

PAROLE

by Mathieu Cailler

After an hour bus ride from the halfway house to West Des Moines, I unload from the back, shuffle by other passengers who have no idea where I've been and what I've done. There's even this little girl, maybe nine, with bright teeth that reminds me of my little sister around that age. The girl smiles at me as I pass through the aisle carrying nothing but gloves and a little spending
5 cash for the ride back "home" in a few hours. I'm encouraged by the girl's grin, like maybe I got a shot at being free – and not just in the literal sense.

According to my calculations, he lives about a mile into town, which is a lot for me, a seventy-one-year-old man with a weak heart, but it's been decades since I've been able to walk in any direction I choose for more than a minute, so I don't mind. One foot in front of the other. One
10 plodding step at a time.

What's the next step here? Do I try and find myself a little job? Something easy? If there are any spots that are hiring an elderly convict, I'm not so sure I want to work there. I mean if *I'm* a catch – how bad are the other applicants?

I don't want to upset him with this drop-in. Hell, even in my free days, I hated the drop-in. People at the door, ringing the bell, and all of a sudden, you're fetching cake and pulling out chairs
15 and brewing pots of coffee. I always thought of my welcome mat as sarcastic.

No, all I want to do is look at him. I went to prison when I was thirty-one, and my then girlfriend, Carrie, was pregnant with him. I never got to meet my boy. I never got to hold or smell
20 him. He never visited, and that made sense – a boy should worry about girls and motorcycles, not have to visit his old man in a building meshed of concrete and steel.

I plan to ring his doorbell and ask to see Mr. Larin. (That was the name of my woodshop teacher in high school, and I like the sound of it.) I hope my boy will answer the door, but if he doesn't, maybe his wife will and, while she's explaining that I'm not at the right residence, he'll come up
25 and see what's going on. I try to keep the conversation going for a bit, say things like, "Do you know where Mr. Larin lives?" and "Did he *used* to live here?"

With all my questions, I could possibly keep them on the stoop for a couple minutes. They might – *my boy* might – be very friendly, too. He might invite me in to use the phone and get out
30 some pie and Sanka. Do people still drink Sanka? I hope the apple falls far from the tree, though, and when I pass by, he's out with his family on the porch, running a paring knife through a pumpkin's toothy smile, doing whatever it takes to make his kids laugh.

I wrote him letters when I was away. Always a nickname guy, I called him Baby Lou in every one. He never responded, though. In fact, I bet Carrie intercepted my notes, and I don't blame her. I've let it all pass, forgiven everyone, with the hope that they would forgive me. Carrie wrote me a
35 few times, mostly to tell me to leave her and Louis alone – that I was a sperm donor, never his pop, and that his new dad was putting in the hard miles: taking him to school, packing his lunch, and teaching him how to change tires. She was right. I was a man far away, in Fort Dodge, who took Bible class twice a week just so God wouldn't shut the door on me. Sometimes, too, on Tuesdays, I'd take a crafts class. There, we build things out of papier-mâché, little sculptures, and all I could think of was how my life was like a wet strip that had never had the time to harden.

40 When I reach Beechtree Drive, the street's not quiet and domestic the way I thought it'd be on a Saturday morning. It's humming with cars and passersby, carrying brown boxes and t-shirts and bowls and picture frames. I grab my scrap of paper and check the address. It's the correct house.

A sign that reads ESTATE SALE hangs from the roofline near the front door. The house is big, two-stories tall, creamy white with olive-drenched shutters. There are six blue-spruce trees in the front yard, all the same distance from each other.

45 Even though it's chilly out, the front door is wide open and a man, a worker in a red vest, nods as I pass the threshold. All these people are stomping along the hardwood floors, unsure of what they're searching for, hoping that a mug and a throw rug will make their Saturday better.

The house has a warm smell to it, like someone has boiled cinnamon sticks. In the foyer, the scent is strong, but it dissipates as I wind towards the living room and stare at a painting over the fireplace of a boat tracing across the sea, its sail full. "A beauty, right?" a woman with a tight face and loose curls says. She also has on a red vest and appears to be working the sale.

50 "Yes," I say. "Who painted it?"

"It's a Winslow Homer print."

55 "Nice," I say. "You can almost feel the wind and the ocean's spray, right?"

"I know."

"Where's the owner of the home?" I ask. "Is he moving or something?"

"I think he passed away."

"What?" I say.

60 The woman taps a co-worker who happens to pass by, carrying a stack of dishes. "The man who owned this home is dead, right?" she says.

The man nods. "Yeah, a couple weeks ago. A heart attack at forty."

I rub my face and feel as though a crack has split around my chest, allowing cold air to seep through and burn the sides of my heart and lungs. This day has kept me going for so long, and I made it, finally, to his home, my shoes aligned on the carpeting where his feet very well could have stood weeks prior. A flare of pain shoots across my rib cage. I clutch my chest, grab hold of the mantle, and count backwards from ten.

65 "Sir? Sir? Are you okay?" the man says.

I gather myself and assure them I'm all right. "And his family?" I say.

70 "Think he was a lone wolf," the man says. "This whole thing was all set up by his accountant. He did well for himself, though. I mean this is one nice place, right?"

"Yeah," I say. "It's something." I move about the floor plan. One of the rooms is getting little attention as most of the goodies have been cleared out, so I tuck inside what seems to be my boy's old office. There's wood paneling on the walls, a large bureau in the center, and a closet off to the side stuffed with bowling trophies that signify a perfect game, first prize in a league tournament, and another for third place in a county championship. I never cared much for bowling – any activity you can manage with a cigarette in your mouth hardly seems like a sport – and I know his mother hated it – she often said it ruined her manicures – so I wonder where the love came from, and I wonder how many other loves I missed out on.

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80 A turquoise ball covered with purple swirls rests on the floor, glittering in the soft light that wends through the far window. I brush the ball's smooth surface with my palm.

I was lying earlier when I mentioned the Mr. Larin story. Sure, that was the plan, but if things went to plan, I never would have been incarcerated. I was really hoping that when I rang the bell,

85 Baby Lou would recognize me in some capacity. I wanted something gooey, you know? When you share a cell for forty years, a man finds himself in need of something like that.

I head into the backyard where a group of people are examining a barbeque. One man lifts the lid, pretends to flip burgers and laughs, while his what-seems-to-be wife howls with laughter, then lets out, "Oh, Leroy! You're a hoot."

90 I take a seat in an outdoor chair on the deck, and when a worker – the guy who confirmed Lou's passing – comes by and asks me if I need help, I tell him that I'm testing out the chair. That seems to appease him and he leaves me alone and files to the far end of the backyard, positioning himself in front of a detached garage, where the door has been lifted and showcases a car that's tucked under a brown cover. He stands near the vehicle, smoking a cigar in perfect rhythm – a puff, an exhale, a flick; a puff, an exhale, a flick. After the man finishes his stogie, he scans the area and tosses the butt far behind the garage.

95 A short customer approaches the estate-sale worker and speaks in a loud voice, "So I'll do what I can to convince my wife and hopefully be back here in a few hours with my good ol' checkbook."

The worker nods, chuckles, extends his hand, and the two men shake on it. "You got it. I'll take the cover off now, and store it and the other necessary materials in the trunk," the worker says.

100 "All right. I like your style," the man says. "Positive thinking." The man turns away and the worker begins peeling the car cover off the vehicle. As he works, it becomes clear that the car is facing forward, pointing directly out into the long, flat driveway. I can't help but wonder if the estate-sale crew did that, or if Lou was skilled enough to back his ride up all that way and tuck his expensive car into the tiny garage, but I'm impressed nonetheless.

105 The worker plucks the cover off the front bumper, giving way to a shimmering, silver Porsche convertible with a black, cloth top. It's not the car that gets my attention – sure, it's beautiful, in seemingly immaculate condition, and picturing my boy driving around his manicured neighborhood in this drop-top is an image I love as long I can – no, what grabs hold of me and won't let go, is the white license plate that dangles from the front bumper, like a loose buck tooth. I am far enough away that I need to squint, but with my eyes narrowed, it's clear: My boy had elected to buy a vanity plate which allowed seven characters that he'd used to spell out BABYLOU.

110 I push myself off the rickety chair and shuffle across the grass to the garage, feeling a tingle in my spine and sharp heat in the corners of my eyes. The worker nods as I approach, and I smile back. "A beauty, right? Only 13,000 miles, too," he says. "I thought we'd sold it the other day, so I had her resting under the cover, but the buyer just called a little while ago and said he didn't want it, so it's back!"

115 I crouch to my knees and run my hand over the raised lettering on the front license plate, tracing the voluptuous curves of the B and the sharp lines of the L. "Baby Lou," I say.

120 "Weird, right?" the worker says. "The new owner - whoever it is - will have to get 'em changed anyway, so it doesn't matter..."

"I hear ya."

"Are you in the market?"

"Maybe."

"It's a stunning car. A five-speed, inline six, good amount of horses and new tires."

125 "You don't know a thing about cars, do you?" I say.

"Is it that obvious?" the worker says, biting his bottom lip.

"*Good amount of horses* gave you away. Can I take it for a spin?"

"Sure, I just need your driver's license. I'm not allowed to go with you, because my boss won't let us leave the grounds, but you can take it around the block and stuff."

130 "Oh, I see. Well, I don't have a license."
"Really?"
"Yeah."
"Don't drive anymore?"
"No, I shot a store clerk at a liquor store forty years ago. Never got around to renewing it."

135 The worker's eyes open wide and he inspects my lips, cheeks, and nose, as though he is going to bring out a pad and sketch me. Then he grabs his fish-bowl belly and laughs. "Good one," he says. "I shot a man in Reno once – just to watch him die."
"Looks like we're one and the same then," I say.
The worker sucks his teeth then says, "But, yeah, if you don't have a license, I can't let you take

140 the car."
"Fair enough. Can I at least sit in it?"
"Of course. Your shoes clean?"
I nod, open the driver's-side door, and plop into the leather bucket seat that wraps my thighs and supports my spine in a simultaneously firm-and-soft way. A warm combination of coffee,

145 maybe some cinnamon, stays with me in the cabin, and with each inhale, I suck the bitter scent into my nostrils, savoring the flavor, almost tasting it as it collides with my tongue.
I depress the clutch and slide the shifter from first to second, then from third to fourth, and up into fifth.
The worker bends down to the level of the open passenger side window. "Looks good on you,"

150 he says. "Like you've been here before."
The world is thick with quiet, like I'm deep underwater; young, free. In this moment, I hadn't gotten drunk on March 1st 1983; I hadn't had a fight with Carrie about the rent and how I couldn't pull my weight; I hadn't wandered down the road and brought my pistol. I hadn't gotten scared and fired a round into the chest of the young clerk behind the counter for a measly forty-six

155 dollars.
At the end of your life, if you've had a total of ten hours of sheer, unbridled joy then you've done something right. All I want now is to collect some hours, so that when the lights go black, I'll know I've kissed a woman, hummed some tunes, and spent some time in whatever way possible with my son.

160 With the car key glinting on the dashboard, I take hold of my chest and begin to gasp, shake, and flicker my eyes. "Help," I whisper.
The worker peeks back inside, and when I see I have him, I crank up the intensity: I let my eyes roll back and rip open my shirt, causing a button to pop off and tap against the windshield. "Go get my wife," I say. "She has what I need! Please! Hurry! Her name is Barbara."

165 The worker says a few jumbled words and darts from the garage, his feet banging on the polished asphalt floor, then the gravel, and then the grass. I sit up, straighten my shirt, grab the key with the rabbit's-foot chain from the dash, and jam it into the ignition.
A roar comes up and surrounds the car, echoing in the tiny one-car garage. The attendees of the estate sale all turn around in unison, their eyes lining up on the silver Porsche that rattles in its

170 cage with plumes of exhaust pushing from its pipes and coiling around its frame.
I tear out of the driveway, let first gear redline around six-thousand, and am swinging into the road by the time I pull the shifter into second. My back's alive with cylindrical reverberations, and I

175 can't hear anything but the push of the engine. Alongside the car, hedges, mailboxes, and picket fences blur into one gorgeous swath. I keep my feet hard on the pedals and my hands tight on the steering wheel, where me and my boy's fingerprints get to live with each other for at least a half a tank.