

Chapter 2

Solitary Confinement

It's times like these that worry me. It's times like these that my mother used to always warn me about. "Keep a watchful eye, and never stop praying! People are wicked, and they should never be trusted.", she used to say. She was right. People have become more and more evil. Dare I say they have become sin itself? It's possible.

My mother passed on when I was a younger. I believe I was just on my way out of seminary; my final year, in fact, when she passed. Twenty-one years of age is too young to lose your parent, in my opinion. That was 30 years ago. She didn't go well either. Her last five years on this earth, were spent bed ridden, coughing, hacking, and yelling constant obscenities at whoever would listen. The walls were a frequent audience. I had to attend night classes to ensure that I remained on the roster, because the day was spent tending after my mother.

I do not miss cleaning the bed pan.

The rain thrashes against my window. The memory of my mother retreats into the recesses of my mind. It's funny how violent precipitation brings back those haunting visions of her. Sometimes I ask myself if I miss her. The same answer always comes back, "Nope". Well, that's not entirely true. What I do miss are the meals. She used to be the best cook I ever knew! Not a single restaurant could hold a candle to what she crafted in the kitchen. Sometimes, on Saturdays, she would invite her friends over to eat with us. Each one in turn would highly complement her cooking or attempt to convince her that she need to open up her own restaurant. Each time, my mother would just place her fingers gently on her lips, giggle, and politely decline.

There was no better cook than my mother. I will happily accredit my plump body to her amazing meal perfection. My stomach is rumbling now just thinking about her specialty desserts. On top of everything else, her desserts were my absolute favorite. She made anything from carrot cake, chocolate mousse filled cookies, orange crunch cake, and her award-winning banana pudding. I pat my belly as I sit here on the edge of my squeaky bed. It has a very significant jiggle when I hit it just right. Sometimes when I know that no one is looking, I like to scrunch my stomach down and make a face out of it. I like to take my hands and move around my belly button to make it talk or whistle at me in the mirror. At times, it was my only source of entertainment. Yes, it's juvenile, but at 51 years of age, you can disguise that kind of thing as just being an eccentric middle-aged man. Not that I would have ever intentionally let anyone see me do that. When I was young, I would lock the door to save embarrassment, but my mother would always catch me if I lost track of time. She used to pick the lock from outside the bathroom door

and yell at me. If she was having a really rough day, she would barge in and strangle me in order to emphasize her point. The words still pierce my ears to this day.

“Elverson! What are you doing in here with the door locked, fatty?” she would yell. “Why do you insist on playing with your fat like it’s some kind of imaginary friend? You should get out and go make some real friends. Or are you too sc-sc-sc-scared that they will make fun of you again? Why don’t you get out of my house before I beat that stutter out of you, you little pig!”

I hated when she called me that. I know I’m fat. I know I stutter. I was born with it. I can’t help it! I clench my mattress in my hands until it hurts. I look out the window, and lightning streaks across the sky with the thunder hot on its trail. The windows rattle and the walls join in the chorus of reverberation. It appears the weather man was wrong again. Whatever the case may be, the lightning seems to have perfect timing because it snapped me back to the present. I suppose I should get up anyway, even if the sun isn’t quite up yet. I blink my eyes several times to adjust my sight. Right. My glasses. Where did I put them? Did I leave them on my night stand? Nope. Sigh. I’ll find them eventually. I always do. I bet I left them next to my keys.

I get up out of bed, place my hands on my lower back and begin to slowly straighten my posture. The doctor says I should stretch more. Vigorous exercise would hinder me more than help me at this point. My back pops in protest in 15 spots. That feels a little better. I look down, and I attempt to touch my toes. Attempt is the key word here. I haven’t been able to touch them while standing in over 20 years. Honestly, I don’t care. I slowly swing my arms, my hips, and I gently bend my knees. That routine usually gets all of the pops and kinks out. Bone to bone arthritis is nothing to joke about; and I have it in both knees. Last X-ray that was done revealed almost no cartilage left between the knee caps. The doctor showed me the photos, and said, “You see all that floating white stuff that looks like chewed-up crab meat? That’s what remains of your cartilage.” Needless to say, I wasn’t too thrilled to hear that news, but it’s not like I have dreams of running a marathon one day. I walk with a shuffle and almost a wobble just to get to the coffee pot. Crap. I forgot to prep it again.

This may be a good time to think up a good lesson to preach this evening for the service at church. And of course, every great lesson starts with a pot of coffee. Let the coffee search begin! Cabinet number one: success. Finding the coffee tin plus the filters inside is a bonus! I forgot I put those in there. But find them I did. All without my glasses...now that’s talent! Maybe there’s a lesson here. Searching and finding coffee is like gold? No. I don’t think that is in the bible. I’ll start with just the searching part. That seems to be a common field of interest nowadays. People are always searching for something. I wish they would search their way into my church. Provided they don’t fall asleep from the other priests, they’ll be just fine. Ok. Coffee is on. Where are my glasses?

In my half-awake haze, I can see my mother out of the corner of my eye. She screams at me, “If you weren’t so fat, you might be able to see your toes once in a while! Oh, and your glasses are by your feeding trough at the table you stupid pig!”

A tear runs down my face as I scream at the coffee, “Hurry up already, y-y-y-you st-st-st-stupid p-p-p-piece of j-j-j-junk!” I want these visions, memories, whatever they are to go away. Coffee does the trick. It makes me awake enough to blot them out. Searching. Right. Where was I? I need to get dressed. I need to distract myself from thinking about my mother. Why is it so bad today? Why can’t I control this? It’s never been like this before. I walk into my room, and I pause to look out the window again. Down on the streets below, there are people literally crawling through the torrential downpour in an attempt to make it home safely in their drunken stupor.

This town of Los Pobres is what I call home. As much as I hate it here, I don’t feel like leaving. It’s such a long drive across the desert just to get to the next closest form of population; the city of Los Ricos. I am literally on the backside of the desert with no hope in sight. It’s hot here. It hardly ever rains, and when it does it floods certain areas of the town. All we have to offer are bars, strip clubs, and pawn shops. Granted there are the occasional fast food restaurants, but aside from the Catholic church I am on staff at that’s really about it. Bleak, boring, and almost in ruins is how I would describe my town. In a way, it kind of reminds me of a hangout for bandits that you would find in your typical western movie. Instead of horses, there are cars. Instead of drunken cowboys crawling on hands and knees from the saloon, there are punks with wild haircuts stumbling and vomiting back to their apartments. Some are drunk, while others are so wrapped up in their self-absorbed world of drugs that they wander the streets looking for that “next hit”.

It is the same thing every Saturday.

I shake my head and shuffle to my closet. Lo and behold, there is a clean uniform. That’s a good thing. A speck of light to my day. It’s the little things in life that count. If finding a clean uniform in my closet so I don’t become the stinky fat priest instead of just the fat priest does the trick; I’ll take it. I need to leave a note or something to remind me to do laundry when I get home. Notes seem to work a lot better for me than screaming. My mother was always a huge fan of screaming.

In front of her friends, and in church, my mother always had the best manners. However, once we were alone, she would go to her pantry and pull out a one-gallon jug of homemade alcohol. She used to turn the jug up on end, and guzzle about half of it down before putting the cork back in it and placing it back in the pantry. She would stagger to her favorite chair in the living room. Back when I was a child, I thought she was hurt because of her funny walk. Looking back, I know that she was simply

intoxicated...heavily. That chair is where she used to bark all of her orders at me when I was growing up. Watching her shows, she would become bitter, jealous, and hostile after seeing the families on television. "Real life is never like it is on TV, Elverson. NEVER! These families stay together. These families are happy. These families love each other and always work out their situations! And what do *I* get stuck with? An empty apartment that I can barely afford since your worthless father left us! Apparently, stripper poles were more enticing. FINE! Don't you ever get married, piggy. Do you hear me? So, help me, you better not end up like your father, or I will KILL YOU!" she screamed at me.

My knees try to dig tunnels through my chest. "M-m-make it st-st-st-stop. P-p-please!" I clench my hands around my ears as if that will drown out my mother's voice. It seems like every time I wake up, I hear her voice. The painful thoughts are only interrupted this morning by the need to rush to the bathroom because the prune juice from the night prior has run its course. Boy, getting old is pretty rough. After I flush and wash my hands I see the painful sight of a tired, pudgy old man staring back at me in the medicine cabinet mirror. The medicine cabinet...

My meds!

I didn't take my medication this morning. That sudden drop to the floor was a stupid decision, because my knees are throbbing now. Adrenaline doesn't stick around as long as it used to. My legs are now starting to tremble under my weight, because my knees are protesting their current state. But I have to take my meds! It's not too late. It's only been a few minutes. Bracing myself on the edge of the sink, I throw the medicine cabinet door open and it clangs off of the wall and partly swings back to its origin. Half of a bottle remains. I breathe a sigh of relief because I thought I was out or close to a refill. I take the two horse-sized pills with some water cupped in one hand from the faucet. Swallow. Good. Wait. I listen. There it goes. Mother's voice begins to muffle, and then finally fades out. She is gone for the day. Looks like I need to leave another note. I think I will put it on the mirror. Would I remember to look at it though? We shall see. I close the medicine cabinet and stop just as the magnets click together. My mother's voice may be gone, but as I stare at myself in the mirror, the same bald, fat, and wrinkled man is there. That's a pitiful combination. My eyes are bloodshot from crying recently, and I have sweat beading in the folds of wrinkles on my face. My eyebrows have wiry grey hairs that seem to have a mind of their own beyond the help of hair gel. As I sniffle, a clear spot of mucus retreats back into my nose by way of my nose hairs that refuse to stay in their nostrils. My ears are slightly cauliflowery from when my mom would box my ears as a boy for not listening to her. The lobes tend to dangle a bit, too. You know, I think I have more hair in my eyebrows, nose, and ears than I do on my actual head! The only things up there besides skin are random sun spots. Sighing deeply, I let my hand drop back to its side. I am a pathetic, ugly old man, and I still have to go to work in this pitiful world. I might as well go get dressed.

I go back to my closet, grab the clean outfit, and put it on. Uh oh. It's a little snug. Thankfully I wear a robe over this. I'll have to go get a larger size on Monday. Maybe if I tuck in my gut a little bit... I inhale sharply. Now all I have to do is get...the zipper...up. It zips. I exhale, and the seam bursts out of the back in the seat of my pants. That's just great. I wonder what the expression would be on the alteration lady's face when I show her this one. I chuckle. I can hear her now, "What you do now to pants? You no fit? Why not?" She knows why. I am a horrible diet follower.

I would do really well a few days. I would eat nothing but fruits, veggies, and some oatmeal. It happens somewhere right around the evening of the third day that my tummy growls in protest. So, I would answer the call. I would go down the street to the convenience store, and restock on my pizza rolls and hot pockets collection. I love those things: instant pizza flavor all in less than five minutes; such a beautiful invention. I don't have to worry about making a fool out of myself by trying to order delivery over the phone. And I don't have to wait the excruciating 30 minutes for the delivery man to find my apartment. On my most recent trip to the store, the Twinkies were on clearance. I couldn't pass them by, and I didn't want to leave the other boxes without their shelf-mate. They would miss him. So, I just *had* to buy them all. So, it's a win-win situation. The store clerk wanted to sell them all, and I just happen to be hungry. It's a done deal.

With today being Saturday, that means that I can have some free time to myself. I do know that I need to prepare tomorrow's lesson for the rest of the staff to review. They always like it when they don't have to prepare for the morning mass; or any mass service for that matter. I think I am going to be nice today and prepare lessons for all of next week. That sounds like a great idea. I have nothing else planned today. At least, I don't think I have anything else planned today. What else did I want to do? I reach down to scratch my knee and I feel the seam protest against my girth again. Oops. I need to go to the alteration shop today, and then I need to buy more pants.

I should make a to-do list. I wobble over to the kitchen table, and sit down in my chair. I slide the legal pad of paper over to me, and grab a pen. On the first page, at the top, is a note I made already: *Don't forget to buy more pants*. Well that's good. I'm glad I remembered to put that on there. Now it is time to add to it. Pants: check. Next, I should probably add in the alteration shop to get this current pair fixed. Well, if I am going to do that, I need to change clothes. That means I can go put my sweat pants on! I'll do that once I finish my list. I don't want to get distracted. I think all that remains is to prep the lesson for tonight's mass service. Fantastic! I can do that when I get home from running errands. Just to make sure I don't forget it, I am going to underline that.

With the list done, I'm going to go put on some comfy clothes. Sweat pants here I come! In an excited rush, I get up from my chair, and turn to go back to my closet. My pants catch on a splinter that I didn't see, and tear the hole from the opened seam all the

way to the pocket. Oh no! I really hope the alteration lady doesn't get too mad at me for that. I turn back to my list and write down sandpaper so I can fix my table. I slowly get up from the table and make my way to my closet.

I get undressed and change into my comfy outfit. One pair of grey sweatpants and one black sweatshirt is my recipe for clothes that don't judge me. I hold up my freshly ripped pants in frustration. My 4XL sweats don't have this problem! They give me the freedom to move when and how I want to without complaining. Sigh. If only the church attire would include sweats, I would be a very happy man. I think the rest of my congregation would be a lot happier too! They probably wouldn't be so dreary looking like death is just around the corner.

I put my sweats on, and I breathe a sigh of relief. That feels so much better! Now it is off to complete my errand checklist. It shouldn't take too long since it is a short one. I think I will go to the department store first and pick up the sand paper. I want to save the alteration shop as my last stop. That way I can prolong the heckling for a little while longer. I grab my list, grab my keys, and I walk out the door.

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