

July 22nd, 2017: Joe Celino

Of all of the guards, Carl has the most punitive spirit. The redness in his rough skin is quick to surface, especially on his neck. His brutality has, of course, led him to be favored by the Sheriff who imagines himself to share Carl's physical intensity but only by matter of circumstance is the one who sits behind a desk. The Sheriff, Joe Celino, is delighted to see Carl when he reports to his office. The guard's body is solid and true, its power present but dormant out of respect for the Sheriff's post. It is about as wide as the door frame.

The Sheriff extracts detailed accounts from Carl of what is happening in the desert. Carl is his hands and his eyes. The Sheriff learns about what his hands have been doing today: dragging a prisoner by his feet over the dirt, veering his head into a fence. This act turned the prisoner from a man into a body in the sun, incapable of riling up the others and affirming the righteousness of their complaints.

To the prisoners, the guard is one of the many hostile forces of nature which oppose them. His violence is inevitable, a product of momentum rather than will.

The Sheriff takes the dangers of nature as a nod to him and his work: the insects make headway into the prisoner's bodies and the sun shines psychotically, inspiring a gross heat which collects in the tents.

Diabetic inmates vomit on themselves without medicine. Carl is disgusted. Their bodies are inside out; dispelling sweat, vomit, and blood; keeping these people contained is a ceaseless effort. When Carl speaks of sweat, vomit, and blood, he and the Sheriff are locked into a vivid hallucination together. In the sterile, insulated office, the outside world is phantasmic. The Sheriff often reflects on how his emissary can be sent out into the threatening haze and reliably return to the world of order again and again. The guard is reliable in the way one can trust the body to heal its wounds; the body has its

own inarticulate and instinctual wisdom, though it is best led by a decisive and clear mind.

The Sheriff gives his orders: the man who galvanized the complaining prisoners is to be sent to solitary tomorrow, the others need to be roughed up a bit. He trusts the guard to be imaginative in interpreting his vague directions. This trust is intense and essentially tangible. As Sheriff Celino leaves the prison, he reflects on Carl's arms; the competence they communicate even at rest; how they are animated by his orders.

In the last few years, he has felt no relief from the disgust he needs to execute his job well. Outside the prison, he sees the inmates' contemptuousness in almost everyone, he hears their Spanish and witnesses more of their vulgar carelessness. He has come to many of his grievances on his hour commute through the desert, where he forms and justifies his conceptual model of the world, one which matches the antipathy he feels.

His sister calls him on his drive home to pin down tomorrow's plans: he will collect his niece at noon and return her at nine that evening. The sister is unconcerned with what happens in between, she just needs the girl off her hands so she can move her mother-in-law into an expensive care home. The Sheriff says what he needs to for the phone call to end. The heat presses up against the SUV but cannot breach it.

The desert has been waging a war at a more heroic scale than can be understood by the Sheriff or his men. The land was once suppressed by a shallow sea, until the earth lifted, rejecting the water but keeping its salt. The desert's mountains withstand rain clouds to prevent them from infecting the land and interfering with its resolute bitterness. The heat of the place is hallucinogenic, as all heat is, and the desert's people became halfway suspended in dreams as a result. The creation myth of the Mojave includes the killing of the universe's creator, and these events can be witnessed directly

through dreaming. The Mojave redeemed the dull character of waking life by saturating it with the violent visions and hyperreal wisdom of dreams. When they were removed, the desert continued to speak in the language of violence and hallucination. The Americans shared this language in their own way.

Sheriff Celino conjures an image of his niece, a child who has been attached to an iPad for most of her life and who never greets him. He anticipates that she will become more insufferable in time, that in a few years, she will blink and the world before her will become hers to *evaluate*. She will have a stupid, amateurish trust in her own conclusions, which will likely involve placing Joe Celino into a repugnant category from which no assigned member can be redeemed.

He becomes manic as he fantasizes about an argument with a teenaged version of his niece. She is now in the car beside him. He imagines making her tie herself in knots with deceptively simple questions about her worldview, leading her to uncertainty and shame. The Sheriff wipes his nose, driven to dripping by a zealous AC, and the car pushes forward with the expectation that the pavement will meet it obediently as it goes.

The role of Sheriff has molded a man who sees all as either ally or adversary; Joe Celino is unpracticed with children. He has brought Madison to the pier, but the girl seems afraid. She has become more distressed since he put a cotton candy in her hand, which requires an uninhibitedness to consume which the girl simply lacks. She attempts to nibble the unwrangleable pink cloud. He has made a crucial mistake.

Uncle Joe has nothing to say to the little one. She is the beneficiary of his tireless work and doesn't even know she should be grateful. While she has inevitably been touched by social rot, the relative comfort she has experienced can only be attributed to his unceasing maintenance of the border between this

world and the prison. He could not begin to speak to her, as she knows nothing about the ugly men and women on the other side of the fence, who he keeps *there* so she can be *here*, staring at him lovelessly from behind a great puff of cotton candy.

Madison's attention is pulled by the arcade, which suits Uncle Joe just fine. He donates five dollars to the girl and finds a place outside to sit.

The Sheriff checks his email to return to the world where his attention is valued and his authority is known. He drags his thumb down the screen to beckon the messages and they pile in the inbox. He finds an email from a buddy at the CDCR:

Sheriff Celino,

I am giving you a heads up as the DA's office is demanding records of all complaints filed by inmates/former inmates in the last fifteen years. We've heard that they're looking for allegations of sexual assault committed by correctional officers which have not been further investigated. I've taken a look at these files myself and I think that one of your officers, Carl Gallagher, may end up facing charges. There have been nine complaints made about him which have not been followed-up on. This is likely to become a PR issue. It may be best to fire Officer Gallagher or place him on leave.

I hope you're doing well, and let me know what you decide to do so we can get everything in order.

Best,

Will Rodriguez

California Department of Corrections & Rehabilitation

The stench of a lit joint advances into Celino's area. He, apparently, is not permitted any peace. He rereads the message twice more while fending off other notifications which descend on the scene. There is an unbearable din coming from the arcade, and the screen is overpowered by the sunlight. Joe Celino is forced to hunch over and cup his hands to give the phone's dim light a fighting chance.

The email makes everything concrete and professional when it's all much more interesting when referenced vaguely and obliquely. This is what bothers the Sheriff the most. He and the guard's shared project of discipline was dragged out of its home between the lines and made sophomorically clear. And what would happen now? He considers the question and revises it: How can he dispel these people's illusion of authority so he can get the fuck back to work?

Madison appears in front of him as she has no more of his money left to spend. She wears a tee shirt with some sort of Japanese cartoon graphic on it which stares at him too. Are you okay Uncle Joe? She is subconsciously pushed into a chaperone role because her head is now higher than that of the hunched uncle. She has a sudden sense of anger as pathetic or maybe just *his* anger as pathetic. She has not thought about things this way before. Madison has spent the last few months or so in the unresolved expanse between automatic deference to adults and automatic suspicion. She is just beginning to doubt. Joe Celino has inspired doubt in her to a greater degree than other adults have, which may have equally as much to do with qualities of his face as his demeanor. The skin on the man's face appears tough, but erupts into visible blood vessels at its peaks. Besides the face, she has also been in the seismic zone of his contempt all day. It has worn on her.

The Sheriff is fine, that's what he says, and the two walk further into the park via a route which feels chosen but is encouraged by the design. Madison is thinking about her newfound opinion and Joe is thinking about Carl. He knows

Carl well; the man is a companion, but in a more profound sense, a phantom limb, so an unambiguous confirmation of Carl fucking the inmates does not feel like news. He has an instinctual understanding of how it plays out: Carl's disgust and frustration channeled into discipline. Celino knows that this is how it goes because Carl is fucking them on his behalf, in the way he would fuck them, and for the reasons he would fuck them. He has often seen the sweating and mouthy women and been forced to think of sex. Fucking them would be means of resolving desire quickly so to prevent its prolonged version, which makes one manipulable and incapable of thinking clearly.

And Madison, beside him, while not knowing what her uncle is thinking, has a sense of the man's viciousness, and she disapproves. His grimace looks absurd in this environment, which was designed with a Nintendodian approach to color and tendency to fix a smiling face on all objects and surfaces. Her growing dislike for her uncle develops alongside a buzz about making these sorts of judgments at all, to have arrived at her own set of standards and have the ability to determine who does and does not meet them.

Their path introduces them to a booth selling the opportunity to hurl darts at balloons. Around the display of balloons, the walls are crammed with plush toys— crass ones; Rastafarian bananas with stoned faces and other obnoxious riff raff. Madison asks her uncle if he'd like to play with her.

Her question forces the Sheriff to abandon the important things on his mind and return to the present, where he is immediately assaulted by the garish sights and sounds of the pier. He needs to lash out.

Sheriff Joe pays, and the two are armed by the attendant. They fall into competition very naturally. The Sheriff summons all his force but there is little of it. His fat body, rarely unseated, jerks uncomfortably in an action which somehow results in a flung dart. It hits the wall weakly and on its side, and drops without threat to any balloon.

Madison, full of momentum, hurls her first dart, and its quick contact with the balloon forces out a pop. The attendant, whose dark makeup confuses and upsets Joe, cheers and encourages the girl to keep going. Madison politely waits for her uncle to give it another shot.

The two women wait and watch. He stares at the precarious, stretched flesh of a yellow balloon and practices the arc of his throw a few times. The dart is too small for his hand; it is probably more proportionally appropriate for Madison. He complains aloud of the odds stacked against him in order to manage the expectations of his audience. As he launches the dart, the inelastic polyester fabric of his shirt constricts his movement and stresses the seams. The balloons remain unmoved.

The attendant is relieved to return her attention to Madison, who has been coming out of her shell all day and is apparently being rewarded for it. She aims, unshakeable, and the dart swipes just past its target. Her near miss is impressive, as the dart is buried deeply and perpendicularly into the wall.

Joe wishes that the girls could understand that these small failures of his are an aberration, that his life's work has been a continual arc of greater mastery over people and environments far more hostile than they could ever know. The attendant slurps a thick blue beverage through a striped straw.

With his final chance, he rethinks how much this little game is worth his effort. He thinks of Carl, both to consider how the guard would approach the challenge and to comfort himself with the thought of someone who knows the truth of his great command over things. He cannot fully bring into focus his dream of Carl deftly and successfully throwing the dart, not enough to learn from anyway. He therefore decides to half-ass it and will himself to care less about the whole thing.

His throw is dramatically unsuccessful, which plummets his spirit. It is quickly followed by the sound of his niece's dart hitting its target with a humiliating and punctuating pop.

Madison is awarded a small plush dog, which evidently deserves enormous affection and attention, so Joe is left to wander off, a bit dizzy, towards the end of the boardwalk.

The Sheriff has not learned much from his failure. He makes a few small changes in his thinking to explain it: he may not share Carl's physical capability, but he could, were things different. If he didn't take so well to leadership, for example. He is now reminded that there are bureaucratic hordes keen on amputation. The Sheriff looks out at the water, heaving up then down. It is full of litter and smells terrible. He addresses God, who he is confident is as bitter as he is and for the same reasons, and vows to protect Carl's job by any means necessary.

On Monday morning, the Sheriff's massive car hurdles through the desert. The air is cruelly and especially dry. As king and sole citizen of the car's domain, there is no one with him when he becomes beset with visions of a great mass of water rolling over the mountains and flooding into the valley. There is no one to say there's nothing there, Joe, whatever it is you're seeing.

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