

LOVE OF CONFINEMENT

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These pathetic words are scratched on stained newsprint because it is the only paper I have right now and I will not have the means to document this story at a later time.

I am alone in a simply furnished cell. I have a straw mattress and a single blanket on the floor and a lamp under a metal cage. There's just one tiny window and a blackened iron door. I also have a bucket that serves as the toilet, and when it's empty and upturned this is the table upon which I lean and commit these words to paper. I want to make a record to tell you and those who never knew me how I came to be in this place.

The unfolding of events is difficult to narrate because of the chain of pleasure and trouble that has shackled my heart. I commence the story part way with my second and final transit through Darwin Station. This town was clearly named after the famous naturalist but not much is made of the reference, Darwinism being too secular for the average settler. None of this mattered to me until now.

Black uniformed authorities apprehended me some distance from where I am confined. I was transported here by prison train. That journey took a whole night; a punishing, shuddering trip that halted abruptly many times. Only a very short distance was covered in those dark, drawn out hours. But whenever the great black cast iron hulk of a carriage paused I grimaced out the grill at the little towns across the red, dusty plains. Along the way I saw the tiny budding lights of Edith, Batchelor and Fred's Pass.

Oddly enough, the first time I arrived at Darwin Station it was at the same hour. I was a free man then, but this time I knew that it would be the last unfortified public edifice I would pass through for a good while. As the train drew into the platform I strained my head to get a better view of the station's Spanish mission porticos.

With my attentive captive's gaze I saw that some of the off-white stucco had by chance caught the final slither of the daylight, glorifying the plaster as if it were alabaster. Mesmerised by what I thought to be a miraculous sign, I stared uncomfortably out the grate window while the train jolted and crawled on towards its final destination, Darwin Sanatorium Prison.

My life sentence without parole was no better than banishment or death. A convict of lesser years had hope of reform but I, a murderer, was bound to resume the life I had embarked on from the age of thirteen when, cast off by my parents, I'd started doing crime for a living. Yet the nomadic journey I had made in the preceding months was the consequence of a pact: I had sworn that I would never be confined again. To stare one more time at cell walls would end my life, the last days of which you shall come to comprehend.

As the train rolled out of the station I thought about my new haven. Of all the state facilities I have encountered, Darwin Sanatorium Prison is the most terrifying. Inmates across the country pale at the mention of its name. The surrounding plains are arid, the grey, unrelenting landscape barren. But on the day of my arrival, as the train slowed down, I was able to discern patches of dead couch grass amid the rocks and pebbles. Just as the carriages came to an inexplicable halt in the middle of an empty landscape, I saw a lone lizard scurry under a rock, a heavy footstep causing its flight. The glimpse of the lizard was abruptly denied as a guard came around the cabins and drew down a heavy canvas blind over each window, covering my last view of the open plains. The carriage then lurched and continued on towards its terminus, the prison.

Citizens of leisure often tell me of the external design of the various facilities I've inhabited but I have never been able to see the outside of these institutions, because with the blinds concealing the view upon approach I was denied any idea of their appearance. It hardly seems to matter

because the walls of Darwin Sanatorium are just like other prisons. They are hardened witnesses. They feel nothing of my pain and affliction. There is no point in consulting them.

Once the train had shunted inside the prison walls and the guards slammed shut those big iron gates, the blinds were raised and we blinked at the new world into which we had been transported. We each arrived with fetters on our ankles and wrists. You would assume that to bind a man in such a way is unjust. But I welcomed such constraints. I was glad to have some measure of my lover's sacrifice. I was contented by limits.

I could not walk because of the shackles. Falling out of the cabin onto the roughly hewn stones a guard shouted at me, 'You there! What are you doing?' I didn't move, waiting for the welcome, a salutary beating. The guard's boots approached and I felt his sizable hands on my neck. But the thrashing I expected didn't come; instead the guard gently raised my head and unfastened the lock that secured the chains, releasing me into a dual state of captivity and freedom like a caged animal. I lowered my face in obvious gratitude. Then, closing my eyes, I conjured up an image from my past, as only a free mind can.

I returned to the day I met Bruno, the second man to have taken my heart. It may seem arrogant to relate so blithely the sordid details of these affairs but I have been possessed by a conceit. I believe the man who gave his life did it for good cause, namely so I could warn you of the dire consequences of our love. As I see it, the crime had its just purpose, for his death led to me to return to my preferred prison habitation.

As I told you, I'd been to Darwin before, only without the manacles. The town had become a pit stop, en route to another region I was travelling to. I had embraced the life of a truly emancipated man, roaming for six months from town to town, not knowing where I would sleep at night. You may think I was a drifter, and it was true, but I was far

from an outcast. I yearned for company and sought it each night in bars and tiny restaurants. And with reasonable success, for my humble lonely figure was kindly taken in by many strangers.

Since leaving the main tourist routes I'd rented some dreadful rooms. Sometimes I'd stay in better places and occasionally a hotel, mainly to get away from the dank mattresses and dark corridors. Wandering led me to towns devoid of other passing travellers, which I preferred. Difficulties were met with on these detours, like finding good rooms, but I found my own desperation perversely exciting.

I had been vigilant up to that point in avoiding unnecessary risks such as arriving in strange towns after sunset. It was always hard to find a room at that hour, except for some reason the day I arrived in Darwin I didn't care. After travelling for so long I was fatigued and had lost my care of precaution. I roamed through villages, populated by short unfriendly creatures. Old men and young women alike spoke to me insipidly. I felt increasingly unwelcome, lonely. And I knew right away that Darwin was yet another unremarkable town in this inhospitable territory.

I have no idea why I stopped there, apart from it being the main town on the route to where I was heading, and because I needed a bed for the night. I didn't know of Darwin Sanatorium at the time either. There was no reason why I would. Only if I had been at all alert on that first visit, I'd have noticed its haunting silhouette in the dry, stony landscape beyond the habitable perimeter of the town. The decision to disembark at Darwin Station at dusk was foolish, driven by a strong predilection for peril. It seems I was dragging myself towards the fate I now relate to you.

Late afternoon shadows were creeping over the station, and the portico of the building was half lit. I walked out of the ticketing hall into the open, paved square. Other travellers were dispersing haphazardly across the cobbles

while I stopped to orient myself with a few notes I had scrawled and a map of the town. I was not sure where I was going. I must have halted right in the centre of the space, in full view of the whole square. I stood there turning the map around a few times before I noticed that a man was staring at me, leaning against a wall on the other side of the square in a patch of sun. He had one leg propped up with his arm draped over it in a languid manner, showing off the fine tone of his body. His other hand firmly gripped his hip pocket. His hair was thinning a little but its longer strands were swept away from his face, which shone as brightly as the white stucco. In a moment of grace, my gaze met his and even from a distance I saw in his iron coloured eyes a troubled but determined look.

Engaged with him in this way, I made an inadvertent offer and feeling exposed I foolishly averted my stare toward the nearby rooftops. It followed that this elongated, loping man approached me without my even realising and he drew so close that when I looked up again he was right in front of me. His shirt gaped and I saw the shadowy skin and fine neck. But I also noticed that his collar was tinged with a ring of grime. The man's voice was fluid and his breath came over me like a sweet and heavy scent. I must have been distracted because he addressed me again, this time a bit awkwardly: 'Are you looking for a room?'

Enchanted by the voice, I forgot to be circumspect. I nodded and said, 'Yes', because it was true, I needed help. It was very late and I had nowhere to stay. This single utterance caused the brittle lines of the man's hard past to crack open around his mouth, which revealed an unfettered toothy smile. He then replied that it would be '20', and this was cheap. I knew I had no option but to accept the offer.

But his voice had a power, one not obvious to others. For me it was beautiful for its anguish, its force emanating from the capacity of a man to be delightful because his voice is the place where the body's pain catches. The man had the hallmarks of such beauty, and it was doubly

intoxicating because I was the only one who knew it. As we walked away from the station he told me his name but, for judicial reasons, you will know him as Bruno.

We left the square. The streets darkened as he led me away. Wending our way through a series of tiny streets for what seemed a while, pockets of light bled onto the gravelly back lanes from windows that when I looked over my shoulder were steaming up with stewing meat, netted curtains like frock lining on a hot day, showing women in apricot smocks shuffling with big carrots across old floors, and the sound of tinkering bandy piano music from old weatherboard walls beyond. A woman looked up through the grimy, fogged glass as I passed by, with eyes uncertain of my ghostly lamp-lit face, hers ripe tomatoes. Bruno turned down a narrow passage and we arrived in front of a small painted door at a non-descript, well worn timber building. Bruno turned an old key in the lock and went up a set of creaky wooden stairs without turning on the light or helping me with my bag. I followed him mutely.

It was a dive. A single bed stood alone on one side of the dingy room. It didn't touch the wall but was high and freestanding, sinking low in the middle with a postnatal belly. I looked down at the carpet. It was grey and faded with wear, yet through the grime and dirt I could see a dim pattern of what looked like artichokes adorned by coils of pink bougainvillea. I dropped my bag. There was silence. It was very uncomfortable. Bruno didn't speak. I gave him the money he'd asked for and waited for him to leave. I looked at him as he stood there and noticed that his pants were tatty and stretched out in patches. His eyes roamed over my face anxiously and he asked me if I would be interested in having dinner. I liked the glint of fury in his blackened pupils. I felt no need to fear this passion. I was also very hungry.

Wherever it was that he took me, it looked traditional. It had small tables with red cloths and arched doorways, peeling walls and relaxed waiters. Oddly, I can't remember

what we ate even though I usually make a point of this. We chatted blithely while the dinner plates came and went across the table. The conversation had been superficial up to this moment. It became hard to speak for we had run out interesting things to talk about, let find a common tongue. My reserved manner made it worse. But we continued to drink. It was red wine, and despite it being served in water glasses, we must have drunk a bottle, maybe more. Someone lit a candle, only by this time the flickering light was hard to endure. The mood switched. I was glaring at the glass with the dregs of red wine. I grew hot and swollen like the sweltering bloated stalk of an overcooked vegetable.

Barely able to sit upright, I gathered my mind and sharpened my tongue, dissecting his insistent and powerful remarks; arguing desperately with him. I was scared because Bruno had found a sore point. He was getting exquisite pleasure from prodding at it.

A waiter lingered somewhere at the back of the restaurant. I remember his shape under a white archway and the look of concern on his face when he came to refill our glasses with more wine. It must have been a strange scene: a beautiful youth alone with this ugly man. Had Bruno taken other innocents there before? Was Darwin Station a field scattered with bruised green stalks for this gleaner? I dismissed the waiter's visual warning as it made its way through my overcooked head.

The force of our argument wound me in, closer and closer to him. Our hands touched briefly and I leant into the middle of the table. I felt very drunk. I tried to explain the limits of the situation but a fug dropped over my brain and I slowly acquiesced under Bruno's touch. I felt my lids droop a little. I saw the red wine. I looked at the wooden table. A snake slipped across its rough surface, then a strong light came over the setting, and the wine turned brighter and thickened. Everything became searingly hot.

I recalled how I used to pray. The breath of God hot in my groin. Was it the same? Was God coming back for

me? I wanted to kneel down right there beside the table. My hand was submissive under his. I didn't resist its pressure. I started to confess, as if he were a priest. A flood of images overwhelmed me: saints, curtains, blood, and my father coming in at night to send me off to sleep. Bruno calmly listened, a receptacle, a chalice that held all my wrongdoing. I saw myself mirrored in the vessel. I grew redder, polished with thoughts of a spoil: I would sin again, and I would do it gladly. I was bewildered. I wanted the holy man to take me, even though this would require some kind of death. But that didn't matter because I had already given up my body and laid it out in parts for others. It wasn't novel.

I babbled. Sense came adrift. The table, the chair and the peeling walls disintegrated. We were leaving. Bruno was dragging me from the restaurant, supporting me as I stumbled out. The street was empty of people. We'd only had one bottle of wine. Was I really that drunk? Bruno and I arrived back at the wooden building. I reeled around on the spot. The stairs were in front of me but were insurmountable without Bruno. He got out his key and let me in.

Renting the room was a mistake but I was not exactly a victim. The shedding of annoying acquaintances is an unfortunate sideline of a traveller's life. I was accustomed to it yet infuriated that another awful night was unfolding. I realised it was due to my appearance. I was a vulnerable, wan creature and men seemed to imagine that a lone adventurer like me must be after some kind of encounter. That was a good approximation of my impulses on this occasion. I was trying to purge something that lurked in my body. And I have to confess it's a relief to write about it. I've imagined you reading this, my love from long ago, and I have been sure that I was not just writing to myself. Keeping this story a secret would have been a dreadful end to my life.

Back in the rented room the light was off. But I could feel his presence. In the darkness I forgot about my gentle

body. Bruno had roused an ancient foe and my hatred for all men spumed. Volcanic yet purulent it oozed from my ancestral flesh. I could not contain it. I leapt at Bruno, every organ throbbing, Bruno's skin raked under my nails, clawing him closer, teeth bared at one another. A scratch, a smack, a push; my tongue sliding over a cheek, an eye and a neck. At this moment my eyes went black.

When I reopened them I saw the warden from the yard standing over me in my darkened cell. I knew where my head was laid but I could not be sure which time my mind was in; future, past or present, so I closed my eyes and drifted off again.

In its inauguration promotion the federal government claimed Darwin Sanatorium Prison was the apogee of a state-of-the-art penitentiary. Its purpose was to reform the convicts in its care but consider that word, 'penitentiary'. It sounds like a religious order, like penance, which is a Catholic sacrament and punishment for sin. An architectural replica of Pentonville, a notorious space of incarceration in London, Darwin Sanatorium consists of an observation or control tower with nine radiating spines that comprise the wings of its complex. It has electronic doors, closed-circuit surveillance and a central locking system. It features minimal furnishings and yards with caged ceilings for exercise. But I cannot help thinking about its name and those two words, sanatorium prison. At first ambiguous, the name exposes the role of the institution as one of ritual public cleansing. To sanitise is to also make sane, the criminal needing both operations to be performed of course.

At its core, the K sensory deprivation space was reserved for the reformation of the worst criminals. Methods of mortification were at their most inspired here with prisoners in K herded into three-by-five metre walled yards. These were dotted with steel buckets like mine and open drains for emptying their contents. The conditions sound harsh but in more ways than one the degradation thrilled me.

I knew nothing of what was to come as I woke up after my first night in that room. Bruno had gone but his presence lingered. He was there in the stinky carpet and the bed. His body still tangled in the crumpled sheets, the pillow. He was on my skin and in my clothes and, like the dust and the filmy air, all of it rose up around me in a million or more microscopic fragments, dispersing and spreading out over everything, yet making me void at the same time. Dullness made my hands numb. The pointlessness ploughed through my brain like bulldozers over a razed forest.

In daylight I saw that the room was even more dismal than I had noticed the night before. Eyes of dull sobriety didn't brighten its aspects at all. I pulled my jeans up over my legs, then found my t-shirt, socks and shoes, and finished getting dressed. The key was in my pocket. I was dumbfounded to discover it there yet my surprise was strange in itself: had I erased all hope of liberty? I came down from the room, creeping out onto the quiet sunlit street, a blinking rat. I set off to survey the town's sights as I had planned to the day before. I had written them down fastidiously, even mapped the route.

Darwin isn't a big town, and it doesn't have much transport, so I walked. As I wandered the sun grew sharper, reaching its hottest, around midday. This brought me to my senses. I saw the terrain properly now. The earth was limestone, and the wind kicked up white dust clouds with every change of its direction.

The things I'd hoped to see were only a short distance from each other, so in half a day I had come to the end of my itinerary: a pile of rubble that had been a military post, a garden with exotic succulents, and the neoclassical town hall. I found a café and ordered a short black coffee. Leaning against the steel bar, I tore the top off a paper sugar tube. I poured the granules into the little cup, some of it missing and skipping across the surface of the bar.

Half a dozen men shrouded in smoke clustered around upright tables. They stared at me intermittently, twisting

their hunched shoulders. I felt oddly paranoid, so I turned to look out the window. I saw a man pass across the street. Was it Bruno? I'd eaten a sticky pastry and the coffee cup was empty. I had no excuse to stay; the men kept on staring. I looked back out the window to where I thought I had seen Bruno but no one was there.

Convincing myself that it was a silly suspicion, I left the bar. I told myself he also could have been going on his way, which could easily happen in such a small town. The streets were dead. Five o'clock. I wandered slowly along the footpath. The shops were closed, curtains drawn. It was so inexplicably still. I kept walking. The buildings had thinned out to a few tin sheds. I saw a rise in the landscape that turned out to be a railway line. I clambered up over its embankment and jumped the tracks to have a look around. Once I'd gained this advantage I was happy to see a wider view of the town and its setting in a dry river valley. I turned around to face the road I had just walked out on. But I froze because there he was, Bruno, calmly making his way towards me from the direction of the bar. The bile in my gut churned. Spite spread up and down my limbs so that I couldn't take a single step as he walked over the tracks. Bruno stepping up one leg at a time over each rail, I remained planted on the rise until he was facing me. I gagged and stammered, 'What are you doing here? Have you been following me all of this time?' Bruno nodded to say, 'Yes'. Disgust curled my face. Bruno didn't move. He was utterly submissive. Then it dawned on me. I realised that this man, master of the previous night, had become my slave. I turned and walked away from him without saying a word.

For the rest of that afternoon Bruno followed me all over town, through a park, the cathedral, looking into shops selling painted plates, in a cemetery and at the front an old tailor's, who kept trying to point out to me in funny faces that he didn't like my friend. Trying desperately to keep up a casual tourist's air, I ran out of sights. At every stop

Bruno had been there, popping up with excuses. I told him to go away but instead he gave constant compliments, tiny gifts and frequent attempted kisses. It wasn't long before he told me that he'd been looking for a companion for years. What was I doing? I had to get away from him.

As I kept Bruno behind me, I made plans to go the next morning, thinking I'd go back to the place where I last saw you, my love. I hoped to find the spot where we met in the mountains a few months ago. I went back to the room and packed my bag. I wanted to leave very early, before Bruno was up. When I went outside he was gone.

Losing him was bittersweet. I was perched on the edge of a pool in the ruined gardens of Darwin, nymph-like amid wild vines and native pines lined up in rows. I felt abandoned as the tendrils of the sheoak swayed like the molesting arms of a throng of desperate men. Even so, I was heartened to see the sun play across the old stone walls. These were covered in bougainvillea, and I remembered that Darwin had once staged a festival to renew the city after a devastating cyclone. I thought about the bougainvillea blooming out of the rubble. But the beauty of flowers had not yet performed their miracle, for the town of Darwin was yet to become a chain of blooms, fetters that would bring me to the bottom of the lake with the flowers like boulders, strung about my neck.

I went back to the room as late as possible that evening. Would I be safer in there or out on the street? I remembered that Bruno had his own key. I had no idea what to do. Not being able to afford to rent another room, I barricaded the door with the table. Slumping into bed I shut my eyes. Instead of lying awake and scared, I went straight to sleep, totally exhausted, despite the mattress being saggier than ever.

Sometime in the night I heard the lock click. I crept out of the bed over to the door just as it pushed open against the table, which simply slid across the carpet. Bruno stood in the hall. We looked at each other like

children, the beauty of our bodies glowering in the dark. Bruno stepped in closer. I spread my feet apart and prepared for an onslaught, which arrived promptly as he took hold of me.

My thoughts were scattered. I was still half in the dream I'd been having. I threw my neck back. This made Bruno feel strong. But my grip under his chin forced his saliva to turn sour. I had him in my arms again. My time in prison had turned physical abuse into a form of arousal. That feeling ran again through my system. Bruno was grabbing my two arms and I groaned, my back arched in a spasm. Or was it his? My thighs stung. I was his prisoner for a moment again. But I, the boy he'd taken from the station, I had changed: the master now feared his subject.

Our bodies broke apart. The ripping of a coarse fabric sounded. We stood across from one another in the dark. It was black. I went in for more. Wanting him or reviling him, what was the difference? Bruno begged me to stop but my flesh was burning for him. I took his cock in both my hands and rubbed it against me, up and down until it was like a hot coal. Bruno pulled back but I held him under me. Our rough skin making awful burns on each other. I couldn't tell what body was his and what body was mine. It was a blitz, an atomic heat that blew off pieces of flesh from him, and the sheaths of black cloth that had barely covered us ripped away to reveal two blunt horns coming out of my gut. I drove them into his bare chest, once, twice, three times.

When this was done, the horns retracted and the black shreds floated off gently, just as air ripples on sand. And he and I were like dust with each other, or, better still, blood, flowing through the arteries of each other's bodies. He was silent while I sank below the level of those beings that walk through gardens at night, which you hear but never see, especially when you are overpowered by the smell of cherried flowers and soaked in a magenta stain spreading over the sky.

Bruno was stretched out in a solemn wake. I lay down beside him as an unexpected saintliness made his flesh even more beautiful to my astonished eyes. He had turned entirely white, I thought at first in shock but it could have been shame. I realised a second later that it was love that had made him appear more wonderful than all the other men. I felt like I had never met that man who now lived inside me.

The room dissolved once more. I could see a kind of light coming through the brown curtains. The walls moved outwards and emptied the space. I floated in a daze, drifting in and out of consciousness. Even now I remember nothing more of that room.

These days I long for my cell. The walls are comforting. They leave no room for fear or passion so I am glad to find myself in prison once again. My face is covered with bruises, my front teeth have been knocked out, and there are cuts on both arms and around my groin from various altercations. I have been kicked and bashed, and my prison uniform torn from me, yet in Darwin Sanatorium I am truly happy, a joy even greater for the awe I still have of Bruno's glorious death. I only yearn that I might end my life as heroically as he.

The things I have written here are not secrets, nor am I ashamed to have made these confessions, yet some of this is too terrible for anyone to bear so I shall keep these notes hidden until the last minute, when I shall send them to you, my love, the only person who understands me. In closing it is pertinent to add that after murdering my lover I walked out of Darwin and on that dusty road the blood on my shoes turned the grey dirt into lumps of alabaster.

— Darwin Sanatorium Prison (date unknown)