



Ace Boggess

Medium Security

I.

“I’d slap the shit out of you, but you’re reading your Bible,” said Pittsburgh from his bunk, his fat brown hands squeezed into mallets above his black poly-fiber blanket. “I don’t want to get blood on the Good Book.” He never turned to look at Elvis as he spoke, instead staring straight up at the beige steel bunk above him. It was the weekend, so he hadn’t been forced to shave. A mat of ebony quills covered almost all of his face. His eyes were a solid mass of magic-marker red from the Haldol he took twice a day for schizophrenia, PTSD, or whatever it was the prison horse doctor thought was wrong with him.

Elvis didn’t glance in his direction either. He kept his face buried in his worn magenta Bible. He was starting over from Genesis—for the third time, as he told everybody—and he didn’t like to be trifled with until after the flood. “Uh huh,” he muttered. “Keep talking.” Of course, Elvis wasn’t his real name any more than Pittsburgh was Pittsburgh. He was called that because he bore an uncanny resemblance to fat Elvis, except for the bald spot perfectly seated like a yarmulke atop his head.

Most prisoners wore nicknames like scars or a scarlet A. Their labels often came from physical characteristics or hometowns (there were far too many Reds and Shortys in the prison, and quite a few Detroits). Some grew out of the offense committed (Butcher in the next cell was in for trimming back the ears of his dogs to make them better fighters). The unluckiest cons were named for stupid things they did while they were locked up (why men were named Powder, Mace, or Suitcase wasn't discussed except in jest). As for those without labels, they went by their last names. No one said *John*, *Josh* or *Bob*, unless it was a guard during mail call.

"Get off that bunk," said Pittsburgh, "and I'll stomp a mud hole in you."

"You ain't in here for stomping nothing," said Elvis.

The two never turned to stare or make eye contact. It was as if they were talking to themselves, each in his private hell of threats and recriminations.

"Say another word, and I'll show you."

Elvis grunted but didn't reply.

From his lower bunk on the opposite side of the cell, Samuelson shook his head and went on with reading the latest pop novel about a serial killer and the bad but likeable cop out to get him. He didn't worry about Pittsburgh and Elvis. He'd seen this back and forth too many times. Even so, he kept out of it ... just in case.

II.

Mike Samuelson was an overweight, middle-aged man with thick, sandy hair and dull green eyes. He wasn't a fighter, but he wasn't afraid either as he hobbled up the steps of the prison van, his old knee injury and the shackles on his legs forcing him to seek precision in every move. He found a seat by a steel-latticed window in the third row. There were five other inmates with him, all being transferred from the Regional Jail to the penitentiary.

Samuelson used to have a normal life. He worked as an accountant at a coal mine, keeping the books, managing payrolls, and forwarding requests for supplies. Then, on a late night when he was doing nothing more dangerous than making a left turn, a drunk driver smashed into his car at full speed. Thanks to a seatbelt and an airbag, he survived, but his left knee was shattered. He spent more than six months rehabbing the injury, and during that time he found himself growing dependent on Oyxcontin—his physician's pain reliever du jour. By the time he went back to work, he averaged three hundred and twenty milligrams a day. Not long after, his doctor cut him off. He fought the withdrawals by buying pills off one of the miners who'd been dealing for years without getting caught. But Samuelson burned through all his money, pawned everything of value he owned, and eventually lost his job after he went to work too high to read the numbers on a calculator.

"You guys are lucky." Samuelson looked up and saw that the person speaking was one of the correctional officers seated up front. The guy was fat and sort of green-skinned like he had some kind of sickness, though maybe it was just sunlight shining through the weirdly tinted windows of the prison bus. "Now that we're moving, I can tell you where you're headed."

One of the inmates in back said, “Where we going? Max?”

“No, the state must like you fellows. We’re headed south to Mt. Harmony. Medium security. You work hard and earn your clearance, you might even be able to work on the road crew.”

Samuelson fought the smile that wanted to play across his face. Mt. Harmony Correctional Center was candy land from what he’d heard. It was a county-owned facility contracted to the Department of Corrections—an old hospital converted into a prison that was less than two years old. The county correctional officers were still learning how to deal with inmates. Tobacco could be found all over the place, smuggled in by the road-crew workers. And drugs—Samuelson meant to stay away from those, having been clean for almost a year now.

“I’m Red,” said the blondish-red-haired guy to Samuelson’s right.

“Samuelson.”

“I don’t normally ask—I’m not one of those people—but are you in for some kind computer fraud? Maybe embezzle some scratch from the bank?”

“No.” Samuelson groaned and shook his head.

“Sorry, man. Didn’t mean to offend you.”

“It’s okay. I’m down on a strong-armed robbery. Three to fifteen.”

“Ouch,” said Red.

“No kidding.”

“What’d you do?”

“I was dope sick. Saw a woman coming out of the pharmacy with a bag of pills. I grabbed it and ran. A pretty stupid move. I got a gimpy leg. She damn sure could’ve caught me if she tried, but I guess the shock kept her standing there.”

“What’d you get out of it?”

“That’s the sick part. It was just Klonopins. Fucking Klonopins. And some kind of diuretic. Didn’t do me a bit of good.”

“That’s harsh,” said Red. “Well, I’m in for intent to deliver. I guess if you’d known me, I could’ve saved you the trouble.”

III.

Outside the cage, a constant buzz of noise from the dayroom lifted and lowered as cons shouted and joked, laughed and sang out of key with their headphones over their ears. Plastic chairs scraped across the stone floor. Cards slammed the table as Spades players made every effort to show up their opponents. Arguments blossomed and quickly withered, small early crocus buds dying in a late winter storm. The noise was unrelenting.

Within the cell, it grew quiet, the roar from the dayroom tuned out as easily as a TV left on in the den while a family ate its dinner in the kitchen. The leopard’s cage of wire mesh let all the sound in, but to the cellmates, it was as if nothing out in the pod existed.

The cell itself held six men on three steel-framed double bunks, vinyl pads like high school wrestling mats thrown on top. The toilet and sink were in one corner, surrounded by a black metal barrier about four feet high that blocked the view from everywhere but the nearest top bunk. It brought the familiar bathroom smells into the cell and from there into the dayroom beyond. That stink was balanced out by the burning fumes of faux-bleach and the smoke from contraband cigarettes somewhere in the pod.

The cell's coppery stone floor was hard and cold. The wall of wire diamonds sprouted from it and ran up into the aluminum-tiled ceiling. The cage door opened on the end farthest from the toilet, with a steel box and button beside it on the wall for getting the attention of the guard at the front desk.

That lock hummed like a muffled dentist's drill. The door opened, and Panda stepped into the cell. He was a squat, broadly built young man with thin blond hair, cheeks bright and red from time in the sun and thick from so many meals of Raman noodles, tubs of cheese, and bags of refried beans, all mixed together and wrapped in tortilla shells from the commissary. He'd been dubbed Panda because of the two black eyes he sported on the day he arrived. One would've thought that'd teach him to be cautious, but no, he just moved on to the next risky thing. Now, he kept the bank for the poker game as a hustle to earn himself a few stamps or soups every night. "Can you believe those guys?" he whined. "Yelling at me 'cause *they* lost all *their* money?"

From the bottom bunk by the bathroom wall, Samuelson lifted his head from his pillow, laying the book on his chest. "What's the deal?" he said.

"Two of 'em trying to say I shorted their chips! I counted them chips. Jesus God!"

Samuelson reached over onto the lid of his gray storage box to find his dainty spectacles. "I warned you not to get involved in that," he said.

Panda shrugged. "It is what it is, I guess."

Without moving, Pittsburgh said, "Panda!"

"Yeah?"

"Shut the hell up before I slap the shit out of you."

"Is your slapper broke?" said Panda.

"Come over here and find out."

Samuelson swung himself off the bed and eased into his thong shower shoes. He was dressed only in his night ware of cream thermal shirt and gray sweatpants, not the khaki prison ensemble like Panda wore. "Let's smoke a cigarette," he said. "Maybe everybody'll calm down a little."

"Good plan," said Panda, his face melting into a goofy grin.

Pittsburgh threw off his covers and swung his huge legs off the bed. He wore only white boxers and tee shirt.

Elvis dropped his Bible and climbed down from his upper bunk by the wall.

After retrieving a cigarette from his hiding place inside another book, Samuelson dug around in his box for a set of AA batteries. Getting up, he headed for the bathroom.

IV.

Samuelson and Red sat beside each other in line for the delousing shower. They'd passed the six-hour trip talking about drugs, jail, women, the Steelers and Cowboys—whatever they could think of—and they kept that up now. It was like they'd known each other for years.

The young guy sitting on Red's right was a stranger to them. They hadn't noticed him on the bus because he sat up front and kept to himself. He couldn't have been more than nineteen, though he looked about twelve. He shook and chewed on his lower lip. The guy must have been fresh out of high school. Samuelson pictured him running track or wearing some gaudy band uniform. Probably a rich kid. Probably a toucher. Samuelson knew it right off, but hoped he was wrong. After all, the guy was young and handsome with a baby face and just the right mix of meek and firm that would've made the girls hungry to be close to him. So, why would he diddle little kids? Samuelson decided to test him. "What kind of time you doing, man?"

The guy admitted nothing, but he gave himself away. "Five years," he said. "For forgery. I signed another guy's name on a check."

Sorry. First mistake. Forgery carried a sentence of one to ten. *Get your story straight, kid*, Samuelson thought. There were plenty of five-year crimes out there. Conspiracy was a good one. Conspiracy always worked. No, the guy—he went by Brain, not a nickname but a typo on his birth certificate—had to make a guess and miss. There were only two reasons cons lied about their charges: either they wanted to look tough or else they were child molesters, baby-porn dealers or something like that. Samuelson knew it wasn't the first of those. If Brain wanted to look tough, he wouldn't have picked a charge like forgery.

Samuelson and Red glanced at each other and shook their heads at the same time as if they were synchronized swimmers. They'd read the guy, and if *they* did, how many of the five hundred other convicts would as well? It only took one to start a wave, swirling and breaking on that young man's head. If his story came out, things would get bloody fast.

V.

"Which guard's up there?" Samuelson asked to no one in particular.

"Freemont," said Panda.

Elvis said, "That fat bastard? Better watch close, and keep it in the vent. Write you up for sure." He and the other two lined up along the cage, the farthest back keeping watch for the guard while Samuelson sat backward on the toilet, lighting his cigarette off the steel pipes using broken razor blades and batteries to make a spark.

"Hey, Panda," came a voice from outside the cage, "you better watch out for that guy." Everyone but Samuelson turned to see Clancy leaning against the wires. He was a goofy-looking young man, rather obnoxious, with bad acne covering his crooked face, and trails of blue prison tattoos stretching up and down his arms.

“What’d you say?” Panda asked.

“You better watch out for that guy. He’s gonna spit on you.”

“Who?”

“*This dick!*” Clancy mocked, already laughing at his own wit.

All four in the cell groaned. They’d heard versions of that joke ten thousand times. Still, it was unusual when it actually worked so well and caught somebody unaware. That was enough for Panda’s face to burn a little brighter. Shaking it off, he said, “Funny. Since you’re standing there, why don’t you keep an eye out for us?”

“Sure. You all go ahead. I got you.” Half his lips grinned while the other half stayed flat as if his face were paralyzed.

Samuelson came up off the toilet, a lit cigarette in his hand. He held it in front of the inward-sucking vent that managed to capture ninety percent of the smoke. He took two quick puffs, exhaled, then passed the roll-up to the next man and cycled to the back of the queue to wait for his turn to come around again. This process was repeated by the others, ending with Pittsburgh who said, “Good looking out,” as he handed the cigarette back to Samuelson.

“Walking,” said Clancy.

Samuelson dropped the cigarette on the back of the toilet, and the four inmates scattered. All tried to look casual, though they felt like they were under a microscope.

Officer Freemont marched past the cage. His massive body was squeezed into a blue uniform of cargo pants and a polo shirt with a badge sewn over the heart. Fluorescent lights from the ceiling reflected off his bald head which glistened with sweat from the heat.

After Freemont passed, Elvis and Panda raced to the cigarette, each taking a quick puff and blowing smoke into the vent.

“Walking back,” said Clancy.

Again, they scattered.

Freemont passed the cage, heading back toward the desk up front. Smoke thickened the air and had an odor like a campfire rising off damp, mossy wood. It was caused by the tissue wrapper the tobacco had been rolled in. Freemont had to have smelled traces the vent didn’t catch, but he said nothing and didn’t so much as glance into the cell.

The crew resumed its ritual, passing the cigarette around until it burned down to a roach and scorched someone’s fingers.

“Feel better?” said Samuelson, dropping back onto his bunk.

Panda replied, “Sure. Good looking out.”

Pittsburgh shoved him in the arm, not enough to damage him but enough to unbalance him and move him slightly sideways. “Slap the shit out of you,” he said.

Panda said nothing. He stood there looking dumb while Pittsburgh got back on his bunk. Then Panda shook his head and turned to leave, heading for the dayroom.

Nobody spoke for a while until Elvis broke the silence that wasn’t really silence anyway. “You guys ever suck on a titty and have milk squirt out?” He didn’t wait for a reply. “I was with a chick once. Lila. She had big old titties. Used to smack me in the face with ’em. I was

sucking on one and didn't know she was knocked up. Damn if she didn't squirt right in my mouth."

Samuelson grimaced.

"It was all sour. I had to spit it out. Don't want to do that again. Still, she let me pound her in the ass."

"Elvis," said Samuelson, "weren't you just reading your Bible?"

"Yeah. So?"

"Oh, never mind."

Then Elvis went off on another tangent, relating the story of some girl he'd slept with or dreamt he'd slept with or wanted to sleep with or whatever. Everyone pretended to ignore him. This was old news. He'd told his stories at least a dozen times.

VI.

That first day, Samuelson moved into a cell that would be his home for a while. Like all newbies, he ended up on the top bunk by the toilet. There was no ladder, so he had to climb up on his gray box to get to bed. For the moment, he sat on his box like a chair.

"You got paperwork?"

His heart raced as he turned toward the voice. It came from a tall black man who looked big enough to be a professional basketball player. The khaki shirt he wore just barely made it down his torso. Samuelson said, "What's that?"

"Paperwork. You move into our cell, you better have paperwork."

Samuelson looked around and saw three men on their bunks, leaning on their sides and staring at him. "Oh," he said, "sure." He stood, opened his box, then dug through it until he found his sentencing order. "Here you go." While the big man scanned text, looking for the charge, Samuelson ran through his story for the second time that day. He stumbled over the words, though. Violence had been implied in the big man's demand. Samuelson knew he was okay, but the threat left him trembling and fighting hard not to show it.

"He's good," the big man said, then introduced himself and the others in the cell.

Taking a deep breath, Samuelson took his paperwork and sat back down without saying anything more. Instead, he wondered about Brain. He pictured the kid going through this same ritual in his cell on the other end of the pod, except he knew Brain would have different results. He'd probably start with his lie. After that, he'd claim he didn't have any paperwork. There'd be threats and maybe worse.

Samuelson closed his eyes and imagined the sound of screaming.

VII.

Panda reappeared at the door, yelling, “Cell *three!*” to the guard up front.

The door buzzed. The other two cellmates, Batman and Wise, followed Panda through the opening. Both were normal-looking younger men with brown hair tightly cropped in a convict fade. They wore their khaki pants and white tees with their inmate numbers drawn in magic marker above the heart. Batman’s nickname had something to do with his crime, though he wouldn’t tell anyone what. Wise, on the other hand, used his last name. He had a small blue teardrop tattooed under his left eye, a symbol that meant either he’d killed someone or was mourning for a dead homeboy.

“Look,” said Panda, as calmly as he could, “it’s not my fault you went all-in and lost.”

Wise got up in his face. “He might not have gone all-in if you hadn’t shorted him on chips.”

“I didn’t...”

Batman snapped, “*He* didn’t short me! You *stole* my chips when I went into the cell to take a piss.” His voice was raised, barking. His fists were clenched into meaty hammers, knuckles squeezed taut as guitar strings.

“Nobody stole your chips,” said Wise, backing away from Panda. “You told me to watch ’em, and I did.”

“Hey, Panda,” said Pittsburgh from his bunk.

“*What?*” Panda almost screamed.

“I’ll slap the shit out of you.”

“Fuck you, motherfucker!”

“Why do I gotta be a motherfucker?”

“Ask God,” said Samuelson from his bunk.

Without answering, Pittsburgh began to laugh—a deep, bellowing chortle like the grinding start of a diesel engine. Panda joined in, as did Elvis and Samuelson. They’d stopped paying attention to the other two cellmates. The sound of a twig’s snap brought their focus back. None of them saw Wise’s fist crashing into Batman’s chin, but they knew what that sound meant and turned to watch the rest of the action.

Blood already oozed from Batman’s lip, but he seemed unfazed. He responded with a rapid left and then a right. The first missed as Wise leaned back. The second struck a glancing blow against the man’s shoulder.

Wise threw a long, arcing punch hard to the chest, rocking Batman like a heavy bag.

Already a crowd had formed outside the cage. The other cons stood in silence now, watching as Wise landed two more punches to the midsection. It looked like it was going to be toe to toe like a professional boxing match, but Batman lunged, tackling Wise—first driving him into the wall, then over the edge of one of the bunks. Wise’s forehead struck a bolt protruding from the steel frame, gouging a hole in his skin that gushed blood like somebody shot a jug of Hawaiian Punch with a pellet gun. Both men hit the floor, grappling and trading

muted body blows. When both tired, they clenched as if lovers, breathing hard and bleeding until one found the energy to slam a fist into the other's side.

"Fire," said someone outside the cage. There were additional shouts of "Fire," "Walking" and "Here he comes!"

Officer Freemont bulled his way through the crowd, stepping up to the wire mesh but not entering the cell. Sweat splashed from his forehead, baptizing everyone nearby. "Break it up!" he shouted. "Break it up, I said!" Then, into his radio, he bellowed, "Officer needs assistance on four-see!" He turned to the crowd. "Everybody lock down! Now!"

Slowly, the cons followed orders, all backing away so they didn't miss anything. The ones who'd propped their cell doors open went into their cells. The rest stood by their locked doors, hoping to see just a little more blood and excitement.

Still, the two combatants clenched and bled and punched, doing no real damage now, but refusing to give ground or give up.

Barely a minute passed before the first officers arrived. They were followed right away by members of the security team with cans of pepper spray strapped to their hips. Then came two corporals and a sergeant. Several of the officers drew their sprayers the size of industrial pesticide cans. They waved them about like flags.

The cell door opened, and the sergeant rushed through it, accompanied by a lady corporal and two can-wielding members of the security team. The sergeant hovered over the two cons and bellowed, "Break it up now, goddammit, or you'll be cleaning out your eyes for the next week, and I swear to Christ I'll bounce you both off the goddamn floor!"

Samuelson and his cellmates covered their mouths with their shirts—not that it would've helped. They'd seen people sprayed before. They knew that, if it happened, half the pod would be gagging, retching and crying for hours.

Sergeant Crouch was a stubby, broad man with a jarhead haircut and wrinkled face that gave mean definition to his dark, dismal eyes. He was the only one of the officers that looked like a real cop. Nobody in Mt. Harmony wanted to mess with him. He held up a hand for someone to come forward with pepper spray, then waved the man off as the two inmates pried themselves apart. Still, everyone knew that if either man took a parting shot, both would be sprayed. "All right. Up against the wall."

Both men rode the wall, forehead to concrete and arms up high. It was as if they were about to be arrested all over again.

Carrying out that illusion, Sergeant Crouch took plastic flex cuffs like giant bread ties from a hook on his belt. One by one, he pulled arms off the wall, locking hands behind backs but leaving faces pressed against the painted white cinderblocks. "Anybody want to tell me what this was about?" He looked at the fighters, then at the other four men in the cell. "No? I didn't figure. Well, let's see who won, at least." He studied Batman's busted lip and swollen eye, then shook his head when he examined the blood pouring down Wise's face from the gash just below his hairline. The crimson syrup left a portrait of a mask on the wall where Wise's head had been. "Messy. Looks like this one got the worst of it. All the same, I'd have to score it a

draw.” He paused, turning to the female corporal. “Take them to Medical first. They’re both in need of treatment.”

Corporal Deville, a tiny brunette with a scowl, said, “All right, let’s go.” She took Batman by the arm and led him away. Another officer did the same with Wise.

Sergeant Crouch scanned the cell. Splattered blood streaked the walls and pooled in one corner of the floor like a bowl of tomato soup. “Officer Freemont, call down to laundry. These guys will need some bleach.” He left without another word.

Almost smiling, Freemont studied the mess. He turned to Panda. “You,” he said. “You go downstairs and get the bleach and the mop bucket. I’ll call down and let ’em know you’re on your way.”

VIII.

Brain disappeared sometime that first night. Samuelson had been asleep, so he missed the squad of officers marching with flashlights through the darkened pod. He didn’t see if the kid took bruises with him or just checked himself off the pod to avoid a beating. By now, Brain was sleeping peacefully in a cell either in medical or protective custody. How frightened the guy must have been, and how the tension of that first day must have gotten to him.

You’re better off, kid, Samuelson thought as he lay on his bunk, listening to others talk outside the cell. Brain was the whole story this morning.

Samuelson didn’t want to make the pod news. Sometimes a war would come, and he’d either fight or take his beating, but just then, the thought of violence burned the back of his neck as if someone were jabbing with lit cigarettes. How long, he wondered, would it take him to get comfortable here? He knew people did. Even in the max-security prisons, folks adapted. When bad things happened, the inmates just shook their heads and went on with their lives. Samuelson couldn’t imagine himself as that kind of person. He wasn’t sure he wanted it. Oh, but he didn’t like this feeling. It was fear and doubt and sadness. It swirled around inside him like a thousand piranhas eating their way out. *Maybe someday*, he thought. He knew he’d be there long enough.

IX.

“Good fight,” said Pittsburgh. “Not great, though.”

Samuelson replied, “I’ve seen better.”

Elvis agreed. “Remember when Mouse beat the hell out of that guy with a chair?”

“Yeah.”

“Now, that was a good one.”

“I don’t know. My favorite was Lessing and that drag queen ... what was her name?”

“Delilah,” said Pittsburgh.

“That’s right. Delilah.”

Elvis said, “That wasn’t much of a fight. They just chased each other around a table a few times, waving their arms and shouting.”

“Yeah, but it was cool at the end when Delilah was standing there in the middle of the dayroom, yelling, ‘You got punked by a punk. You got *punked* . . . by a *punk!*’” He tried not to laugh as he emphasized the words, mocking an effeminate tone, but he couldn’t help it. A man needed to keep his sense of humor in prison. Otherwise, he’d go nuts fast.

“You’re right,” Elvis said, grunting and snickering. “That *was* pretty sweet.”

The three lay in silence again, enjoying the memory. As always, the silence didn’t last.

“Hey, Elvis,” said Pittsburgh.

“What is it?”

“I’m gonna slap the living shit out of you.”

“Uh huh. Sure. I’ll try to keep that in mind.”

Ace Boggess has published poems in Harvard Review, River Styx, RATTLE, and elsewhere. His books include The Beautiful Girl Whose Wish Was Not Fulfilled and, as editor, Wild Sweet Notes II, an anthology of work by poets living in West Virginia.