

I've Changed

"Dad, that's not going to happen," she said into the receiver, her baby green eyes turned down to the concrete floor. "They don't understand that. No one is going to understand."

"I've gone to all the meetings," I argued. "Every damn one. I've learned about caring and forgiving. I've been figuring out how to calm my anger, and I get every question the instructor asks right. I know right from wrong now. I even made a friend here for once. My cellmate and I are pals. He thinks I'm a great guy."

"They can't adjust your sentence after everything," she said. "I'm sorry Dad, but I don't think they'll let you off on good behavior. Going to classes and making a friend won't be enough. Not in this case."

"We can try!" I persuaded. "I swear to you, Adri, we will win this."

"I can't afford a lawyer every time you're feeling a little better," she snapped.

Lividly, I stared at her through the glass, uncertain as to whether I should simply put down the phone. Was there any reason to keep talking to her? Usually, our conversations consisted of playful banter. She complained about her job, her neat freak, cynical boss, her children— *my* grandchildren. Adriana would never bring them in. I'd never once seen their faces in person. It didn't feel right that way, the way she pressed her phone against the partition to show me pictures the rest of the world had already seen on her social media page. I wanted to share a bond with them, and it'd never be a bond if everyone had access to that very same picture or memory.

"You don't believe me, do you?" I asked after a short pause.

Her eyes popped a moment. "What, dad, how could you say that? If I didn't believe there was good in you, I wouldn't be still coming two times a week after all this time."

“You don’t want me out,” I accused. “You don’t see me as a different man *now*.”

Silence at that. She avoided eye contact and shifted uncomfortably in her seat, as though the cushions had suddenly turned to stone. “You know I still love you,” she said quietly, “but- people don’t change. I just think it’s better- *safer* for you in here. You snap in an instant, Dad. It could be years or a matter of hours before you lose it again.”

My stomach dropped. I always had the suspicion that she still saw me as I was before rather than who I was right then. She was afraid just then, especially to the reaction in my face. I could hardly tell what I was doing, but her brows pinched together and her eyes grew wide. I’d never wanted to scare her before. But the sudden burst of energy in my muscles and chest made it hard for me to keep calm. It wasn’t because I was angry. It never was, no matter what people said. I was only...frustrated, I supposed.

“But what about all the progress I’ve made? I’ve went so long without an incident,” I tested. “I’ve never worked so hard to change my life— for you!”

“Just because you’ve taken your punishment with dignity and humility doesn’t make you any less of a killer,” she said solemnly. “Don’t you dare raise your voice at me again. You promised.”

“What didn’t I mean!? Adriana!?”

The phone slammed down on the table as she stomped out of the room. I was left there, sitting alone. I didn’t hang up the phone until a hand touched my shoulder and a deep, husky sounding voice told me it was time to leave. It was the last thing I wanted. I wanted to sit a while longer and pretend she hadn’t left, knowing that she’d come back and visit again. It was all I lived for.

Sometimes, when she was talking about her day, her work and how her husband was never home in the evenings, I’d remain silent and my thoughts would begin to drift. It was nice to pretend. That was what I was best at. I’d pretend Adrianna was my wife. They looked so alike,

that most of the time it wasn't on purpose. She had the same prominent green eyes with long lashes. Even her hair was a curly brown that twisted and twirled down to her always stiff and straight mid-back, as though she was expressing her superior nature to the world imitating a straight wooden board. I always both loved and hated that about my wife. She always remained so calm during our arguments, just as she had been before slamming that phone and walking out the door. The objects around her always got a better read on her emotions than I did.

Now I'd never get to see either of them again. I just knew it. She'd never come back. She'd leave me like all the rest! *She's come back before. Even when you've fought with her,* I tried to assure myself. But this time, it didn't put my mind to rest. I knew my wife, my daughter, and she was never so forgiving. I stared at the glass until my head began to ache, as if doing so would beckon her to come back so we would part on good terms.

Instead, I was roughly picked up by the armpit. I was angry at the man who kept a hand on my back to dissuade me from turning around as I was forced to walk away. He knew that I had once jammed my thumb into another officer's eye a while back. I hated being contained or restrained. But I'd gotten better with it now! I walked by each set of metal bars with a glare to let them all know I wasn't to be touched.

I was even upset when the escorts shut the door and walked off. The cell was grimey, empty and lonesome. The sheets on my lower bunk were worn, turning brown and grey, with ragged holes at the corners. There was still red stained on them, like little red rose petals. It was beautiful, really. It was a wonderful gift Steven had left for me.

I waited for him to come back, sitting at the edge of my bed and stared at the dust, illuminated where it hung there by a small flickering light outside my cell. I needed him to tell me I was being a bastard after what had just happened when my daughter came to visit, that I

hardly knew what it was like to experience hardship. It always seemed to help me. *There's nothing wrong with me. Steven is the problem here.*

"They could let me go," I practiced telling him. "Every day they see her walk in, but they still won't let me go. It's bullshit. She's still here, can't they see that?"

You still hurt her, you moron, he would say to me. *It doesn't matter how you see it, they'll never understand it like you do.*

It seemed a little unlike Steven to understand me, but I played along. Maybe he was having a rough day or something.

"But I changed," I argued gruffly. "I'm not like that anymore. No one believes me. I've worked hard to get better. Hell, it wasn't that hard."

Then why doesn't your daughter think that? he tested me. His voice seethed like he was trying to make me upset. *You haven't even met her husband yet.*

"She's wrong!" I shouted, clenching my head. "She doesn't know. She's not here every day! If she'd just look in a damn mirror, she'd know I didn't do anything wrong!"

My chest and cheeks felt hot and tense, like every muscle in my body was aching so terrible to do something drastic, quick and powerful. Steven was a nice fellow, but he had a way of pissing me off, too. I got up from the bed and started pacing around the cell, walking the same circles over and over again and breathing heavily.

"You weren't even there," I said, looking at him narrowly. "You don't have any reason to judge me. No one was there, how could they *possibly* assume what happened!?"

You had her blood on your hands, genius, Steven said sarcastically. *What other explanation is there?*

"I was trying to help her!" my voice broke. "I was trying to save her from dying. I-I don't know what happened. Stop asking me!"

I don't see how you could be so naive, said the police officer. He came into the room with me for interrogation. *We found the weapon on you, matching the wounds inflicted on the victim. Do you think I'm stupid, Bart? Do you?*

"No sir," I tried to tell him politely. I shook my head regretfully. "I don't know how it got there. Don't you think I'd remember killing the woman I love!?"

That's enough sir, thank you. If your lawyer knew what was good for you, he would have plead insanity.

Ha! See? He's proving my point! Steve said, suddenly sitting atop the bunk. *Look, we're all your family now, okay big guy? You can still talk to your daughter if she ever comes back, but I don't think you're ready to let loose.*

I let out a long, hard howl as I began to pound my fists against the hard brick wall until I'd painted it a dark, velvet red. *No one understands. No one understands. No one understands. No one understands. No one understands.* No one around me understood that I was finally getting better! I found myself actually caring for the people that were around me. I cared about my wife. I cared about Adrianna. I cared about my son Dillon who refused to speak to me. And I truly, truly cared about those grandchildren. I wanted to spoil them beyond their wildest dreams. I'd find a way to come by money, I was sure. Adrianna always had lots to borrow for me, just like my wife. We would go to movies and fairs and I'd take them out to nice dinners to make up for how much of their lives I missed out on. I didn't even get to see my own children graduate.

It wasn't always that way. Sometimes people began to think I was misbehaving. I was in a trance. But that wasn't the case anymore. I'd worked hard. There were a few times I'd misstepped, but overall, I was so much better than before.

I did the laundry for Steven and some of his buddies later that day. Sooner or later, Adrianna would know. My wife would know. Steven would know. They would all know that I had changed and I was a better man. All for them.

"Are you really that dull?" I remember hearing one the other inmates say as he threw his uniform in the dryer. "That's your *daughter*. I saw her the other day when you were on the phone. Unless you married someone half your age, I think your nuts. They wouldn't have convicted you of murder if she was still walking around."

The next day I wiped that man's face against one of the folding tables. His nose was running with a small red stream. I couldn't recall directly but I must have helped stop his attacker that had suddenly disappeared. I was dragged off to my cell soon after with blood on my hands and a newly passed out friend being pulled in the opposite direction, as though I'd done nothing but make the situation worse. I was helping, goddammit!

The scrawny little fellow wasn't there a few days later to help with the dishes. *Ungrateful bastard. Doesn't he know I'll protect him if it happens again?*

"Bart," an officer called, stepping into the kitchen. There were there other men with him, one with a pair of handcuffs dangling from his hand. "It's time to go."

A childish delight welled up inside me; I was being let go! They were going to escort me to a court room, where I'd be let go on good behavior! All my hard work had finally paid off. I was going to see Ophelia, Jackson and Tyler for the first time ever. Most of all, I wanted to hold my wife by her thin little waist and press my lips against her big fat ones.

There was no argument on my end. I offered my wrists immediately, unable to contain the toothy grin on my face. My stride was prideful as I took a peek into each set of bars this time around, hoping to catch eye contact with someone, to let them feel the most disgusting envy that was asleep within them.

When a screeching metal door opened to a single room with a table and two metal chairs, I found myself scratching my head. *I forgot. I'll have to meet with the lawyer and Adrianna first*, I thought. I politely sat on the far end of the room to wait in silence as the door slowly clicked into place behind me by the guards standing at my side.

"The guy is nuts," a muffled voice behind the door said. "You see him smiling back there?"

"Maybe it's for the best," the other replied.

I patiently waited and listened to the four of the mumble among themselves, though now I could hardly distinguish what they were saying. Who needed them, anyway? They thought I was dull because I wasn't getting out today, But I was confident. I knew from the depths of my gut that I was going to leave this place soon. We may have needed to go through the process, but it was a small price to pay for the people I loved.

"Dad?" a voice cracked. I stood up immediately. I would have hugged her in joy had it not been for the restraints and the two friends of mine that made me keep my distance. "I'm here."

"That's great!" I said, chipper as ever. "Adrianna, I'm so excited. It's been so long that I haven't been here. Much too long if you ask me."

Her brows pinched together as she sat down without a smile or hug in return. This was the first time in years we had a chance to embrace! Did she still not believe me? She would see. I was certain of it. Her eyes were red and watered with joy, and she sniffed from time to time as she looked at me sorrowfully.

"I know we've lost so much time together," I said, sitting back down and reaching for her hand across the table. She pulled away. "Where is the lawyer?"

Adrianna shook her head. My heart stopped and I scowled. *Where is the damn lawyer!?* A flood of pressure built up in my chest and stomach that ached to be released. She wasn't going

to tell me this wasn't going to work out, was she? No, no, I was going to get out of here. I didn't care what was in my way, I was going to get out of here.

"I know it's been tense between us," she started, "and I've always had a hard time forgiving you. I don't know that I ever did, or thought I ever would. But for some god awful reason, I still love you. I couldn't help but visit you all the time. I never stopped seeing you as the father who would dress as a handsome prince to come rescue me during our games, and-"

"What is all of this?" I said, my voice hissing "*Where is the lawyer.*"

"There is no lawyer, darling," she said. She was almost a spitting image of my wife right then. "I have to tell someone. You hurt him. You hurt Dillon. I know it's not your fault. So we are going to get you help."

"*No!*" I hollered, fists slamming on the table. She jumped up, moving her chair away. "I don't need help! *I don't need help. I don't need help.* I'm fine! I've changed! I'm better now!"

"You're scaring me," my wife whimpered. The guards held me back by the arms. "I know you don't understand, but this is for the best."

I'd caused the table to fall over in a flurry of motion. The guards tried to hold me in place, but I fell forward against her. I pounded my fists on the ground over and over until they turned red, tainting my fists, cuffs and orange uniform. The men struggled to remove me from her. My wife screamed in distress, begging I stop. *Please Bart- don't do this!* I'd do just what she did. She always took her frustrations out on the things around her. Why couldn't I do the same? She must have understood. For her silence was deafening.

"We need backup in here!" the one at my left called.

Four or so guards piled into the room. My body was lifted and pushed away from the mess I'd made. Rose petals and red rivers were smeared about the floor and room. I was covered in

it. My wife was lying there, mourning the death of the floor. She was huddled in a fetal position, unable to move.

“Call an ambulance! *Now!*” the officer yelled.

“She’s fine!” I assured, trying to stand up. One of the men stepped back at that. “She’s just being emotional. She’s only sad.”

Another leaned over here and shook his head. “No heartbeat. Get that needle ready.”