Seven Iron Railings

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Abstract

SEVEN BARS . . . just seven iron railings away from the outside . . . the outside of here—of life . . . freedom itself. “O.K. Mac, gotta eat yer chow. . . .” The slightly uncomfortable two hundred and twenty-seven pounds confined to the faded brown trousers made the not too tiresome work of jail flunky interesting, if not entertaining—and, profitable, at times...
game. And then did the animal mind have a few convulsive seconds to reason why the blast had hit him instead?

Several minutes later the boy got to his feet again. He had done the right thing. As a judge he had brought a just verdict.

He walked back to the car alone and decided that he would take some flowers out to his mother’s grave that afternoon.

—Jerry Borum, Sci. Sr.

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SEVEN BARS . . . just seven iron railings away from the outside . . . the outside of here—of life . . . freedom itself.

“O.K. Mac, gotta eat yer chow . . .” The slightly uncomfortable two hundred and twenty-seven pounds confined to the faded brown trousers made the not too tiresome work of jail flunky interesting, if not entertaining—and, profitable, at times. At least, he was paid to watch the occasional “visitor.”

I turned, not wanting to—but, I was afraid . . . afraid to stay and look outside . . . I wanted to be out there . . . I turned to the still locked cell door, to the outstretched hand with the tin plate. The very being of the seldom-used county jail swept from the musty straw filled mattress on the sagging bed, to the warm food—the first meal, in the town, that was warm . . . the rest were just sandwiches, oranges, and insults. This meal . . . I wanted this meal to be warm.

The outstretched hand holding the tin plate was on the other side of the grilled gate.

“Could I have some light tonight? So’s I can write some letters. I need some paper, too.” Did I really expect to get a light . . . and paper? Sonny Boy, this is the grand tradition of the lonely town—the towns of one man . . . mayor, sheriff, judge and jury . . . the man who says ‘Do’ or ‘DON’T’ and you’d better do it Yeah, you’d better do it, or here you stay—you stay in this filthy, stinking rat-trap they call a jail. But, maybe this guy isn’t so bad . . . maybe . . .
“I ain’t got all day . . .” I stepped toward the expected answer—sarcastic refusal or pathetic admission of jail flunky—but, I wanted the tin plate more than the light and the paper tonight.

I stood, stopped in front of the locked door, looking into the dimness that faded into darkness before it reached the opposite wall with the window. I almost looked past the brown pants, and his outstretched forearm. I thought the opened the door to bring you food, but the keys still hung from the cracked leather belt around the two hundred and twenty-seven pounds. My left hand still gripped the steel junction of the room’s fourth wall . . . I slid my right hand vertically through the bars, toward the food in the tin plate.

Crack! The solidness of wood-covered leather, hitting through muscle to bone. My right arm felt numb . . . there should have been a fiery, burning pain of bruised flesh, but, there wasn’t . . . I should have watched his eyes—eyes tell a lot about a person—but, I shouldn’t have asked him about the light and paper . . . maybe, yeah . . . maybe I shouldn’t have been looking at the trees outside . . . maybe . . . sure, I should have stayed in Ohio, instead of coming here—here, where just one man, a great big boy—he thinks—where this big boy runs the town, practically the whole country . . . and I had come from Ohio, all the way South, just to cross a guy . . . maybe it wouldn’t be so bad, if I knew the guy . . . maybe he’s a right guy, once he gets to know you. But, why did I hafta bring my dice into this afternoon’s game? Sure, I pulled a switch, but my dice were O. K. . . . No law against puttin’ legal dice into a crooked game—not that I ever heard of . . . and then they hadda find those crooked dice on me . . . not even my own, but that didn’t make any difference . . . here I am.

“That’ll teach ya ta take yer time . . .” The numbness was starting to leave, and I could raise—almost—my right arm . . . it still hung on the other side of the bars, nearly hot with feeling, but still unmoved. I just looked at the fingers. I couldn’t move . . . the fingers that snapped at each dice roll. My left hand still held the iron rail . . .

The burning, dull ache of pounding blood pulled the fingers convulsively when the numbness was almost gone.
My right arm jerked upward, hitting, upsetting the tin plate—the plate was cold.

"Jees! If you ain't the limit!" Polite like. Brown Pants had lost what ever inclined him to nearly break my arm, and stared at me—almost right through me . . . those eyes—now I could see his eyes . . . hard eyes that come from being unwanted when you're young—eyes that have seen formal education stopped in text books by the time sixth grade was reached . . . they were the eyes of a man who had it tough, and wanted the other guy to suffer for it. I just happened to be the guy—nothing personal, yet.

Still staring at me. If he looked through me, I was looking straight into his soul. I looked past the bars, into those unblinking, almost hypnotic eyes, into what he saw of me, what I was to him, what he was going to do now . . . Yeah, I knew what he was going to have me do now . . .

His eyes blinked . . . he was through looking at me from outside the bars. The cracked belt was unbuckled, drawn through the worn belt loops—the key chain dangled from his hand now, instead of the belt.

Creak . . . squeak . . . click . . . a different kind of rusty, unused squeak and the cell door was open. I knew . . . I had seen it in his eyes. Both of his hands were on the short, heavy, wood-covered leather tube that he had first hit me with. He tried to force me to look down, but, I knew . . .

"Clean 'er up." He hadn't moved from beside the cell door . . .

"Where's the mop . . .?" I didn't really expect it . . . why had I asked . . .?

"Mop!" . . . he sez . . . hard eyes . . .

Crack! . . . stars of purple, lightning, and my father's voice followed the thud of my falling. Brown Pants had hit me—a little higher up, and the rabbit punch would probably kill a man, at least, it would cripple or blind him.

I tried to get up . . . to stand and look into those eyes . . . show him I wasn't afraid . . . The room, darkened though it was, spun crazily. Walls seemed to come apart, to telescope—shrinking and growing—each time I opened my eyes. I heard voices, quiet soft voices when I closed my eyes . . . voices that reminded me of the Sunday I had been near the cemetery,
watching them bury my father and mother . . . it almost seemed as if the voices were talking to me, telling me something I should know . . . I wanted to know—I had to know. Then, as if from another world . . .

“Clean ’er up!” . . . a kick in the ribs . . . no pain again . . .
The walls were starting to become joined again, darker than before. No longer voices trying to tell me something—but I wanted to know . . . I almost had to know . . . the keys were still dangling in the lock, moving . . . swaying gently after being turned.

I started to get up—to try and be the same height as before, without stooping, to look Brown Pants in the eye . . .
to know what was coming next. I moved my right arm under my shoulder, to push upward—hot sparks of needles, and thorns of cactus dug into the muscles of the swelling bruised flesh. I couldn’t stand without first bracing myself. I slid back on the floor, the pain of my arm traversing up and up, toward the ache of awakened soreness coming down from my neck. Soon, the ribs would begin to pound, to feel the pulse of warm blood—blood that brought life .

I just wanted to lie there, just do nothing but close my feelings of hurt . . . lie with my eyes closed, and try to hear those voices again. Only, I couldn’t. I had to get up.

The walls, the ceiling . . . the cage I once was in, only a few minutes ago . . .

I rolled over, looking upward, seeing nothing but the keys dangling . . . then looking at the floor . . . from the left side this time. Slide the arm slowly under the shoulder—push—keep pushing until the back is nearly straight. There! Now, slowly bend forward, keep the arm under the shoulder. On the knees now . . . the mitigation of pain . . . one foot, then the other . . . hang onto the steel door . . . try to palm the keys as you nearly stand erect . . . turn, face Brown Pants with your hand still on the door, reaching for the keys. Now! Just look into those eyes again . . .

“So—ya finally decided ta get up, eh?” Lovingly, caressingly patting the leather stick.

I was looking into those eyes now. Looking for what had to come—what I knew was going to happen. Keep reaching, twisting the pained fingers toward those keys.
Clink! . . . steel against steel . . . big steel being hit by little steel . . .

"Say! . . ." Brown Pants shoved me, seeing the raped lock.

Whack! The leather stick came down again. This time higher than before . . . at the base of the skull—where the neck and head join. Hit high enough, and you can cripple a man . . . maybe even kill him.

Voices again . . . walls moving nearer, farther away voices calling, going to tell me something. Cool, quiet voices . . .

—Marve Benson, Sci. So.