

CAPTIVITY

If you do not listen, I will weep in secret because of your pride; my eyes will weep bitterly, overflowing with tears, because the Lord's flock will be taken captive.

—JEREMIAH 13:17

EIGHT

Alejandro mixed the drink with sacramental precision. Standing behind Pedro's desk, inside his front office, Alejandro held a plastic mug filled with hot water and rubbing alcohol. As steam rose from the cup, painting the room with a medicinal smell, Tomás and Bautista stood on either side of Alejandro like a pair of wayward altar boys. They kept close watch over Santiago's every move, as if he might make another break for freedom, but Emilio had already locked the center's front door, the key now safely stowed in his pocket.

"The hot water makes the alcohol hit the guy harder," Alejandro told me. Why do you want that? I asked.

"To keep him alive," he said.

Worried about the immediate symptoms of detoxification, the cocktail was a makeshift effort to manage the dangers of withdrawal, as well as to induce users into a state of calm as they slowly weaned off their drugs of choice. And so Santiago gagged his way through the drink while Alejandro hounded him to finish it even faster.

I mentioned to Alejandro that Santiago was not drunk, that he was in fact completely sober, but Alejandro wouldn't take me at my word. "You don't know that," he said with some wisdom. No one ever really knew the full details of any of these men, he explained. During a conversation later in the week, Pedro admitted that he had missed the signs of withdrawal, which can include disorientation, confusion, and hallucination, far too many times.

"We've lost ten guys this year," Pedro told me.

So what do you do with the bodies? I stammered, knowing full well that some centers ditch them in the streets, especially if the pastor had not been in contact with the families.

"We call the police," Pedro said, "and they collect the body."

But then what do you do with all the men? I followed up, wondering how a police officer could enter the center without asking questions. Even one mention of coercion from a captive could hypothetically initiate an investigation, inviting the officer to ask each one of the men whether they were inside the center of their own free will. To Maria's horror, Santiago would have been the first to step forward, and the scene would have undoubtedly cut Pedro's population in half, if not more, within a matter of minutes.

"We put them in the [former family] room," he said. "I tell them to shut up and then I lock the door." Pedro looked a little defensive. "We aren't doing anything illegal here," he reminded me. "We just don't want the guys talking to the police."

Or passing them a note, I thought to myself.

Alejandro continued to shout at Santiago to finish the drink. "Even if they aren't drunk," Alejandro later told me, "the alcohol calms them down. It takes the edge off. We even slide sedatives into the drink sometimes, if the guy is really wild."

But Santiago wasn't wild. By the time Santiago stood inside Pedro's front office, he seemed to be thoroughly wiped, appearing almost resigned to the situation. You could see it in his shoulders. In the market, he would bow his chest, as if reassuring himself that he knew what he was doing, but now he slumped forward, completely bereft of the confidence that I had witnessed earlier that day. Now well into the night, amid the calmer space of Pedro's front office, we all watched Santiago while hints of the hunt lingered, radiating off of everyone's bodies. Santiago was the most visibly worn out, with beads of sweat forming on his forehead. His shirt was also wet, in parts translucent.

The fluorescent lighting invited an almost surgical gaze. My attention immediately landed on the patches of lint that clung to Santiago's beard. I also noticed for the first time that the tips of his fingers had been burnt from smoking out of metal pipes and that his teeth had yellowed. A rash of bug bites studded one of his forearms. All of these details had escaped me in the market, its shadows softening the severity of Santiago's state. Under a new light, in a new space, Santiago looked like a completely different person.

It was this crushed vision of Santiago that Bautista captured with a photograph.¹ "We take a picture when they enter the center," Pedro later explained, "and we take a picture when they leave." The photo would prove vital in determining when Pedro would release Santiago from his center. "It's so that I can show the family how much the guy has changed," Pedro explained. He later added that he wanted to capture a visceral sense of life before the center so that he could stage a redemptive vision of life after. Part of Pedro's process included producing a classic Christian division between a life before Christ and a life after Christ. If there is no before, Pedro reasoned, then there can be no after. The taking of men was dependent on the taking of photos.²

Unbeknownst to me, Bautista had also made a smartphone recording of Santiago's capture. It was not a perfect production by any means. There

was not enough light, and the phone's fixed-focus lens simply could not keep up with Bautista's jittery camera work. What eventually appeared on screen proved to be nothing more than a mix of shadows and muffled sounds, most of which came from Bautista's own finger tripping over the device's embedded mic. The video would have been completely incomprehensible to the unfamiliar viewer, and yet, for me, it was nothing short of haunting. I was immediately struck by how differently events unfolded in the video versus how they replayed in my mind. Fully aware of the intricacies of memory, with its tricks and discrepancies, it was nonetheless odd, even perversely intimate, to reexperience the abduction from the foot of Santiago's bed, to hear that muttered prayer one more time, and then to see Santiago set upon. At the time of his taking, Santiago seemed to have gone so peacefully, with more of a shrug than a struggle, but the video showed him resisting far more than I remembered. At one point he arches his back in sheer horror.

What do you see in this video? I later asked Pedro. We spoke in his office, days after the hunt. Both of us huddled over his smartphone in some effort to make out the video. It wasn't easy but Pedro seemed confident in his interpretation.

"I see someone who needs to change," he answered.

After the drink, Pedro ordered Alejandro to move Santiago from the front office to the morgue.³ This meant pushing Santiago down a short hallway and then up a set of stairs. Along the way, a half dozen of Pedro's lap dogs howled at Santiago. One bared his teeth. The barking and nipping put me on edge as Santiago walked past a message that Pedro had written on one of the house's interior walls. Painted in big black letters, for newly acquired men to read as they lumbered towards the morgue, the letter taunts:

Dear friend,

Value the roof over your head. Value the food. Value your family. You alone choose between the bitterness of alcohol and drugs and the love of your mother, wife, and children. Keep consuming, my stupid little friend, and I'll keep waiting for you here.

The Pastor

Alejandro knew the morgue well. The room was the color of mildew, yet it smelled like disinfectant. With no windows and only a king-size mattress flopped on the floor, a couple of buckets sat in the corner while a stool lingered near the door. The stool was for one of Pedro's huntsmen—so he

could manage the morgue—and the bucket was for those who couldn't make it to the bathroom in time.

"I once woke up in the morgue," Alejandro remembered. "I asked this guy next to me if he'd stop me if I tried to escape." The man told Alejandro that he would not. "And so I got up and started acting crazy." Alejandro apparently banged against the morgue's metal door, screaming for help. Pedro unlocked it to see what was going on, which allowed Alejandro to push past him, grab a chair, and start hitting the locked door at the top of the stairs. "You either let me out of here," Alejandro screamed, "or I want drinks." Pedro had someone fetch three glasses of rubbing alcohol. "But they must have had pills in them," Alejandro guessed, "because I started to get all quiet. I was all wired on cocaine, but I started to calm down." Alejandro did the math: "I had an eight ball of cocaine before I got picked up. I smoked ten rocks the night before, but they just kept giving me pills and drinks." Alejandro eventually settled into his cell.

Santiago proved to be far more submissive. He had been defiant when they dragged him across those last few meters of freedom, but then he capitulated, quietly obeying every order. Perhaps the most invasive was to strip naked in front of the other captives before entering the morgue. This strip search was standard practice.⁴

On the second floor of the center, just outside of the morgue, Santiago stood naked as he waited for instruction—to be told to bend over and then to squat down; then, at the bottom of the squat, to pull his scrotum to one side and to cough. All of this was to search for contraband and concealed weapons, but also to enact an intimate kind of dominance over the captive, to communicate to him that he had no right to privacy, that his body was no longer his own.⁵

The strip search often took only a moment, but if the captive resisted, the process could drag on across an entire afternoon. Santiago did not put up a fight. He stumbled into a fresh set of clothes that Bautista handed to him. Green shorts and a secondhand sweatshirt—this would be his uniform for his foreseeable future.

This intake process was more or less the same at the 200 or so centers around Guatemala City. Pastors would capture and then search captives, though sometimes they would just drag them straight to the morgue so that they could cool off or sober up. The only part of the process that Pedro left out was a ritual that had become legendary years earlier in Jorge's original center.

In the 1980s, a man named Frener was living in Maryland, learning English and building a life for himself. He was undocumented and spent

years working small jobs until one day he slipped into a kind of depression, started using drugs, and spiraled out of control.⁶

In a terrible state, Frener walked to a gas station, doused himself with gasoline, and then swallowed a lit match. His body erupted into flames, from his mouth outward. He survived, but only after a long stretch in a public hospital to treat the third-degree burns. His body was crippled and his hands bent inward, their tips melted off in the fire.

When telling me the story years later, Frener explained how he had been medevaced to a hospital in Maryland. "I flew in a helicopter," he said, reflecting some pride that someone, somewhere, took an interest in him.

Once he was stable, the United States deported Frener back to Guatemala, and he convalesced in a hospital. On March 3, 1989, his family sent him to Jorge's center, where he would stay for over twenty years. The stated reason, as scribbled on his intake form, was the use of drugs and bad conduct (*mala conducta*). Frener was in the center when police raided and closed it in 2011, but even after that, after every captive had scrambled to escape, Frener found himself unable to leave. He wandered the house, not knowing where else to go.

"I just feel locked up sometimes," Frener mentioned to me as we toured the empty center, which the police had raided only a few days earlier. "I can't really get through the door." He walked through the main hall, where his fellow captives once lived. "The penalty for leaving is kind of bad," Frener explained. "They keep you locked up in the morgue, or we need to be against the walls." With the voice of a child, he confessed that "they mostly be mean with us." After twenty-three years of captivity, Frener felt positively trapped even when the front door hung open.

For years, Frener played a special role at Jorge's center. During the strip search, after a new captive had been told to bend over and squat down, Frener would slyly join the circle. After being prompted by another captive, Frener would approach the new man, stand close to him, and announce: "Welcome to hell!"

The joke was that Frener, because of his burned body, was thought to resemble Freddy Krueger, the evil protagonist from *A Nightmare on Elm Street*. "Frener Krueger," they called him.

The alcoholic drink, the photograph, the strip search, and even Frener's nearly forgotten routine, all confirmed that while the hunt is a game, captivity is a ritual, with Pedro's acquisition of Santiago opening a window into a deeply patterned process.⁷ And so, exhausted and a little drunk, Santiago entered the morgue and collapsed into a deep sleep.

NINE

Maria arrived at Pedro's front door the next morning having again worked her way through city traffic with a combination of public buses. The trip took over an hour, but she nevertheless looked rested. Following the hunt, while Alejandro and his men drove Santiago to the center, Maria took a few minutes to straighten up her home. Tomás and Baustista had dragged dirt into the house and knocked over a few chairs on their way out. She also found patches of mud on her tiles. But none of this took long to clean. With a quiet house and Santiago off the streets, she had gone to bed with a weight lifted from her shoulders. Her son was safe inside a center. There was even a slight skip in her step as she walked through Pedro's front door. Maria would later mention to me that she had never slept more soundly. No longer in the streets or at the market and well beyond the reach of those kids who had once shot him, Santiago was now under lock and key.

Maria took a seat on a rickety stool while Pedro sat commandingly in his office chair, a desk dividing the space between them. The optics of the front office made clear who was in charge. Pedro's chair literally lifted him ever so slightly above Maria as the stool forced her to slump forward. Upstairs, Santiago sat in the morgue.

Maria looked nervously around the office as Pedro pulled an intake form from his desk drawer and slid it through a typewriter. With his reading glasses slipping to the tip of his nose and his posture accentuated, Pedro hunted and pecked his way through a series of questions that he posed to Maria, carefully establishing a modicum of a paper trail. I sat in the back on a stool.⁸

"What is Santiago's complete name?" Pedro asked Maria. He punched out the answer with two fingers.⁹

S-a-n-t-i-a-g-o . . .

"What is his date of birth?" Pedro took his time, documenting every detail with a snap of a key.

D-e-c-e-m-b-e-r-o-9-1-9-9-o

"What is his level of education?"

P-r-i-m-a-r-y

"What is his permanent address?"

Z-o-n-e-2-1

"What are the phone numbers we should call, if we need to contact the family?"

5-5-7-6-3-3-4-1-and-5-5-8-8-3-2-1-0

Pedro then arrived at the most important question of all: "Who will be the person to decide when Santiago can leave?" There can only be one person, Pedro explained. Convincing or comforting more than one guardian was both taxing and confusing. Instead, he preferred a single point of reference, which was perfectly fine for Maria. She alone would make the decision to set her son free. Pedro typed out that answer.

M-a-r-i-a

Months after Santiago's hunt, during a bit of downtime, I asked Pedro why he used a typewriter. Over the years, I had often seen him struggle to collect basic information, and the machine always seemed to jam or the ribbon would break. And sometimes, when Pedro would strike two keys at roughly the same time, they would tangle and he would have to separate them in ways that inked his fingers and, in turn, the forms. Wouldn't it be easier to use a pen or maybe a computer?

"I like how the typewriter sounds," Pedro admitted. "You can't hear a pen and you can't hear a computer." Pedro apparently wanted his clients to experience the formalization of their loved one's captivity. The sound of every keystroke gave authority to a contractual relationship that was otherwise dubious at best. More than creating a set of coherent files, Pedro cared about cultivating an atmosphere. The process of completing the intake form was less about collecting information than delivering a sensation. The main message was that a son or brother or husband was now under Pedro's jurisdiction.¹⁰

The intake forms were also part of the process. Pedro had lifted much of his legalese from Jorge's forms. One of Jorge's original forms read: "The center offers security to the detainee, delivered by professional and specialized staff members trained to recuperate the fallen from such problems as alcoholism, drug addiction, delinquency, homosexuality, and other problems."¹¹

Jorge's intake forms also stated that detainees are only allowed to have a toothbrush, toothpaste, underwear, a change of clothes, soap, toilet paper, and a BIBLE. Bible was written in all caps. "There will be no phone calls," the form flatly stated. If the detainee tried to escape, the center was "not responsible for this: neither for what happens during an escape nor for what happens after the escape." If the detainee turned violent and destroyed furniture inside of the center, "the family is responsible for replacing these broken objects." The very bottom of the intake form cited Isaiah 40:10: "The Sovereign Lord comes with power, and he rules with a mighty arm."

And then there was the contract that the captive signed. Above the space for the signature read: "For my own rehabilitation and my own good I promise to comply with the regulations of this house, and also to comply with its disciplinary rules." The form continued, "As I have stated when seeking rehabilitation, I have no outstanding warrants for my arrest with either the civil or military authorities. And I also authorize the authorities of this house to keep my belongings in case I ever escape." If the captive could or would not sign the form, he provided a thumbprint against his will.¹²

The filling out of the form, with all of its overextended language, was part of a broader performance. From the stool upon which Maria sat to the office chair in which Pedro perched, the imbalance between them was embodied in their postures and compounded as Pedro pecked at his typewriter. But Pedro's performance was also an obvious conceit, for the relationship was not as asymmetrical as Pedro would have liked. Without Maria's consent, without her business, then Pedro had nothing. This ritual of signing bound Maria to Pedro, confirming his authority over her son through an act of submission.¹³

Maria nervously tapped her heel as she balanced atop the stool, remarking, "He's a beautiful person until he gets money in his pocket." She then got deadly serious: "And he's going to die in the streets without this center." Her dark prophecy hung in the air as she began signing the papers that Pedro placed in front of her. Written in the first person, the following are only some of the conditions to which Maria agreed on behalf of Santiago:

I hereby voluntarily enter this ministry to submit myself to treatment for alcohol detoxification and/or drug rehabilitation, located at the address stated clearly at the top of this form. I give formal consent to my total, complete, and voluntary submission for the restoration of my complete person during what will be my internment. I commit myself to strict observation and follow the given rules for the reestablishment of my health. I will be transferred to another ministry within this network if I do not comply.

- a. I understand that the treatment will last seven months, which the institution understands as an appropriate length of time for my restoration and recuperation.
- b. At the moment of entering this center, I have given a nonreimbursable donation of the following amount: ____.
- c. To cover any additional medical, psychiatric, or psychological care, I have provided a nonreimbursable sum of money of the following amount: ____.

- d. Whatever debt that I incur through the destruction of furniture and equipment will be paid by me or whoever is responsible for me.
- e. I promise not to ingest toxic substances, drugs, and/or alcohol during my time of treatment for detoxification with this ministry because it can be hazardous to my health and contrary to the interests and the objectives of my restoration.
- f. I accept to see visitors on Thursdays and Sundays but only after the first fifteen days of my treatment and only by family members, such as a father, mother, wife, brothers, and children.
- g. I accept that I may be subjected to the following laboratory tests: 1—drugs, 2—HIV/AIDS, which would immediately cancel my stay at the center.
- h. The decision to enter the center is mine. I enter because of alcohol and/or drugs, my own loss of control, and the danger to which I have put my family and society.
- i. So that there is no confusion about my decision to enter this center, I have asked a family member to accompany me to serve as a witness. He or she signs this paper along with me and shares in the responsibilities detailed by this contract.
- j. I accept this contract completely, and by the power and authority of this institution I have read, accepted, ratified, and signed (or give a thumb print from my right hand because I cannot sign) this document, confirming with a witness that has accompanied me and has been previously identified.

With pen in hand, Maria signed her name at the bottom after negotiating some conditions. Both she and Pedro agreed that Santiago would stay inside the center for seven months; Maria would also offer the center Q600 [\$75 USD] per month; the offering would cover three very basic meals a day but not a bed. Santiago would sleep on the floor. Maria handed over another Q600 for possible medical expenses and added another Q400 [\$50 USD] to cover the hunt. “That was nearly all the money that I have.” Maria winced as we walked out of the center.

As we spoke on our way to the bus stop, Maria marched more confidently than I had ever seen in the past. I asked her if she understood the form that she just signed. “To tell you the truth—” she blushed “—I didn’t really read it.” The details, she said, seemed like an afterthought. Santiago

was already inside the center and she had already given Pedro her money. Most importantly, Santiago was off the streets.

What else could you ask for? I asked.

"A miracle," Maria answered with some certainty. "I want him to change."

TEN

Alejandro once complained that "there's just so much time inside the center. What do we do with all of this time?" The answer was to wait.¹⁴ Over the years, I found that waiting could look a lot like sleeping, with a captive's head propped against a concrete wall, arms folded across his chest. Santiago often wore a hooded sweatshirt that he was able to pull over his head, straining the strings to close the hood almost entirely over his face. Only Santiago's nose stuck out. Others sat on the floor, hugging their legs in such a way as to create a tent when they stretched their T-shirts over their knees, allowing them to duck under their collars for a bit of privacy. As the second hand pushed the minute hand and the hours added up, these captives created their own spaces and simply waited for the day to end.

"But then you go to bed," Santiago said, "on the floor, next to these same guys." And so waiting for the next moment ultimately became a meditation on waiting itself. The question that emerged for all captives at one time or another was not how to wait, but, rather, what they were waiting for. Nothing about life inside the center ever proceeded according to concrete markers. There was no talk of steps and stages or even progress and growth; the dominant experience of captivity was just waiting.

"Waiting keeps these guys off the streets," Pedro told me, knowing full well that the therapy he offered did not lead in any particular direction. "It's better that Santiago is upstairs just waiting around rather than running the streets." He added, "You can get yourself killed out there." This is no exaggeration. The principle argument for holding these men captive was to keep them alive. At the very least, even during the most excruciatingly repetitive days, while listening to yet another testimony, these captives were nonetheless passing the time rather than waiting to die. "Because out in the streets," Pedro insisted, "you're going to get shot. At least here you're not waiting for that." A few weeks later, having thought about my question more, Pedro approached me again. "They're waiting for a better perspective on life," he

added. “They’re waiting for a chance to make a good decision. They’re waiting for a chance to know better.” Waiting apparently had therapeutic value in itself.

The captives were also waiting for their families to heal. “The families need a break,” Pedro also told me. We spoke just outside the center, a few days after Santiago’s capture. “They come here with their son or brother or husband, and they are tired. They’ve had their money stolen. Their sleep stolen. Their pride broken. Their loved one has been scandalous, and so they come here for a break.” The language of warehousing suddenly became literal—families stashed a loved one inside this center not so they could be saved, but rather so they would be stored.

“I’ll come back later for him,” a mother once told me. We had just driven away from the center after delivering her son to the pastor. She was angry at her son and somewhat pleased that Pedro’s men had roughed him up; she was also relieved that she could go home to sleep. “I don’t have to worry about him at night running around getting high,” she said. “I don’t have to keep counting my money and hiding my stuff.” With the city streaking past us out the window of a taxi, the woman said, “He can just wait there. He can just wait there. Until I’m ready to get him out, he’s just going to have to wait.” She then turned to me. “And he might have to wait there for a very long time.”

Most of Pedro’s captives found themselves waiting for a very long time, which is why Pedro committed them to a daily schedule that he had also borrowed from Jorge’s center. The schedule was, in many ways, inspired by the very penitentiary system that once held Jorge.¹⁵

5:00	Bathroom
5:30 to 6:00	Hygiene and house cleaning
6:00	First worship service

During these two hours, detainees dedicate themselves to prayer, praise, and testimony as well as prayers for the pastor and singing in chorus. Prayers led by the pastor. Meditation on the Word of God is followed by songs and then a closing prayer.

8:00	Breakfast
9:00	Cleaning

The following hour is dedicated to playing ping-pong and chess and reading the Bible, until the next worship service begins.

10:00 to 12:00	Second worship service
12:00 to 14:00	Lunch
14:00	General cleaning
15:00	Third worship service

The detainees practice “fencing” between worship services. This is a game to see who can find the appropriate Bible verse first.

16:30	Visits
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Visits by family and friends until 19:30. During this part of the day, detainees spend time maintaining and repairing the vehicles used to evangelize, assist, visit, and collect people from the streets.

19:30	Dinner
20:00	Evening prayers

The schedule could look busy, at least on paper, but there was never much to do.

The vast majority of the captives didn’t have responsibilities. They were either straight from the streets, such as Santiago, or unfit to work. The latter routinely spoke out during sermons, constantly barking their frustrations at having been locked up by their family. Their anger was understandable. My own daylong shifts inside the center often left me breathless, sometimes forcing me to fumble my way out for fresh air. Stretches of fieldwork left me with a mix of horror and admiration that individuals could sustain that style of captivity for so many months without revolting. But frustration, as understandable as it was, also kept a captive from working through the system and, thus, working their way out of the house. Pedro never released captives for good behavior, but they could perform a kind of Christian piety for Pedro that suggested a certain degree of salvation. This is why the rebellious never really got anywhere. “They don’t let me do shit here,” one captive told me, “because of my attitude.” He thought about it for a moment and then fell back into the same trap that Pedro had set for him months ago. “Well, fuck ’em.” He shrugged, and Pedro obliged, quashing any chance for this young man to ever prove himself inside the center.

Cleaning the floors was one way for captives to prove themselves. It was also a way to keep them occupied, as they essentially walked in circles while mopping. The process went something like this: Those charged with

washing the floor would get everybody's attention at the top of the appointed hour. The most senior among them would then actively shepherd everyone against a wall, huddling the men together to expose as much of the floor as possible. The newest of the captives would then collect and discard any debris. Scraps of paper. Used tissues. A broken pencil or two. The others would mop the floors and later dry them by snapping towels just above the tiles to create a trace amount of wind. When the captives were done, they would allow the rest of the men back across the room.

Cleaning the floors took up an hour and a half of every day, with the rest of the day largely spent waiting. Alejandro, for one, would wait to use the bathroom. He would wait for his morning tortillas. He would wait for worship services to end. He would then wait for lunch and for dinner, and even for the end of the day so he could fall asleep. "And once you start thinking about all of this waiting," Alejandro admitted, "it can drive you crazy. Like, you can't do anything but wait. It can start fucking with your mind."

The mind-numbing nature of it all was palpable. Users often entered the center, sobered up, and dove into the sessions before the repetition became obvious. Each day would bleed into the next, losing any distinct quality from one to the other. Fridays could be Wednesdays, and Tuesdays would feel no different than Thursdays. "The only day that saves us is Sunday," Tomás explained. "There are no sessions on Sunday, and so that breaks the rhythm a bit." Tomás sat on the floor, slowly kicking a bottle cap with his foot. "So Saturdays can feel a little different because it's the day before Sunday, and Monday is a little better because it's the day after Sunday."

What do you do on Sundays? I asked.

"Oh, we don't do anything," he said. "There are just no sermons. So we just sit around all day instead of having to do the sessions."

In the same room? I asked.

"Yes, in the same room," he said with a bit of impatience. "There isn't any other room here."

On Sundays, the captives chose where to sit, when to sleep, and how to pass the time. No one forced them to sit up, keep their eyes open, and/or listen to each other. They could turn away, which was exactly what Santiago did on his first Sunday. He sat himself in a corner, with his hood over his head.

"People deal with this in different ways," Tomás said. "Some guys come here ready to fight. Others start working right away for the community, helping with stuff around the center, and others just get really quiet. They're here, but they're not really here."

Like a ghost? I offered.

“Like a ghost,” Tomás echoed.

The breaking point would come when captivity felt utterly without end. There were few ways to gauge the passage of time, except the walls. The walls marked the change of seasons.

On the second floor, inside of the center, the walls changed colors. They were once green, and then they were blue and then white and then blue again. I knew this because the captives scratched at the walls. There was nothing desperate about it. They just quietly picked at the paint with their fingernails, gently scratching the surface so as to carefully (if not compulsively) separate one layer of paint from another.

“You have to go slowly,” Alejandro explained. “You have to take your time or the paint just falls off the wall.” You could tell from the sound of his voice that this frustrated him when it happened.

In the former family room, where most of the captives ate, slept, and prayed, men would lie on their sides for hours and slowly peel their way from one layer of paint to the next. Sometimes I would see them doing this during sermons or as they drifted in and out of sleep. These were not expansive projects. No one ever tackled more than a small patch at a time, usually something the size of a postage stamp, and most of these men placed their work near the bottom of a wall. These were discreet efforts that could easily be overlooked. I’m not even sure Pedro ever noticed them, but picking at paint occupied a good deal of the men’s time.

Repaintings took place on a regular basis, and they happened through the bartering of goods and services, with a family exchanging the captivity of a loved one for a fresh coat of paint. This was also how Pedro had his car serviced, appliances updated, and center fumigated. Pedro once landed a commercial refrigerator for a hunt and a few months of captivity.

I once asked Alejandro about the significance of picking at the paint, of literally scratching at the walls. I could see that the colors allowed him to move from one era to another, to link the present to his expansive history of captivity. Each layer of paint seemed to harbor a different set of memories for Alejandro, with each era somehow color-coded in his mind. “When the room was blue, that’s when things were pretty bad. There were lots of fights between the guys. No one was really in control. Green was a lot calmer.”

The scratching always struck me as an effort to repurpose the room into a resource for rehabilitation, with the paint itself providing these men with the means to work with their hands as they thought through their lives. I pressed Alejandro on the therapeutic possibilities that literally scratching

at the walls provided. The question immediately felt naïve. Does it help? I asked.

“Guys are just trying to kill time,” Alejandro said. When these captives scratched at the walls, they did so out of boredom, for the simple delight of peeling one layer of paint from another. “There’s not much else to it,” he added.

More defiant men would make their mark in deliberate ways. With a paper clip or pen cap, they would scratch their name into a wall, usually with the dates of their captivity. They would write the month, day, and year of their arrival, and then they would make an open-ended dash. Many would commit to completing the record on the day of their release, but no one ever did. The thrill of release always overshadowed the little promises that these men made to themselves during the quieter moments of their captivity, and so their names hung on these walls with open ended dashes, suggesting that confinement may never actually have an end date. It might just go on forever.

ELEVEN

Sermons always seemed to go on forever, with visiting pastors sometimes showing up multiple times a day. Pedro preached on occasion, but he typically outsourced most of the sermons to a cohort of preachers who spent their days travelling to different centers across the city. One day, I walked up to the second floor and encountered a man I happened to know well. He was older, or maybe just weathered by life, with a gaunt face and a brown suit. His tie was tight around his neck. I had first heard him preach at Jorge’s center several years earlier. At that time, Jorge’s center was just beginning to slow down, and held fifty rather than its usual 250 captives. Frener was still one of them, as was a young man hiding from the police. He had tattoos across his fists and face and would always ask me if the police had come to the front office for him.

“Are they here?” he would ask me.

No, I always answered, assuring him that he was well beyond reach of the law.

When I first heard the visiting pastor speak, I was struck not so much by his moral ambition but rather by his commitment to engage these centers. He himself had been taken captive years ago for drinking too much.

His daughter had apparently paid a pastor to hunt him, and now he seemed committed to staying out of places like Pedro's, which oddly meant visiting them almost every day. The sight of someone like Santiago seemed to scare this visiting pastor straight in ways that made this man of God need the center as much as the center needed him.¹⁶

Back inside Pedro's center, the visiting pastor greeted me with a business card that peddled his Pentecostal skills as a spiritual director, theological therapist, and motivational speaker. There was also a phone number and an email address. Before he began preaching, however, he insisted that I make a digital recording of his sermon so that he could hand out copies to whoever would listen. I happily obliged as he settled behind a makeshift lectern.

The pastor would deliver the very same sermon that he had given at Jorge's center years earlier. With its well-rutted peaks and valleys, the pastor preached on a single virtue for over an hour: a positive attitude. It was a message that shifted the scale of the hunt from the streets to the soul, with the sinner suddenly invited to hunt himself—to track down his own appetites and put them in a cage.

"So let's talk about having a positive attitude," the pastor said to all fifty-six men. Some sat on chairs but most had found space on the floor. The lucky few leaned against a wall in ways that allowed them to pick at the paint. They surreptitiously scratched, studied, and then scratched some more. Santiago was in the very back of the room with his hood over his head. He seemed to be sulking. I sat attentively on a stool.

"If you think you can do something, you can do something," the pastor said, "and when people change their attitude, they change their life." He effused positivity, his energy almost assaulting this seemingly anesthetized audience. The contrast in affect could not have been more dramatic. "Jesus Christ came," he said with verve, "to set the captives free, to give freedom to the prisoners and to the oppressed. And the biggest discovery of this generation is that human beings can change their lives by changing their minds." He shot a quick glance at my digital recorder, to make sure that it was working—and so tipped me off to his real interest. Preaching at a clip that far outpaced the energy of the room, the pastor obviously had his ambitions on accessing an imagined audience through the recording.

"In other words," he said, "all people can change, but what do you need to have?" The question hung in the air until he answered it: "You need to have a positive attitude. We all have problems in life, and God has the solution for us. Jesus is the way. He is the truth. He is life, and no one comes to the Father except through the Son."

"Thomas Edison," he then proposed, "was the one who invented the light bulb. And how often did he fail? He failed nine hundred times. But he also succeeded. He just kept trying over and over again." The pastor's point seemed to be about persistence. "You have to persist over and over again. Because you don't have to stay here." Santiago flinched at this last point, shaking his head side to side. "You can get up," the pastor reasoned. "You must get up! God wants to bless you. He wants you to prosper. He wants the best for whatever you touch. Whatever you do in life—be blessed."

He then instructed the men to turn toward each other. "I want you to tell something to the person next you," he said. "Tell him: 'Jesus has something special for you.'" The men turned to their side and repeated the phrase. "Then say: 'He wants to change your life.'" The men did this. "Then add: 'God has miracles for you. God will do extraordinary things in your life.'" The group echoed the words back to the pastor in sync. "Now say: 'God will change your attitude.'" ¹⁷ They all did—even Santiago joined in this time.

"We can change," the pastor explained, "but it all depends on us. You have to have the desire. If you have the desire to change, then you will change. You need to say to yourself, I'm going to do it." He stood firmly in front of the men, acting out success through his bodily comportment. "Success lies in your habits and customs. People who have bad habits fail. People who have good habits succeed. A winner is not born super gifted or with high intelligence. A winner's advantage is his attitude, not his fitness. Attitude is the standard for success. It is crucial because it determines the way you act."

Alejandro stood over the men to ensure that everyone participated.

"But do not pity yourself," the pastor insisted. "We instead need compassion. Because compassion is one of the most remarkable emotions that we have as human beings. Self-pity is possibly the worst. Self-pity is an emotional disease. It's a terrible thing to have. But compassion is what we need to have for ourselves and our neighbor."

The sermon halfway through, the pastor asked captives when they were going to improve their attitudes. Without pause, he answered his own question with zeal: "Today! Today is the day when the weak will become strong! Today is the day that the fool will become smart!" He tapped his Bible while surveying the room for a pair of eyes to engage. He settled on Tomás. "God gave us special gifts," he announced. "God gave us talents. And God has special things for each of us. But everything depends on us. We need to have the desire to do these things." He took a step back. "Look,"

he said, "your attitude is very important. I am constantly amazed by how many people have a poor attitude but still want others to be optimistic. If you have a poor attitude and tell your family, 'Well, that's just how it goes,' then what?" No one offered an answer.¹⁸

"And I'll tell you something," the pastor continued. "Your family is my family. It doesn't matter if you tell me that your dad is involved in drugs or that that your mom is doing drugs. Those things do not matter. God wants something special for you." His voice began to peak: "You can leave this house. You can do it, but it all depends on your desire to do so. Is your desire weak? Or is your desire strong? You have to want to change your life."¹⁹

Santiago seemed to bristle at the message; he started to squirm.

"And keeping a good attitude is easier than getting one," the pastor added. "You have to stay positive, but how will you do it?" He got prescriptive: "You have to read inspirational books that motivate you. You have to read the Word of God every day. You have to go to church. You have to meet people at church. You have to find a way to be motivated. You have to find people who will minister to your soul." The laundry list continued: "God has the power and authority to get ahead, and God is the one we need to get ahead."

Santiago began to look indignant.

"We're going to kneel," the pastor announced. "We are going to ask the Lord to help us. If you want to raise your hands to heaven, you can do so. If you want to repeat the words that I say, you can do so."

Santiago refused.

"Lord Jesus, today, this afternoon, I put my life in your hands," the pastor wailed. "I ask you, Lord, to forgive me. I have sinned against you, and I have done evil in your eyes. Today I put my life in your hands, and I ask you with all my heart, with all my strength, to help me." The pastor continued, "I give you my addictions, and I ask you to help me."

He then began to sob: "Have compassion and mercy on me. Forgive me. I have misbehaved with my mother. I have misbehaved with my father. I have misbehaved with my children. Forgive me, in the name of Jesus. Thank you, Lord, I know you're going to do a miracle in my life. I know there is rejoicing in heaven for every sinner who repents. In the name of Jesus, I receive my salvation. Thank you, Lord, amen!" Santiago shook his head, knowing that this would be his world for months to come.

Later that week, I sat down with this pastor. He told me about his own battles decades earlier with drinking and drugs, and then explained, "This is a year of liberation. The Lord has put the power of liberation in each of

our hearts, and so hundreds of people are going to be released from slavery this year. They are going to be set free.”

I asked what kind of slavery he might mean.

“I am talking about spiritual slavery,” he said. “I am talking about people locked up in spiritual prisons. These are prisons made of drugs, alcohol, and delinquency. It’s a prison made of vices.”

But what about the center itself, I asked, isn’t that also a kind of prison?

The pastor plowed past my question, again speaking directly into my digital recorder to yet another imagined audience. “The Lord is preparing his children. He is preparing their souls. He will give them liberty by freeing these sinners from their chains. The Lord is going to raise each of these sinners up. He is going to make each of them taller, spiritually speaking, and allow them to return to their families.”

What is your responsibility? I asked the pastor.

He paused. “My role is to tell them that they must change.”

TWELVE

Pedro issued a notebook to each captive once he entered the center. Sometimes it was a few sheets of paper, other times captives would share a notepad; a lucky few got an entire book all to themselves. This is because Pedro demanded that each of the men take notes when he or any other pastor preached. It was a fairly specific request, with Pedro insisting that captives catalogue every reference to scripture. The intention was for them to learn the Bible, chapter and verse. When a pastor gave a sermon, the captives would jot down each biblical reference and then afterwards, when there was nothing else to do, they would search the Bible for the full verse, copying it out word-for-word with pencil and paper.

Alejandro ascended to become the star student in this regard. His notebook was nothing short of pristine—a compendium of verses couched in disciplined penmanship that I came to admire. Never rushed in manner, Alejandro printed Bible verses neatly and with consistency; his *d*’s, *p*’s, and *o*’s often popped with a kind of optimism. The color of the script regularly changed too, with verses alternating between red, black, and blue ink. And still, the quality of the letters themselves bordered on the calligraphic.

Alejandro was also diligent about content. I would routinely find him amid a small group of men, flipping through a Bible and then copying the

verse into his notebook. He paid great attention to even the slightest of details—spelling and the proper use of accents always mattered. He also shuttled between different translations and versions of the Bible, as the center always had several lying around the main room. Debates would erupt between Alejandro and the men about which verse had appeared in the sermon earlier that day, indexing a surprisingly high level of interest in getting the assignment right.

But Pedro never collected the notebooks. He had his huntsmen page through them from time to time, but Tomás and Bautista were never really in a position to assess biblical proficiency. They were less familiar with the good book than most of the captives and were at best functionally literate. Alejandro, on the other hand, seemed deeply committed to the practice, lining notebook after notebook with what would ultimately become Bibles transcribed out of order. One page in Alejandro's notebooks read:

Matthew 24:36—"But about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father."

2 Corinthians 11:14—"And no wonder, for Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light."

2 Corinthians 11:16—"I repeat: Let no one take me for a fool. But if you do, then tolerate me just as you would a fool, so that I may do a little boasting."

John 3:8—"The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit."

John 11:1—"Now a man named Lazarus was sick. He was from Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha."

His notebook served as a model to the other men, about how to engage the sermons in ways that transformed stretches of captivity into open-ended Bible study. Alejandro and the other captives' notebooks evidenced a plodding kind of Pentecostalism that remained ever-committed to the word of God and one's ability to position the soul towards higher ground, but rarely did any kind of hermeneutical effort follow these citations. Pedro never asked the men to apply scripture to their own lives.

Alejandro could be excused, then, when amid his sea of scripture there appeared a half-written note to his aunt. She never visited and for the most had part cut all ties with him. She had proven unable to deal with her nephew's long battle with drugs and alcohol and knew that sustained contact would also mean having to pay for his captivity. Pedro was constantly on the lookout to monetize Alejandro's time spent inside the center, and so his aunt's inattentiveness made his note ever more wishful.

Bookended by a pair of verses, Alejandro's mind must have wandered beyond the confines of his own captivity when he wrote the following:

Matthew 7:13—"Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it."

Aunt, forgive me for all the bad things that I have done. I am full of bitter thoughts. I once walked with a heavy heart through darkness, not understanding why God sent me to this country. I had to leave everything that I loved: my family, my wife and . . .

Matthew 7:14—"But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it."

The note ended as hastily as it began—a frustratingly small window into Alejandro's inner world. It was in many ways a precursor to the letter that he would write to the National Police, as he cast about for someone who might be able to help him.

What else did Alejandro want to write to his aunt? The question could also be posed: What else did Alejandro want to write to himself? For he knew that his aunt would probably never read the letter. Perhaps he addressed the letter to her in an effort to work through his own feelings of being held captive by not simply the pastor but also by his own sin.²⁰

The center produced no shortage of such letters. Captives often used their notebooks to pen messages to loved ones, holding the notebooks close to their chest while they slept and stashing them in knapsacks during the day. They became prized possessions in the rather austere center. The notebooks allowed men to extend themselves (even if only by way of imagination) beyond the walls of the center, and they contained notes to mothers and fathers; sisters and brothers; children and lovers. These scraps of paper were sometimes passed to visitors when no one else was watching, begging

loved ones to bring basic necessities such as food, medicine, and toiletries. The notes could also be desperate pleas for freedom:

Hi Mom—This is Javier, and I am sending you this letter to ask you to please come and get me out of here. I am better, thanks be to God. The thing is that they punish me here and they beat me and I do not want to suffer any more. Please help me. Only you can help me. I want to escape. Come quickly. I promise to change the way that I am. Please come and get me out because I want to continue living. I beg you. Mama, come here after you get this letter or you might lose me forever. I love you very much and I am waiting for you here. Love, Javier

Across the years, captives pressed an untold number of these letters into my hands without Pedro's knowledge, hoping that I might be able to deliver their message. Often making rather specific requests, the letters demonstrated how the epistle as a genre ensnares its addressee with the responsibility to reply. With every letter, I had to accept or decline a captive's request to engage not simply with his family but also with his life history—with the very politics of his captivity.²¹

Dear Mom—The reason for this letter is to tell you that I want to get out of here. I beg you. I cannot stand it anymore. Please, mom, understand me because I understand you and I am sorry for bothering you with this letter but I cannot take it here anymore. Goodbye and God bless you. Yours, Tomás

Mother—When am I getting out of here? You can tell me when you come to visit me on Wednesday or if you do not want to bother visiting me you can just send the answer with the man who is doing me the favor of giving you this letter. I love you. Your son, Andrew

I once found a letter on the sidewalk just outside of Pedro's center. Thrown from the second floor through a crack in one of the windows, it reads as if it were placed inside a bottle and then tossed out to sea:

My name is Carlos Rigoberto Gonzalez M. They brought me here on the eleventh of November. They took me from my parents' house while I was sleeping. Today is August 13th and I have been locked up inside this

center for 9 months and 2 days. As much as I beg my parents to take me home, they say no.

One can read these letters not just as appeals for mercy but also as clandestine efforts at escape, written in the hope that an anonymous passerby would read the note and feel generous enough to call for help. That would be the work of luck, which these captives often held out for. Their letters were a practice of hopeful endurance as months stretched on.²²

Of course, not all captives used their notebooks for such ends. During the slower moments, when afternoons felt like days, captives would lend me their notebooks, allowing their notes to structure our conversations about the Bible and salvation. But it quickly became clear as I thumbed through these books that many of these men would break from their assignments copying down biblical versus to drum up fantastic ledgers buried between pieces of scripture. They fashioned their own wish lists:

Psalm 18:41—They cried for help, but there was no one to save them—to the Lord, but he did not answer

5 pounds of beans, 5 pounds of rice, 5 pounds of sugar, 5 pounds of salt, soap to clean clothes, soap for the bath, soap chips, Clorox, cooking oil, toothpaste.

Proverbs 28:27—Those who give to the poor will lack nothing, but those who close their eyes to them receive many curses

Others would write their own scripture, folding their deepest desires inside of their notebooks and then hiding them as chapter and verse:

John 12:32—And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.

Apocalypse 4:1—Positive words. Positiveness. Fun. Hard work. Realness. Honesty. Perception. Passionate. Knowledge. Wisdom. Happy. Love. Friendship. Sisterhood. Partnership. Obey, respect, Self-sufficient. Power of Will. Braveness. Joy. Serenity. True love. Red lips. Commitment. Pleasure.

Psalm 41:1—I swear to God I fucking miss you my little beauty. I miss you so much. No joke! Jesus Christ if I could have a moment with you. My God. I fucking adore you.

2 Peter 1:19—We also have the prophetic message as something completely reliable, and you will do well to pay attention to it, as to a light shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts.

Most of the captives also drew in their notebooks, with each effort contributing to an expansive archive of images that shuttled between the surreal and the salvific. Santiago, for one, drew ghoulish ink drawings of hooded skeletons on the backs of horses racing through the night, sometimes with a spear in hand. These figures had almond-shaped eye sockets, drawn so compulsively that the paper rutted and bowed under the weight of the pen and its ink. Santiago would also sketch cityscapes and skylines, even rough drawings of what seemed to be weather patterns and thunderstorms. His notebook included anthropomorphized forests; trees had eyes, noses, and mouths, and thickets of branches that melded into some sort of trap. Flora appeared to be laughing with sinister intent as it struggled to pull its roots from the ground. Trees walked in the same way that someone might try to step out of quicksand: with high knees and snagged feet. They seemed to be on the run but were held back by their own form, quite literally rooted in place. Another drawing proved slightly less opaque. It featured an army of stick figures jumping out of a crack pipe towards a door marked “exit.” Underneath, Santiago labeled the escapees with a single descriptor: “slaves.”²³

Many drawings by captives compressed multiple Christian metaphors. There were illustrations of hands folded in prayer atop roses in full bloom, all splayed across an empty cross. Muddled in composition but clear in intent, these images invoked the resurrection of Christ, if only to inspire the revival of the user. “I love you, Jesus,” one drawing announced.

Other sketches trafficked in carceral imaginaries, of work camps and chain gangs. They tended to equate the time a captive spent inside the center with the emptiness of breaking rocks into pebbles. Lined with biblical passages, these sketches explored the absurdity of life inside the center alongside the optimism of renewal. “Is not my word like fire,” asks an artist by way of Jeremiah 23:29, “and like a hammer that breaks a rock into pieces?” From the boulder fly pieces of alcohol, crack cocaine, liquor, LSD, cigarettes, and marijuana.

And then there was Michael the Archangel. His image often appeared inside Pedro’s center, and one very memorable rendition hung in the morgue. A young man from the capital named Miguel depicted the angel with a muscular form, a wide set of wings, and flowing hair. Obviously

midbattle, his sword pointed downward as if about to be thrust into a beast that sat just out of frame. The message was never lost on these men, as the angel is said to have commanded God's armies against Satan's forces in the Book of Revelation, hurling Satan and his angel to earth (12:7–9). Pastors such as Pedro often framed time spent inside a center as a battle between good and evil, with the very life of the user at stake.²⁴

Miguel's drawings typically dripped with religious imagery. In one epic drawing, Jesus's bleeding heart breaks the chains of slavery while flying doves announce that man can be "free on the inside." All the while Christ stands crestfallen, too ashamed to face the materiality of mass incarceration. As with most of these montages, the artist represents himself somewhere in the piece. This one placed him in the bottom right corner of the page. Miguel depicted himself behind bars, in the shadows, and framed by scripture that he had invented: "One comes to understand through pain (Psalm 36:15)." The psalm actually doesn't say this; in the Bible, it reads: "Let their sword enter into their own hearts, and let their bow be broken."

"I didn't know that when I got out of jail in Guatemala," Miguel told me one day, "that I was chained up by cocaine. Because all I thought about when I was in jail was that I wanted to be free." Rolling a colored pencil between his fingers, he continued: "But I didn't think about my spirit, my soul . . . that I was chained up spiritually. Basically I got out of jail and came back to jail, again. And now that I'm in rehab, it's like I'm locked up again."²⁵

Captives tried to render themselves legible through these drawings. Santiago's efforts were defiant, at least at first—a series of insults paired with scenes of escape—but they softened once he realized that no one was really watching. Left alone before God, his drawings eventually explored the more forgiving themes of solitude, loneliness, and remorse. He pieced together one image several months after his capture. It was of a child, maybe even a toddler, in overalls and a striped shirt. He may have set out to draw Chucky, the title character of the *Child's Play* horror film series. But rather than a murderous doll coming to life, Santiago depicted the toy sitting down, with shoulders slumped—as if it had been given a time out. The drawing seemed to be waiting for someone to set him free. An image frozen in time, the doll also lay in wait.

During the first week of Santiago's captivity, I asked to read his notebook. I had seen him studying in the corner with a Bible in his lap. He appeared to have taken notes during an earlier sermon and looked to be in the middle of his homework, diligently searching and writing down verse after biblical verse. His eagerness to engage the assignment seemed at odds with his initial

THIRTEEN

The true tyranny of captivity lies in the sheer unpredictability of events. Given fortuitous circumstances, some families would yank their loved ones out of the center at a moment's notice. Upon an order from Pedro, Alejandro would suddenly interrupt a sermon to pull a lucky captive from the general population, delivering the surprising news that it was time for him to leave. A person could find himself slugging through yet another testimony one moment and then packing his belongings the very next. The exit never took more than a few minutes. Any captive could be plucked from the crowd at any moment, not unlike the rapture.

This is because families could change their mind about captivity—for a price. After locking up their loved one during the heat of an argument, amid the very worst conditions, a family could then pay the pastor to have him released after only a few months in the center. This early release program had quickly become a second layer of income for Pedro, prompting the pastor to write these conditions into his contracts, such as the one Maria signed. The stakes of this political economy were serious. For if the hunt was central to the center and its business model, then the early release of captives also bolstered the center's bottom line. The contract elaborated this through two terms:

- E. If I should stop treatment before the prescribed term I promise to pay the costs of room and board and waive any responsibility of this center in case of my death by natural causes and/or any other cause, including the use of alcohol or drugs or the abstention of either . . . I fully understand the circumstances under which I have arrived and the logical consequences of my intoxication. Because of this I will not hold the center accountable.
- G. If I stop treatment before the previously specified length of time I promise to pay the fees associated with that lost time and what other costs that occur during my stay at a rate of Q55 per day. This covers the price of food, board, medicine, and miscellaneous purchases.

Given the unpredictability of captivity, Pedro's catch and release program proved to be lucrative. It also made the work of waiting a deeply fraught enterprise. In a clinical rehabilitation setting, one hitched to liberal notions of development, expansive apparatuses chart the progress of patients as they move from one therapeutic stage to another. Waiting is itself

progressive. Programs like the famed Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous lay claim to an agentive, forward-moving plan of action, with each step building towards a full recovery. Given enough time, the logic goes, patients will progress. There are caveats, of course. Rehabilitation can be studded by holdups, delays, and setbacks. But even so, those conceits imply a progressive notion of time, however much progress is routinely held up, delayed, and set back.²⁶

Conversely, waiting inside of Pedro's center never felt like moving on-wards or upwards. Instead, Pedro's center aspired toward articulating a captive's before and after, which itself evidenced a commitment to the miraculous. Santiago could be held captive for months on end, with no signs of ever leaving, while the captive sitting next to him could suddenly walk out the door—often without rhyme or reason.

Pedro never preached about progress. When pressed, he would stick to the fundamentals of his faith. "I bring sinners here to wait for God," he said. "I bring them here to wait for a miracle." He insisted that he had no real power to help any of these men. His role was different. He hunted sinners so that the Lord could heal them. "All I can do," he said, "is pull them from the streets just long enough for God to save them." Pedro even downplayed the power of prayer, instead relying on the possibility of a miracle, of the grace of God to suddenly and without warning touch the heart of a sinner. "It's a miracle," he would say. "It's a miracle when these guys change. It's a miracle when they don't smoke crack or when they stop drinking." He had personally experienced this miracle. "I was in the streets," he told me "I was dying in the streets and God saved me."

Pedro's center operated through a paradigm of radical rupture and rebirth. The net effect was that Pedro never asked his captives to work harder but rather to wait longer. "They need to wait," Pedro insisted. "They need to wait until God is ready for them."

Christians have been known to wait. Following the death of Jesus, the earliest Christians waited for Christ to usher in a new order.²⁷ They oriented themselves toward a mindset of watching and waiting for Christ's imminent return, while at the same time evaluating their lives on the basis of Christ's first coming. This was a radical eschatology that contemporary Pentecostalism often assumes, with the end of the world not simply *near* but *here*. This makes the religion's relationship to history rather uncertain. The question becomes: What might progress look like at the end of times? Pedro's commitment to captivity provided one answer, as users were warehoused under the Pentecostal possibility of someday changing.²⁸

“One of the hardest parts of this place is not knowing,” Santiago admitted to me. “I don’t know when I’m going to get out of here. Maybe seven months but maybe sooner.” Santiago looked dispirited. “Or maybe I’ll be here for even longer.” The possibility of ever leaving Pedro’s center largely amounted to a matter of waiting, which often proved terrifying. “I just don’t know what is going to get me out of here,” Santiago once confessed to me with tears in his eyes.

But the process of release was never clear, not even to me after years of fieldwork. “They don’t get out of here until I say that they can get out of here,” Pedro told me. “I need to talk to their families. They need to want the person back. But most of all, I need to see a change in the person. I need to see that they’ve changed. The way they talk. The way they dress. The way they pray. It all needs to change before they can go.” Pedro then calmly laid out the consequences: “Or they fail and end up back here. Or worse, they end up dead.” In Pedro’s estimation, he had set far too many captives free far too soon. “Too many of them have died in the streets,” he said, “not from overdose but from violence. They’ve been stabbed or shot. I don’t want any of these guys to die in the streets.” Given all the risks, very few families wanted these men out of the center.

Anxiety peaked among the captives when it was no longer obvious how exactly to perform the kind of change Pedro sought. Santiago seemed to have already given up. “I’m supposed to show the pastor that I’m better,” he sniffed, “but how am I supposed to do that in here? Sitting through those sermons, next to all those guys?” All Santiago wanted to do was leave.

FOURTEEN

Alejandro also wanted out, and so he took matters into his own hands. As Santiago settled into the center, quietly tucking himself into a corner of the room, Alejandro began to hatch his own plan for escape. It took the form of a letter, one addressed to Guatemala’s National Police, and it fell directly into my hands.

On June 2, 2016, Alejandro and I sat side by side as a visiting pastor preached about the love of God. “You have to know that God loves you,” the pastor announced. “He loves you and he wants the best for your life. He wants you to get ahead.” Alejandro suddenly got my attention by nudging me in the side. “No matter if you’re using crack cocaine or marijuana or

whatever,” the pastor added, “and it can even be the vice of sex, of prostitution. It doesn’t matter. God has compassion for you. He loves you.” Alejandro then pushed the letter into my hand. “God is going to help you, but you have to ask him for help. Tell him that you have problems. Tell him your limitations. Speak to God because God can change you. Only the Lord can change you.” The pastor straightened himself out, standing slightly taller than before to punctuate his next point. During which, in the matter of a moment, Alejandro got as close as he could to me.

“Get me the fuck out of here,” he said.

Later, after the sermon but still on the second floor of the center, Alejandro explained: “You need to go to the police with the letter. Let me tell you what it says.” He looked over his shoulder to see if the coast was clear. “It says that my name is Alejandro, and that I was born on such and such a date. It then says that my mind is clear and that I am aware that I do not want to be here.” He told me all of this as the letter sat in my pants pocket.

Over the years, this had easily happened over a hundred times. Captives would approach me, maintain eye contact, and then place a piece of paper into the palm of my hand. They would also quietly tuck notes into my pockets during sermons or push a piece a paper into my bag, always mentioning later that they wanted to me to deliver a message to a friend or a family member. Often it was just a phone number that I needed to call, and all I had to do was to pass along as simple of a message as “please bring fresh clothes.” In this sense, nothing about this exchange with Alejandro seemed unusual. For all I could tell, it was yet another moment in my fieldwork in which I would connect captives to their families, either by phone or with a visit.

But then Alejandro grabbed my shoulder. He squeezed my arm in some effort at creating intimacy while also conveying urgency, adding: “And you know that I don’t want to be here.” Something had obviously changed in him. Although he never wanted to be inside the center, it was not always obvious that this disinterest outpaced the despair he often discovered in the streets. For all of the abuse, humiliation, and near complete lack of freedom that he endured inside the center, Alejandro knew that he lived relatively well because of Pedro. He benefited not only from the food and shelter but also from a sense of self that he cultivated through hunting. Rarely able to hold down a job and forever struggling with his own dependencies, Alejandro could at times appear grateful for the center, but something had changed.

“The letter says,” Alejandro continued, “that on a date in April, I was picked up by the pastor and by two of the main guys here. They held me,

beat me, and threw me in their truck. And on the way here, I told them that I do not want to be at the center, that I don't want to come here, that I don't need this place. It's all in the letter."

Alejandro took another quick look over his shoulder to see if Pedro was coming. "Look," he said, "the bottom line is that I don't want to be in this place and that I don't need this ministry. I don't need this help. I say in the letter that the pastor is very mean and rough. And then I describe the kinds of punishments that we get. We have to clean. We have to do exercises. We get no food. We get thrown into the morgue, and you know that the worst thing about all of this is that I have to tie people up."

This last part seemed to weigh on Alejandro the most. "If I leave to go pick people up, the pastor always tells me to pick them up rough-style," Alejandro explained. "He tells me to hit them." Over the past few months, Alejandro had become the center's main enforcer. He had always hunted, but now he had been tasked with disciplining the general population, which included tying people up with ropes. The hunts had also gotten more physical. Sometimes Alejandro would dominate the captive just enough to complete the task, to bring him back to the center, but increasingly he would play with his prey, working out his frustrations on the people he hunted.

Alejandro saw the long game. He thought past the most immediate of horizons towards life outside of the center. "The thing is," he said, "I have to pay the consequences for that stuff. For hitting people and tying them up. There are people in the streets who are mad at me." Alejandro looked scared. "I want to get out of here and I want to stop doing this stuff. I want to stop hunting." But he was trapped.

So why don't you just take off running the next time you go out for a hunt? I asked.

"I've done that so many times," he said, "and the pastor just finds me and brings me back. I need to send a message that I want out. Like I want to get out of here right now, and I don't want to come back."

Alejandro's letter would certainly send a message. Writing to the National Police, if they took the letter seriously, would trigger a raid of Pedro's center, effectively bottoming out the pastor's business.

I had sensed that Alejandro was frustrated, but I never anticipated that he wanted to escalate his plight to the National Police; and through me, no less. Again, I had become accustomed to delivering letters to loved ones. For years, I would travel throughout the city delivering notes to mothers and fathers, sisters and brothers. This created rapport between me and my interlocutors and allowed me to connect with their families—to hear the

other side of the story. To speak with only Santiago about his captivity was to engage a story of Dickensian gloom, but then to hear the despair of his mother was to learn of a more robust struggle over freedom.

One time, in fact, not too long after his capture, Santiago sat in the back of the former family room as a visiting pastor delivered a sermon on the saving grace of Jesus Christ. "How many people here feel blessed to be alive?" the pastor preached. "Amen," the pastor answered—to himself, by himself. "Because life is a blessing." The pastor stood firmly behind the lectern. "And so I ask you, what is your intention?"

I then felt a piece of paper pushed into my pocket. "What is your purpose in life?" the pastor asked again. I turned to see Santiago settling back into his corner. "My purpose," the pastor continued, "is to tell you that Jesus has come to give all of us hope."

I fished the note from my pocket as the pastor extolled the struggles between hope and heaven and quickly realized that it was a letter written by Santiago. He had penned an apology to his family.

"Oh, you can tell," Pedro once told me. "When a person changes, there is a change in his physical status. His hygiene starts to change. He starts to fix himself, to change himself, to improve himself." We were sitting inside his office. "There are those who don't want to change. Their hearts are hard, but a fixed person is obedient. He follows the rules."

Later in the day, with that conversation with Pedro echoing in my ears, I opened Santiago's letter. It was addressed to his mother, brother, and sister.

"How are you?" it began. "I'm feeling better now that I am inside the center. I have begun to handle myself differently." The letter modeled the sincerity that Pedro had described, a sincerity that seemed to mark the beginning of real change. "I'm really happy because I'm not on drugs," the letter continued, "and I'm not drunk. This place has given me some time to think. I'm better now." Santiago's note worked hard to externalize things that would always be hidden on the inside: sincerity of faith, true conversion, maybe even radical change.

"The exterior reflects the interior," I remembered Pedro once telling me, infusing otherness with disorder and salvation with rectitude. "Did you know that? A person who is right with God is going to show it in his face. They are going to comport themselves differently."

"I hope," Santiago continued, "that you can forgive me for everything and for all the stuff I took from the house. Forgive me. Please. I'm really sorry."

"But there are people who just don't care," Pedro had said. "They come here and they act the same way inside the center as they do outside it, but

the most important is the interior of the person. And if we can fix what's going on inside a person, then we can set that person free." Pedro quickly qualified his conditions of release. "Spiritually speaking," he said. "We can set that person free, spiritually speaking."

With physical liberation seemingly out of reach, Santiago's letter seemed an honest first step toward spiritual freedom. Regret, concession, and repentance—it all fit the genre. Santiago seemed to be doing things with words.²⁹ But then he suddenly slipped in slow motion, tumbling over himself.

"When you come," Santiago asked immediately after apologizing, without even a line break to mark a new thought, "could you bring some sugar and some bread?" The request was modest, but it also felt shallow. It was too soon, considering how much and for how long he had made his family suffer. Social theorists have long argued that the apology is a process through which a person symbolically splits into two parts: "the part that is guilty of an offense and the part that dissociates itself from the delict and affirms a belief in the offended rule."³⁰ Santiago seemed incapable of splitting himself into two parts. The ask also made him seem completely unaware. His requests rolled on.

"Could you also bring beans, coffee, soup, milk, ham, fried chicken and some French fries?" His apology suddenly became a grocery list: "and some juice, cookies, sardines, mayonnaise, a few of those muffins that you brought last time, ten pieces of fruit, and a cup of chicken broth?" At a certain point, the apology faded from sight entirely. One could even be forgiven for missing it. "Could you bring five pounds of rice. Five pounds of beans. A liter of Coca-Cola." Every item requested evidenced an interior in need of further rehabilitation: "Also could you get me some deodorant and some toothpaste, some floss, some soap to wash my pants, five tubes of glue, two razors, two tablets of aspirin, and two tablets of cold and flu medicine."

To Santiago's credit, the center's food was terrible. The men were chronically underfed, and Santiago had already lost considerable weight. But his letter as an effort at escape had obviously missed its mark. Santiago had misplaced his apology.

"But there are people who just don't care," Pedro repeated, as if having read Santiago's letter. "The way they comport themselves in the streets is the way they comport themselves here."

I remember arriving at Maria's home, where Santiago's brother eventually read the letter. He shook his head. It obviously upset him. With what seemed to be sincerity, Santiago's brother announced through gritted teeth,

"He'll stay there for another year. For another year." He turned to me to ask: "What do you think about that?"

A year sounded extreme, I remember saying. I also thought about how this conversation could not happen for a captive such as Alejandro, if only because he had no family to visit him or loved ones for me to engage. Nobody had ever signed a contract on his behalf, visited him inside the center, or paid Pedro for another month of his captivity. All Alejandro had was me and a postwar state that had proven to be as negligent as his aunt.

I knew that delivering his letter to the police would prompt a raid, and this made the missive a bold move. It would most certainly drag more than fifty families into his struggle, each with their own story of abuse and heartache. "Santiago stole the light bulbs right out the sockets," Maria once told me.

It was in such moments of moral adjudication that I most felt part of predation's pastoralism. I was poised to help Alejandro escape but unsure about whether his release should come at the expense of everyone else's suffering. It was a terribly uncomfortable position to be in because of the dead ends I knew we would find. Regardless, I felt compelled to act, if only because Alejandro had no one else to ask. Alejandro, a grown man with all of his faculties, was being held captive inside this center in ways that chafed against my own liberal assumptions about freedom and self-determination. While Maria assumed authority of Santiago, and while most other captives had families keeping them inside the center, no one in the city (except Pedro) gave much thought to Alejandro's life. And Pedro's interest in Alejandro had become so entangled with his bottom line that it was difficult to take his decisions seriously. Alejandro had been abducted and put to work, all against his will.

So what's the plan? I asked.

"You give this letter to the police," Alejandro said. "They'll come to the center, and they'll raid the place. Then they'll ask, 'who doesn't want to be here?' And I'll step forward."

Have you ever seen this happen? I asked.

"No," he said, "but I've heard that it's been done before."

