

Departing Friends & Prison Matrimony

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3:45 A.M.

Michael's been shitting himself for a week and today's his wedding. He's marrying Elizabeth before he dies. Michael is forty-eight. He has an estimated three months to live and 15 months remaining on his sentence. He won't make it home.

Arnold goes home today after 17 years. I'll watch the celebration from behind a barred window on the fourth floor of Oregon State Penitentiary. After saying good-bye to a friend I'll never see again, I'll attend a dying man's wedding.

Michael is six foot three, 223 pounds with red hair he just cut yesterday. He has bloodshot brown eyes, a puffy red face as if a mixture of chicken pox and acne is spreading across his cheeks.

Michael was diagnosed with liver cancer in February 2012 and committed coercion for attempting to compel a person by threats in January 2013. His twenty-five month sentence was suspended due to his health. Michael then violated court requirements by moving outside Portland, Oregon without permission. The suspension was revoked and Michael came to prison. Now that the cancer is breaking down his body he's thinking about home constantly. Although he envisions being home fishing next year, he knows his body is deteriorating rapidly.

"I notice I sleep more" he says, "I'm not ready to say bye yet."

Michael met Elizabeth in 1990 by the spider spin ride at the Funtastic carnival in Camas, Washington, where he worked on the set up and tear down crews after moving there from Connecticut. He invited Elizabeth to The Frontier club for drinks. Six months later they were married. Both were 23 years old. Eleven months later, he told her he was going to the store and left to California, abandoning his newlywed wife and their two-month-old son, Josh. He ran because the life of lies he spun to hide his past begun to unravel when his mother told Elizabeth about five years he spent in Cheshire Correctional Institution back in Connecticut for a murder he committed at age 15. He shot a man who raped his sister.

“Running out on Liz is one of my biggest regrets,” he says during our visit in the back room of the prison infirmary where I visit him as a hospice volunteer. He was dangerous and dumb, she a victim of his neglect.

Cancer makes it hard to breathe, crying complicates it further. Coughing, choking, saying he’s sorry. It’s genuine. I know authentic remorse. The remorse visibly hurts him.

I too have victimized people in my life, including a young couple murdered in a 1994 carjacking committed to prove I was a bad ass, the Scar Face Boyz in The Hood type bad ass I believed made me a man at age sixteen in the culture of street crime.

I know what regret looks like: Michael wracking his body dying in tears to express the pain of his heart.

He regrets abandoning Elizabeth and Josh. Today though, Josh is his best man.

Arnold is young, healthy, and free. A 37-year-old clean shaven baldhead six-foot tall muscular Hispanic, his friendly demeanor shows none of the violence from which he comes. Born and raised in Texas until age 13, he saw his dad abuse his mother frequently but when he tried drowning Arnold in the river his mother moved to Oregon with nothing but her three kids. Shortly after arriving Arnold joined a gang. At age twenty he brutally assaulted a rival and was sentenced to seventeen years. Today he leaves. Soon he’ll begin college and voluntary community service.

We met raking softball fields, a volunteer position granting more time outside during summer. While working we discussed writings of Mandela, Gandhi, and Latin American freedom movements. As Texans, we frequently spoke of our childhood in the Lone Star state. While working we bonded. Impressed with his clarity of thought and commitment to self-improvement, I invited him to a new Restorative Justice Group. Arnold was a prisoner in good standing among the prisoner population. He used his influence to promote peace, self-growth and begun sharing theories of Restorative Justice with peers.

The past five years we shared struggle and triumph, he lost his grandma and I lost appeals. We wrote plays, facilitated seminars, and mediated conflicts. Mandela wrote that prison can be a cauldron of friendship since the quality of a prisoner’s life is most defined by the quality of their relationships. Inevitably, those who struggle together grow together. In efforts to be better people we became better friends. I will miss him.

Michael collected drug debts, rode Harley Davidson motorcycles built from violent proceeds, snorted and shot every drug from methamphetamine to cocaine, and lied his way through his twenties and thirties before sobering up in his forties. Elizabeth and Michael reconnected 19 years ago and have been friends ever since. They recently decided to remarry.

When Michael's mother was alive she said Elizabeth and him would reunite when Michael started living right, being honest, not hurting people, and prepared to settle down. "That girl will love you to the end," she said.

The end is nearing. With his death imminent, prison administrators made special accommodations allowing a visiting room wedding during count time. Seven times daily the bodies of prisoners are counted. The 10:30 am count between morning and afternoon visits is when Michael and Elizabeth, their son Josh and stepdaughter Mykala, will rush to the visiting room for a thirty-minute ceremony. At the end they will once again be husband and wife—till death do them part.

The end of prison is nearing for Arnold also. It's now 7:45 a.m. and guys from every race and association fill the chapel library to watch him leave. The chapel library and education department on the top floor of the prison have windows above the wall facing State Street, a Salem throughway. From barred windows prisoners glimpse a world denied. We watch people jogging, walking, and biking as traffic zooms a stream of cars seeming futuristic in their design. Mill creek runs past the prison where geese frequently land to wet their feet and prompt prisoner daydreams of swimming in streams while camping in the green landscapes of the Willamette Valley.

Next to the sidewalk between the prison and State Street is a bright yellow fire hydrant. Three times a week before personal growth groups, Arnold, myself, and others looked out across thirty-foot high razor wired walls and rifleman towers to visualize ourselves in the world beyond. We declared intentional goals of walking out to the hydrant, touching it, and waving back to guys physically left behind, yet, carried forth in the freed man's determination to be a light in the world beyond.

Arnold is waving. Signaling he made it.

His mother, sister, brother, nephew and nieces are waving. My wife is waving.

Like Michael will do in the next two hours, I got married in prison fourteen years ago. I was 26 and she was 25. The bonding with the woman I came to marry ultimately healed me enough to grow. The relationship, in which it was safe to be vulnerable, provided the intimacy necessary to work through dysfunction. One loving relationship transformed my life. When favorable court rulings led us to believe I had a chance at freedom, I asked her to marry me.

As the years passed, in the slow crawl of court appeals, rulings sending juvenile lifers home aren't being applied to me. I am stuck serving life, yet, she chooses to remain my wife. I think of her as a blessing; it is through bonds with her, family, and friends that my heart remains open to the joys of life in the world. Thus, I understand why Michael and Elizabeth desire to eternally bond before his imminent departure from this world.

Arnold is walking away. Looking back one last time, he waves. He's gone. Into the world.

Turning towards the door, I head to Michael's wedding.