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Why I Walk

Walk-Off

Lonesome, I will be no longer
Tied to you. You need a stronger
Hand than mine to slap your face.
When I do it, I leave no trace.
Will Butler, “A Man Leaves the Sea”

I come from an agreeable family. That seems both a bit of damning with faint praise and a little coy, but I am nothing, considering the disappointments and terrible possibilities of the world, if not grateful. Nobody in my bloodline is psychologically wicked, or wrecked, though my mother has thus diagnosed every one of us—father, two brothers, me, individually—at one time or another. “Christ,” is how she puts it, “it’s like you’ve got a screw loose.”
There is a prison in my hometown that has maintained throughout my life the dubious distinction of being the largest in the world. I never thought much about it at the time, although it had so many subtle effects (and by subtle I sometimes mean unsubtle) on the way I think and live. The prison, when I first consider it, stands for forgiveness, atonement, a chance to “work it off,” emphasis on the work.

My uncle and my father played baseball against the prison team when they were promising minor leaguers in southern Michigan. They never did well against the prison team, for that adversary always had, as my father grumbled, the home team advantage. My uncle Mike remembers a third baseman on the opposing team yelling at him, “Come on, we haven’t got all day!” (they didn’t: a whistle blew, and the lockdown would commence). But Uncle Mike, sharp-tongued as well as fleet of foot, bellowed back, “I figure you’ve got a couple of years!” The third baseman hurtled toward my uncle, who was sure that he was in for it. “Thanks, Jack,” the prisoner said, instead, “the judge said it was life!” Ron LeFleur, a beloved Detroit Tiger, played many a time against my father on the diamond with the high, high home-run wall. My father, from whom I have inherited a weakness for the obvious statement, tells us they were playing to a captive audience.

Living downwind of the world’s largest prison (largest walled prison, the natives of Jackson will specify, so that you knew we were protected) didn’t necessarily generate a gallows humor so much as a shaggy-dog-story patience: we did have all day, if not three to five years, if not life.

Nobody ever complained about the prison. It was on the outskirts of town, out of sight, out of “do you mind?” and it provided more jobs than the ever-failing car industry factories in Detroit’s orbit. Every time somebody got laid off from the Goodyear tire plant, they were usually able to find work at Southern Michigan Penitentiary. My brother is now a guard there, or more than a guard,
something of a boot camp trainer for nonviolent criminals; he is, approaching forty, in tip-top shape, so the prison has kept him young and put food on his family’s table. I know an inordinate number of dentists and hygienists who work with the teeth of prisoners there, and that sometimes gives me pause: experiments?

Too, we benefited from the cottage industries of the prison. License plates, yes, and no end to the municipal signs that had to be made and remade that read, “Welcome to Jackson We Like It Here,” because so many were stolen or altered, and that’s all I’ll say about it. They had, and still have as far as I know, a publishing house for the production of Braille books. When I was in high school, some of my juvenilia, a handful of dreadful poems, were “translated” into Braille, the only work I’ve written aside from a bit of smut I wrote for an anthology, now available to a lucky but limited German audience, that has been translated into anything other than Times New Roman. So you see, having a prison in your town supports an economy and arguably assists municipal life, science, and even art. I have a houseplant that I feed only bitter, black, cold coffee and its grounds. It is green; it has to be cut back regularly.

How does having such a structure in my life affect the way I look at things? What must I have taken from that early time that I haven’t been aware of? Things that wouldn’t seem too much “reading into” the business? A love of safe spaces, sure. A distaste for the color orange, the official color of inmate overalls. A judging personality? A need to live at the tops of apartment buildings to have the sentry’s view? One’s habits are indeed affected by circumstances. A man living alone, I clutch, at regular intervals, for the clanking bunching that is my house keys in my front pocket, and grasp my ass at the other intervals to feel the persistence of my wallet.

I know there are ways in which the women of my town seem more fearless, brassier. One surname on my father’s side of the family is “Hauser,” and when the women of that clan, my mother included,
get a little liquor’d-up together, they are not to be messed with. They
are called by the men of the family, with some affection and a little
concern, the “Hauser Broads.” When I graduated from high school,
they took over the folding tables closest to the beer keg at the party
thrown in honor of my diploma, and my English teacher heard
them so identified, and she said, “Hauserbroad? Is that your
mother’s maiden name?”

So Aunt Charmayne and my mother discussed this fearless family
trait with me while snowbirding it on Jekyll Island off the coast of
Georgia last winter, during the “Finders Keepers” ball, where I was
the youngest buck by at least two dozen years. Half my family
spends winter on that island, golfing and learning how to navigate
southern lingo (“Would you like some assed tay?”) and living with
gators (on the golf course, my father recommends zigzagging to
throw them off). The “Finders Keepers” ball was held on February
20, so they were able to get a lot of leftover Valentine’s Day candy
conversation hearts (“Hubba Hubba,” “Oh You Kid”) for cheap, to
scatter across the tables. The real draw was the promise of “heavy
hors d’oeuvres,” upon which I think my parents live exclusively
through those short-day’d months. The ladies dressed in “glamour”
tops, Lawrence Welk/ish chiffon, and mannerist turtlenecks to com-
fortably dance to the live big band tunes, and their menfolk hustled
to keep up with them, all cardigans and cartilage. I stood in line be-
hind an intimidating octogenarian with skin that had been tanned
and retanned into a patterned, seasoned leather the pigskin color of
the Corsican citadel Calvi (and by the color of Calvi, I mean a foot-
ball), watching her scrape half a smoked salmon off its salver into her
matching purse, and when I glared, she glared back, and what I
thought was: Zigzag. Zigzag.

But there was plenty of prime rib at the other food station, and I
listened to my father and Uncle Doug, a career man on the train
line, talk about hornets’ nests and various methods for clearing them out (drilling, duct tape, flames). I, intermittently bored and then terrified (the way a prisoner might experience the doing of time), looked over at the Calvi-colored salmon-stealer and thought, hornets are ornery.

My mother and Aunt Charmayne, at the other side of the table, talked golf that week. The latest scandal had to do with a regular in their set who went golfing the day after her husband’s death. They both agreed that they were on her side (so was I), and then they moved on to the subject of real rudeness on golf courses, and this included the gators—some business here about “false charges.”

“Aren’t you afraid of the gators?” I asked, finally. Weren’t there mistakes, on both sides, about eggs and balls, and sand traps and water hazards?

“Oh, hell no, Brian,” my mother said. “They mind their business and we mind ours.” Minding your own business is also considered a virtue in my hometown.

“Besides,” Aunt Charmayne added, slapping her own thigh, which she does for any sort of emphasis, having to make herself understood to a long line of rowdy boys and wayward dogs and geese, that, as I remembered from childhood, boldly came up off the lake where they lived and crapped on her porch, “after you’ve played golf at Jackson Country Club, you’re not much afraid of anything.”

By this, Aunt Charmayne meant the golf course right at the edge of the Southern Michigan Prison grounds, and specifically, an event that’s part of family history. Perhaps in a coup of bad planning, the Jackson Country Club put its farthest holes closest to the prison farms, the minimum security facilities for recovering sorts who were never much of a trouble in the first place and perhaps only needed to learn a trade in order to become decent members of society. More on that in a moment.

Some of them, however, discovered that they had no handcuffs on, no chains or bars or large wall keeping them down on those
farms. They realized that they could just walk away from their confinement, and they were called, if you can believe it, “Walk-Offs.”

On a fateful day before the advent of cell phones, a certain prisoner decided he’d endured enough of his sentence and this was a day to earn the title “Walk-Off.” And off he walked, straight through the golf course. Aunt Charmayne might have been the first to see him, if she had seen him, because the farms were right on the ninth hole, the hole farthest afield at the country club. This also seems to have influenced me, this reckless placing of pleasure next to punishment; imagine being confined to a small room with just a sink and a stinky roommate for years, and the only view outside your barred-up window was a lot of people taking their leisure, hitting golf balls at the country club. In Jackson, you know, we don’t even have gators to zigzag away from. Placing punishment and reward so close together, I think, the two may have started to blur together for me, pain and pleasure, stupid and bad.

Aunt Charmayne was upset, but only after she was back home and found out about the event she never knew had happened to her. Post-trauma panic: this, too, I may have picked up from my prison days. To her dismay, Uncle Doug responded, “Oh, for cripe’s sake, ma, you had golf clubs! You’re a Hauserbroad!”

Yes, I think the prison had a toughening influence over women, and softer creatures, too, such as myself. A decade ago, my brother Chris, who works hard for the prison, married Michelle, a quiet daughter from more northerly climes (the upper peninsula of Michigan, where people are raised to be more reserved, so that one does not need to slap one’s knee in order to get a goose’s attention, or that of a rowdy boy). I first met her when I came home for Thanksgiving the winter after they got hitched. She was pretty, fair-skinned, happy to offer a gracious smile. I had confidence in her even then, but I do recall that this was also the first Thanksgiving after our Uncle Dick, a man famous for large appetites, with the carriage of a mature
Brando and the ability to smoke through five packs a day, had finally succumbed to desire. His emphysema near the end of his life confined him to an oxygen tank. But he smoked anyway.

As the turkey and trimmings were passed around the table among my grandparents and us three brothers and their families, we all welcomed Michelle into the fold by acting normally, which is to say, the way one acts when one lives in a town with the world’s largest prison. “Well, Uncle Dick did slow down his smoking a little bit near the end there,” Scott, the youngest of the three of us, informed me. I lived in California then; I needed filling in. “He’d get up in the morning, you know, and light up the first cig in the bathroom, to get his motor rolling, if you know what I mean.” I looked down the table to see whether Michelle knew what he meant. She was very interested in the cranberry sauce: grandma always mixes carrot shavings into it, to give it “that finished look” we value so in the Midwest. This “finished look” has kept the paprika industry thriving back in Hungary, for without it, deviled eggs would never have “that finished look.”

Scott went on, “So he was smoking away, flicking the ashes between his legs into the toilet and,” and now even Scott was wondering about Michelle, but it was too late now, it was time for him to fish or cut bait. “And,” he went on, a new resolve pushing the story forward, “Well, he’d gotten pretty heavy there in the last days, so that he didn’t realize at first that one of the ashes landed, you know, down there, and had started, you know,” one last glance toward our new sister-in-law, “a brush fire. Pass the gravy.”

“Christ,” my mother diagnosed: “it’s like you kids have a screw loose.” And then we blessed Uncle Dick and wished him well, free from the bonds of this earth and no doubt enjoying all the cigarettes the afterlife allows. Michelle was ever a gracious thing, then, and smiled, I think, though what I noticed most was the high coloring in her cheeks. It must have gone all right, because she is still part of the family—more than I am, in certain ways.
And on the tenth anniversary of that Thanksgiving, we sat down at that same table, with nearly the same cast, gaining a few children, losing an adult here and there. By then Chris, her husband, had become very much involved with the prison, and I asked him, as the cranberries and carrots went around, what it was like to work in the world’s largest walled prison.

“Aw, Brian,” he said, hashing turkey into tiny bits for his daughter, “you don’t go to prison for being bad, you go to prison for being stupid.” Initially, this statement made the bristles of my politically correct nape stand on end, but now I don’t think of the race issues tangled up in his observation, or the problem of this nation in which more people than anywhere else in the world cool their heels in a jail cell. I think instead how this is roughly how people see the world in my town: you are not punished for being bad, you are punished for being stupid, getting caught. “You’ve got your four levels in the prison,” Chris explained. “Your ones and twos, they’re not so bad, drugs and that. Then there’s the real problem, your level threes, and they’ve done felonies, violent stuff, and they need a lot more supervision, and yet they give all this attention to the level fours, and they’re more quiet-like, like that one guy, Reggie what’s-his-name.”

I was supposed to know of some notorious criminal from our town, but I’d been away a while. Michelle, his once-timid wife, piped up, “Oh, Reggie, that guy who owned a restaurant and killed his wife and deboned her?” You see? She’s a Hauserbroad now.

Me too, or perhaps I have become too cavalier when in the presence of danger. I have watched too many forms of safety and precaution fail—hard hats on job sites, survival suits in Alaskan waters, proofreading, airbags, condoms, maps—and now I am the proverbial fool, rushing in. Living close to a clutch of convicted armed robbers, rapists, and thugs, it seemed only a matter of time before they’d spring themselves.
And they did. I was a page at the public library, and have a vivid memory of shelving books from the top story, and looking out beyond the town’s boundaries to see the prisoners rioting. Trouble showed itself in a long black plume of smoke; later, I’d see the same black smoke rise out of the Corsican ferry smokestacks, and in the camps of gypsies, that forever-wandering nation that kept itself momentarily comfortable on abandoned sofas and choking, billowing, smoking fires stoked on plastic bags and garbage. There was talk in the normally sedate library, but nobody panicked, nobody left. I had books to shelve, and there’s always time to run.

And one more thing: what the prison might also have done to the character of my hometown has to do with art. The prison gift shop, always a fun excursion for the family, was stocked with all sorts of objects hecho-a-mano by inmates: leather goods and rather paint-by-numbers-like paintings, but also Popsicle-stick lamps, purses made from gum wrappers, tin can briefcases. Hobo art. The act of making things, especially elaborate things, was associated with confinement, sitting around, having nothing better to do with your time. Not, as it were, with being a productive member of society. What must painters and poets and musicians seem to most of the people in my town?

Islands are historically perfect places to put prisons, to “keep” people. Think of Alcatraz. Islands were used to keep people away from power. Able was Napoleon ere he saw Elba. Supervillains, too, get put on islands in the comic books, and for that their immortality and fame are secure, and after a while, one wants to see how Lex Luthor or the Joker will manage to get away one more time. Said the suffragist Carrie Nation, “If you steal a loaf of bread, you go to jail; if you steal a railroad, you’re a senator.”

Things of the world that are apt to perish, like politicians or poetry, “keep” on islands, as if packed in salt or ice. There is purity.
Puerto Ricans breed a horse called *paso fino* that runs with the two left legs forward together, then two right, rather than the mix and match, creating a “fine gait,” a real ballet. They’ve been bred this way and stay pure in their island isolation. To see the paso fino in action is to see something from fairyland, more surprising than a unicorn. Another example: linguists consider the rough, grouchy Catalan spoken on Mallorca closer to the way the language was originally spoken long ago than the Catalan spoken in mainland, big-city Barcelona. I blame Anne of Green Gables’ incorruptible purity, if not her undiagnosed Attention Deficit Disorder, on the gorgeous unspoiled miniworld that is Prince Edward Island.

An island, for the great, was a place to save one’s self, and to languish. Ovid, making his elaborate word things, took his chill pill on Capri. Seneca was stuck on Corsica. These poets, to please their patrons once back in power and out of island exile, might defame the islands, as Seneca did of Corsica in his pastorals, taking a swipe at the quality of the island’s honey. The honey, as it turns out, is rather a source of pride among Corsicans, since the bees sip off all those plants in the maquis.

No, I think, instead, that I didn’t feel influenced by wardens and guards and cops so much as by prisoners. Southern Michigan Penitentiary maintained that string of low-security prison farms to rehabilitate nonviolent criminals, like the one that menaced Aunt Charmayne lo these many years ago. We could see them from the state highway, and to me, they resembled a profane monastery, where the inmates, like monks, grew their own fruits and vegetables and maintained a certain level of self-sufficiency. One of my earliest memories was watching trustees cut ice on the lake for their low-tech iceboxes.

And from those farms, quite naturally, there were those “Walk-Offs,” the prisoners who simply, unwatched, walked away from their punishment. There were signs all along the roads leading in and out
of Jackson County—manufactured in the prison workshops—warning us in paint a shade of municipal, fire-alarm red, or maybe blood, “Do Not Pick Up Hitchhikers.”

Walking—and perhaps here I am, like my father, pointing out the obvious—seems to be both a monastic eschewing and an escape of the prison-break sort. Although I’ve never been a prisoner, neither actual nor mental, I’ve never quite felt at home anywhere but in motion, on the lam. I’ve pretty much come to accept that I’m alone with that feeling. To discover it feels strange, more monasticism, more escape—and, of course, more of a sense of being one of them-bad-guys. What is a bad guy if not a person whose desires and goals are utterly foreign to everybody else?

Once a bad guy is caught and put in prison, his desire to make others suffer (let’s call it “sadism”) turns into a desire to suffer (that’s “masochism”). Only the stupid go to prison, says my brother.

While walking to Santiago that first time with Petra, I spent three days hiking along with five Belgian men, who mostly kept their distance in the evenings, but who were very talkative during the day’s hike. I got to know Pietr well, one of the three who were taking orders from the other two. Every morning, the two order-giving ones, both short, blond, and taciturn, would say in Belgian (therefore I approximate), “Okay, you guys, time to get up, let’s get moving.” Pietr and I talked for three days about our mutual interests—opera, literature, travel, good wine.

We passed by Irache, a vintner famous for giving free wine to pilgrims. You simply filled your travel cup with as much as you could drink, just as long as you didn’t steal. Unfortunately, we’d arrived at nine in the morning. This didn’t stop most of us. But when Pietr reached for his tin cup, one of the two phlegmatic blondes said, “No, stay away.” Pietr frowned, but obeyed.
I furrowed my brow and asked Pietr, “Why are you always taking orders from those guys?”

Pietr smiled. “Well, you see, I am a prisoner.”

A prisoner? So were the other two men who were taking commands. No shackles, no firearms, who could tell? They were “walk-offs.” It seems a Belgian law that dates back to medieval days allows criminals to be punished by sending them to Santiago. My fellow Belgian pilgrims were doing penance, with the added chore of fixing church doors along the way.

“What did you do?” I asked Pietr.

He never told me explicitly, although I heard farther down the trail that all three were embezzlers. “White-collar crime,” is all he told me.

“So,” I thought it out, “if Pietr is walking to Santiago as a punishment, why am I walking?” And I sank into days of asking myself this question, wondering how ridiculous I must seem, thinking more about what I seek than what I destroyed.

Those jabbering, questioning, mental Boolean threads can only be stopped by two things: jabbering with another walker or the arduous, masochistic physical effort of the trek. The second option is the more effective, because the self, or the selfish, retreats deep into the body because it must go into hibernation. No guilt-ridden voice speaks then, no chain of awful memories surface in reflection. No pie-in-the-sky ambition can flourish, only the one that gets you through the next zigzag scramble over scree. Physical exertion is usefully belittling: all of the character attributes of which I am proud of myself mean jack, for apparently, I am not bright enough, not profound enough—even my own hubris is worthless to the task of self-reliance. There is only silence and sensation, and many of those sensations are searingly painful.

It’s not all self-inflicted pain, not the process. When you see those people running in triathlons and the sports-show cameras capture
them in a mask of wretched pain, you do not know about the other stuff, the endorphins running through the body, the druglike high created by dehydration and apoplexy. How can I make people believe that being silenced, feeling tiny, being sick, even, feels *good* after making it to the top of a peak, or the bottom of a chasm?

“You’re an animal!” a girl fruitlessly compliments me, when she is told how many miles I walk in an average summer. Bones heal, chicks dig scars. I’m not fishing for compliments, and it’s funny how mocking disdain can turn, on a dime, to awe-struck glorification. If you eat a half a pint of ice cream, you are a *pig*. If you eat the whole pint, directly from the container, you’re an *animal*.

And you know what? At the top of a peak, looking across at the other mountains that must be traversed, every one of them a shark’s tooth, and then looking down into a deep glacial lake, and looking over at Petra, who has been here for ten minutes and whose tinfoil from her power bar has whipped off in the wind and slices by me, while Lula the Lab bounds effortlessly in front of me as I gasp in the thin air like a large-mouthed bass at the bottom of a bilged-out boat, and the sunblock has gone liquid again with my sweat and runs directly into my eyes and makes me weep, and my ears are burned purple from prolonged exposure, and my backpack seems to have been filled with granite and my ankles ache and the extreme-sports boys roar past me once again, I feel like an escaped convict, a walk-off, not bad but stupid, stupid but divine, the holy fool in some Russian novel—*Raskolnikov*, happy to be free at this moment—though in the next I may be in shackles again.