

THE LOST ART OF ACCOUNTABILITY

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In this short story, Younker tells a compelling tale of injustice befalling resident artist, Old Man Sanders. The story begs the reader to consider how one can cope with the realities of a justice system that punishes in the absence of blameworthiness.

Nobody was quite prepared for the infernal wailing of our prison alarm on Monday morning, an ear-ripping caterwaul that jarred everyone from their cozy slumber. Only the mental health crowd seemed able to ignore it, for they were so heavily sedated that not even a siren song of the Apocalypse could readily stir them.

From my cell window, I witnessed a throng of correctional officers dash off towards the gymnasium like a swarm of angry hornets. This proved only vaguely interesting at the time, of course, since unruly incidents had become something of the norm in recent months. We were getting used to these scenes. Some people blamed it on the weather, while others pointed to the disrespectful attitudes of our prison staff.

Whatever the case should be, I nevertheless sighed and took a stroll down my tier. Before stopping at the last cell on the left, I was disheartened to notice that everyone gazed eagerly out their respective windows, relishing the commotion, no doubt hoping to glimpse a splash of violence and brutality. Here were the cheering multitudes who lined the seats of a Colosseum in ancient Rome, screaming for bloodsport and senseless slaughter.

When I at last arrived, a familiar sight prompted me to smile. Old Man Sanders sat at his desk, hard at work. With wild gray hair tossed in random wisps, oversized reading glasses slightly askew, and a brow furrowed in concentration, he might have been a mad scientist fashioning arcane devices of unknowable purpose. On the easel in front of him, a scene of oceanic depths progressed towards completion. This aquatic rendering, as masterfully portrayed as any you might find in a museum, revealed marine life and billowing fronds of kelp, full of color and creative dimension.

Sanders is an artist of substantial talent. Over the last twenty-seven years of his incarceration, my old buddy has managed to run his own business from the inside of his cell. It is largely an arts & crafts retail line, catering to those who are interested

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in acquiring artwork and knickknacks from prison craftsmen. And from all outward appearances, business is booming.

"What's all the ruckus about outside?" I ask, though only halfway curious.

Sanders shrugged noncommittally, never taking his eyes off the work in progress. "Who really knows anymore? Probably another stabbing."

"Wouldn't even be a surprise, would it?"

Chuffing flatly, he says, "Gettin' to be a daily ritual."

Nodding, I ask, "How's the business?"

He exhales slowly and lifts his glasses. "Better than ever. Only two more orders to fill this month, then a little down time."

This one-man enterprise, amusingly titled Convict Showcase, manages to sell between five and eight pieces a month, in addition to the crafts and trinkets he is able to piece together from random items commonly available to the inmate population. Miniature pool tables, teddy bears, and personalized throw pillows constitute a few of the more popular items.

Before I had a chance to comment on the rising tide of violence any further, a brusque voice on the loudspeaker sternly orders everyone to return to their housing units at once. Lockdown procedures were in effect. Whatever had occurred over at the gym obviously demanded a full regiment of investigators. None of which particularly concerned me at the moment. Not yet, anyway.

Back in my cell, I fired up my trusty typewriter and got back to work on an article I'd been composing for a certain human rights organization. After a few stalled and stumbling attempts, however, I eventually had to take a break from the project for today. My mind was on other things. Namely, the sad states-of-affairs for people like Sanders. Men and women who have served a lifetime of atonement, but have no hope of rejoining society, even though they pose neither danger nor disparagement to anybody. It's a shitty piece of knowledge to consider that certain states offer no reprieve for Lifers, only an unremitting monotony of days, years, and centuries.

Anyhow, developments drew my attention to the window once more. In the courtyard, a humorless security team drags a perp across the grounds, his eyes red and swollen from liberal doses of pepper spray. He will now be taken to solitary and, depending upon his infraction, be subjected to some unthinkable penalty, along with savageries that will no doubt go undocumented. All of which will mysteriously happen well off camera, of course.

"It is better to go to heaven missing a leg than be stuck on Earth missing a soul."

Indeed. That is the prevailing wisdom of Sanders and, as fortune would have it, has served him well over the last two decades. More interestingly, it was this biblical theorem that came to mind when things took a shocking turn for the worse. Nobody could have seen it coming. Including me.

Without provocation, the front door of our block swung open and a platoon of jack-booted commandos stormed the day room. Watching this spectacle with

mounting amusement, I wondered what this jive was all about. Unbelievably, the whole squad headed directly towards a familiar cell. Frowning, I did a double take. What the hell?

Sanders.

I wouldn't find until much later that the previous incident was indeed a shanking. As the rumor mill would speculate, it was as ruthless as it was sudden. A prison official, to be exact. The instrument of attack, a paint brush handle, had been sharpened to a wicked point.

The handle in question elicited yet more speculation from sources other than the mill and, from these dithering suppositions, investigators came up with a likely suspect. It was well known who our resident artist was. As such, conjecture quickly curdled into blame. And from blame, a brief jump to accusation. My old friend was innocent, of course. He no more fabricated a weapon than would a child conjure monsters to populate their closets. But prison staff are not the most plausible bunch, we know. Guilt assumed is guilt branded in these strange and unpredictable times, sad though it may be.

Anyhow, poor Sanders took the brunt of these unfounded charges like a champ, neither cowing nor caving in to their heinous tyranny. Even when they trashed his cell. Even when they destroyed his artwork. And yes, even when they confiscated his prized trove of art materials.

A most demeaning and unfortunate turn of events, to say the least. But like I said earlier--- we were getting used to these scenes.

A lot of smart people claim these incidents come down to a question of accountability. Those in power seem to be increasingly immune from such notions. Admitting error or misjudgement is, by all accounts, beneath them. But when it comes to the Average Joe, sins both real and imagined are frequently punished to the highest order. This is the America we've come to know and love, folks. Better get used to it.

As it turned out, Sanders was eventually absolved of any wrongdoing and subsequently released from solitary. A review of the evidence, coupled with video footage, finally cleared him. Just not until well AFTER he served a deplorable sixty days isolation. To make matters more outrageous, no apologies were ever given and, after his triumphant return to general population, no effort to reimburse him for the damaged materials were ever given. Hundreds of dollars in missing instruments. Thousands in destroyed artwork.

Collateral damage incurred during a search is devoid of institutional responsibility, they say.

"How did you do it?" I later asked him. "How did you endure such blatant disrespect with a cool head?"

He only frowned and shook his head. "Better to lose a little," he said solemnly, "than to fight them and lose it all." A sad epitaph for these post modern times in our country's doomed justice system, indeed.