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**Opening Extract from...**

# Cell 8

Written by Roslund & Hellström

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HE LOOKED AROUND the cell. That distinctive smell. He should be used to it by now. It should have become part of him.

He knew that he would never get used to it.

His name was John Meyer Frey and the floor he was staring at was piss yellow and unnaturally shiny. The walls that assailed him had probably once been white and the ceiling over his head screamed of damp, the round stains on the greenish background making the fifty-five square feet seem even smaller than they actually were.

He took a deep breath.

Worst of all were the clocks.

He could cope with the endless corridor of countless iron bars that kept anything that wanted to escape locked in; he could put up with the sound of rattling keys that bounced off the walls so your head felt like it would burst and your thoughts were shredded. He could even put up with the shouting of the Colombian in Cell 14, which got louder and louder as the night wore on.

But not the clocks.

The corrections officers wore great bloody wristwatches in fake gold and it felt like the hands were taunting him whenever one of them passed his cell. At the far end of the corridor, on a water pipe that ran from the East Block through to the West Wing, was another one – he had never been able to fathom why, it seemed so out of place, hanging there, ticking away, unavoidable. Sometimes, he was certain

of it, he also heard the church clock in Marcusville strike: the white stone church with the tall, thin steeple on the square that he knew so well. In the early morning in particular, when for a brief while it was almost silent and he lay still awake on his bunk, searching for something on the greenish ceiling, it pierced through the walls and counted the hour.

That's what they did. Counted. Counted down.

Hour by hour, minute by minute, second by second, and he hated knowing how much time was no longer left – that two hours ago his life had been longer.

It was one of those mornings.

He had lain awake nearly all night, twisting and turning and trying to sleep, sweating and feeling those minutes. The Colombian had shouted more than usual; he'd started around midnight and carried on through the night until sometime after four, his fear ricocheting off the walls in the same way that the rattling keys did, his voice getting louder and louder by the hour, something in Spanish that John couldn't understand, the same thing, over and over again.

He'd dozed off around five, didn't look at a clock, just knew that it was around then; it was as if time was inside him, his body counting down even when he did everything he could to think about something else.

Half six, no later. He woke up.

The smell of the cell assaulted him; the first breath made him gag and he hung over the dirty toilet bowl. It was more like a porcelain hole with no lid that was far too low even for someone who was one metre seventy-five. He had gone down on his knees, waiting to spew, and then had to put his fingers down his throat when it didn't happen.

He had to empty himself.

Had to get rid of that first breath, had to get it out; difficult to get up otherwise, difficult to stand up.

He hadn't slept through a whole night since he came here, four years ago now, and he had stopped hoping that he ever would. But last night, this morning, had stolen more from him than any other morning or night.

It had been Marvin Williams's second-to-last night.

About lunchtime, the old man would be escorted down the secure corridor, over to the Death House and into one of the two cells there.

His last twenty-four hours.

Marv, who was his neighbour and friend. Marv, who had been on Death Row the longest now. Marv, so wise, so proud, so different from the other madmen.

Diazepam enema up the anus. Marv would be dribbling by the time they came to get him, he would be drugged and docile towards the end. He would slowly and drowsily allow himself to be escorted out by the men in uniform and by the time they locked the door of East Block, he would have forgotten the smell.

'John?'

'Yes?'

'You awake?'

Marv hadn't slept either. John had heard him tossing and turning, walking round and round his tiny cell, singing something that sounded like children's songs.

'Yes, I'm awake.'

'I didn't dare shut my eyes. D'you understand, John?'

'Marv . . .'

'Scared of falling asleep. Scared of sleeping.'

'Marv . . .'

'You don't need to say anything.'

The bars were off-white, sixteen ugly iron bars from one wall to the next. When John stood up and leaned forwards, he did what he always did – he put his thumb and index

finger round one of the bars, encircling the metal, holding on. Always the same, one hand, two digits, he enclosed what enclosed him.

Marv's voice again, one of those deep baritones, calm.

'It's just as well.'

John waited in silence. They had spoken to each other ever since he came here. On the very first morning, Marv's friendly voice had helped him to get up, to be able to stand up without losing his balance. The conversation had carried on ever since, and was still going on; staring straight ahead through the bars at the wall opposite, for several years, without being able to see each other. But now. His voice caught in his throat. He coughed. What do you say to someone who is only going to live for a day and a night more, then die?

Marv was breathing heavily.

'You know, John, I can't stand waiting any longer.'

———

They read quite a bit. John had never read before. Not through choice. After a few months, Marv had forced *Huckleberry Finn* on him. A bloody children's book. But he'd read it. Then another one. Now he read every day. So he didn't have to think.

'What will it be today, John?'

'Today, I want to talk to you.'

'You have to read. You know that.'

'Not today. Tomorrow. I'll read again tomorrow.'

———

Marv. The only black man in town.

That was how he used to introduce himself. That was what he'd said that first morning when John's legs didn't

want to work. A voice from the other side of the cell wall, and John had reacted in the way he always reacted: he told the voice to go to hell and eat shit. The only black man in town? John had seen for himself when the four guards had escorted him down the corridor and opened the door and then locked it for the first time. Not many other white men in East Block. He was on his own. Seventeen years old, and more terrified than he'd ever been in his life. He'd spat at the wall and kicked it until small chips of plaster powdered his shoes and he had shouted *bloody nigger, I'll get you* until his voice was hoarse.

And so it continued in the evening. 'Hi, my name's Marv, the only black man in town.' John didn't have the energy to shout any more. And Marv had just carried on, told him about his childhood in some hole in Louisiana, how he had moved to a mining town in Colorado, that he'd visited a beautiful woman in Columbus, Ohio, when he was forty-four and gone into the wrong Chinese restaurant at the wrong time and seen two men die at his feet.

'Are you frightened?'

Death. The one thing they couldn't think about. The only thing they thought about.

'I don't know, John. I don't know any more.'

———

They'd talked without stopping all morning, so much to say when time would soon cease to be.

They'd watched others being escorted out; they knew the procedures that were written down in the Department of Rehabilitation and Correction's manuals and that hung on the walls round about, telling you how you would live, hour by hour, in your last twenty-four. A female doctor had been in earlier, put diazepam in a tube up his anus and Marv was

slowing down now as a result. He slurred as he tried to keep control of his words and it sounded like he was dribbling out of the corner of his mouth when he spoke.

John wished he could see him.

All this, to be standing beside someone and yet not, to be close to someone and yet not be able to touch him, not even put a hand on his shoulder.

The door at the end of the corridor opened.

Hard heels clacked on the piss yellow.

The peaked hats, like caps, the green-brown uniforms, the shiny black boots; four guards marching, two by two, down to Marv's cell. John followed every step, saw them stop a couple of yards away, their faces turned to what was on the other side of the wall.

'Put out your hands!'

Vernon Eriksen's voice was quite high, his dialect typical of south Ohio, a local boy who'd come to work at the prison in Marcusville for a summer when he was nineteen and had stayed, and was then promoted to senior corrections officer on Death Row only a few years later.

John couldn't see what was happening any more, the big uniforms were in the way.

But he knew.

Marv's hands were poking through the bars and Eriksen had put the handcuffs round his wrists.

'Open Cell Seven!'

Vernon Eriksen, a corrections officer whom John had slowly come to respect. The only one. The only one who got involved in the inmates' daily life, despite the fact that he didn't really need to or in fact shouldn't at all.

'Cell Seven open!'

The central security PA system crackled, the door to Marv's cell slid open. Vernon Eriksen waited, nodded to his

colleagues and stayed standing where he was while two officers entered the cell. John watched him. He knew that the senior officer hated doing this. Collecting a prisoner that he'd come to know, escorting him to the Death House, preparing him for death. It was not something he'd ever said, it was not something he could ever say, but John had understood and recognised it a long time ago, he just knew. He was tall, Eriksen, not muscular but solid, with thinning hair, an old-fashioned pudding-bowl haircut like an inverted grey halo under the rim of his uniform hat. He was looking into Marv's cell, watching the movements of his colleagues, his white gloves fiddling with the two sets of keys that hung from his belt.

'Stand up, Williams.'

'It's time, Williams.'

'I know that you can hear me, Williams, stand up, for God's sake, so I don't need to lift you.'

John heard the two officers forcing his neighbour up from the bunk, feeble protests from a drugged sixty-five-year-old man. He looked at Vernon Eriksen again, who was still facing the cell. He wanted to scream, but not at the senior officer, who bizarrely was on their side, so to shout at him would be meaningless. Instead he turned around and pissed into the hole that was supposed to be a toilet. No words any more, no thoughts. As Marv was led out of his cell on the other side of the wall, John chased a piece of paper down into the water-filled hole. He forced the piece of paper back and forth with his jet stream until it finally stuck to the white porcelain.

'John.'

Marv's voice, somewhere behind him. He buttoned up his overalls, turned around.

'I want to talk to you, John.'

John looked at the senior officer who gave a curt nod, then approached the bars, the metal bars between the lock and the concrete walls. He leaned forwards, as he always did, his thumb and index finger encircling one of the bars. Suddenly, he was face to face with a person he had seldom seen, but had spoken to several times a day, for the past four years.

'Hi.'

That voice that he knew so well, friendly, safe. A proud man, straight-backed, his black hair had long since turned grey, clean shaven as John had always imagined he would be.

'Hi.'

Marv was dribbling. John could see that he was trying to concentrate, that the muscles in his face would not obey. A prisoner who is about to die has to be sedated, no unnecessary anxiety; John was certain it was in fact for the officers' sake, to quell *their* fear.

'This, this is yours.'

John watched Marv lift his hand to his neck, how he fumbled for a while with deadened fingers, but finally got hold of what he was after.

'I would have to take it off later anyway.'

A cross. It meant bugger all to John. But everything to Marv. John knew that. Marv had found God a couple of years ago, like so many others who were kept in this corridor while they waited.

'No.'

The older man bundled up the silver chain, wrapped it round the crucifix and thrust it into John's hand.

'There's no one else. To give it to.'

———

John looked at the chain he was now holding and then uneasily over at Vernon Eriksen again.

The senior corrections officer's face – John had never seen it like this before.

It was completely red. Like he was in spasm, like it was burning. And his voice, it was too forceful, too loud.

'Open Cell Eight!'

John's cell.

That wasn't right. John looked at Marv who didn't seem to react, then at the three other officers who stood still, but glanced at each other, confused.

The cell door was still locked.

'Please repeat, sir.'

A voice from central security over the PA system.

Vernon Eriksen lifted his chin in irritation, made sure he was looking straight at the officer at the other end of the corridor when he spoke: 'I said, *open Cell Eight*. Now!'

Eriksen stared at the bars, waiting for the door to slide open.

'Sir—'

One of the three officers appealed to him by throwing open his hands, but he had barely opened his mouth before his boss interrupted.

'I am aware that I am now deviating from the set time schedule. If you have a problem with it, please file your complaint in writing. Later.'

He looked over at central security again. A few more seconds of uncertainty.

They all stood in silence as the cell door slowly slid open.

Vernon Eriksen waited until it was fully open, then turned to Marv and nodded in the direction of the cell. 'You can go in.'

Marv didn't move. 'You want me to . . . ?'

'Go in and say goodbye.'

———

It got cold later, damp, there was a draught from the window in the corridor high up by the ceiling, a muted whistle that dropped to the floor. John buttoned his overalls right up to the collar, orange cotton with no fit, and the letters DR printed in white on the back and thigh.

He was shivering.

Maybe it was the cold.

Or maybe it was the grief that he was already starting to fight.