WHAT IS LEFT

a short story by EVAN SHOPPER

I spent twelve years in the state penitentiary for crimes imagined by children and believed by adults. For those twelve years, my body became my enemy and my commodity — I let the inmates hurt me so I could live. Besides the common abuses, they also broke my fingers and thumbs and sometimes the little bones in my hands. Once, they shattered a wrist. They'd wait until I healed, then find me again, often working both hands so I couldn't feed myself. If I fought or resisted, they said they'd cut off my fingers. They pinned my arm between their bodies, and sometimes I wished they had cut off the fingers so we could have been done with it. I'd wait for the shock of pain and tell myself they didn't hate me so much as hate themselves.

I was put in isolation to let my hands heal. I don't remember much from these periods. I know at first I felt relieved to be safe, but within a few days I felt numb, and under that a horrible loneliness, as if I'd been abandoned and forgotten. I couldn't read. I couldn't focus my thoughts. I tried to sleep as much as possible. I felt myself growing lighter, as if becoming transparent. When I spoke, my voice sounded thin and hollow. Sometimes I thought I was dying.

I remember Ray, one of the guards, feeding me when I couldn't feed myself. He gave me four minutes of his time, then left; if I wasn't finished eating, I had to cup my plate between the casts on my hands and eat like an animal. Sometimes, depending on the meal, I talked to Ray for the four minutes while he cut up my food, but he was a stern man, as conservative with words as he was with time, and he mostly just listened to me. Still, it was a relief. He stopped coming after my casts were removed, but I was held in isolation for an extra two weeks; I pleaded to return to the others, where I'd at least be part of something. It didn't matter that the inmates would come for me again — that was inevitable.

Out of isolation I mostly kept to myself, looking forward only to the big yard, where I sprinted back and forth along the fence, running until I couldn't breathe or until my legs cramped or I vomited. But after a minute of rest, I'd start running again. This was pain, but it was my own doing. Each day they didn't break my toes or my feet, I was grateful.

Over the years the inmates came to handle me with a sense of routine and duty. It wasn't always necessary to strike me or treat me roughly, though one or two of them occasionally did.

In time, after both pinkies and a ring finger had been amputated above the bottom joint, after pins had been drilled into an index finger and both middle fingers, after nearly a dozen casts, they seemed to tire of me.

And then, after twelve years, I was released, the convictions overturned. I had been a victim of the moral panic that had swept the country over sex abuse in day-care centers. I remember reading about similar cases — one in California, two in the Midwest — where they couldn't get convictions, where the authorities were found to have coerced the kids. My lawyers told me that the prosecution had destroyed and buried evidence, that the children's testimonies were no longer credible. Thirty-two counts of first-degree sexual offense, six counts of first-degree rape, thirty counts of taking indecent liberties with children, and eighteen counts of crimes against nature. Nine life sentences. All dropped. If you read the indictments, they say my wife and I and two of our employees engaged in ritualistic satanic child abuse; that we sodomized, raped, and molested half of the children at our day-care center one fall.

The fact that I'm innocent is still something only I know for certain. I am not an evil man; deep down the children must grasp this. That is the stubborn nature of truth: only the players know it. After my wife and I were both incarcerated, we were rarely able to phone each other. We still talk every now and then, but at times I wonder if I hear the cast of doubt in her voice — her innocence does not ensure mine. Or maybe it's not doubt so much as weariness and disinterest. We have never been a strong couple. It's as if we've lost a child: in the aftermath, some couples are able to feel a greater bond, to turn to each other. I've tried being selfless, tried feeling her misery, but, in the end, her misery is hers alone, as mine is only mine. Perhaps that is the most honest thing we give each other. When she calls, I'm pleased to speak with her, but we keep the calls short and begin our goodbyes before the stillness sets in.

I don't blame the children for what they said. They are no more guilty than I am. But I don't understand where or how the rumors started and why everyone believed them so readily. It seemed once the first child claimed we'd touched him, others were already making claims of their own. Everything piled on top of us. We couldn't catch our breath, and when we tried to say this was all impossible, no one listened.

I've come to accept what people did to me — first the parents, the police, and the social workers; then the inmates. I used to think I needed to forgive them: the parents who were protecting their kids, the inmates who knew only cruelty. But forgiveness isn't helpful to me. I don't think I can forgive, and anger has become too exhausting. I used to feel a catharsis when angry; now I just feel angry. I'd rather let it go. What I really want is for people to accept me again. I want them to see me and think I might be someone they wouldn't mind talking to.

Now I am forty-five — ironically, the age at which men are supposed to feel a sudden urge to start over. I guess we're supposed to worry about death. Some men will buy sports cars and sleep with women half their age, but I want only to sleep and move slowly. I want normalcy. I go to bed early so that I might offer myself to each morning as a supplicant might offer himself to his god. I wake to the robins calling to each other and drink my coffee outside on a lawn chair while the hints of purple light give form to the fir trees across the street. The cats are up, too, usually sitting in the driveway, waiting. It may seem like a small pleasure — sitting outside drinking coffee and watching the day unfold — but I'm grateful for it. When my neighbor Linda Lowe, a woman in her fifties, pulls out from her garage, she looks for me and then waves as she begins her hour drive. A little later, Mr. Yunker, a few doors down, waters his roses, a watering wand in one hand and his small terrier's retractable leash in the other. He praises the dog when she squats to pee. I've regularly seen a deer and her two fawns visit his roses; Mr. Yunker has surrounded the plants with chicken wire, but a few stems have escaped the fence, and the deer nip off their buds. I'm always tempted to scare the deer away, but I imagine they enjoy the snack. Anyway, I'm careful now with people and their belongings and the moments of peace they create for themselves. When I begin to hear the highway noise in the distance, I return inside to fry an egg.

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It is still early, and I clean up, dry the pan, and leave it on the stove for tomorrow's breakfast, an act that I've come to see not as routine but as an act of faith in myself. Then I soak my hands in hot water to soothe the dull ache I wish I could ignore. Sometimes, when the pain is too much, I take something.

Before I head to the YMCA for my swim, I walk with my neighbor Clemento. He lives with Maria, his daughter, who has told me he is over ninety. His face doesn't look so old, but his body is aged and broken. He usually stays in his chair, except when he takes his daily walk down the block. Doctors have fused several vertebrae in his spine so that he's permanently bent to a near right angle at the waist; during our walks he clasps his hands behind his back, giving him a thoughtful, almost scholarly, appearance. Were he to release his hands, they would dangle and swing below him like a monkey's.

Clemento doesn't speak any English, and I don't speak Spanish. But on those walks he talks to me, and sometimes he'll sing songs that have only the faintest melody. Maria says he's mostly remembering his early years; his memory of the recent past is largely failing him. I suppose this is the way things go, that our minds eventually wipe themselves clean in a frighteningly systematic way, moving from the present to the past as we become more and more like a child. There's a beauty in this. So I listen to Clemento's talking, at times inserting my own "Yes," or "I see," not to make fun of him, but because I think I grasp his intent. Sometimes, when he's quiet, when it seems the walking is difficult for him, I tell him scenes from my own childhood.

After seeing Clemento, I walk the ten minutes to the YMCA for the morning lap swim. I've never been a swimmer, but I've found a kindness in the water: the strange nonsilence underneath, the buoyancy, the rhythm of my stroke. But mostly the water doesn't hurt my hands. In prison I ran until I got sick; it seemed necessary then. Now I've come to think I might enjoy living into old age, and I'm trying to be gentle with myself. I swim in the slowest lane beside the circuit of elderly women who bounce and trot along the pool floor until the water is up to their shoulders, then loop back to the wall. I could swim faster, but I prefer to lie on my back thinking, *Chicken, airplane, soldier*, a phrase from when I learned the backstroke as a child. Afterward I sit with the other swimmers in the amber-lit sauna and listen to their talk. They don't rush off to work but bide their time, joking and trying to make each other laugh. I imagine they are artists or small-business owners. I don't join in, not because I'm afraid they wouldn't welcome me; I just don't know what I would say. Everything I imagine saying seems flat or awkward or forced, and I realize I have forgotten how to talk to people. I sit and listen and silently repeat their words to myself as if learning a new language.

It's the same at Pete's Drugstore, where I often have lunch at the soda fountain among a group of retired men and the occasional teenagers who order shakes. We eat tuna-fish or ham-and-cheese sandwiches with canned soup heated in the microwave; the food comes quickly and is reliably mediocre. This is not an excitable group. The men have known each other since childhood, and there's a lassitude and patience that I enjoy. Silence is not unwelcome here, though the men often nod or glance at me as if I had an opinion about the crows' seeming noisier this year, or whether certain streets need repaving. I'll nod back or give a half smile, then return to my sandwich. Sometimes some of the men will have a scoop of pistachio, mint-chip, or rum-raisin ice cream. Occasionally I'll join them. Ice cream is a rare, pure pleasure; although I feel as if I deserve it, I'm cautious not to indulge myself.

The first day of my release, I walked around downtown looking at the displays in the shops, afraid to make eye contact with anyone. There was nothing special or fancy about these stores, but I felt as if I were wandering around some foreign town. It didn't occur to me that the things I saw were available to me, that buying something because I liked or needed it was possible. Mostly I wanted to be near people again: people walking among each other, doing ordinary things, not thinking it odd to be surrounded by strangers. I sat on a sidewalk bench where it seemed relatively safe to watch them. When someone caught my eye and said hello, I ventured a greeting back. I spent the afternoon sitting there, returning nods and practicing my hellos. When I left the bench, I stopped to read a menu at a restaurant and realized I could eat there. The world was opening before me. I was flush with freedom, but I also felt as if I were falling.

A few days after my release, I went to an AA meeting. I don't drink much; I just wanted to be with people feeling raw and rent. When it was my turn to speak, I told the group I'd had a drinking problem for the last twelve years, starting when I'd lost my wife and child in a car accident, and how I wished I'd died, too. I held up my hands with their mangled and missing fingers and said this was all I was left with. It was a terrible lie, but it felt true. I stared at the floor as I spoke and told them I'd lost twelve years of my life, that the days had rolled away from me, and the only thing that felt real was the pain. It hurt to hold a fork, to brush my teeth. I didn't deadbolt my house at night because some mornings I wouldn't be able to turn the key to unlock the door. The woman next to me was crying, and when she placed a hand on my shoulder, I could no longer speak. Afterward, when a few of the men introduced themselves, I could only nod at them. I didn't return the following week.

(end of excerpt)