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Salem, Oregon.  
6:15 p.m.

### Punctuality.

It's Friday night and inside Oregon State Penitentiary six prisoners serving life sit wondering where in hell our best selling author friend is. Her name is Lauren Kelssler, she's a concentrated force of nature who's written 16-books, taught around the world and is always on time to the writing group she's taught here the last three years.

"Hey, is this a mistake" ask Mike one as soon as I enter the room.

"what'da mean?" I ask.

"Lauren's not here this week is she?"

"Fuck if I know"

Around two hard plastic folding tables we sit in a 20-by-20 foot room that's lined with privacy denying windows. we drink coffee and eat little Debbie brownies that taste ten months stale.

"I bet they scheduled her for the wrong week" says Don who is responsible for the brownies that the group generally agrees were under his bed for year or more. Our writing group has no set schedule and usually meets twice a month to talk about writing, share stories and laugh. Oddly, the only writing we do in the group are fifteen minute free writes based on a prompt Lauren provides. At the end of each meeting she'll tell us when she's coming back and when that time arrives—she's there. But not tonight.

Although we received emails from her last week setting a meeting date still a week away, there was a sign on the bulletin board near the cafeteria that said the meeting was tonight.

“I bet those fucks fucked it up. God damn it.” says Mike one. Since our group has two Mikes we numbered them according to who was in the group first. Mike one is a two-hundred-sixty pound big-bellied hairy back shit talking red neck type that reminds me of my uncle Mark. Only Mike is a man of greater integrity and possesses characteristics that anybody is fortunate to have in a friend.

Mike two is a 60-year old clean-cut white guy who worked for the Regan presidency years ago. He recently committed a white-collar offense and sits here with us poor folks only because his victim was a richer more powerful white man. I have come to truly like him. I marvel how his mind works and find value in his ability to imagine completed plans.

“Maybe she’s tired of us” says Jimmy in a sad humor prisoners often use to express a painful thought. Any prisoner who has done more than ten-years knows that people come and go. Some by the buss full, others by the handful, and even the exceptional. In our group all but one have been locked up for more than two decades.

“her book’s finished” says Mike one “she’s only here now to visit”

“You know she’s going to embed herself in another story soon” Don says “ the one about the cowboys”

“When’s that?” Jimmy mumbles while unwrapping a brownie.

“When’s what?” Mike two ask.

“When she’s leaving” says jimmy in a tone conveying the realization of an imminent departure.

“Probably after her book comes out.” says Mike one. “You know she was worried about the prison not letting her back in once the book publishes.”

“that’s why she wants us to write,” I say “and I think she’s worried about getting regular content.”

When our group meets for two hours we usually write for fifteen minutes, during ten of which those who didn’t write much start talking to those who didn’t write at all. For the most part our time is spent telling stories and complaining about conditions. In truth, I’m not sure if half the men even like to write yet participate for the fellowship.

“does anybody know what elevated CBC levels are,” ask Jimmy “ I got a notice from the clinic notifying me that my blood work shows signs of concern and their scheduling an appointment.”

“Yeah, it means your dying” Blurts Taz with as much sensitivity as an alligator chomp. All but Jimmy laugh. Taz is Mike one’s friend. Whereas I’ve seen him around for years, I don’t know much about him except for I can appreciate his sense of humor. A hallmark characteristic of prison is the ability of people to live for decades in a confined space and still not know much about each other.

“I don’t know what your blood work means but I know we need to write and make sure we turn stuff in for the website” I say to bring the topic back into focus.

“yeah but if she leaves who do we turn our stuff into?” ask Don.

“man, that’s on us to figure out. This woman has taught us how to tell stories so that we can give voice to our experience and now she wants to make sure when she does move on she left us with a platform. Don’t y’all see that?”

“ but how are we going to get it on the website?” jimmy echos Don.

“that’s the easy part, just have somebody you know submit it”

“I don’t know anybody” says Mike one.

“You know me, and mother fucker, I’m somebody.”

“shit your about as worthless as titts on a bull” the group burst out in laughter.

“seriously guys, theres no better way to honor Lauren then to take what she’s taught us and share it with others”

we are talking about speak truth to power an oline platform that was created to give voice to the voice by featuring short stories written by incarcerated people.

“this is a big opportunity for us” I say seriously “and it’s success depends on our commitment”

Lauren’s gift to us has been her time and her expertise. There’s not a single person in the group who hasn’t benefited from her knowledge and passion. Be it her tireless editing pages and pages of rambling thoughts, or teaching grammar lessons, or coaching the crafting of award winning stories.

Its now 6:30 p.m. and clear that not only is our usually punctual leader late but she isn’t coming. We all knew it was the wrong date. “we should write a prompt about her not being here” I suggest.

“And call it punctuality” says Taz. We all chuckle.

“Let’s do it” says Mike two.

We begin scribbling in our notebooks for twenty minutes and then share our pieces out loud, just like we do when she’s here.

Of the six men present, four wrote letter like pieces affectionately expressing appreciation. One wrote the beginnings of a story and one didn’t write at all. Just like normal.