Rec Yard

A novel by

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You see, in this world there's two kinds of people, my friend:
those with loaded guns and those who dig. You dig.

SERGIO LEONE
The Good, the Bad and the Ugly

I

SIMON

It seemed like such a good idea. Derek L. had a ready pen, he wrote poems and stories. I don't know much about poetry, but the stories were powerful enough: an authentic, muscular tone. Almost all of them were set inside the prison walls. I was struck by "Rec Yard" in particular, with its original point of view. In that story there's a God who sees everything, because he's a surveillance camera, but you don't know that at first. God observes the prisoner as he makes his monotonous rounds of the recreation yard. Conversely, the prisoner has all his hopes pinned on the surveillance camera. The free world, after all, is located right on the other side of its lens.

Derek L. sent me that story (and the poems). He had always been an admirer, he said. By then he'd read everything I'd written. I knew him, of course, from our meeting at the book club. A girl from the library organized a club for inmates, and occasionally she invited a writer. I wrote back to Derek about "Rec Yard": "I don't know if you have any more stories lying around, but this is a fantastic title for a collection."

The prisoner in the story plans his escape, not in the traditional way with a rope tossed over the wall or a bunch of sheets tied together, but through the surveillance camera. He has his sights set on that camera. If he can get to the other, the good side of that lens, he's a free man. In the prison yard he sees only the tall, gray walls and a blue patch of sky. On the other side of the camera he'll see the rec yard from above, and so become God himself.

"I've got more," Derek wrote back. "I can recommend it to one and all, a little time behind bars. Every up-and-

coming writer. No one wants to meet up with you. There are no birthdays or holidays you can't miss. No children to pick up from school. No wife carping at you when you finally go out for some fun."

I saw to it that "Rec Yard" was published in a literary journal. The editors at *That Other Canon* were excited. They were all promising young literati and this was precisely what they needed to get the journal's subscriptions up to par. They liked the story, they recognized its quality, but I noticed right away that the idea of a prisoner with talent was what really appealed to them. A murderer who wouldn't be released any time soon. A wild animal. A bored lion watching the visitors at the zoo. There they are, on the other side of the fence, they lift their children onto the low wall for a better look. The lion is dozing, swatting flies with his tail – but he isn't missing a thing. One false move and they'll see how quickly he reacts. They'll get there too late, in any case.

He sent me more stories. To be completely honest: none of them were quite as good as "Rec Yard", but they were still good. I approached a publisher and emphasized the golden combination of convicted felon and literary talent. I sent the perfect letter to the prison authorities; you can leave that up to a writer. The launch would take on extra luster if the writer could be there in person, I wrote. One weekend. What, after all, was one weekend compared to years behind bars? Derek L. would report back to the prison gates on Sunday evening. I agreed beforehand to any conditions they might pose. The discreet presence of plainclothes detectives, maybe even an ankle monitor. As I wrote the words *ankle monitor*, I realized that it was also the title of one of Derek L.'s stories. Just like *weekend leave*. I laid my final card on the table. "My wife, Hanna Hanson, is a detective with the National Crime Squad," I wrote. "Derek L. will stay at our home for three days. There is no better guarantor than my wife's presence; he'll think twice before getting out of line."

The image of the sleeping lion is not my own, it comes from him, from his longest and most recent story: "Savanna Grass". After "Rec Yard", it's the best one in the collection. It's about a criminal who never forgets. In his

cell he ponders his revenge on a friend who betrayed him. He compares himself to a lion dozing away in the high grass of the savanna, only his ears moving on occasion to shake off a pesky fly. The zebra foal that's strayed from the herd assumes that the lion is asleep…

Maybe you'll say I should have read those stories more carefully. Should have read them differently. That I let myself to be blinded by the robust metaphors and muscular style. That's easy enough to say – in hindsight.

This is perhaps also the moment to confess that my own motives were not entirely devoid of self-interest. But, I told myself, I wasn't harming anyone else. A writer with only the purest of motives will never, ever write anything that lasts. I simply had an eye for Derek L.'s talent, I was the first to notice it. Is a killer by definition a bad writer? On the contrary, I'd say.

All of this now being in hindsight.

The Thursday began so wonderfully. I picked up Derek L. at the prison gates. He had a powerful handshake.

"Hello," he said. "Nice to finally meet you in the great outdoors, Simon."

HANNA

Back in the day, not so long ago, all heads turned whenever I came into a café or restaurant. As I walked to the bar or had the waiter show me to my table, I knew all eyes were on me. Or no, not all of them: the women didn't stare as long.

That was then. Men on scaffolding put down their tools to whistle at me. They didn't only whistle, they kept on looking at me until I disappeared around the corner. In the tram or bus, no one stood to offer me their seat. *Why make things any easier for her?* is what they must have been thinking.

Now the whistling has stopped, the scaffolding remains silent when I walk past. The construction workers still look. I see them look my way for a moment, they've seen a woman turn the corner, then they go back to what they were doing. And not too long ago, someone in the bus stood up and offered me their seat. A man, not much younger than me. I shook my head. But next time I'll just accept the seat, I figure.

You often hear women – my girlfriends, women in magazines and on TV – complain about reaching a certain age. As though it were the border of some country you're being banished from forever, with no possible return. "From one day to the next I've turned invisible," they say. "They don't whistle anymore. They don't hold the door open for me anymore. No one pulls back my chair in a restaurant."

"No one buys me flowers anymore," I heard one woman say on TV not long ago. She tried to laugh as she said it, as though it was all one big joke. Or maybe she was hoping that hundreds of viewers would now send her flowers.

I'm not like that. You won't hear me complaining. I can buy my own flowers. Looking back, it started with a gray hair here and there, then suddenly there were more and more. At first I didn't do anything about it, I still fell within the category "looks good for her age". But I didn't want to go completely gray, I wouldn't

let things get that far. One day you're still a Christmas tree with ribbons, lights and tinsel, the next you find yourself out beside the dumpster with the other trees. My hair was thick, thick and black. Now it's dyed. It's also become unmistakably thinner. If you look carefully, you see that the life has sort of gone out of it.

I've embraced the invisibility like a best girlfriend who lets you sleep on her couch after your divorce. These days I can simply walk into a café. When I'm by myself in a restaurant, men don't approach me anymore. They've stopped sending a glass of champagne or a rose to my table. What I remember most is the bother: I had no choice but to turn, to raise my glass, to smile and join the toast. After that, before you could count to ten, he'd be standing at my table. *Would you mind if I join you?* Or the classic line: *What's a beautiful woman like you doing here all alone?*

It's so much quieter now. I don't sit in a restaurant all by myself too often, but when I do I feel no self-pity at all. You have to watch out for the waiters, though. They used to show me to a table close to the aquarium or to a window seat. These days they try to muffle me away behind a big fatsia plant, or in a quiet corner close to the restrooms. When I go out to dinner with Simon, that's all different. They tend to know his face, and see me only as the wife that goes along with that face.

DEREK

Sure, every prisoner's going to tell you they're innocent, but I really am. Up to a given point, let me make that clear right away. There are certain facts with which I've been charged. Some of those have never been proven. Or maybe better to put it this way: they started it. You can go on talking, but at some point you have to stop them in their tracks, otherwise you're the laughingstock. They have to keep taking you seriously. And how serious is someone who suddenly shows up and pushes a piece in your face? Can you tell me that?

I have no remorse. At most, I think it's too bad that it had to go this way. I was never planning to stay here for long. The tunnel's finished, all the way to underneath the showers, two more months of digging and I'm out of here. No, just kidding, there's not really any tunnel. The tunnel exists only in my mind. But it helps to keep me calm. Sometimes I lie on my bed and work on my tunnel for another fifteen minutes. I've read that before about hostages, that they do the same thing. Hezbollah held onto Terry Waite, the Anglican, for almost five years, in a cellar no bigger than six by six, with nothing at all – no books, no newspapers, nothing, nada. During those five years, the guy built an entire castle. In his head. He talked about it on TV. He started with the drive and the drawbridge, then went on with the walls and all those rooms. After that, he furnished the place. A little further every day, for five whole years; what actually worried him most was that he'd never get to finish the castle.

That's the way it is with me too. I hung up a poster across from my bed. A poster of a real sizzler, like we all do, not some celebrity or something, just a hot chick leaning kind of provocatively against a brand-new Lamborghini.

I lie on my bed and look at the poster; in my mind, there's a hole behind it, that's where the tunnel begins.

You've got prison movies and then you've got prison movies. The audience almost always roots for the inmate. *Escape from*

Alcatraz, no, I mean that other one: *Birdman of Alcatraz*. A prisoner takes care of this little bird, until one day a sadistic warden takes the bird away from him. The inmate goes ballistic. That's what it's all about, in fact. In any prison, this one too. That people can go ballistic. With me, all I need is a little nudge. That's what the other guys here say about me too: "Derek's got a short fuse." Let me put it differently: personally, I don't understand people who *don't* have a short fuse. You reach a certain point, someone bumps up against you in the shower room, they stare at you just a little too long, like they're examining you, you know what I mean? With that superior look, as though they're better than me.

Not long ago there was this dickhead who looked at me like that, we'd just come out of line at the commissary and took our trays to the long table at the back of the room. He was a new guy, only been here for a week, but he had this air about him that was all out of line, like: I may be here right now, like the rest of you, but it's bound to be a misunderstanding. *Higher education*, I recognize the type. He looked at me with that weensy little smile, like I was some interesting casus: an animal in a cage from some far away land, and it was like he was reading the little sign beside the cage to see which countries were my natural habitat.

But he was making one fatal mistake: he wasn't outside the cage, he was in it. The kind of news story you read sometimes, or see on YouTube in a film some bystander made with their phone: someone at the zoo climbs up onto the wall and falls into the ditch between the fence and the actual habitat. A sleepy lion takes a first, bored look, but then decides to go for a better look anyway. In the YouTube video you can hear the bystanders screaming.

"Was there something you wanted to say to me, professor?" I asked it real calmly, in a quiet voice, almost friendly. But I could tell from the other guys at the table, there really was a shift: like they just went on eating as if everything was peachy keen. Have you ever had that?

The professor noticed something too, he wasn't completely retarded. I saw him looking at me. The way a zebra or an antelope looks at log floating in the watering hole: is that really a log, or is it a crocodile? Most days here I'm a log. I keep myself in check. I wait for the right moment in the showers or in the

yard. By the time the zebra finds out that it really isn't a log, it's too late anyway.

There are twenty of us in what you'd probably call the minimum-security wing. We don't have to stay in our cells between nine and six, we can just wander the halls. Actually, there's only one hall, about ten meters wide. Everyone on both sides has their cell door open, some of them hang their laundry up in the corridor, on a rack to let it dry. When you look in you see the same tableau everywhere: a couple of posters of girls on the wall, a little desk with a couple of books. A few of them don't have any posters on the wall, so that's clear enough: pictures of half-naked men or boys is something you better not hang up in our wing.

At one end of the hall you've got the rec area with a pingpong table, a foosball table and a cupboard full of board games: Risk, Monopoly, that kind of thing. And five decks of card, all of them missing one or two.

The other end of the hall is set off with bars and a wall of frosted, armored glass so thick you couldn't break it with an axe. As though anyone here would have an axe in their cell. We do have other things, though, things I'm not going to talk about here, I'm not ratting on anyone. Sunday, if I go back, with the emphasis on *if*, I might need those things, I hope not, but you never know. It's good to have them around anyway.

Sometimes, when they get on my case, I imagine how it would go: I'm lying on my bunk and a guard says something about dirty laundry on the floor, in this tone like he's my mother or something. Then I think about it. I slide my hand under the mattress. He doesn't have time to get away, maybe he starts screaming, maybe not, I'm fast. I don't need much time; I'm done before his colleagues can get there to help him.

But I don't do that, never have done that. As far as that goes, we're all alike. *Good behavior*, that's the tie that binds. We do our wash, borrow a book from the library, play a little pingpong or fussbol, pull some weeds in the herb garden. Whatever we do, we don't get into fights. Not even the start of one, we're aware of the cameras, twenty-four seven. "That ball was out, right?" the other party asks carefully. And apparently calm as can be, he lays his paddle on the pingpong table. We look at each other. "Staring down" is what they call that. It's about who

has the most persistent stare. But the surveillance camera can't see it. "I think so too, it was out." You make an internal note to do something later on, in the showers or out in the yard, in a corner where there aren't any cameras.

That ball wasn't out, you know that – and he knows it too.

It was sort of like that time during the book club. You had to fill out a form before you could join. They asked me what kinds of things I read here. And whether I'd check off the books I'd finished reading. *Explain your answer*, it said at the bottom of the form, and for me that was reason enough not to check off anything.

The girl who organizes the book club is pretty much okay. A bit of a blabbermouth. One of those people who never listens, except to themselves. She thinks it's fantastic of herself to be organizing a book club for prisoners, you can tell just by looking at her. That she's doing "a good deed", you know, like running a refuge for crippled seals, or bathing mentally handicapped seniors. But otherwise she's okay, in the looks department too.

Sometimes, when I'm listening to her, when I look at that blabbering mouth, I imagine what I'd do with her if we weren't here like this in the prison library, but somewhere on the outside, in a park or in the dunes, or better yet: in a hotel room with a view of the sea. The Mediterranean Sea, if it's up to me. Way down deep I'm a romantic, and that's not even my own estimation; that's what the judge said to me after he'd read my whole dossier.

Which is what almost did me in, the last time, the fact that I live more inside my fantasies than here between these walls that hold me. In fact, it's just like with that tunnel I'm not digging. I looked at the book club girl's blabbering mouth and I imagined that hotel room, and suddenly, out of the blue, she stopped blabbering and asked me something. She had to ask twice, because I guess I didn't hear her the first time.

"Are you all right, Derek?"

"What do you mean, am I all right?" I said.

I didn't like her tone of voice, it had something holier-than-thou about it, like she thinks she's better than us because she's a blabber-girl with a book club for prisoners.

Right away I felt the haze coming up, the haze that narrows everything down and makes it smaller. I had an MRI scan once, it's like that: you're lying in a tube and you're not allowed to move. I had to watch my step; if I gave in to it than everything would be rolled back to what it was years ago, then I'd been stuck in here till hell froze over, acting serious about books that as far as I was concerned could just as well never have been written.

"You groaned," the blabber girl said. She looked at me almost reprovingly, like a school teacher calling a kid up to the front of the class. "And you said something."

"Oh yeah, what did I say?" I asked, putting on my cutest smile. That was no easy task, because on the inside the fuse was already lit, we were about one nanosecond away from the explosion.

I couldn't do to her what I'd done to the professor, in the shower room, back where the guards and cameras couldn't see. I wasn't going to run into her somewhere else in the prison either; after the book club was over, she would walk right out the gates.

No, I had to keep ahold of myself, I had to keep smiling. And meanwhile I was ranting inside, mostly at myself, because it wouldn't have been the first time I'd said something without knowing it.

"You said: 'Jesus, what the fuck?'" the book club girl said.

All I could think of was to burst out laughing. And then everybody started laughing, and so the moment passed and my weekend leave could go on approaching quietly, the way it had come closer lately with every new day.

Because the book club had at least been good for something. One day the blabber-girl invited a real writer. That writer was going to be my ticket out. But not, by the way, my only ticket. The other possible exit visa was my "girlfriend"; I'm nothing if not adaptable. A lady who had pen pals in prisons, that's how I got in contact with her. You've got women who are desperate, who think – just like the blabber-girl from the book club – that they're doing a good deed by getting in contact with inmates. And so I was handed a pen pal too, just because I was in some program where you were allotted a desperate woman like that. In fact, I'm not going to say a bad word about her; she meant

well, but it's exactly all those good intentions that are so humiliating, so condescending. Would that lady have contacted me if I wasn't behind bars? If, for example, I'd seen her sitting at the bar in the café around the corner? Would I have gone up to her and asked to buy her a drink? Never! No way! I'm not going to describe her looks, I'm not going to make it any worse than it is, just let me say that I'd have to be awfully drunk to get aroused by her, and even then I'd probably say I had a headache and fall asleep beside her.

After the initial correspondence came the visiting arrangements. We were allowed to be in a room together, with a guard present. The first time, I was really shocked, I'd only seen her in the pictures she'd sent. Pictures that must have been taken fifty years ago, because at first I just looked at the guard in amazement to make sure there wasn't some mistake. I'm not going to say anything bad about her; she wasn't ugly, it's just that she was older than she'd been in those photos, and who knows, maybe more desperate too.

But I thought she was nice, I actually thought she was kind of sweet. Maybe nice isn't really a good basis for a relationship, but I really enjoyed seeing her, every time she came to visit.

The writer was pretty much okay too. It felt like I recognized something in his book. A certain sympathy for the criminal, for his life, the excitement and the adventure, which is, in the final run, a different kind of excitement to be sure from what you feel sitting at a desk.

"You understand us," I told him. "I can tell from your book. You know that we're not good little boys, all right, but also that it hasn't always been completely our own doing."

After that we started talking about my stories. By then I'd only finished one of them, but of course that could always turn into more.

And so it happened. I sent him that one story and he sent me back an enthusiastic reply. "Have you got more?" he asked. I got down to work, wrote a new story every week and sent it to him. Meanwhile, the first story had been published in a magazine, the man wrote and told me. He had approached a publisher about doing a collection.

One Saturday morning I was called into the warden's office. That writer had sent him a letter requesting a probationary leave so I could attend the book launch in person. A probationary leave. For me!

Only one weekend, to be sure, but still, that was all I needed. One weekend had to be enough.

They were submitting it for review, the warden said, but they were not disinclined beforehand. Those, literally, were the words he used.

It might take a while, but that weekend leave was on its way. I could feel it in my bones.

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