

# Moment of Clarity

## **Chapter 29**

WHAM! The steel door slammed in my face.

"Something wrong with you shutting your door, Gandy?" Harris asked, like I was keeping from him something important.

I paid him no mind. I just stood there like a mental patient waiting on medication.

"Yo, Rob!" someone yelled from a few cells down.

"Yo!" Rob hollered back.

"Turn to the Spanish channel."

I grabbed hold of the steel bars and held on tight. I was afraid to turn around, horrified that I would lose my mind from being cooped up in such a small space.

"Joe!" another voice called out, but no one answered, "Hey, Joe!"

"Man, will you lay down?" a high-pitched nasally voice shouted from the front of the block. "Joe was eaten by a bunch of ravenous squirrels five days ago. Now, lay down. I'm trying to watch television."

I stuck my nose between the bars to inhale the stale air on the block. "You're gonna die in one of these tiny cells," the voice inside my head said slyly. They're gonna dress me in a blue state issued suit, shove me in a cardboard box and bury me in some lonely, forgotten state cemetery. "Nobody is going to cry over you and nobody is going to miss you."

I could feel my heart thumpin' in my chest. If I kept facing forward, if I concentrated on the open space outside the cell, I reasoned, maybe I could calm down and get myself together.

I tried to stick my arms through the bars to experience the openness, but my biceps wouldn't allow me to reach out

so far. With my forearms extended as far as they would go I leaned forward and rested my forearm on the cold metal and shut my eyes.

I had to get a grip! If I lost it, they would pump me full of drugs and stick me in the infirmary for observation. I'd be double locked behind plated glass in a naked cell with a pair of bright orange shower shoes, an oversized black and white striped jumpsuit and a concrete slab to lie on. They wouldn't turn off the lights, and I would be watched around the clock.

"It's in your DNA to prevail," I told myself. "You come from a long line of fighters. It's too late to give up now. And you're being selfish. What about your mother? You wanna worry her into an early grave? It's bad enough you're in prison with a life sentence. Now you're gonna complicate things further."

There's always a chance, I thought, while looking up at the skylight. Like making love to Donna... who would have believed that was possible? Anything can happen. They could change the laws tomorrow and give you a second chance. Imagine all the things you can do with a second chance. I thought about my mother, June and Donna. They needed me, so I had to be strong.

I slowly turned and looked around the cell like it was my first time being there. A small white ceramic sink with metal hot and cold push button fixtures hung from the dingy beige concrete wall. Above it was an eight by ten water stained metal mirror. Attached to the floor to the left of the sink was a plain white ceramic toilet without a seat cover. My shelf was stacked with essential toiletries like soap, toothpaste, shampoo and deodorant. On the other half of the shelf were books.

I looked at my thirteen-inch color television that sat on the wooden desk. Then it hit me: the vodka. I reached inside the cabinet and pulled out the plastic container with the clear liquid inside it. I held it in my hands and stared at it. "It's on," I said under my breath. "Party over here, oop-oop! Party over there," I said softly, while dancing foolishly.

Anthony Mycheals

I clicked on my super two radio and tried in vain to find a station to set the mood. Through the static, I heard the sultry voice of Phillis Hyman. She was inviting somebody to "Meet Her on the Moon."

I spun the dial again and settled for the clearest station I could find.

*"I've been through the desert on a horse with no name,  
It felt good to be out of the rain.  
In the desert, you can't remember your name  
'Cause there ain't no one for to give you no pain.  
La, la, la, la, la..."*

I wasn't even drunk and I was bouncing and signing to "Horse with No Name" by America.

I sat on my bed and untied my Timb's. The cool concrete felt refreshing underneath my sweaty feet. I fluffed my pillow and propped it up against the wall and leaned back. I hunched my shoulders, took a deep breath and exhaled.

I was pleasantly surprised to find a handwritten letter from Donna. For such a beautiful, educated woman, I thought, Donna's handwriting was atrocious.

June's letter was scented with her favorite body oil from Africa. I placed it under my nose and inhaled. It had the sweet aroma of tropical fruit. The second letter from June was a one-pager, so I skimmed through it, balled it up and threw it in the waste can with the notice from Ebony Magazine.

I reached for the magical elixir and unscrewed the top. I sat there with the container in my hand just looking at it. When I lightly shook the jar, the clear deceptive liquid moved slow and deliberate, almost defying the implication of resembling water.

Normally, I would read my mail before I did anything else, but I wanted to be in the right frame of mind. I pushed the two letters to the side, propped my feet up on the wooden cabinet and sipped the stimulating beverage. Tonight, I was going to enjoy myself. I was going to get lost in the moment.

I took small sips of the warm liquid, allowing it to splash around in my mouth before swallowing. I tilted my head back, closed my eyes and, before I knew it, the container was empty.

In my newly found perception, I looked around the tiny cell and realized just how free and safe I was. What worries did I have? I had three meals, a place to sleep and a family who gave me everything I wanted even though they couldn't afford it. I didn't have to work that hard to earn a living. I spent most of my days lifting weights, running my mouth, looking stupid or sleeping.

If I was bored, I could always watch my soaps, BET or ESPN. My cabinet was full of goodies, so I always had something to munch on while I fell back watching television with my toes curled.

The only bill I had was for the cable. Hell, I didn't even have to be a man. Prison had relieved me of that responsibility. In fact, prison gave me a legal excuse not to be a responsible human being. I could even play the victim, blaming society or my family as the reason why I was in prison.

Over the phone, through letters or during visits, I could buffalo my people into thinking that I had matured. Yes! Life was good and I didn't dig it until tonight.

In reality, I was a fool and my family was the true victim of my crime. It was easy to fantasize about all the things I would do if I were free. It was easy telling those on the outside how they should run their lives. I could criticize the mother of my children who was raising my babies alone with no support. While she struggled with the rent, the car note, doctor's bills, school and the everyday grind of trying to hold it together, I was sitting around throwing pity parties about how hard it was to do time. I was upset because they didn't have scrambled eggs that morning or sugar to put into my coffee. But—to let me tell it—I had all the answers.

I looked around and everything seemed foggy. How could anyone live like this and consider himself sane? How was I get myself into this mess? Damn, Donna had some

good pussy and she smelled good, too. I wondered what she was doing.

I didn't realize how drunk I was until I stood up to take a leak. I stumbled to the toilet and stood there for what seemed like five minutes before I had to go. While washing my hands, I caught a glimpse of myself in the hazy mirror. For thirty-eight, I vainly thought, I looked twenty-eight. My skin and eyes were clear, bright and youthful. I stood upright and looked at my broad muscular shoulders.

I stumbled backwards while looking down at my well-defined abdominals. My fascination forced me to touch each and every ripple on my stomach. I pulled down my sweats and looked at my member, which was large and fat, though flaccid. What a waste. I'm in my prime and rotting away behind these walls. What use was a prizewinning rose if it sits lonely and naked behind a glass case in some dusty attic?

I was no different from the young men on the basketball court who had so much talent and promise and yet threw it away in some stinky prison. Life was about growth. It was about living, loving and being productive. I was a beautiful, intelligent, caring man, but what good was I to anyone as long as I was incarcerated?

To fully appreciate a woman, to fully and unconditionally love my family, I had to be there. There was no other way.

I tried to shake the negativity from my mind by splashing cold water on my face. I staggered to the bed, slipped and fell in a sitting position. Once I fell, I didn't have the energy to move. All I could do was lean my head on the wall, close my eyes and try to catch my breath.

"God in heaven, please don't let me throw up," I prayed.

I drank too much too fast and my system couldn't handle the poison. Sweat began to bead up on my forehead. With my eyes shut, the room started spinning. I sat there like a dead man, afraid to move, not wanting to puke.

I thought about the letters. Read the letters! Without looking down, I picked up the first envelope I touched. It was Donna's. I sniffed the envelope, a habit I developed over

I the years when I received mail from women. I opened the envelope and began reading.

Dear

Dear Anthony,

Meeting you has been an interesting experience, and a challenge. I find myself thinking about you in ways that I shouldn't, and I don't know what to do about it.

I wanted to share these things with you in person, but was afraid I would start something I couldn't finish.

Although you've never expressed in words how you feel about me, I see the way you look at me, and I think I understand.

What surprised me is my feelings toward you. I should have kept my distance, but my curiosity got the better of me. Now I feel utterly powerless over my heart and mind.

But no matter how I feel about you or how you feel about me, it'll never work. You're never getting out of that place, so what's the use of hoping and waiting for something that will never be?

If I sound cold it's probably because I've been drinking. You don't know what I've been going through, or the sacrifices I've made since I met you. Everyone thinks I'm crazy. And the one person who loves me threatened to walk out on me, if I continue seeing you.

But they don't understand how beautiful you are. They can't see the potential. To them you're a convict, a criminal who deserves to be locked up forever. I can't blame them, I felt the same way several months ago. Now, I just feel angry that you got yourself in such a mess. The people out here could really benefit from your manly wisdom, and you went and got yourself locked away for life. I could slap your face.

If you care about me, Tony, you'll understand. You won't hate me. You'll wish me well, and truly mean it. I'm not just thinking about myself. I'm thinking about you also.

I'll keep you in my prayers, but I can't visit you anymore. I just can't. Please understand!!!

Donna-

After I read her letter, I felt confused. Maybe I was missing something. If this was a "Dear John," what was today all about? And how come she didn't mention the letter or the visit? And what was all that talk about adding her girlfriend to my visiting list so she can meet me? It made no sense.

The letter was dated three weeks ago, but the postmark on the envelope was only three days old. Today was Saturday. According to my calendar, she would have had to mail the letter Wednesday or Thursday evening. I just didn't get it.

I read her letter several times, trying to make sense of it all. It was late, my day was full and I was spent. I sat there uncomfortably with my pillow crunched behind my back. All I had to do was fluff it and place it evenly behind me, but the effects of the alcohol had me in a lazy stupor. I sat there feeling completely immobilized with my hands laying beside me, palms up, like two weights.

When I leaned back, I misjudged the wall and hit the back of my head. All I remember hearing was a loud thud. Strangely, I didn't feel a thing.

"...the voice inside my head said slyly. They're gonna dress me in a blue state issued suit, shave me in a cardboard box and bury me in some lonely, forgotten state cemetery. Nobody is going to cry over you and nobody is going to miss you."

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