

Reformation
A Halloween Story
by Curtis Berry

Police Chief Marvin O'Brien folded the newspaper angrily and turned off the reading light above his head. He glanced at the young officer behind the wheel of the late model cruiser and smiled slightly; the rookie was nervous--that much was evident by his rigid posture look of complete concentration on his face.

The trip from Tulsa had been long and boring. They had been driving since yesterday, the silence between them only occasionally broken by the grumbling chief trying in vain to find a decent country station on the car's factory-issue AM radio.

The graying chief kept his hard gaze on the rookie, whose behavior had been nothing less than exemplary from the outset. Marvin prided himself with a reputation for being one of the most efficient--and toughest--police chiefs in Oklahoma. Watching new officers like Frank Benson squirm in his presence was one of the little perks that he enjoyed.

Marvin inwardly chuckled, knowing what Benson was probably thinking: "Oh god, why did they pick me to drive old hard-ass O'Brien all the way to Omaha and back?" The men back at the station had probably ribbed him, saying that it was an honor to be at the chief's side.

To pass the time and the miles, Marvin had been reading the

Tulsa Tribune. As soon as he had unfolded the paper, his eyes had fallen on the front page story. That was when the rugged chief realized that his grief would never end. The title of the article: `NELSON GETS 10! MURDERERS 1, JUSTICE 0'.

The event had been O'Brien's baby for the past year and a half. While robbing a local convenience store, a man named Joseph Nelson had looked up to find the place surrounded by police. Desperate, Nelson had reacted by grabbing the store clerk. He proceeded out the front door while holding the hapless cashier in front of him like a human shield.

O'Brien was there. Crouching behind one of the patrol cars with bullhorn in hand, he had tried to talk Nelson into putting down his gun and surrendering.

For a moment, Nelson looked to be considering doing just that. He had loosened his hold on his hostage and was beginning to lower his weapon. The situation looked good.

But for some ungodly reason, the clerk made a play for the gun and turned and tried to wrestle it away from Nelson, causing it to fall to the ground. Before nearby officers could act, Nelson had thrown off his attacker and was diving for his fallen pistol.

The officers reached Nelson and set upon him just as his hand closed around the gun. All three wrestled for several tense moments before two muffled shots rang out. Nelson was subsequently overwhelmed by a mass of men in blue and was cuffed.

But when the pile of officers was untangled, one of them

remained down, never to rise again.

Marvin had seen many people die in his line of work and had quickly learned to subvert his emotions. He still cared, but not so much that he allowed himself to be swallowed by their loss, which was what happened to some police officers. The death of a cop, however--one of *his* cops--was something that he had never been able to swallow.

In the turbulent trial that followed, the enraged community wanted the murderer sent to the chair. What had stood in the way of the just solution had been Nelson's attorney, a slick dog out of Chicago. He somehow managed to convince the jury that the actions of the two officers were negligible, and that the firing of the weapon had not been premeditated. Those packed inside the sweltering courtroom were elated when Nelson was convicted but shocked when the judge pronounced sentence: ten years in the Oklahoma State Penitentiary with the opportunity for parole in five.

Marvin would never forget the victorious smile plastered on Nelson's smug puss. Oh, how he had wanted to kill the bum ... still does.

Yet another image emblazoned clearly in Marvin's mind was the faces of the slain officer's family. He clearly felt their anguish and sense of betrayal at the hands of the justice system. In most cases of cold-blooded murder, the families of the victims got some measure of satisfaction knowing that the killer was either going to or rot in prison for the rest of their life. But these poor people

wouldn't get that satisfaction; their killer would live on, his every moment of freedom mocking the memory of a good man.

Over the next few weeks, Marvin pulled some strings on a far-flung hunch. He had recently heard about violent convicts being reformed by a program instituted and administered by the warden at the Nebraska State Penitentiary.

Researching further, Marvin had found staggering reports about all the murderers sent there over the past twenty-five years with life sentences. Every single one of them had been paroled early for good behavior--years earlier than their original day of eligibility. What stood out was how each one of them had undergone the warden's mysterious program, for which Marvin could find no information on.

Those released had been monitored for years, with ninety-nine percent of them showing no signs of remission as they went on to lead productive lives. The implications were breathtaking. The warden, named Shapiro, had supposedly been doing this for a quarter century now and Marvin was truly interested to meet him.

Using all his influence and a calling in a few favors, Marvin had managed to get Nelson transferred to the Nebraska pen. There, the rotten bastard would undergo Shapiro's reformation program. Marvin found himself hoping against hope to discover that the warden was employing some sort of torture device to get his results, but he knew that was impossible.

Marvin and Benson perked up as the prison came into view, lit

up brightly like a beacon in the night. Frank pulled up to the gate and rolled down his window as the car came to a stop. A stocky guard stepped out from a small gate house and leaned forward with his clipboard in hand.

"Howdy!" he smiled, happy to see someone so late at night. "What can I do for you?"

"Police Chief O'Brien of Tulsa here to see Warden Shapiro," Frank announced in his best, official-sounding tone.

The guard checked his list, stopping at some point on the paper and tapping the spot with the tip of his pencil. "Yes sir. Just turn left as you drive inside and follow the signs to the visitors parking area. Can't miss it." He stepped back into his gate box flipped a switch. The twin, chain link gates opened with an electric hum, and the black and white sedan glided through.

Once out of the car, the two travelers stretched and popped their tired joints thankfully. Not wanting to waste time, Marvin quickly made his way into the main building. The Tulsa policemen were ushered through several guarded checkpoints before being led to a small room to await the warden's arrival.

Minutes later, a stately-looking old man entered the room. He wore a dark suit with a striped silk tie and he leaned on an ivory-tipped cane. His gray hair was slicked back neatly, and his weathered face bore a pleasant smile.

"Good morning, gentlemen," he nodded curtly. His accent was heavy and hard for Marvin to place. The warden moved over and

seated himself in a plush chair opposite his two visitors.

"I am Eric Shapiro," he introduced himself. "Call me Eric, please. And you are Chief O'Brien and officer Benson, I presume?"

The Tulsa men expressed return greetings.

Marvin got right down to business. "Eric. I assume you've received my transfer from Tulsa county detention?"

Eric nodded. "Joseph Nelson. He is here."

"Good. I would like for you to supervise him personally," Marvin continued while returning the warden's steely gaze. "Your reform program has had amazing success with men like Nelson, which is why I want him to go through it."

Eric smiled. "Ah yes, I have gone over the file on Mr. Nelson in great detail. A nasty individual he is, but I think we can handle him, my good Chief O'Brien." As the conversation continued, Eric produced a silver coin and began playing with it in his right hand.

Marvin asked the warden several questions about the nature of his reform, but each time he was met with polite, yet evasive answers. At one point, the coin dropped to the floor and rolled close to Marvin's foot. He reached down to pick it up and quickly drew his hand back when Eric darted from his seat and quickly snatched the coin off the rug. In doing so, the warden's arm extended out from his sleeve, revealing several numbers tattooed upon his forearm.

Marvin squinted to make them out but they were too small for him to see.

It was at this point that the stately warden chose to end the

conference, indicating that it was getting late. At his call, a guard opened the door and proceeded to lead the two guests to their room for night.

Marvin was intrigued by the foreign gentleman who oversaw so many hundreds of convicts. Even so, the warden's elusiveness immediate made Marvin suspicions.

Many times before, by taking heed of those suspicions, Marvin had nabbed criminals who might have otherwise escaped the law's notice. But this was the warden of the Nebraska State Penitentiary, Marvin reminded himself abruptly, supposedly a pillar of society.

Then why, Marvin wondered, was the hair on the back of his neck bristling?

The guest room looked like a suite right out of Holiday Inn, complete with two twin beds and a small bathroom. Both men were beat and wasted no time in winding down from the hard day. At least the beds were comfortable and the hot water hot.

Marvin tried to strike up a conversation with Benson about the warden only to realize that the younger officer was too self-conscious to offer any real insight. With a sigh, Marvin rolled into bed and snapped off the lamp. Maybe some sound sleep would soothe his tired and troubled mind.

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The next morning, a bell sounded and row upon row of cell doors slid open. The prisoners filed out of their holes and shuffled to the mess hall for breakfast. They were clothed in the same light

blue jeans and denim shirts, with each man bearing a different number on the shirt's pocket. The convicts were composed of negroes, whites, some spanish and representatives from a mishmash of other cultures.

After breakfast, the inmates piled outside for exercise. The penitentiary was a state-of-the-art facility with high fences and armed guards seemingly everywhere.

A few prisoners ran along a paved track encircling the vast outer courtyard. Some played basketball on a court situated in the center of the grounds, while many converged on the weight racks to pump iron. Lifting weights was a serious thing to some of the men, who, over the course of their stay, managed to mold bodies worth competing with.

Among them stood a new man--Joe Nelson. He was in his mid-twenties, with wavy brown hair that reached the top of his broad shoulders. His lean, chiseled face lent him a sly look that made people suspect he was up to something--and usually he was. Joe currently spotted a man on the bench press when several blacks stepped up as a group.

"Yo, sunshine!" the largest of the bunch moved to stand within inches of Joe. He was fully six feet tall and all muscle and flashed a confident grin revealing a mouth full of gold teeth.

Joe looked up and snorted derisively. He knew this would happen eventually--the old dogs showing the new ones who boss. "What can I do for you, Jackson?" Joe asked in a low voice. A few

muffled chuckles came out of the growing crowd.

"My name's Mamba," the man growled, his smile gone, "and what you can do for me is shine my mother fucking shoes."

Joe looked down at Mamba's feet for several seconds before glancing back up surprised. "Those are shoes?" he sneered. "I thought you'd just washed and combed the hair on your feet, boy." A roar of laughter went up among the gathered inmates just before Mamba pounced.

Joe easily dodged to the side to avoid the mass coming at him. He lashed out, his fist swinging savagely down across Mamba's neck, sending him sprawling face first to the pavement. Joe wasn't hoping to take him out in one blow, he just wanted to make him look like shit.

Mamba was up in a flash, and the two fighters squared off inside a ragged circle formed by scores of cheering inmates.

It didn't take long for Joe to prove that his speed and skills were superior to those of his larger opponent. He darted in and out, ducking all of Mamba's punches while easily landing several of his own.

Mamba hit the ground just as the guards began arriving and busting up the crowd. Before moving off, Joe looked down at Mamba. "Fuck with me again, boy," he hissed, "and you won't live to screw your next punk!"

This sort of event happened occasionally, and the guards did little more than disperse the mob.

Joe wandered over to the fence near the visitor's entrance, where he spied Chief O'Brien and his partner talking with Warden Shapiro. The moment he had arrived, Joe had been taken to see the warden. The weak-looking old man was polite and had asked some very routine questions--except for one.

Shapiro had wanted to know if Joe knew anything about World War II. Joe had studied very little of anything in high school, let alone world history, and he admitted his ignorance on the subject. Following the conversation, Joe was left with the impression that the old fart was a little bit senile.

Marvin caught sight of Joe looking his way and tried his best to avoid eye contact.

He failed.

Joe grinned and waved.

Eric turned and gave a curt nod before ushering the two policemen out of the visitor's gate to their car. He seemed eager to get the men on their way.

As the Tulsa cruiser disappeared from view, the warden reentered the prison grounds and strode over to where Joe stood watching. "Good morning, mister Nelson," he said, his accent evident. "I trust that your first night in our fine establishment has met with your approval?"

Joe suppressed a sarcastic response. "It has, warden."

Eric fished a bright silver coin out of his pocket and began to maneuver it through his fingers with considerable dexterity. "I trust

also that your stay with us will be without incident," he added.

"I'll try my best to be a good little boy, warden." Joe wanted to laugh but for some strange reason felt it wouldn't be a good idea. Sometimes the nice guys were the ones you didn't want to fuck with.

The warden tossed the coin over the fence and Joe caught it easily. "As a token of my trust that you will behave, I want you to keep that," he said. "It's a limited edition silver pfennig," he raised an eyebrow. "Worth a lot of money to the right buyer. It may give you something to look forward to when you are released."

Joe laughed. "Warden, ten years is a long time. I'll be a lot older by time I walk out those gates."

Eric turned to leave and then stopped to look back. "Maybe not, my dear man. Maybe not." He departed and walked off toward the main building.

Joe shook his head slowly. What the Hell was that supposed to mean? Looks like the head dog here in con-land is a couple of cards short of a full deck after all, he thought with a chuckle.

Joe held up the pfennig for a look. It was no bigger than a dime and in pretty good condition. Engraved on one side was a man in some sort of uniform, his right arm held out stiffly before him in a salute. Below that were some foreign words that Joe didn't recognize. The reverse side of the coin sported the image of a flag with a symbol Joe did recognize--a swastika. Below that were more foreign words and the date 1943.

Though Joe was no expert, even he knew that a coin like this, if

made of real silver would be worth some cash. How Shapiro could afford to give away stuff like this was beyond Joe--but he wasn't one to argue with money. With a shrug, he pocketed the pfennig and headed over toward the basketball court.

The rest of the day went by uneventfully. Mamba turned out to be the leader of the largest gang of the many running around in the prison. Joe's fists had earned him some respect, which meant everything to a man in behind bars.

After dinner, the inmates were herded into their cells for the night. Joe, however, got an unexpected surprise. As per orders from the warden, a pair of gruff guards slapped him in a cell in the isolation ward. He figured it was because of the fight.

A couple of hours later, the lights-out bell sounded, and the cells went dark.

Joe exhaled deeply and settled onto his bed. It took a while, but he finally managed to doze off.

The prison was generally quiet after lights-out, except for occasional bursts of laughter or shouts echoing through the corridors followed by several others hollering for quiet.

Joe's cell door clicked and slid silently open. A darkened figure lithely stepped inside. It set a candle on the table at the head of Joe's bed and struck a match.

Eric Shapiro carefully lit the candle, which filled the cell with a pale light. In his right hand he clutched a small, leather-bound book, which he cracked open as he knelt close to the bed.

Eric glanced at Joe's unmoving figure, his face barely illuminated in the pale candlelight. The aged warden gazed hard into the book and began reading from it, his voice no more than a whisper as the choppy, unintelligible words escaped his trembling lips.

Eric gestured with his left hand as he spoke.

A soft glow began to emanate from Joe's shirt pocket. The light became steadily brighter and hotter, and the faint smell of burning cotton began wafting upward.

Joe sat up with a start while pawing at his shirt. "What the Hell's going on here?" he cried as he pulled out the pfennig. Though burning hot moments before, it was now cool to the touch. Joe blinked in surprise at the sight of the warden.

"Relax, Mr. Nelson," Eric soothed. "I just wanted your attention."

"Well you damn well got it!" exclaimed Joe as his eyes flicked from his burned pocket to the foreign coin in his hand.

"I want you to look closely at the pfennig, Mr. Nelson," instructed Eric. "Very closely."

Joe frowned. This was bullshit, the warden inside his cell--and talking gibberish at that. "If I weren't such a nice guy, I could strangle you and nobody could do shit about it."

Joe leaned forward as if to make good on his threat.

Eric sat still, his unflinching gaze causing Joe to blink and settle back slowly on his bed.

"Look at it, Joseph," Eric persisted quietly. "It holds the key to your salvation."

Puzzled, Joe brought the coin up gave it a good look. Shapiro is a psycho, Joe decided with certainty. Then he quickly reminded himself that his balls were in that psycho's hands. He would have to humor him—at least for now.

Eric gestured once more and whispered a quick phrase.

The coin flashed.

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Marvin was pissed. An hour before noon, after having sidestepped every one of his questions about the program, the warden had done everything but outright order him and Frank on their way. Then, at high noon, the cruiser took a crap right in the middle of nowhere.

Luckily enough there had been a lonely gas station just up the road. After towing the Ford in and giving it a quick look, the raspy old owner relayed that the car's radiator was shot and the only available replacement was about a day away.

Pops, as he was called, wiped his hands clean with a shop rag. "I can set you up in one the rooms in my trailer if'n you like."

Marvin mulled the offer over a moment before brightening suddenly. "No, actually. I think we can get by in the guest quarters back at the penitentiary. That is, if you can give us a ride there."

"No problem," replied Pops with a toothless grin. He was going to gouge the Hell out of these city boys anyway, so why not tack on

an extra fifty bucks to the bill for a taxi ride?

They arrived at the penitentiary about four o'clock, having spent most of the ride listening to Pops complain about "how those damned commies are infesting every part of the good old US of A" while never once going over twenty miles per hour.

After explaining the situation to the gate guard, the Tulsa men were allowed inside and ushered back to the guest room. Before the guard could leave, Marvin caught him by the sleeve.

"I'd appreciate you telling the warden I'm here. I'd like to see him when he's free."

The guard shook his head with a smile. "Mr. Shapiro has left word not to be disturbed under any circumstances. He's funny that way."

Marvin offered no argument, but his neck-hair was standing on end again. The question of how all those prisoners had been totally reformed could not be ignored. Why the warden's program hadn't gained national attention was another mystery to Marvin. Modesty was one thing, but Shapiro was being downright uncooperative. Marvin decided then and there that he wouldn't leave this time until he got some answers.

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Pain. Terrible, gut wrenching pain.

Joe sat up with a start and immediately grabbed his stomach. Never before had he felt the kind of piercing hunger that gripped his gut right now. Grimacing, Joe struggled out of his bed. His bare feet

slapped against the cold floor, and he crumpled to the ground in a heap. For some reason it took all his strength to stand. What the Hell?

And then the stench of urine and excrement hit Joe like a brick, nearly bowling him over. He squinted through the dim light, trying to locate the source of the horrid smell.

The more Joe looked around him the more he realized that he wasn't in his cell at all. And where was Shapiro? The old boy had been sitting next to him a second ago.

"Pssst! Hey Eric!" came a whispered voice from above and behind.

Joe spun around to find himself staring at the most haggard looking man he had ever seen lying on the bunk above him. His eyes were pits in his sallow face, his breath was foul, and his tattered clothes hung from his skeletal frame like mop strings.

Bunk bed?

"Eric! Get back into bed before the guard discovers you," the man said in an accent similar to Shapiro's.

Joe frowned. "My name's Joe, and who the fuck are you?" he demanded loudly.

The other man threw up his hands and motioned for Joe to be quiet.

Joe started to say something when a light caught his eye. Through a window he could see the sun beginning to peek over the distant horizon. The light filtering into the room revealed more

bunks filled with bodies that began to stir, their ragged coughs beginning to fill the air.

This was definitely not his cell.

The door at the far end of the room burst open and in stomped a towering man in a grey uniform with what looked to be a machine gun slung over his shoulder.

"Up, you craven scum!" he bellowed. "I want to see you working faster than a snail this morning! Actung! Schnell!" he screamed as the thin figures began sluggishly climbing out of their bunks.

That was when Joe realized that the rank odor came from the other men. The ghastly figures filing out through the door slouched low, their bare heads hung against their chests. A few were clothed in grey shirts with blue stripes and matching trousers while most wore mere rags. None of them had shoes.

Joe looked down at himself and gasped in horror. The bones in his hands almost showed through his skin, and his ribs showed through his pale skin. "This isn't me," he gasped.

"You there!" screamed the soldier at Joe. "Get your stinking ass moving, NOW! Or I'll beat you dead!"

Joe lurched forward to obey and followed the last man outside as fast as his already cramping muscles would take him.

Unsatisfied with Joe's progress, the sneering soldier delivered a vicious kick to his's ribs as he walked past. Though a glancing blow, it shot waves of pain throughout Joe's body, and he nearly fell

again.

The group of twenty men emerged outside into the frozen morning. They stood shivering in a courtyard filled with wooden barracks similar to the one they had just exited from. From those places shuffled more living dead into the yard, pushed and kicked by still more soldiers.

Flakes of fine, white snow fell lazily from the sky, covering everything. Strangely enough, noticed Joe, the snowflakes didn't melt on his skin.

The breeze shifted from the right and Joe's weakened knees nearly buckled again from a new odor that caused him to wretch. He spotted a from a large, brick structure topped with four round brick smoke stacks a few paces away. From atop those metal fingers billowed gouts of thick, grey smoke. The smell was definitely coming from there.

Joe's head began to spin as his mind raced for answers. One moment he was sitting there talking to the warden, and the next minute--this. Just what kind of nightmare was this, anyhow?

The uniformed soldier overseeing Joe's group moved before the line of gaunt prisoners. "You are lucky today!" he announced with a broad grin. "If you do well during this day's work, you will get a double ration of food! But you must work quickly!" he warned. "You will be taking bodies from the showers and placing them in that building over there!" He pointed to the one with the smoke stacks, which had an ominous look about it.

The prisoners turned and began to march toward a long, white building. Written on the wall were some words in a language Joe didn't recognize, yet for some reason he knew that they read SHOWERS.

What the Hell is all this and who are these people? Joe thought frantically. These men were all death on legs--himself included. And the soldiers. If he didn't know any better, he would have thought they were German soldiers from some of those old war movies he had seen as a kid. If this was a nightmare, it wasn't like nothing he had experienced before.

His thoughts were interrupted by a low booming noise coming from the direction of the rising sun. Several more dull, thumping explosions began following the first with increasing regularity. The men all looked to the east, and a few whispers went back and forth among them.

"Don't concern yourselves with that, my children," spoke the soldier smugly. "Our armies are beginning a counterstroke on the Russian dogs today. Now move!" he punctuated his command by kicking at one of the prisoners moving too slowly for his taste. Although the soldier's voice was filled with arrogance, Joe caught a fleeting glimpse of fear in his eye.

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Marvin roused himself out of bed only to see that Benson was already up and in the bathroom shaving. The sun was peeking through the drapes and was already warming the room. Marvin

parted the drapes and squinted outside, looking for nothing in particular. He needed coffee in the worst way.

"Morning, Chief," called Benson as he wiped his face free of a few last bits of shaving cream. "I called the gas station. Pops said the new radiator would be in the car around dinner time."

"Fat lot of good that'll do us," Marvin grumbled. "We'll probably have to stay another night." Then he smiled. "Which is just as well since I plan to pin Shapiro down on his little secret of success before I go home."

"I was sure hoping to get back to Joan and the baby," Benson muttered sullenly. "I should at least call her before she goes bananas worrying."

Marvin dressed himself, plotting his next conversation with the warden. "You make your call while I try to find Shapiro. I'll meet you back here in about an hour, okay?"

"Okay, Chief."

Marvin barged out into the hall and almost knocked the warden down. He quickly steadied the man.

"Excuse me, Mr. Shapiro, I didn't-"

"That's Eric, please. Call me Eric," he smiled wanly as Marvin released him. Eric was once again dressed in a dark suit and tie, and, as ever, his white hair was slicked back perfectly.

"Oh, I-I'm sorry ... Eric," Marvin stuttered. "I was just coming to see you. Would it be all right if Benson here made a call home to his wife?"

"Yes. Yes of course, Officer Benson." Eric said pleasantly. "You remember where the visitor's area is, don't you?"

Benson nodded in response and hurried down the mirror-smooth hallway.

"Walk with me, Chief O'Brien," Eric spoke in a level voice as they began walking. "Why are you here?"

Marvin explained the cruiser's untimely demise. "It looks like we won't be able to leave until tomorrow morning," he explained while gauging the warden's reaction.

Eric frowned ever-so-slightly before replying. "I regret that my duties here keep me from socializing for any length of time, Chief O'Brien. You understand, I trust."

"Surely," Marvin nodded. "As long as you understand my determination to speak with you about your methods of rehab-"

"I would like to," Eric interrupted wryly while glancing at his watch and then back at Marvin. "Unfortunately I have an early orientation meeting with some prisoners who were--as you say--out of line yesterday. If you'll excuse me." He bowed slightly and walked off down an adjacent hallway.

Marvin watched the warden depart, and his eyes narrowed sharply. The times before, when Eric had been evasive, Marvin had given the old boy the benefit of the doubt. And why not? The man had a lot of responsibility running a prison and didn't have a lot of time to simply shoot the breeze.

But now Marvin wasn't so sure he was willing to accept that

line of reasoning. Eric Shapiro was avoiding him. Though just a plain country boy at heart, Marvin could tell when a man was squirming. His determination now set in concrete, the seasoned Tulsa chief made for the cafeteria to get some breakfast and a shot of Pepto.

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Under the watchful eye of an armed soldier, the menagerie of walking corpses entered the showers, the weight of their oppression hanging in the cold air like a dark cloud. Inside, the charnel smell was thick and choking. Joe found that he wasn't as repulsed by it as he was before, making him wonder how he could possibly be getting used to it.

The workers were divided into groups of two and instructed to enter the shower, grasp a body, and carry it to the building with the smoke stacks.

Joe waited until the soldier had turned his back before leaning close to the man who had been picked as his partner. "Where are we?" he whispered. The man simply stared ahead and shrugged.

They entered the shower stall, and Joe couldn't believe his eyes. Under the small, barred window high on the wall rose a mound of bloodied, naked bodies. It looked almost as though they had tried to climb on top of one other to get to the window. Some of the men and women had either gouged their eyes or torn out their hair--or both. Their faces were contorted into agonized stares. The tile floor, normally white, was now stained with urine, excrement, and blood.

The soldier saw Joe lagging and pushed him forward. "Get to it,

dog."

As Joe grasped the cold, lifeless hands of a nearby body, his stomach wretched. He leaned over to puke, but there came only violent dry-heaves.

Recovering himself, Joe began moving outside with his partner. They lugged their body past another soldier beating a hapless prisoner with the butt of his gun. Joe shook his head and continued on into the building where the bodies were being piled on the dirt floor.

Inside, the place was unbearably hot. A long hallway ran the length of the building, one side of which was a series of iron doors--some open and some closed. Those that were latched shut glowed a bright, cherry red.

Nearby, a pair of grim-faced prisoners hoisted bodies from the pile and tossed them into the open doors. Oh my God, thought Joe. They're burning them--burning them all.

As Joe headed back to the showers to continue his grisly task, he noticed several trucks entering the compound. All the while, the explosions in the distance were growing louder.

A thunderous roar overhead was followed by a silver plane zooming down toward the camp. A couple of the soldiers raised their machine guns and fired at the plane as it flew by, but with no effect.

Joe's heart was beating furiously, and he momentarily forgot his weariness and pain. Come on, you fucking nightmare, he pleaded silently. End now and let me wake up back in the pen.

It took about half an hour to transfer all the bodies from the showers to the ovens. Afterward, the prisoners were put to work loading the waiting trucks with supplies. The spent men were pushed relentlessly on, one of them collapsing and dying as a soldier beat the remaining life out of him right before Joe's exasperated eyes.

Despite the cruelty of the soldiers, they couldn't mask their fear as they continually glanced eastward.

As the noonday sun crept into the sky, the last truck was loaded and the exhausted prisoners were allowed to rest.

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Later that morning, Benson hitched a ride with an outgoing guard to Pop's gas station. He had convinced Marvin that a little presence might hurry the old man along toward getting the patrol car fixed. The rookie was itching to get home; unfortunately, his chief was no longer in such a rush.

Marvin had pondered the situation many times before breakfast but was unable come up with any solutions. Why was Eric ducking him? Was the old boy worried that he wouldn't get credit for his work? The image of a little old lady protecting her favorite apple pie recipe popped into Marvin's mind and he had to smile.

The thoughtful chief stared at the wall-mounted black-and-white television, currently alive with an old Andy Griffith re-run. Lunchtime was approaching, which was when Marvin hoped to catch the slippery warden in the staff lounge. There, he could ask him a

few point-blank questions. He almost felt like a cat getting ready to corner a mouse.

Marvin rolled off his bed and shut off the television. He left the room and slowed himself after realizing that he was practically running down the hall. Marvin entered the lounge moments later and spied his target sitting near the coffee machine. Eric looked up and sighed before taking another sip from his cup.

Marvin stopped at the lunch counter for a burger. When he finally got it, he turned to see that Eric was gone. "Shit!" he cursed as his eyes swept the room. Marvin barely caught sight of the dapper warden exiting the lounge. Slamming his food down on the counter, the chief rush off in pursuit. In the hallway, he spotted Eric moving quickly away.

"Eric!" Marvin shouted. "Eric, wait! I have to ask you something!" Marvin was running as fast as he could, all the while cursing every donut he had ever eaten.

Caught, Eric stopped and turned to face the puffing chief. "What can I do for you, Mr. O'Brien?" his tone was politely tolerant.

"I wanted to speak to you about your-" he huffed but was interrupted by a voice behind him.

"Mr. Shapiro!" called a guard near the lounge. "You have an important phone call--long distance."

Eric smiled slightly and tilted his head forward. "If you'll excuse me once more, Mr. O'Brien."

Marvin blocked the way.

"I intend to speak with you on the matter of your prisoner reform techniques before I go, sir. You have my word on that." Marvin emphasized this by raising his eyebrows.

Eric locked gazes with Marvin, who finally stepped aside. Without a word, he proceeded down the hallway and disappeared into the lounge.

Marvin, a dogged yet patient bastard, tapped his chin and muttered, "You can't dodge me forever, asshole."

*** * ***

Joe Nelson quickly realized that those responsible for running this grotesque hellhole were bugging out.

Only a few trucks--and even fewer soldiers--remained within the barbed wire fence of the prison camp. By now, at least two more planes had dove down and strafed the compound with their guns--killing several soldiers and a lot of prisoners.

One truck was hit, and it exploded in a bright ball of flames. Sporadic bursts of gunfire erupted here and there, accompanied by flaming explosions that rocked the compound.

Whenever Joe and the other wretches attempted to take cover from the danger, a soldier would shoot the ground at their feet and order them to continue working. As time went by, some of the other groups of prisoners were herded naked into the showers by soldiers who by now were working with a visible sense of urgency.

Joe figured that he would either wake up from this nightmare or get shot. Either way, it was better than going on with this horror.

For the first time in his rough life, during which crime and violence had been a constant companion, Joe Nelson was truly frightened.

An hour later, Joe's group was divided into twos again and ordered into the showers to unload the bodies of the prisoners who had just recently been herded inside. Joe knew now it would only be a matter of time before he would share their fate.

*** * ***

Marvin had spoken with Benson on the phone after dinner. The new radiator had arrived, and the car would be repaired in about an hour. Once that was done, Benson would drive back to the prison to spend a final night there.

By now, Marvin was ready to explode, for Eric had ordered the guards to put him off. Each time Marvin had shown up at the warden's office, he was curtly informed that the warden was in conference, or on the phone to an important official, or whatever. He knew the excuses were all a dodge.

Benson arrived back at the prison at about a quarter after six just as the setting sun was red on the horizon. Marvin decided not to mention his suspicions about the warden to his rookie partner. He decided that if he were going to converse with Shapiro at this point, it would be in a way that Benson wouldn't need to know about.

To pass the time, the Tulsa men watched television and played some gin. Marvin was unaware that he was losing every hand; his attention was squarely on the time. At ten o'clock, the guard shift changes would take place, which was when he would take a little

trip to the warden's quarters.

*** * ***

Eric Shapiro settled into the plush chair behind his desk and flicked on the small reading lamp. His breath was slow and measured as he fished a key out of his pocket. He unlocked the desk drawer and slid it open smoothly and slowly before pulling out a weathered book.

It felt good in his hands.

"Another hour and the task shall be done," Eric whispered through smiling lips. He withdrew a handkerchief from his coat pocket and wiped his perspiring brow. No matter how many times he had done this, he always became nervous when the final moment approached.

Eric gently cracked open the book and riffled through its musty pages until he found the right one. From there, he began to read. And the rest of the world was soon forgotten.

*** * ***

Marvin quietly stepped out from the room as soon as Benson hit the shower. He proceeded down the hallway to the exit. After peering through the window for some time and gathering his nerve, Marvin eased outside.

Across the open grounds, about fifty yards away, was the entrance to the staff quarters as well as those of the warden. The guard on the wall seemed more interested in the small radio that he had pressed against his ear than anything else.

Good.

Marvin bit his lip and moved. Staying close to the shadows, he arrived at the entrance to the staff building. He sneaked a peek through the windowed door to make sure the way was clear. It was.

The hallway was bright, and Marvin could see three doors on the right wall and two on the left. The far one on the left displayed the name WARDEN ERIC SHAPIRO.

Bingo.

But just as Marvin began to move again, that very door opened and out stepped the warden himself. Startled, Marvin leaned back out of view and held his breath. After a tense moment, he chanced a look only to see the warden stepping through a door at the end of the hallway.

Marvin open entered the building and hurried after his quarry, thinking it odd that the Eric would be going this way--to the isolation ward. And at this time of night?

At first, Marvin thought about yelling after the warden and cornering him again. But after chewing on it a moment, the chief decided that Eric would only find a way to weasel out of the encounter or just refuse to answer any questions. Marvin decided to follow the warden quietly to see what panned out.

Marvin neared the doors and looked through the window. He was getting good at this sneaking around business. Maybe a little too good, he thought. Marvin saw that Eric had stopped a few yards away and was busy talking to a guard standing behind a gate of iron

bars.

The guard smiled, nodded, and opened the door.

Eric stepped up to the guard and said a few brief words that Marvin couldn't hear. He then patted the man's shoulder before walking into the block.

The guard watched his boss disappear from view before producing a Playboy from the inside of his shirt. Leaving the gate open, he looked at his watch, nodded to himself, and ducked into a nearby bathroom.

Allowing the warden--or anyone--to enter the block unattended? Marvin thought with a frown. Leaving the security gate open and unmanned? This was getting weirder by the minute.

Assuming that the guard would be in the john long enough to get his rocks off, Marvin hurried to the checkpoint, stopped and glided through.

The isolation ward was composed of forty small cells, twenty on each side, that were used to hold men who were usually troublemakers or in danger of being harmed by their fellow prisoners. Currently the entire block was dark except for a pale light flickering from one of the cells.

Marvin grabbed a clipboard hanging on the wall near the gate and squinted at the writing. Scribbled on the lined sheet was a single name: Joseph T. Nelson, Cell 14.

With stealth borne from his fear of being caught, Marvin eased toward the open cell. All was quiet except for the sound of his

beating heart. Sweat rolled off of his brow down into his eyes, making them sting. He blinked hard and moved on.

Marvin squatted close and peered through the open cell door. Inside sat the warden on a stool, his back to the doorway. He was hunkered down over a small book in his lap. Atop a small table next to him rested a small candle, its weak flame flickering back and forth, causing Eric's shadow to bounce about in a lazy dance on the back wall. Lying on the bed was Joe Nelson, face up and fully clothed. His eyes were closed.

Eric reached into his pocket and pulled out a coin. He leaned forward and placed the coin on Joe's forehead, where it almost seemed to glow.

Adjusting his position to get an even better look, Marvin lost his balance and toppled forward. He reached out and grabbed the bars of the cell door, causing it to slide open fully with loud a clang.

Eric abruptly stood and turned. "O'Brien!" he gasped. "What in blazes are you doing?"

Marvin righted himself and stood, gathering his courage. The cat was out of the bag now, so he figured he might as well seize it by the tail. "I followed you here," he said resolutely. "You wouldn't talk to me, but I was damn well going to talk to you!"

"You must leave," growled the old man. "Now!"

"I'm not going anywhere until you've given me some answers," Marvin shot back. "You've been avoiding me, and now I think I know why."

Eric looked at his watch and winced. "I have no time to argue with you, Chief O'Brien," his distinctive accent now more pronounced than ever. "This man's life is more important than covering my own ass. Now if you must know, sit down in that chair over there and I will quickly explain. Time is of the essence!"

Marvin obliged as the warden impatiently settled back on his stool.

"It all started back in late 1939 in Prague," Eric started. "I was only eighteen at the time and a hard worker on my father's farm. From out of nowhere came the Blitzkrieg, which raged across our unprepared little country.

"My father and two brothers were killed. Somehow I managed to escape, and I eventually wound up on a farm many miles away. My freedom was short lived, though, as the house where I hid was overrun one night by Nazi troops. I, and the family sheltering me, was carted off to a concentration camp. There, we were stripped of everything--including our dignity. They spat on us, humiliated us and then they branded us." Eric rolled up the sleeve of his right arm and pointed to the tattooed numbers on his forearm.

"The name of that camp escapes me, but I survived there for two years before being taken to the infamous Auschwitz. Oh the horrors I have seen, O'Brien. They go beyond description. Yet somehow I managed to survive all of their torments. By using my skills as a cook, I bought myself time--valuable time.

"When the Russians came in late 1945, the murderous Nazis

tried to destroy everything before they left. They wanted to leave no trace of their villainous work. Thankfully, the Russians were too strong, too fast for them.

"At one point, when the camp was being overrun by Russian troops, the Germans guarding us began gunning down any prisoner they saw. Many of us managed to escape the carnage by taking cover beneath one of the barracks. From there I could see Russian soldiers advancing from the woods that ringed the camp. We prisoners, seeing freedom coming so close, were so swept with joy that we bolted from our hiding places and ran to greet our saviors.

Eric's eyes became distant. "Before I could get very far, a flash at my feet caught my attention." He grasped the coin from Nelson's forehead and held it up. "This is what I saw, and I picked it up.

"The others--God bless their souls--had continued on across the compound. They were slaughtered by a pair of Nazi pigs who had stepped out from behind a truck. Luckily enough, I escaped their notice and returned to my hiding place, where I prayed to God.

"Hours later, the Nazis were either dead or gone, and the Russians had taken the camp. Those of us who had survived were thrilled to finally be free, though most of us were so undernourished and weak that we could barely express our gratitude.

"A year later, I met a priest in Paris and told him of my ordeal. For some odd reason, he seemed to recognize me, although I had never met him. He told me that the coin I possessed was a gift from God. He termed my ordeal as a miracle and proclaimed that I was to

be the bearer of the memory of the holocaust and those who died in it. This I would do, the priest explained, armed with the power of God and this latin bible, which he gave to me."

Eric held up the weathered book. "I have no idea how the man knew these things. Later I came to realize that his words were true. Within these pages I found my calling and decided to use my special gift to take people who killed, maimed and destroyed and teach them to appreciate life by experiencing the horrors of death.

"So I eventually found myself here, in a place filled with killers," Eric sighed. "I have helped a great many of them realize the errors of their ways and emerge back into society perfectly reformed."

Engrossed in the amazing story, Marvin didn't notice that the warden's eyes were becoming bright with tears, which began flowing down his wrinkled cheeks. Eric quickly regained his composure and dabbed at his tears with a handkerchief. His steely eyes dropped from the Tulsa chief to his watch.

"Ah!" he exclaimed before setting the coin back upon Nelson's forehead. "I must finish my task now before it's too late!"

"You still haven't told me what you've done to this man," Marvin said, still unsure if he believed the warden's outlandish story.

Eric clenched his teeth in frustration. "By touching the coin to Nelson's body and reciting certain passages from within the bible, I can place his consciousness back in time into the body of one of the prisoners at the concentration camp."

Marvin stared wide-eyed at the Eric, whose face bore a look of total seriousness. "Place his consciousness," he glanced at Nelson, "back in time, into another person's body?"

"Yes."

"Whose body?"

"Mine."

*** * ***

Joe and his partner had just hauled another corpse to the ovens. By now, chaos had taken over the camp and soldiers were running everywhere. Some of them would crouch and fire eastward toward the tree line, while others fell to the ground, cut down by an enemy bullet.

The prisoners were now only being supervised by a single soldier, whose attention was fully on the approaching Russian threat.

Joe didn't intend walk around quietly until he was shot or forced to die in the deadly shower himself. He leaned close to his partner and whispered into his ear. "When we get close to the guard, I'll jump him. But I'll need your help to bring him down."

Like the other prisoners around him, the man simply stared ahead, seemingly oblivious to the goings on around him. Joe couldn't tell if his plea had been heard.

As they walked close to the distracted soldier, Joe attacked and caught the man totally by surprise. He quickly put the surprised German into a headlock, but his grip was weak and he knew he

couldn't hold on for long.

The soldier brought back his elbow, smashing Joe squarely in the nose and forcing him to loosen his hold. Again came the elbow. This time Joe slumped to the ground, blood trickling from his shattered nose.

The enraged Nazi cocked his machine gun and leveled it at Joe. "You stinking corpse! How dare you lay your festering hands on a soldier of the Reich!"

The gun fired into the air as the soldier arched his back in pain. He whirled around to face Joe's partner, who stood ready with a shovel in his hands. The stunned German felt the gash in the back of his neck and stared in shock at his bloodied fingers.

"Yes!" Joe exclaimed as he lurched to his feet and threw himself into the stunned guard's back, knocking him to the ground.

Coming out of their stupors, the other prisoners joined in the fight. Flailing their fists wildly, they mauled one the men who had subjugated them for so long. It was a small measure of revenge for them and they gladly took it.

Joe called for the others to follow him, and they all headed for cover. A couple of stumbling men collapsed, cut down by stray bullets that continually peppered the compound. Those who made it, including Joe, managed to reach safety in a crawlspace beneath a nearby barracks.

Suddenly, a tank appeared out of the smoke hovering just beyond the front gate and plowed through the barbed wire fence

with a crash. Its turret rotated slowly to the right and stopped. The main gun recoiled, belching fire and blowing a building across the way into rubble.

Several men who had been stalking along cautiously behind the tank, fanned out and entered the compound. They wore brown uniforms and green helmets.

At last they were saved! Joe thought, an overwhelming sense of anticipation growing within his starving belly. They had to be the Russians! grinned Joe.

Joe and the other ecstatic prisoners scrambled out of their rat holes and began running toward the tank.

* * *

"So whose consciousness is inside Nelson's body here?" inquired Marvin, now was fully wrapped up in the event.

"This body has no mind at the moment!" Eric snapped, by now sweating profusely. "His body is kept alive only by the power of the bible and the coin. But that won't last forever. In fact, if I don't finish my work now, the consequences will be disastrous!"

"Oh really?" Marvin pursed his lips slowly. "How disastrous?"

Oblivious to sudden change in the chief's tone, Eric hastily answered. "If I don't complete what I have begun, Nelson's identity will remain trapped back in my-" Eric stopped himself and raised his eyes from the book.

The man sitting across from him had a dangerous look on his face. Eric swallowed hard and began reading again from the latin

bible he held in his trembling hands. It had to be done now.

Marvin's reeled from a flashback of Nelson's trial and the verdict that had been read. Ten years was all that bastard had gotten. Ten years was a drop in the bucket for the murder of a police officer. What about the wife and little son of that man? Added to their grief was the knowledge that Nelson would be out on the street again.

Marvin's eyes focused on Eric Shapiro. If all of this mumbo jumbo were true, he thought, then by disturbing this so-called ceremony, he could trap Nelson in a concentration camp. What better punishment for a cop killer?

*** * ***

About a dozen yards out from the barracks, a small object appeared on the dirt floor of the compound. It was thin and circular, about the size of a dime, and silver in color. It was a pfennig--the engraving of a man with his hand outstretched on one side, and a flag with a swastika on the other. It began to pulse with a dim light that gradually increased in intensity.

Of the dozen men fleeing for their lives, only one man noticed the light--Joseph Nelson. He paused in his flight to see what it was.

*** * ***

Marvin's hand shot out and snatched the glowing coin off of Nelson's forehead. It seared his fingers, forcing him to drop it quickly. "Yeeeeooooow!" he cried as the coin hit the floor with a tinkle and rolled under the bed.

"My God, man! What have you done?" Eric exclaimed as he dropped to the floor began desperately reaching for the coin.

Marvin quickly recovered from the trauma of his burned fingers and grabbed the warden's shoulders roughly. With relative ease, he hauled the much older man up to his feet until they both stood nose to nose.

"Listen, Eric," Marvin's voice was low and menacing. "Joe Nelson deserves to be tortured for what he did. Whether he's reformed or not, that dead policeman will never be brought back!"

Somehow, Eric managed to tear away from the chief's grasp and resume his search.

Marvin grabbed the warden again, this time throwing him aside like a toy.

Eric tripped over the stool and crashed against the cell door. Stunned, he slid to the floor. The look of sheer horror on his face caused Marvin to pause.

"I-It's too late, now," Eric breathed in resignation. "Too late."

*** * ***

The coin disappeared. Joe thought he had seen something, but maybe not. It must have been his imagination, he thought with a shrug. Remembering his situation, he looked up and quickly resumed his sprint toward the Russians--and freedom!

The fleeing prisoners only got halfway across the courtyard before two German soldiers emerged from behind a burning truck. They fired their Schmeissers into the crowd, cutting down four men

like newly-mown grass.

Joe tried to reverse his course, but he too went down hard. The pain in his back immediately began to spread throughout his entire body like a rising tide of searing hot needles. A second bullet caught him in the neck, causing him to jerk wildly in response.

Several Russian soldiers opened fire and dispatched the two Germans quickly. But it was too late for Joe and several others.

"I thought I'd never wake up from this damned nightmare," chuckled Joe just before he died.

*** * ***

In Cell 14, Joe Nelson's eyes opened wide and his chest heaved once before his body slowly faded from view.

Gone.

Marvin's hand flew to his mouth in disbelief. He looked down at the fallen warden, who watched him forlornly, a kind of peacefulness spread across his sallow face.

Eric Shapiro's substance became hazy and then transparent. But before he had completely faded away, he spoke a few words which Marvin just barely made out.

"God's work ... thwarted by a selfish man," he whispered.

Gone.

The bible and the coin both disappeared.

Marvin suddenly felt dizzy right before everything went dark.

*** * ***

"Honey? Honey!" a sweet voice caused Marvin O'Brien to jerk

awake. He was in his robe leaning back in his favorite La-Z-Boy recliner with the evening paper draped over his belly. He must have been dozing.

"Marvin!" called the female voice again, this time a little more demanding.

"Yeah, Margaret?"

"Do you want any coffee while I'm in here?" she asked.

Marvin was having trouble comprehending things after his turbulent dream, which actually seemed more like *deja-vu*.

"No thanks, dear. I'm fine." He picked up the paper and looked at the date May 12, 1989. The headlines read: **EX-CON ON PAROLE KILLS FIVE IN OMAHA.**

Marvin frowned, trying to place the event. It was slowly coming back to him now. A murderer who had been paroled from the Nebraska pen after ten years had walked into a McDonald's yesterday and blown away a family of five before officers cornered him and gunned him down.

Prison must have really changed him, thought Marvin with disgust. There had to be a better way of fixing those guys before letting them back out into society.

Still disoriented, Marvin rose from his chair and moved over to stand by the window. He folded his paper under his arm while mildly appreciating the setting sun as it painted the Oklahoma sky red. It was Halloween now, and the kiddies would be out in force soon.

That was by far the most vivid dream he ever had--almost too

real. It would be best not to tell Margaret about it. She would only worry.

Marvin spotted a costumed young boy walking along the sidewalk across the street. The cute pirate turned to cross the street but stopped to pick up a small, shining object out of the gutter. A truck shot past, narrowly missing him.

"Shit!" Marvin exclaimed Marvin and darted for the door. He whipped it open just as the little pirate was hurrying up the driveway. If the boy hadn't stopped when he did, he would have been killed!

"Are you all right, boy?" Marvin asked, still shaken by the near miss.

"Sure, Mr. O'Brien!" beamed the youth while proudly holding up a small coin. "I found a lucky dime!"

"You don't know just how lucky it is, kid," Marvin sighed.

"Huh?"

"Oh, nothing," Marvin smiled in relief as he reached back through the doorway and grabbed a bowl of candy off the table. He placed a handful into the smiling pirate's bag.

"Thanks, Mr. O'Brien!" and the boy was quickly on his way to the next house.

Marvin shook his head with a sigh. "Thank God you're alive, kid."