

Maybe The Governor Will Forgive Me Too

An Interview

By

Allen Burnett

Austin never saw it coming. A blow so hard he thought he was being stabbed. Blood filled his right eye socket, seeped through his giant hands, found its way to his cheek then onto his neck. “It was right at that moment I made the decision not to go after the guy.” Austin said.

Beads of sweat appeared at the surface of his forehead as he relived his experience. “He hit me with four cans of tuna wrapped in a pillow case. Coward!” Growing animated, he spat with indignation. Austin sits across from me, at the dayroom table, powerful hands moving with every word that left his lips. At first glance, he appears menacing, 300 pounds, barrel-chested, his hair thinning, with thick reading glasses and pasty skin that has been denied the sun since the assault. His T-shirt stained and worn out, his grey shorts too small for his thick thighs. He wore flip-flops with no socks. Austin’s right eye is still discolored from the blow, which never completely healed. He spoke between mouthfuls of Jack Mackerel mixed with chili Top Ramen soup and instant white rice.

“The guy hit me.” He paused for a moment to gather his thoughts. “His case was like mine.” He cautiously leaned in close to whisper, concerned someone may hear his secret. “The guy had a sex crime too. They pressured him to get me or else they were going to get him. He almost knocked my eye out my

socket.” Austin rubbed his eye reminiscing about the incident before snapping back to attention and going after the bowl of Jack Mackerel. His voiced raised, forgetting he was in a crowded dayroom. “I didn’t—you know.” He shrugged his large shoulders. “We were high and drunk and in the morning she called the cops and I got 50 years to life.”

At 1:30 p.m., an announcement came over the building’s intercom interrupting our conversation. “Yard Release!” Cell doors began opening simultaneously as prisoners scrambled to leave the building. Impatiently, some men shouted out cell numbers eager to get outside. Austin watched the commotion intently, scanning the room; something he learned during the nine years into his life sentence and now purposefully watching hands as well as faces, still feeling the emotional effect of the assault. These past nine years have been hard for Austin, prisoners considered sex crimes worse than murder, so his safety was always at risk. Any day he could become a victim of some assailant looking to make a name for himself by stabbing a sex offender.

In the beginning of his prison sentence Austin contemplated suicide to escape the shame and regret of his choices. In fact, he attempted to take his own life on three occasions. “My daughter is all I have left in the world,” he says; tears well up in his eyes as he speaks of April, his 27 year old daughter. “I got custody of her when she was a baby.” He smiled a piece of Jack Mackerel wedged between his teeth. “I was a single Dad.” His face brightens. “April’s mom was strung out on drugs. I mean, we got high together—but she was really bad. When we split, the Judge gave April to me.” He pointed at his chest with his thumb. “My daughter is my life. I got myself together after the split; I raised April in the Church in Chico, up North. You know, the choir Sunday school, church outings, you name it! I was a good dad. I was. The drugs messed me up.” He took a couple bites and started up again. “April’s in College now studying to become a Social Worker.” Beaming with pride, he announces, “she is the reason why I didn’t go after the guy. I could have hurt him, but I promised my little girl I’d come home to her.” He continues: “She wants to help abused

kids. I was abused as a kid by my dad.” He wipes his forehead. “My dad was a mean drunk. April knows about him; I tell her everything.”

Finishing the last of the Jack Mackerel, he wipes his mouth then his forehead, and hands. His gaze intensifies. “I got back into drugs pretty bad. I was high that night with the lady; we both were.” He pointed over his shoulder indicating it was in the past. He lowers his head affixing his steely gaze on me. “I’m not making excuses, I was wrong. I had no right....no right at all.” We sat quietly, the weight of his admission hovering above us. The silence is uncomfortable the tension palpable while he searches for his next words. “I’m glad I have Christ in my life again; otherwise I don’t know where I’d be. 50 years to Life is a long time,” he says.

“I would be 99 before I see a parole board. I probably won’t live that long. I filed for Clemency.” He lets his words trail off. He stands, looks over his shoulder toward his cell and collects his bowl and napkins. “April forgives me. Christ forgave me. Maybe the Governor will forgive me too and let me go home to my little girl.” Austin stuck out his giant hand; it is calloused and gnarly. We shake and I watch him walk away towards his cell.