in the present. His job must be to make sure the Prisoner doesn’t stray into that other realm. A man might not go gentle into that good night, but he might at least go sanely.

“Fucking noise,” CO2 says softly. “Shouting and banging. Every single fucking time.”

“At least they aren’t flinging their shit,” CO1 laughs.

The Chaplain clears his throat and both men shut up quickly. Who are you, the Chaplain wants to say, to complain

about anything? The corrections officers often forget he is there. The Chaplain thinks that it's because he is young. They are used to older chaplains, grey-haired and milky-eyed. In fact, the Prisoner seemed shocked to see the Chaplain when they first met. No one respects youth.

Again, silence and only the sound of their shoes. The Prisoner's grin is larger now, toothier, the Chaplain notices, as if he appreciates the COs' banter. The Chaplain can feel the tension around that grin. A spooky feeling, like when a dog bares its teeth. The tattoo around his neck gives the impression of a collar.

"Left here," CO2 says.

The Chaplain is suddenly distracted by the CO's title – CO2. Carbon dioxide. He thinks of the silliness of it and wonders how often he is teased. "You're sucking the air out of the room . . ."

The Prisoner doesn't turn wide; instead, he makes a sudden left and cuts the Chaplain off. They bump shoulders hard. The Prisoner swings his head quickly towards the Chaplain. He is as tall as the Chaplain, so their eyes meet squarely. The Prisoner looks as if he's going to kill him, but then his eyes focus on the terrified eyes of the Chaplain, and the Prisoner immediately swings his head back down and stares at the ground. The Chaplain knows that the corrections officers are armed with truncheons and pepper spray and guns and will keep any danger at bay, but for that one brief moment, he felt his insides contract, his heart speed rapidly, his throat seize. The look in the Prisoner's eyes was enough. This man, the Chaplain reminds himself, is here for a reason.

The room is small. Barely ten feet by ten feet. An underground parking space in a condominium building. Concrete walls. The ceiling seems low, but the Chaplain realizes that is only because

The Prisoner and the Chaplain

there are no windows. You would think they would let him have a window, a last look out, to see the changing light, the weather. He thinks this oversight is unfair.

The floors and walls are thick. The walls are painted green, chipped with age. There is a small, rusty sink in the corner and a toilet with no seat beside it. A roll of paper rests on the floor beside the toilet. There is no soap for the sink. The Chaplain shakes his head. There is a digital clock on the wall, to count down the minutes. There are two chairs and a cot. Blue and green blankets, clean white sheets, the smell of bleach emanating from them. No pillow. The chairs are stiff, side by side. Black. They look out of place, like they should be in a dining room, or a modern living room. They should be in that condominium with the underground concrete parking space. Although the Chaplain and the Prisoner will spend twelve hours in these chairs, they look like an afterthought. The door has a small window in it, and at all times, he was told, the COs will be right outside, looking in. There will be five COs in each shift – a special, elite squad. Two shifts. The final shift will walk the Prisoner to the death chamber. The Chaplain looks at the window now and yes, they are all there. CO1 and CO2 have left. Their duty is over for now. Gone home to wives, babies, children, dogs, soft beds and open windows. They get their names back the minute they walk out of the prison. They will become human again. COs 3, 4, 5, 6 and 7 look back at him. Numbers on their shirts. No one smiles.

Although they didn't pass it, the Chaplain knows that they are directly beside the execution room. The final chair the Prisoner will sit in – be strapped into – is right next door. It's an eerie feeling, being separated by only a wall.

Not every prisoner requests a chaplain. He feels lucky. And also cursed. Sometimes a man's last twelve hours are spent on

the telephone with family. Or alone. Or with the corrections officers. Watching. Always watching.

“Too bad about him,” the Warden had said earlier, before the Chaplain met COs 1 and 2 and escorted the Prisoner to his cell. “Who’d have thought he was sick? I mean, the guy was the picture of health. And then he’s down for the count.”

“Cancer,” the Chaplain said. “You never expect it, I suppose.” His mentor, the Prisoner’s original chaplain, had collapsed at work only a week ago, and the Warden had called the Chaplain into his office and asked him to take over. He was only halfway through his two-year mentorship, but there was no one else available on such short notice. The Chaplain had been ordained and certified and trained; all he needed was one more year with his mentor. But his time has been cut short. It couldn’t be helped.

“Yep. I hear he doesn’t look so good now. I always wonder, you know, if he hadn’t found out he had cancer, would he look so bad so quickly? I mean, he looked fine, he felt fine, until he found out.”

The Chaplain sipped his coffee and shrugged. Good question, he thought. The Chaplain’s own mother looked good right up until she was told she had breast cancer. And then she started to look haggard and tired. He always assumed that the stress of knowing you were dying took a toll on your body before the disease actually caught hold.

“I’ve got COs 1 and 2 taking him down with you. They’ve been on death watch since he found out. They like this kind of stuff. Makes their lives exciting.” The Warden laughed. The Chaplain cringed.

But the Warden took pity on the Chaplain. “So, you’ve only met him once?” the Warden said. “Yesterday?”

The Prisoner and the Chaplain

“Yes. Briefly. It’s such a shame that his previous chaplain got sick now. Just when he’s needed the most. And after all the years of preparation. All the time they spent together.”

“Believe me, this guy won’t really care who’s with him. He’s not a touchy-feely kind of guy.” The Warden laughed. “In fact, he’ll probably try to beat the shit out of you when he gets you in that cell.” The Chaplain’s face fell. “Sorry, I shouldn’t have said that. It’s just that he’s a tough cookie. You saw that yesterday, I guess? He really doesn’t say much, unless he’s fighting.”

The Prisoner was quiet when the Chaplain met with him. But the Chaplain could feel it bubbling under the surface. The tension in the Prisoner’s jaw. One hour together, and the Prisoner said absolutely nothing. “Well, I suppose that’s what got him into this situation.”

“Your mentor has done this kind of work before, too. You haven’t. It’s pretty intense. It can really mess with you.”

“Yes, well, I’ve been trained.”

The Warden laughed and the laugh was like a soft cry, a gasp – like the seagull, the Chaplain thought, and shivered.

“Fucking training,” the Warden said. “Sorry, Chaplain, but that ain’t going to help you now.” The Warden leaned forward in his chair and locked eyes. “Training for this is like being told how to handle a gun without ever having seen one, if you know what I mean. It makes sense logically, but shit, it’s not the real thing.”

“Yes, well.” The Chaplain didn’t really know what to say. The training was a bit of a joke. An appointment with the psychologist. And he has had enough of psychologists to last him a lifetime. A couple of hours. Here is what you do. This is what you say. Listen. Always listen. Keep him talking. Keep him calm. All made-up scenarios that never take the real situation into consideration. A few book recommendations and a pamphlet

or two, but no one can prepare for something like this. It has to be an instinctual thing, a fly-by-the-seat-of-your-pants kind of thing. You have to have faith. There is nothing you can do to make it easier or turn things one way or the other. Just being there, the Chaplain thought, should be enough. Or not. In the long run, it probably doesn't matter at all.

The whole thing, the Chaplain realized, as the Warden chuckled like his demented gull, was an exercise in futility.

The Prisoner settles onto the cot, his shoes where the pillow, if there was one, would be. He puts his hands behind his head and stares up at the ceiling. A lazy day in the park under a towering willow. A farmer resting in his field. A small boy engineering shapes out of clouds. The Chaplain sits down quietly on one of the two chairs. He adjusts his body so that he is comfortable for now, but he knows the chair will soon get the best of his lower back, and he wonders if he should have brought his Formed Back Relaxer and if that would even have been allowed. This all happened so quickly he didn't have time to ask about small things such as comfort, food, bathroom breaks.

The Prisoner speaks. "Is my chaplain okay?"

"Pardon? Sorry?"

"The guy you replaced. The other chaplain. Is he okay?"

"Yes. Well, no. Not really. He's alive, if that's what you're asking." The Chaplain takes his foot slowly out of his mouth. He can't believe he just said that. "He's okay. Had surgery on his large intestine and they took out the tumour. They need to do chemo now. He's not that old, you know, so he's pretty healthy for the operation and such. He'll be fine. I hope." He curses internally – stop rambling, he thinks. Slow down. Breathe. "It's only been a couple of weeks. I don't really know all the details." Be honest.

The Prisoner and the Chaplain

The other day, when they met for the first time, the Prisoner said nothing. The Chaplain told him why he was there, what he would do for him, how the Prisoner could tell him anything, could talk or stay silent, whatever he wanted. The Chaplain told him it might feel good to get things off his chest. He asked the Prisoner to think about whether or not he wanted the Chaplain to deal with things – where his body should be buried or if he wanted cremation and, if so, where would the ashes go? What about his funeral? What about any property he owns or family he needs contacted? Think about this kind of thing and we've got twelve hours in which to deal with it all, he had said, and the Prisoner had only nodded.

So now, hearing his voice shocks the Chaplain. It's a clear, clean voice. No accent. Just a low thrum of a voice, almost like listening to a news announcer or a radio host. A confident, deep voice. Sure of himself.

“So he'll be okay, then? My chaplain?”

“No, not really.” The Chaplain looks around the room again, as if he's missed something. “No. He'll die of his cancer. That is for certain. It's a bad kind. But he might have a few years left.”

“Sounds familiar” the Prisoner says.

“Yes, I suppose it is. The waiting.”

“Funny that he'd get sick right when I get called up.” The Prisoner rolls onto his side and looks at the Chaplain. “Like he didn't want to spend this time with me. After all we'd been through.”

“No, no. That's not true. It's not . . . that's not what happened. He got sick. It wasn't fate that it happened when your execution order came through. It just happened that way. He would have wanted to be here. I know that.”

“Did you talk to him?” The Prisoner rolls onto his back again. “I mean, did he say that?”

“No. I didn’t talk to him. But I know.”

“Yeah. You guys are always so sure of yourselves, aren’t you? Guess it’s your faith or something. Guess it’s just your way of looking at things.”

The Chaplain doesn’t know what to say to that. He is certain of many things, that is a given, but he’s also very uncertain when it comes to a lot of questions about life. He questions many things, has always been curious. Just because he never questions his faith, because he never questions his God, it doesn’t mean that he doesn’t question other things. But then, the Prisoner is right about the Chaplain’s mentor. He was always so sure of himself, so sure of everything. And he made sure you knew it. Made sure you heard him.

The Chaplain realizes that he’s thinking about his mentor in the past tense, and then he thinks that this Prisoner before him, in a little less than twelve hours, will himself be in the past tense. He will be a *was*, as opposed to an *is*.

The Prisoner flops back and forth on the cot, attempting to get comfortable. The COs peer in the window, which, the Chaplain notices suddenly, has mesh between the glass. Not breakable, even if there was something in this cell you could break it with.

Two weeks ago, the Chaplain was working with prisoners in D block. Talking to them about forgiveness and guilt and empathy and faith. Telling Prisoner Dwight about the afterlife and about how to think about God and religion. Telling Prisoner Rusty about how he needs to forgive himself before others can forgive him. About how God will forgive. He was there to comfort the suffering. Two weeks ago, his life seemed fairly simple. A chaplain job at the prison. A few friends. His sister, Miranda, whom he loves dearly, and her two crazy kids and truck-driving husband, Richard. He had finally gotten past

The Prisoner and the Chaplain

those things in his life that he needed to get past, those things that were torturing him. Simple. Until this. His mentor fell sick. Cancer. Death row. Twelve hours. An execution.

It's his turn now. A turn he never really wanted to take. How do you stay calm in the face of this? When you don't believe in what is happening? When you believe in forgiveness and acceptance and faith. *An eye for an eye* is not the way his faith runs. These are the questions he cannot cope with, the questions he isn't sure how to answer. But the Prisoner is right about the Chaplain's mentor. With his cancer, his many years in service over the Chaplain, his walk down this path before, the man always felt he had all the answers. He felt that his job was not to tell the system it was wrong, but to give hope and peace in those final hours. To smooth the head of the sinner and tell him everything would be all right. The Chaplain is not here to right the wrongs of society, but to comfort the sinner in his time of need.

Now he asks the Prisoner, "Why do you think he became sick right now?"

"I told you, man, because this is when I was called up. Maybe he just wanted to avoid having to talk to me for twelve hours." The Prisoner laughs. CO4 looks in the door at the sound. The number on his uniform shirt seems to glow through the window. Numbers on the front. Numbers on the back. The man is branded, nameless, until the minute his shift is over.

"No, really," the Chaplain says.

"I don't know. I don't really care. Maybe . . ." the Prisoner rolls to face the wall, ". . . maybe he's going to die before me in order to save me a place beside him at the dinner table."

He won't die that quickly, the Chaplain thinks, but says nothing.

The Chaplain looks at the digital clock on the wall. The Prisoner says, "You got somewhere to go?" even though he is facing away from him. How did he know he was looking at the clock?

"No. Of course not. I'm here for you. We can talk about anything you want. We can be silent. We can pray together. Whatever you want."

"What's the time?" the Prisoner asks, without looking up at the clock.

"Twelve-thirty-five," the Chaplain says. "Seems later than that, doesn't it?"

"Yeah, I guess." The Prisoner yawns and rolls back to face him, and then he sits up on the bed. "I was wondering if time would go fast in here or slow. It's something I've been wondering."

"Me too," the Chaplain says. "I couldn't tell you. Right now, it seems to be going slowly. That's good, I guess."

"Is it?"

A corrections officer knocks on the door and enters. He has a six on his shirt. "You got to fill out the form about your last meal and when you want it and all," he says, thrusting a piece of paper and a pencil at the Prisoner. He stands there, waiting, while the Prisoner looks at the form and then looks at the Chaplain.

"I've got to decide now? With you watching me?"

"I can't leave you with the pencil. The last guy tried to stab through his eyes to his brain with a pencil."

The Chaplain opens his mouth to say something, but can't think of anything to say. The irony of trying to stop someone from killing himself so that you can kill him yourself.

"Man," the Prisoner says. "That's fucked."

He writes something on the form and then hands it back to

The Prisoner and the Chaplain

the CO. CO6 leaves the room. Locks the door behind him.

The Chaplain wants to ask what the Prisoner ordered and what time the food will be coming, but he decides not to say anything. He wonders, though, if he'll have anything to eat himself. They didn't give him a form.

As if reading the Chaplain's thoughts, the Prisoner says, "I should have ordered you something," and lies back down upon the cot.

There is silence then. It fills up the room and the Prisoner's eyes shut. The Chaplain shuffles on his chair but tries not to make too much noise. He tries not to squeak the chair or move the chair over the floor. He isn't sure if the Prisoner has fallen asleep. Time clicks on.

"I suppose," the Prisoner says after about five minutes, his eyes still closed shut. "I suppose I should start with the beginning."

The Chaplain looks at him. "Sorry?"

"My story," he says. "That's what you're here for, right?"

"Well, I'm not sure. I'm here for whatever you want me to be here for. Whatever you want. Religious guidance? Comfort?"

"But you want my story, right?" The Prisoner opens his eyes and turns his head towards the Chaplain, curious. "I mean, why else would you be here?"

"You asked me to be here."

"I asked my chaplain to be here and I got you."

"Yes, that's true."

"If we've got twelve hours," the Prisoner says, "then I might as well start with the beginning."

"I've read your files," the Chaplain says. "You don't need to tell me what happened if you don't want to. I know about your robberies, the storage unit, I know what happened. The murders. You don't need to waste any of your time thinking about me. Whatever is good for you."

The Prisoner thinks about this. “I’m not telling you the story of *what* happened,” he says slowly. “Everyone knows that. No sense in rehashing it. No, I’m going to tell you *why* it happened. I think that’s a better story.”

“Sure. Of course.”

“I mean, we might as well pass time, right? Better than praying for twelve hours. It’s not like my prayers are going to be answered.” He laughs almost gleefully and the Chaplain wonders, for a brief instant, about his sanity.

“I do want to hear your story. But a little prayer never hurt anyone.”

“We got time for both,” the Prisoner says. “All the time in the world.”

The Chaplain thinks this is curious. They have the absolute opposite of all the time in the world. The clock is ticking.

“Too bad your chair is so uncomfortable. Too bad I don’t have a pillow.”

The Chaplain pulls the other chair up across from him and puts his feet upon it. The Prisoner smiles.

“That better now, Chaplain?”

“Yes,” he says. “Much better.”

The Prisoner faces the ceiling, closes his eyes, and begins. “I had a pretty average childhood,” he says. “Normal house. Normal life. Even had those fucking glow-in-the-dark stars on my bedroom ceiling.” He laughs. And the Chaplain suddenly pictures his own childhood room. The train set in the corner, the thick pile carpet where, if you dropped a tack or a pin, you’d find it eventually with your bare feet, the door that adjoined his room to Miranda’s, where they would knock secret codes back and forth pretending to be spies. He thinks about his childhood – perfectly normal. So what made the Chaplain do what he did to Tracy? What made him take his anger out on

The Prisoner and the Chaplain

her that way? And, more importantly, what made the Prisoner kill? “You know what I mean,” the Prisoner continues. “Normal. White-bread sandwiches for lunch. An older brother, Jack. An older sister, Susan. My dad was an asshole but everything was okay for a while. Until my mother left . . .”

In the hours before he was to join the Prisoner, the Chaplain had felt a sense of foreboding. Not the usual foreboding that comes with unfamiliar work, but a general uneasiness, something intangible that came, perhaps, from his seagull dream. He’s been dreaming it since he heard. Since they called him and told him he would be spending twelve hours with a murderer. The exact same thing every night. The cabin and the gull. And the arrow. Shot clean through.

The Chaplain figured this was his subconscious. A contemplation of what was to come, of what was unknown. But every morning – and as he came into the prison tonight – it felt as if there was a weight on his chest he couldn’t move.

Even now, listening to the Prisoner speak, he can’t stop thinking about the seagull, about how helpless he felt watching it fly over the trees. The horror of it. The feeling it gave him. As if he, himself, had an arrow through his body.

The Chaplain woke up from his quick nap, before coming to the prison, chilled even though the temperature was high and the humidity was thick and full. A stormy summer. Wildfires burning uncontrollably. Heat and tornados. The world is slowly melting, overheating. They used to call it global warming and now they just call it the weather. He woke wrapped tightly in his simple sheet. He pulled the comforter up to his neck until his body recovered some warmth. All the way to the prison, he couldn’t shake this chill. He drove with his windows down and the hot, thick, smoggy air around him,

Michelle Berry

everyone else sealed up in their permanently air-conditioned cars. The rain poured down. Sheets of it. Lightning flashed in the distance. Then in the Warden's air-conditioned office, and then in the cold reality of death row, the Chaplain still shivered to keep warm.

“Just be careful, Chaplain,” the Warden had said in a deep, low voice. Almost a whisper. “You never know what tricks these guys have up their sleeves. He's a murderer, remember. A violent man. He's not just some thief. We wouldn't be executing him if he were just some thief. This is serious stuff. You never know how much this kind of stuff can fuck with you.” The Warden rolled his finger through the air around his temple. His eyes widened. “Cuckoo. Cuckoo.”