

Sitting in the Backseat of a Sedan

February 1997

Sitting in the backseat of a sedan; the sun is shining. It is a cool, but not an unseasonably cold February morning. There are three of us driving east on Route 17 from Elmira, New York to Manhattan. The trip should be about six hours, but we are making great time. It is early, and there are not too many cars on the road, but then again, there are never very many cars on this road, far between cities in upstate New York. The driver has no real consideration for the speed limit. A State Trooper is not going to give a Corrections Officer a speeding ticket. I am in a pretty good mood.

I know the two “officers” well enough, almost on a first-name basis. They know me pretty well too. Southport Correctional Facility is a relatively small place and I’ve been living here for three years. I am glad Officer “Wendy” is here making this trip. She is exceptionally friendly but I don’t talk to her much around the prison. As a matter of policy I avoid social interactions with female staff. With a conviction for sex-crimes I believe in avoiding even the appearance of chumminess with any of the female staff.

Still, she knows me well enough by reputation, and I her. C.O.’s who I don’t know will always make me nervous. There is the ever-present fear of physical violence and verbal harassment because of my child molestation conviction. Since Wendy is along for this trip I feel safe.

“Can we think about stopping somewhere for a bathroom?” I say, trying not to sound like I’m shouting, or demanding.

“We’ll stop in about twenty minutes. Is that okay?” The radio is playing and I have to strain to hear clearly through the Plexiglas partition.

“Yeah, great, thanks.”

When we pull over Wendy opens the back door for me since it does not open from inside. She is tall, and good-looking even in a cop’s uniform. The wind catches her shoulder length blond hair. I stretch my back and legs a little after getting out of the car.

I am wearing a leg-iron chain across my ankles. The leg-irons don’t bother me nearly as much as the handcuffs I am also wearing. They are trapped in a lock-box which does two horribly uncomfortable things. The first is that the box holds the cuff-chain rigid so that my wrists are held in place. I cannot change their parallel positions, the distance between my wrists, or the angle of my hands. The second is that a chain linked through the box is wrapped around my waist and locked so that I have limited vertical movement of my arms. My hands can reach my face, but no further.

After six years in prison this is not the first time I've been chained up. Normally when inmates are transported by the Department of Corrections they are leg-ironed to one another in pairs of daisy-chains. Walking that way is really a three-legged-race endeavor. For me, in comparison, hobbling over to the bathroom is not all that difficult. I have about ten inches of chain length between my ankles. I am taking it slowly, with small steps, enjoying the smell of the open air. There is a smell of freedom in the air and I try inhaling it deeply.

We have pulled off the highway and stopped at an innocuous rest area. There is a small bathroom shack and a soda machine. There are a couple of picnic tables, trash cans and not much else. There are trees all around. For me it looks like Eden.

The officers are hardly paying any attention to me. Wendy heads for the ladies room. Officer McCoy lights a cigarette. He is a big Irish cop with an equally big beer belly. The notches on his belt can measure his years as a C.O. on the job as the rings of a tree measure the passage of time. McCoy knows I am not going to run off anywhere, and he is letting me take my time shuffling off to the bathroom entrance.

There are a few other carloads of people around. I have too much else on my mind to bother with concern over what they must be thinking seeing me. Oddly though, they seem oblivious to my presence. Is it possible that a man in chains is not such an unusual sight to them?

Inside the bathroom I am suffering from the worst case of stage fright ever. Standing at the urinal, after it took me forever to get unzipped what with the handcuffs and the chains, and now I can't go. I really have to pee, but I can't. *Just relax. Just relax*, I think to myself. Then what seems like to me a whole troop of boy scouts come charging into this tiny bathroom. *Oh, that is **not** helping matters! Not at all.*

When we come out Wendy is already back at the car. McCoy buys a soda from the vending machine. I wish he would buy one for me, but I would then have the added complication of holding the can all the way to New York City, and having to wait until Manhattan for another bathroom. Some gifts are not really gifts at all.

I don't want to get back in the car. I can hear birds chirping. My feet are scuttling along while a car rolling by softly crunches on the gravel surface. The occasional whoosh of a car speeding by on the main road is the only other sound, and to me, that sound rings of freedom.

We are back on the road. I am feeling better after the bathroom stop; a bit more comfortable. I am enjoying this trip. It has been six years since I have been outside the walls of prison. I am excited to be going to New York City, yet outwardly trying to maintain a somber appearance. We are, after all, on our way to my father's funeral.

* * *

Five days earlier – Valentine's Day

When my cell door opens unexpectedly I head to the front of the gallery. When I get there the C.O. tells me the Catholic chaplain wants to see me. In prison that is code for, "Someone in your family died." All family tragedy alerts are handled by the prison clergy. Also, the Department of Correctional Services permits inmates to attend funeral services for immediate family members, and those arrangements are made through the Catholic Chaplain. Special escort staff will be arranged to drive me to the funeral.

"Mack" (Officer McLaughlin) opens the electronic gate with a button, and waves me out the door. Mack is one of the good guys in my book, the kind of corrections officer who puts in his hours, collect a paycheck and health insurance for his family, and goes home. He has no grandiose ideals that by punishing inmates the good tax-paying citizens of Elmira are safer at night.

Mack is one of the regular officer's for the cell block on the day shift, but he, like all the other regulars who work this cell block, does shift swapping. They coordinate their scheduled days-on and days-off with each other and then they all do "doubles." Standard shifts for officer staff is four day on, two day off. This scheduling permits everyone to get a fair rotation of weekends off as those two days off cycles around each time. The shifts are eight hours with the standard three shifts being 7:00-3:00, 3:00-11:00, and 11:00-7:00. Mack usually works seven a.m. till 11 p.m., sleeps for eight hours, and then works the same 16 hours the next day. Those count as his four shifts per "week". By doubling-up he, and Wiz (C.O. Wizowski) who he swaps with, each only have to work two days "on" (doing doubles) and then four days off to do whatever else they want to do with their lives. Nice work if you can get it.

The Block Officer is supposed to give me a hall pass, but it really doesn't matter. Nobody ever checks. Mack unlocks the door with another button and I head downstairs. At the bottom of the stairs I press the intercom button and C.O. Elliot opens the stairway door. I wave to him as I head through the block gate and out to the hallway.

Ninety percent of the inmates at Southport are locked in their cells under punitive segregation. The only inmates wandering the hallways are Cadre inmates. We make this place run. We do all the grunge work to keep the prison functioning for all the inmates in solitary confinement. This place is friendly, or rather the staff is friendly and polite to the Cadre inmates. Staff often greet me as we wander the hallways with, "Hello" and "Good morning Jesse." It makes a huge difference in the quality of my life.

Southport Correctional Facility was built on swampland (and after only fifteen years it is already sinking.) The layout is all horizontal, instead of circular (or horseshoe) like most other maximum security prisons. There is one long hallway, about three-quarters of a mile from end to end, and all the buildings are an off-shoot to the main hallway. Every twenty paces there is another security gate. They are monitored and controlled by a central control officer, and the entire length of the hallway is lined with cameras.

I used to work on the hallway clean-up crew. It was a good gig working with C.O. Turco who treated his guys well, but right now the hallway is empty. When I get to the first gate it slides open before I even press the intercom button. When the hallway is empty C.O. Orme sees people coming and is usually pretty good about opening the gate before you get there. I offer him the courtesy of sliding the gate closed behind me.

When I get to the next gate and hit the intercom button Orme comes on and asks me where I'm going.

"Catholic Chaplain!" I tell him.

"Where's your pass?"

Why did he not ask me these two questions before at the first gate? Don't expect logic around here. I wave an old pass, up to the camera, and he opens the gate. Everyone here pretty much always has an old pass, or some small white piece of paper, or even a tissue in their pocket for when Orme asks to see their pass.

Chaplain Merriweather is an imposing woman in every manner. She is a large, large woman who rides a motorized chair up and down the hallway, and even around the cell blocks when she goes to visit someone in their cell. She can tell a joke as good as the rest of us. Not very much of a nun, really, more like one of the guys.

In her office Merriweather tells me what I already suspected – that my father died. She is consoling as she explains her understanding that "under Jewish law you are supposed to bury the body within twenty-four hours, but prison regulations insist on an autopsy." I don't think I knew that until just now, but I nod with concerned agreement.

She allows me to call my oldest brother David directly from her office, instead of collect from one of the inmate phones. He is home, but we have little to say to each other. This news has not come as a surprise for either of us. What I want to ask him I can't say in front of the nun.

"Did you take care of that... thing... okay?" is my only question for him. Recently there was some question about whether David would continue to make payments on Dad's life insurance policy and I am checking to see if he did, and that the policy payments are up to date. He understands my question and assures me everything is in order. That's about it. I tell him I'll call later this afternoon, and I head back to the block.

I have not seen, or spoken with, my father for almost seven years. There was never any anticipation that I would see my father alive again. The news of his death is not a shock. There is no overwhelming sense of sorrow with his passing. Dad has been on the brink of death, or at least wishing for death, for seven years.

My father did not adjust well to prison life. Socially and physically his adjustment was passable, but not emotionally. He suffered horrible traumatic fits, similar to post-traumatic stress disorder, ever since his arrest. Dad wrote me four or five letters a week for the better part of six years. He likewise sent a similar volume of letters to David. They were tear-stained, melodramatic, and irrational, but always with an attempt to express his love.

In order to correspond, Dad and I required special permission from the prison. Our letters also had to be left unsealed so that they could inspect the contents. Sometimes a letter of mine would disappear, and his likewise. We ended up sequentially coding our letters to track these disappearances. My suspicion has been that if whoever was screening the mail thought what I wrote might upset my father then the letter was withheld. His mail to me always backlogged and I often received a weeks worth of Dad's letters on the same day. Often I would toss them aside unread. There was rarely much of substance in his letters. The day to day of his mundane life interspersed with his anguish.

I have not had the warmest of feelings towards my father for most of these years which I've been in prison. My imprisonment is, albeit indirectly, after all, his fault. If he had not been stupid enough to write back to an undercover postal inspector regarding child pornography I'd have never been arrested. Admittedly, there were a long series of events in-between, any number of which could also have altered the final outcome of me being sentenced to 18 years in prison, but I don't dwell much on who is to blame, or what caused this tragedy. I try to face each day with the bravest and most hopeful face possible.

By dying Dad has made me a rich man. I am the beneficiary of his life insurance. Dad's passing wishes to my brothers has long been that the life insurance money be bequeathed to me to help repair my tattered life. Part of me has been hoping for this day for many years. Inwardly I am remarkably happy about his death.

* * *

What fun it is to be going on this trip and watching the scenery go by. Reading all the signs and checking out what little of civilization I can spy as we zoom along. I have not spent much time the past couple of days dwelling on my feelings so I take these moments of solitude to search my emotions.

I am excited to be seeing my brothers, but I know I should not appear gleeful when we arrive. I am apprehensive only to the extent that I am unsure of what other peoples' moods are going to be at the funeral. Clearly I can't be all smiles and happy-to-see-you even knowing that nobody else is all that sad about Dad's death either. There must be some solemn pale coloring my visit, but how much?

As we get closer to New York City I notice how the road gets narrower while inversely the volume of cars increases. Up by Binghamton the road is two lanes in each

direction with wide shoulders and an expanse of grassy median. Closer towards the Tappan Zee Bridge the road becomes three lanes in each direction, the shoulder narrows, as does the median, and there are many more cars on the road. When we reach the Major Deegan Expressway there is no shoulder, no median; cars are hurtling along inches from each other. The six lanes of the Deegan are as wide as *half* the two lanes of Route 17. There is an increasing pace; an increasing energy, as we near Manhattan.

This has been a long drive, but we left a little after six a.m. and we are punctual. It is just before noon as we park across the street from the funeral hall. My family was told to expect me (us) at twelve when I would be allowed to spend time with immediate family only. I can't stay for the service or go to the cemetery. McCoy goes inside the building probably to look around and talk to the owner. I wait in the car with Wendy. The street is pretty quiet since it is a Sunday morning.

There are my brothers, David and Seth, walking towards the hall. My oldest brother David lives at Fourteenth Street at Fifth Avenue. The funeral hall is on Fourteenth Street between Seventh and Eighth, so they obviously walked together from David's. They spot the car from across the street. I imagine the color and the big state insignia on the door saying "State of New York Department of Correctional Services" is pretty obvious. David sees me in the backseat and I wave to them both in my handcuffs.

McCoy returns describing the layout of the building, with the reception room upstairs and "only one exit. It's good." And then to me, "I just met your brothers. They're waiting for you inside. Nice guys."

I get out of the car and take a deep breath. It smells like Manhattan. The air has an urban density to it. This is my old neighborhood (almost) since I used to visit David all the time before I went to prison. I can see the changes to the neighborhood that David told me about. New streetlights have been installed. They are black and ornate giving the street a less urban edge, and a more residential feeling. The road surface has been newly repaved which makes a huge difference with all the truck and cross-town traffic noise.

The building is white painted brick; a five story tenement squeezed between residential apartments. There is a green awning with bold black lettering on the front which reads, "**REDDEN'S FUNERAL HOME**". There are two large oak doors with brass handles. Each door has a little rainbow stained glass windows. With three small steps down from sidewalk level we enter the funeral home.

After the doors close behind the three of us the room is quiet, so very quiet. The heavy doors muffle any street noise. There is no prison noise. There is no wind. It feels strange to be standing still after being in motion for six hours. The rich carpet dulls the room ambience and feels strange under my feet. I don't think I've walked on carpeting since I've been in prison.

One wall is a floor to ceiling mirror. I look ridiculous. The polyester suit is what looks strange to me, not so much the chains. The prison keeps special “street clothes” for inmates. What they give you when you are released is the same thing which they put you in if you go out for a funeral trip. I am reminded of David Byrne and his “Stop Making Sense” big suit. The clothes obviously do not belong to me, but more so I don’t look like I belong to the clothes.

The cops lead me to an alcove to take the chain and handcuffs off, telling me they are only going to leave the leg-irons on. That seems pretty fair to me. I have one hour before we leave for the long drive back to the prison. Whoever is in charge of the home does not seem the least bit interested in the oddity of me, this one peculiar guest. The three of us go upstairs together.

There is one large room with a partial divider. The front is arranged with rows of chairs, perhaps eighty of them, facing a pulpit. There are large flower arrangements and two large windows facing out towards Fourteenth Street. They face south and lots of sunlight is shining through.

Then there is the casket, dark, large, and looming. Uncle Howard says, “He doesn’t look too good. There is a lot of make up.” There is some mistake because there is an open casket.

Howie came from California with his partner Jack. It is nice to see them, and a surprise that they are waiting there for me as I walk up the stairs. They are overjoyed to see me. Big bear hugs all around. Howard and Jack have been together for about twenty years already; as long as I can remember anyways. Uncle Howie is visibly upset. He’s been crying and does not attempt to hide more of his tears. This man’s whole life seems to revolve around extravagant melodramatic expressions of emotion.

The back third of the room is a meet-and-greet space. David is arranging memorabilia on some tables, and is trying to get a cassette player working. He brought tapes of Dad’s old mambo band to play as a kind of upbeat memorial to happy by-gone days.

Obviously David did the best he could with arranging this funeral. He certainly did not have any help from his brothers, and I can’t imagine Mom did anything but fight with him about every last detail. David is very much alone in life.

Still, my brothers are happy to see me, and I them. Seth’s current steady Miriam is also there. They have been together for a few years now, but I know almost nothing about her. Miriam is a bigger woman than I expected, with a sweet face. They live in California and this is the first time I’ve seen Seth in many years. (Miriam will eventually become his wife and mother to his daughter.)

“It’s amazing having you here!” exclaims David expressing his joy at the three brothers being together in a room which is not a visiting room. “Did you ever think the three of us would be together in Manhattan again?” he asks, mostly rhetorically.

Looking at David is like seeing myself in nine years, as he is nine years older than me. Years of depression over Dad and me being in prison have taken a painful toll on his appearance. He has lost most of his fine, brown hair and gained a large waistline. Seth still has a head full of curly dark hair, but it is beginning to fall out.

The three brothers look very much alike; talk very much alike; sound very much alike; laugh very much alike. I think we could fool most people into thinking it is a different brother on the phone without too much effort.

I brag about how I still have my hair, which leaves me vulnerable for both brothers to make their point that there are still plenty of years ahead of me during which my hair will certainly suffer the same fate as theirs.

“Do you want to go look at Daddy?” David asks. He always refers to his father as “Daddy” and always will. I am apprehensive, scared, and would much rather return to prison not having looked inside the coffin. But I came all this way and figure it is a rite of passage of sorts for me.

David walks with me, holding my arm, small steps, as I shuffle along. I’m real nervous and feeling faint. We make our way, just the two of us, through the maze of chairs to the casket. My father’s dead body becomes the first dead body I ever see. There is nothing particularly remarkable or traumatic about what I see. I don’t know who I am looking at, or what the lifeless form is supposed to represent to me. I see the face of a stranger.

Mom shows up late with her mother Sarah. Grandma is quiet and looking around.

“I’m so happy to see you!” Mom says with a big hug.

She is upset seeing me in chains. I deflect her concerns and act like this is no big deal. My role in the family has always been to put on a strong front and be amenable towards everyone. I feel badly because I know she is not really welcomed, and Mom knows this too. The animosity runs thick and runs deep in this family.

David and Mom do not speak to each other much, and have been in an unspoken feud for as long as I can remember back to my adolescence. They don’t talk to each other so-much-so that they have yet to find a way to set aside their disagreements enough to be supportive of me. When I was in solitary confinement and had to get a desperate message to my family for help, I would have to write two letters. When I had only two stamps and no way to get more, I had to use both because I knew David would not cooperate with Mom and Mom did not cooperate with David.

I try to say pleasant things and smile while Mom tries to bring me up to date with the latest insanity and arguments regarding the funeral. This family can do nothing amicably, especially when feelings of cooperation or consideration is involved.

It is great to see Grandma since I have not seen her in six years, but it makes me sad seeing her after all these years. She looks old. I've not seen Grandma in five years and in my mind she is still the vibrant staunch family anchor of years' past.

My mother is fond to point out that when my grandmother walks down the street everyone says hello to her by name. Grandma has long been involved in community activism for senior citizens, and our local Congressman always attended her birthday parties. After moving to Great Neck a few years after we did, Grandma and I became very close since we got to see each other so often. Up until that time she was living in a giant house in Boro Park, Brooklyn. That house was like a museum to me and my brothers when we were kids. The house my grandmother lived in was the same house she grew up in with her eleven siblings. It is also the house which my mother lived in growing up with all her aunts and uncles and cousins.

My extended family is considerably smaller. From the time I was ten the only grandparent I had was Sarah. As an adolescent I used to find a respite from my parents' house at Grandma's. There was always an open door, and a guarantee of a meal, waiting for me at Grandma's.

Mom looks tired. She too seems old. Little by little my mom is turning into a grandma with the graying hair and shrinking. But even with watching her grow old over the years she still looks like "Mom" to me. I guess she always will.

"It's so wonderful to see you not in a prison visiting room. It's almost like a normal funeral." This makes no sense to me. How can she call this "normal"? I'm in chains and my father died in prison.

"It's so nice having all three of my sons here."

Pretty much everyone at this funeral has not seen anyone else in at least five years. Half the guests are not on friendly speaking terms with half of the others. Maybe it's that way at other funerals as well. I don't know. This is only my second funeral, and the first time anyone close to me has died. Since the family has always been small, funerals and weddings have never much a part of my life.

I manage to excuse myself from talking to Mom because I am much happier being with my brother. I go over to look through the memorabilia David set out. There is a guestbook, and a number of scrap books with photos of Dad.

My brothers ask about the trip from Elmira and tease me about the suit. Seth prattles on about this or that argument with Mom, and Howard being upset about

something else. If it were not for fighting this family would have little to talk about with each other.

I have a few precious minutes to sit and talk with Miriam. She embraces me as a would-be future sister-in-law and I can see she is a lovely person. I ask her about Seth, trying to get her point of view of my brother's life since he has never been forthcoming with much of anything personal on the phone from prison. I try and learn a little about Miriam like where she grew up. I do not know that these five minutes with Miriam is the only time I will ever meet her. A totally different journey of life will result in Seth ceasing to speak with me. His anger over *Capturing the Friedmans* will boil-over. He will blame me, for what, I will not know. I will never meet my niece.

It is almost time to go. People are beginning to show up for the service. David's best friend Scott arrives, as do a few cousins and other relatives who I might know by name, but not by face. The new arrivals don't come over. It is obvious they don't know what to say to me and most of them politely take a seat and wait. They leave us – me, Uncle Howard, David, Seth, and Miriam – to ourselves.

Grandma is talking to the cops who are waiting and watching politely and respectfully to the side. They are paying attention to the new arrivals but since everything is still calm and quiet they aren't saying anything to anyone.

I can imagine poor Grandma questioning them. "So, tell me, where do you know Arnie from?" Being 87, Grandma is actually remarkably fit for her age, still living alone and getting along pretty much as she always has. But her orientation is not what it once was.

I don't think Grandma realizes I have been in prison, and that those are two guards. McCoy seems uncomfortable, but Wendy appears to be having a conversation with Grandma. I love her dearly and it pains me when I realize that the next time I see her it will likely be in a room just like this one, only with her body in the casket instead of my father's.

* * *

The cops give me a nod from across the room. It is time to leave. I am sad to leave, but I am strong, and knew today was going to be filled with emotional battles. I want to run from here quickly. No lingering good-byes. The three of us go downstairs where they take me aside to chain me up again, and we head out to the car.

I have only been in Manhattan for 90 minutes and I feel sorrow having to leave. It looks so beautiful – all the people, and buildings, and bridges. I am holding my feelings inside. I won't let the cops see me cry. I won't let the cop see me enjoying the view either.

* * *

I notice we are not driving as fast on the return as we did on the way down. The cops are on over-time. They are in no rush to get back. I heard rumors of cops buying real-world food for inmates when they are taken out on trips. I can't ask the cops. That would be too presumptuous. I try listening for any indication of our schedule in snippets of conversations spied over the radio. With each passing flashing white line of the highway Manhattan is further and further behind us, and closer is the cold home of my cell's cement walls. As I ponder this possibility the solemn look on my face begins to match my solemn mood.

We're getting off the highway. We're stopping.

"You hungry?"

"Yeah, uh, sort of. I could eat."

We pull into the parking lot of a diner. I have no idea what to expect now. Are they going to go in and leave me locked in the car? Will they get take out and eat in the car? Will they buy me dinner?

"Okay, here's what we're gonna do. You have two choices. There is a bag lunch here for you which you can have if you want," McCoy explains. "Or you can come into the diner with us, but then you don't get the bag lunch. Which do you prefer?"

I'm confused. I'm actually kind of hungry, even with the slight presence of motion-sickness which I've had with me since we left ten hours ago. I really want to go into the diner if that is what they are offering, but I have to eat something, preferably not while the car is in motion.

"He's kidding. You're gonna come inside with us. We're not gonna make you eat the prison food. Just behave yourself," Wendy says.

It is the same drill as before. They take the handcuffs and waist-chain off and I walk into the diner pretending to be a normal person. We are seated in a booth and McCoy tells me sincerely to, "Order whatever you like."

I am at a loss for what to order. It is one of those huge diner menus with everything! Sensing my obvious confusion Wendy helps by directing me, "Get yourself a sandwich." This narrows the decision enough for me to pick. "I'll have a Monte Cristo"

"And to drink?" the waitress asks, adding an unforeseen additional complication to my already complicated ordering process.

"How about a milk shake?" I request by way of a question.

"Sure, hon. What flavor?"

* * *

The highway is dark. No streetlights this far from the city limits. I strain my neck to peer out the window. They are faint, very faint. If I shield any glare and wait for a field with no trees where I am able to catch a glimpse of a few stars. I don't usually get to see the stars. There's the Big Dipper as big and beautiful as ever. Today is filled with a great many first-in-a-long-time events.

Pulling up to the prison at night the illuminated electrical security fence of razor wire appears like twinkling candles in the darkness. The only other light comes from the cellblock windows. Strange to see them this way, from the outside looking in. I am exhausted both physically and emotionally. We arrive sixteen hours after we departed. The cops unshackle me, make a phone call to hallway security, and send me on my way to walk back to the cellblock. The hallway feels eerie.

Everyone has already locked-in for the night. It is quiet and dark. Walking to my cell, past everyone asleep in their darkened cells, I have a brief sense of what this world looks like from the cops point of view – on the outside of the cells looking in. But then I reach my cage and I lock-in too.

I am too tired to think. Too tired to do anything except take off my clothes and hug my pillow. I don't want to think about today. I don't want to think about tomorrow. I don't want to think at all. I just want to wake up and have all of this gone away. That is not going to happen. Not the next morning, or the morning after that, or for a thousand plus mornings, and a thousand more after those.