

White Room

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The slamming of a prison door sounds like nothing else in the whole world. It's a harsh, hollow, hopeless sound. There is an air of finality about it that turns the bones as cold as steel bars, and the heart into a lump of concrete in the chest.

Billy flinched, even though he was doing his best to be cool. He'd done time in juvey holding and county lockup but this was different. This was the Big Leagues. State prison.

He forced a grin onto his face. *You're Bad Billy*, he told himself, *and as of now you're a Major League Player*. But the grin fit his face like a cheap plastic mask, and his steps slowed as the oppressive air of the place wrapped around him like even more chains than he was already wearing.

"Move your butt, pretty boy." The guard was in his late forties, and at least a hundred pounds overweight. Wrinkled gray uniform with sweat rings under the arms. Shirt buttons pulled tight across his belly. Mean little piggy eyes behind thick round glasses. He prodded Billy from behind with a pudgy hand. "Your suite's all ready. You wouldn't wanna let the champagne get warm, wouldya?" He snickered and patted Billy's fanny. "Or mebbe you're more the fruit basket type."

"Screw you," Billy muttered, half under his breath, knowing it was a pretty lame comeback. The problem was this place was *socold*. Not cold like winter, but cold like you didn't mean nothing to it. Like you were nothing but a tiny little cockroach in a giant steel dumpster.

He hunched his shoulders and walked faster down the concrete corridor, his chains jingling in time. I shouldn't be here like this, he thought bitterly, chained up like some freakin' dog. Wouldn't be either if the lawyer the public defender's office had stuck him with hadn't been a boozy, chain-smoking old bag who spent half her time lighting up a fresh smoke from the butt of her last, and the other half coughing and looking for papers she couldn't find. Stupid old bitch hadn't even been able to keep his name straight, kept calling him Bobby. She'd bargained his charge down from aggravated assault and armed robbery, sure, but getting him two years hardly seemed like a favor.

The corridor ended in a solid steel door that looked like it could stop a bulldozer.

"Wait up, Cinderella," the guard drawled, grabbing him by the back of the white coverall he'd been issued. The guard glanced at the clipboard he carried, then raised his voice. "Genovese here with a new deb. William F. Thomas, prisoner number 3154-822985." He flipped up a sheet, made a clucking noise with his tongue. "Got us a real tough guy here." He eyed Billy like something smeared on a toilet seat. "He beat up two women while knocking over a liquor store."

Billy bit his tongue, his face sullen. The lard-ass guard was right about what he had done, but it wasn't like he made it sound.

"Clear," came a bored, scratchy voice from the speaker grille next to the door. The heavy door rumbled to one side, opening on a short dead-end corridor. One side was nothing but blank wall, the other lined with white doors without any handles or windows. The walls of the corridor were white, as were the floor and ceiling, and it was so brightly lit that Billy had to squint against the glare. There was not a single person in sight. No guards. No prisoners. The corridor was eerily silent. Like a tomb.

The guard gave him a push. "Move your buns, blondie. I was s'posed to go on break five minutes ago, and if I don't get coffee and a smoke soon I'm gonna get reeeal cranky."

* * * *

Billy stood by his cell door, absently rubbing his wrists to get rid of the feel of handcuffs. He looked

around at the cell, unsure if he should be unnerved or relieved.

His cell wasn't anything like what he'd expected.

It was maybe ten by ten, the concrete block walls painted the same glaring white as the corridor outside. The floor was white. So was the ceiling. There weren't any windows, not even in the door. That was just a featureless white slab.

To his left was a single bunk, no more than a narrow white-painted steel platform. On it were a thin mattress, a foam pillow, and a flannel blanket—all white.

In the corner on his right was a small cantilevered table and a white plastic chair. At the far right corner a three foot square section of the floor was a couple inches lower than the rest. That area was home to a toilet and a soup-bowl sized sink with a small steel mirror over it. A showerhead protruded from the wall in the very corner, and a drain was set in the center of the sunken floor. A towel and a washcloth—both white—hung from a hook attached to the short wing wall between the shower corner and the rest of the end wall of his cell.

There was some sort of small door set in the wall a bit below eye level just to the left of the wing wall, but Billy didn't give it a second look.

There was something else far more interesting to look at. First because it was black, instead of white, and because Billy was very much a child of his times. It appeared to be a large screen TV built into the left-and side of the cell's end wall. He went to check it out.

“Far out,” he said, the close white walls of the cell giving his voice a hollow ring. “They're gonna make me do two years watching Wheel of Fortune.”

The TV's controls were a flat black touchpad, like on a microwave. He turned it on. A picture of a nesting bird appeared. Since it wasn't shot, eaten, blown up, or run over within ten seconds he figured it was some sort of boring nature program.

“Public TV,” he sneered, reaching up to change the channel. “Wonder if I get ESPN or HBO?”

As it turned out, he was stuck with that one station or nothing at all. So he sprawled on his bunk, locked his hands behind his head and got comfortable for tubing out.

All I need now is a beer, he thought with a smug grin. If the worst prison was going to do to him was make him watch egghead tv, doing his time would be a cinch.

* * * *

“*Time to get up,*” blared the metallic voice as the lights in Billy's cell brightened to their usual harsh glare.

Billy sat up on his bunk, swinging his bare legs over the side. His blond hair stuck up in every direction, and his blue eyes were muddy and dull. He stood up, shuffled to the TV and turned it on. The screen lit, rewarding him with the familiar opening sequence and song of Sesame Street.

Stifling a yawn, he went to take a leak. After washing his hands, he went to stand in front of the small door in the cell's end wall between the shower and tube. He had ignored the door at first, but soon learned its importance.

He was humming along with the *Alphabet Song* when he heard the clunking sound he had been waiting for. The small white door slid up, revealing a compartment about the size of a breadbox. Inside was a white rechargeable razor, which he took to the mirror over the sink and put to use. It didn't take him long to shave the sparse stubble from his cheeks, and when he was done he returned the razor to the cabinet. The door slid shut. A minute or two later it opened again, this time on his breakfast.

Billy ate in front of the tube, seated on the end of his bunk with the cardboard tray balanced on his bare knees. Breakfast was the same exact thing it had been for the twenty-seven days he'd been in the cell. A paper hot-cup of coffee and a smaller cup of juice. A paper bowl of scrambled eggs, and two slices of buttered toast. He ate mechanically, eyes glued to the screen.

Each of those identical breakfasts marked another day in which he had not seen another human face—other than the ones on television. At first he had been relieved that he'd been given a cell by himself. He hated to admit it, but he'd heard enough stories about prison to be worried about getting stuck in a cell with some humongous mass murderer who'd want to turn him into his girlfriend.

In those fleeting moments when he could peel his brain off the tube long enough to think straight, he wasn't so sure this was better. He ate by himself and showered by himself. His food, clean clothing, and bedding came by way of the box in the wall. Every day at four an exercise program came on the TV. At first he'd hooted at the sour-faced no-neck who led the exercises. After the third day he realized that it was just a single tape that repeated every day at the same time. *Grunting with Gunther*, he called it, and he'd have to be pretty desperate to play along.

Now he waited, already stripped to his shorts, for four each day.

There seemed to be no escape from the white walled solitude. He didn't even get to see a human guard. Anything he asked for and all he was told came by way of the inhuman sounding metallic voice. About day four he had demanded to see his lawyer. The voice had replied that his appeal had been denied, and his lawyer taken off the case. He had asked if he was going to get to see any visitors. He had been coldly informed that no one wanted to see him, not even his mother.

Billy finished his breakfast. The whole rest of the day stretched out before him like a narrow tunnel. White. Empty. Unvarying. Lunch at noon. *Grunting with Gunther* at four, a shower and fresh coverall at five. Supper at six. Lights out at eleven. Lights on at seven, and do it all over again.

Cookie Monster appeared on the screen. Billy giggled.

“*Time to get dressed,*” said the robotic voice that was the architect of his days.

Billy obeyed without a second thought.

* * * *

Billy frowned when the sound portion of the program he was watching suddenly cut off. The show was about ants. They were pretty interesting little buggers when you got right down to it.

“*Prisoner 3154-822985,*” blared the metallic voice, “*Attention. Respond.*”

“Why'd you shut the sound off, Darth?” Billy whined. He'd started calling the voice that a week or so before, naming it after the *Star Wars* villain because they sounded kind of alike. He'd given up trying to guess if the voice was human or not, but naming the voice made it somebody rather than something.

“You have been incarcerated for exactly thirty days. Because of your good behavior you are being granted the option of signing up for a special program.”

Good behavior? Billy thought in confusion. When've I had a chance to y'know, be bad?

“Do you wish to sign up for this program?”

“What program?” He glanced back at the TV screen to keep track of the ants. Wouldn't want to miss something.

“A social activities program.”

Billy's frown returned. Social activities? Did that mean he might finally get a chance to talk to somebody other than himself? Still he'd better be careful, he thought, a guardedly sly look creeping onto his face. “What kinda social activities?”

“Meaningful.”

Which didn't mean squat. “What would I have to do?” Not that anything different wouldn't be a treat at this point.

“Accept this offer or say no.”

“That's not what I meant! C'mon, Darth! What's the program, y'know, involve?”

“Yourself in a meaningful social activity. Do you accept?”

Billy made a few more half-hearted tries to get more details out of Darth, but would have gotten further trying to walk through one of concrete walls of his cell. In the end he said yes. He was so bored and lonesome that even ballroom dancing with sex offenders would be a night on the town.

* * * *

Nothing happened. The next few days went on exactly like the ones before. Get up. Shave. Eat breakfast in front of the tube. Get dressed. Watch the tube. Eat lunch in front of the tube. Watch the tube all afternoon, and exercise in front of it at four. Shower and clean clothes at five. Dinner in front of the tube at six. Watch the tube until lights out.

Darth had told him that he was allowed to have textbooks and educational materials if he wished. Billy hadn't been much of a reader in school—he'd always said he'd rather get caught with his dick in his hand than a book—and once he'd been expelled, he'd stopped altogether. Now that there was no one to see him and nothing else to do he occasionally had a hazy notion to ask for something to read, but it was easier to watch TV.

There were moments when he thought the monotonous repetition would drive him so crazy he'd start beating his head against the wall just to do and feel something new. There were other times when even the slightest deviation from routine filled him with a nameless terror.

He drifted through the dead-end days in his dead-end room in a dead-end corridor in a dead-end called prison like a glassy-eyed zombie. Sometimes he curled up in a little ball on his bunk after lights out and cried, dimly wondering what was happening to him, but that was happening less and less as he sank into slack-jawed apathy.

Then on the forty-sixth day everything changed.

* * * *

It happened right after supper. The five day supper cycle had brought it around to tuna casserole, green beans, a buttered roll, and apple pie for dessert. The day before it had been hamburger steak with baked potato and gravy, creamed corn, whole wheat bread, and peach cobbler for dessert. Tomorrow it would be chicken and biscuits, spinach, applesauce, and lemon cake for dessert just as sure as the Sun rose—

—somewhere. Billy hadn't seen the Sun for so long that he would have traded his dessert for a single peek at it, and apple pie was his favorite.

He was sitting there, shoulders slumped and face blank, watching a program on bats when both picture and sound vanished. His face clouded over. They were about to show how bats mated! He was about to yell for Darth when a face appeared on his TV screen. Not a pretty face, either.

Replacing the bats was a middle-aged woman, maybe in her early forties. Deep crow's-feet were carved into the corners of her bloodshot brown eyes. Her face was long and plain, faintly horsey. Her hair was a dull brown, limp and lifeless.

Billy stared at her disinterestedly. Although she was not exactly a looker, she could have passed for okay in a mousey, no other women left in the bar at closing time sort of way. Her kind were easy to pick up, and so grateful for attention they would do anything to please.

But whatever physical charms she might have possessed were spoiled. One of her eyes was blackened and swollen half-shut. Her cheeks were cut and bruised. A strip of adhesive tape covered the bridge of her nose. Her lower lip was all puffed up and badly split. Three heavy black stitches held it together. Five more were half-hidden by her eyebrow.

She looked frightened. She looked confused.

She looked like she was looking right at Billy. “C-can you help m-me?” she stammered.

Billy stared at the screen blankly, still trying to figure out what kind of show this was.

The woman swallowed hard. “Please...” Billy noticed the livid bruises on her neck. It looked like someone had grabbed her by the throat. If only they'd grab her again, get her off the TV and bring back the *bats!*

She licked her lips, wincing as her tongue touched the ragged split. “Th-they told me to call this number. That s-someone would see me and talk to me.”

Still Billy only stared at her, trying to figure out how this fit into the narrow concrete walls of his personal reality. It really looked like she was looking at him. Talking at him.

The woman sniffed and hung her head. It looked like she was about to cry. “I guess I made a mistake,” she said in a low, hopeless voice. “I guess I've got to face this alone...”

It was the word *alone* that finally penetrated Billy's foggy brain. She made that word sound like it was made of cinderblock and iron, as if it were a small white cell with no way out.

"Wait," he croaked, blinking as if waking from a long uneasy sleep, and really looking at the woman. He cleared his throat and spoke again. Louder this time.

"Wait! Don't go!" He didn't know how it was that she was talking to him through the tube, he just knew he didn't want her to hang up or whatever the hell she was about to do.

"I'm here," he told her. "I can hear you, can see you."

"Thank god," she sighed. "I thought I'd go crazy if I didn't get to talk to someone."

You and me both, Billy thought, sitting up straighter and caught between laughing and crying at how good it felt to hear another human voice. "My name's Billy. You can talk to me."

* * * *

Billy was sprawled across his bunk. The tube was still on. Something about China. The stuff you ate off, not the country. Normally he would have hung on every word, no matter how little it meant to him. But he had the sound turned down to a low murmur, and stared at the white ceiling above him instead of the screen.

The woman's name was Jean.

She was forty-three, single, and worked as a receptionist and secretary for a big insurance agency.

Her face was all messed up because two men had jumped her when she got out of her car in a supermarket parking lot. They had beaten her up, taken the sixty dollars cash she had on her, her jewelry and credit cards, and would have probably gone on to rape and kill her if an off-duty policeman out walking his dog hadn't come along and frightened them away.

Some sort of crime victims' assistance agency had given her a videophone and a number to call if she needed someone to talk to. Videophones were still pretty rare and expensive. He'd stolen a couple, gotten good bucks for them too.

She had ended up talking to him.

Him. It hadn't taken him long to decide not to tell her who he was, where he was, or why.

How the hell had she ended up on his TV? Was this some sort of game the prison was running on him? Some sort of trick?

Then he remembered being asked if he wanted to take part in some—what had Darth called it?—meaningful social activity. Was this it? There was only one way to find out.

"Darth? Are you there?"

"I hear you."

"Did you—did the prison—fix it so that woman called me?" He didn't figure he needed to explain. Darth seemed to know everything.

"Does it matter?"

The question caught him off guard. Before he could even begin figuring out how to answer, Darth's voice filled the cell again.

“Do you wish me to block the call if she tries to contact you again?”

Billy freaked, pure and simple. *“Don't you fucking dare!”* he bellowed, coming up off his bunk like it had turned white hot under him. As he drew a rattling breath he realized that he was hollering and shaking his fist at the ceiling.

He let the breath back out as a sigh, his shoulders slumping and his hand falling. “Please don't,” he said hoarsely. It shouldn't matter so much, she was just some beat up broad old enough to be his mother, but the thought of not being able to talk to her again filled him with a nameless terror.

“I'm sorry,” he added meekly. “Please don't stop her from talking to me.”

“You are sure?”

“Yeah, I am. She, uh, y'know needs someone right now.” He shrugged. “It's not like I've got nothing better to do.”

“Very well.” There was that hollow click that meant Darth was done talking.

Billy slumped back onto his bunk with a sigh. He shouldn't have let himself get so worked up. It wasn't even like he'd get to screw her or anything, it was just...

He rolled over to face the wall, hugging himself and drawing up his knees. He hoped she called back soon.

* * * *

It wasn't fair! Just thinking about it pissed Billy off so much that it had him pacing and muttering to himself. Since there wasn't anything to break or anyone to scream at, that seemed to be his only outlet. The TV muttered to itself. He ignored it.

He'd just talked to Jean again. It had been five days since her first call, and she'd called at least twice every day since. This had been a bad one. She had gone back to work today.

They had talked about it for hours in the days before. Jean was afraid. Afraid to leave her house. Afraid to walk the streets. Afraid to go back to her job.

He had tried to convince her that she could do it. That nothing had really changed. That she was still the same person she'd been before the attack. After all, she'd gone to work and out shopping and all of that kind of stuff for years without a problem. Her attack was just something that had happened, like lightning striking.

But in the end it was Jean who made him see that everything had changed for her. He'd slowly come to understand that what had really been stolen from her in that parking lot was her confidence. How could she believe that she could take care of herself when she couldn't forget how she had let herself be knocked around, let the rings be torn from her fingers, would probably have let herself be raped and maybe even killed if that cop hadn't come along? The world had been turned into a hostile and uncertain place. The next person she met on the street or in an elevator—*anywhere*—ould be the one who finished up what those other two had begun. All she had to do was look in the mirror to see how well she

could protect herself.

But in the end Billy had been able to convince her that she should go back to work. That the only way to glue her life back together again was to start by picking up the pieces.

Hunting for some way to bring her around, he'd told her about how his father had been killed when he was fourteen, hit head-on by a drunk driver while on his way to pick Billy up from a friend's house. How he had hidden out in his room for days, sure that he had killed his dad. That his having friends killed him. That his not being home killed him. How he had come out only when his mother forced him to, and how although things were never the same as they were before, they didn't start getting at all better until he picked himself up from where everything had fallen apart.

He hadn't told her how everything went downhill from then. The fights with his mother and teachers. The cutting classes. The drinking and drugs. The fights. The shoplifting. The things he had done to try to fill the gaping hole inside himself, to dull the feelings of helplessness and worthlessness and rage.

Jean had called just an hour ago, so freaked out that at first he was afraid she had been attacked again.

In a way she had been, but more subtly. It had taken him a while to get her calmed down enough to talk coherently, but he got the whole story out of her at last.

When she went back to work they wouldn't let her have her desk back. They kept telling her to go home. That she should take a few more days off, take all the time she wanted, no hurry.

Jean cried when she talked about the horror she had seen in their eyes when they looked at her. She was never pretty, but now she was ugly. Who could blame them for not wanting her out where the public could see her?

And there was something else. Something worse. They looked at her differently. Treated her differently. Like maybe she was the criminal. Like what had happened to her had to be her fault, because if it could happen to her for no reason, then maybe it could happen to them. Like she had some sort of disease, and if they got too close they might catch it too. All they had wanted to do was get her out of there, and in the end that had been all she wanted too.

Billy paced restlessly. What a mess. He was in way over his head. What the hell could he tell her?

He'd done his best to get her to believe that she wasn't ugly, that she shouldn't blame herself for the way they had treated her. While he didn't think she was really convinced, at least he had gotten her calmed down and to stop talking like she was thinking about killing herself.

She needed help, and he needed help if he was going to be able to help her. But where was he going to get it?

Then something he half-heard on the TV penetrated his funk.

Billy's pacing faltered and he turned to stare at the tube. They were saying if you wanted to know more...

"Darth?" he called. "Can you hear me?"

"Yes, I hear you."

“You said I could get books if I wanted them. Could I get anything on, um, like what to say to people like Jean? On how to help then, y'know, get back to normal?” They had books on everything else, so it only stood to reason there would be some on this.

“Yes you can. Would you like some?”

“Please.” It had been a long time since he'd hit the books for anything, and he hoped he was up to it. Usually reading just put him to sleep. He wondered if—

What the hell. “And Darth? Could I please have a cup of coffee, too?” He'd never asked Darth for a favor before, but it wasn't like he was asking for a file or hacksaw.

“The books and coffee will be in your box in about five minutes.”

* * * *

The books were a help, except on one particular.

Jean kept asking who he was. Was he a counselor, or what? Couldn't she see him in person? Why wouldn't he tell her much more than his name?

He'd managed to sidestep her questions so far, but had a sinking feeling that sooner or later she'd back him into a corner. Once she found out that he was in prison and what he was in for she'd dump like a sack of garbage.

Every time he thought about that happening he got this sick feeling in the pit of his stomach. He kept telling himself that he just couldn't stand the thought of going back to the lonesome tedium of before she'd brought him some tiny measure of escape.

But sometimes as he lay there on his bunk after lights out other reasons came to him. With them came feelings that had him curling his body into a tight ball and hiding his face in the pillow.

* * * *

Jean's face had healed considerably in the nine days Billy had known her. Her black eye had faded to a pale yellow, as had some of her other bruises. She had even started wearing makeup again.

At the moment her eye makeup was running down her cheeks. Because she was crying.

Billy hated it when she cried.

At first it had made him angry. After all, what did she have to cry about? She was free, wasn't she? She had choices and chances he wouldn't have for almost two whole years.

The more he talked to her, the more he understood the source of her tears, the more his anger turned toward her situation. She didn't deserve to have her life frigged up this way. He had learned several new words from the two books he had slowly, painfully waded through so far. *Ego* was one of them. He now understood that hers had taken an even worse beating than her face. That her sense of self and self-worth had been beaten to a pulp, and you couldn't stitch them up or cover them with a Band-aid and expect them to automatically get better.

Billy's anger still remained. Lately it had begun swinging like a compass needle toward the miserable

bastards who had put her in this position in the first place. If the world was at all fair then they would be, well, *inprison* .

That thought was a mind-blower for sure. He hadn't got it anywhere near straight in his head, and there was no time to think about it now.

Jean was in the middle of another bout of depression. She'd started blaming herself again for being so weak and worthless that she became a victim, and condemning herself for not being able to get over having been one.

"Listen to me, Jean." He stared hard at her image on the screen, wishing he could pat her on the back or even hand her a Kleenex. Her head was bowed, and all he could see of her face now was her chin. "Are you listening?"

She nodded. "Uh huh."

"None of this is your fault. The only ones to blame are the shitheads who did this to you. You didn't ask them to mug you, and they didn't choose you, y'know, personally. You ... you weren't even a person to them. They didn't look at you and say to themselves 'she wants this.' They never once thought about who you were, or how awful it would be for you. You were just an easy target. A source of some money, and maybe some fun."

Jean peered up at him. He could see how desperately she wanted to believe him. "How can you know that for sure?" she asked in a small voice.

"I—I just know their kind," he answered evasively.

She wiped away a tear, leaving a black streak of mascara. "Did something like what happened to me happen to you?"

"No." He had to change the subject. "Now—"

But Jean wouldn't let it go. "Then how can I know you aren't just telling me something to make me feel better? That's probably your job, right? That's what counselors do."

He shook his head. "I'm not a counselor."

"Then what*are* you? A cop? A priest? Social worker? *What?* "

"Nothing like that. I just know what I'm talking about here, that's all," he said plaintively. "Can't you just trust me?"

Jean's face had gone tight and angry. "How the hell can I, when you won't give me a straight answer to a simple question?" she demanded.

Billy could only shake his head from side to side like a groggy boxer backed into a corner. "I can't ... I just can't tell you."

"But I've told you*everything!* " She shuddered. "God, I've stripped myself naked for you, told you things that made me so ashamed—"

"That's why I can't tell you!" Billy cried, seizing on that one word she used like an exit from the steel box closing around him. "Because I'm too*ashamed!* " And it was true. That word wrapped itself around one of the terrible inner pressures he'd been trying to suppress, and now that it was named, there was no hiding from it.

"You don't trust me," Jane shot back accusingly, her anger fragmenting into despair. Her face fell. "I'm just some spineless middle-aged loser who's not smart or strong enough to take care of herself. Maybe you say it wasn't personal because for you it isn't. You just want to get me patched up, close my case, and not have to put up with me any longer."

Billy couldn't take it any longer. He felt like he was about to explode.

"No, dammit," he growled, "That's not true. I've told you a hundred times I'm not some frigging counselor." He drew a shuddering breath. "You*really* want to know what I am?"

He never gave her a chance to answer. His voice dropped to a harsh whisper. "My name is William F. Thomas, prisoner number 3154-822985 at the Covelson Correctional Facility. I'm serving a two-year sentence for robbery and assault. I know exactly what those two men who mugged you were like *because I'm just like them!* "

Jean stared at him in shocked disbelief. "Y-you can't be," she stammered. "You're not—"

There was no stopping now. It all came pouring out like pus from a lanced boil. "*I am* . I called myself Bad Billy—like Billy the Kid, right? Big outlaw. I got myself kicked out of school at sixteen for hitting a teacher who caught me ripping off lockers. I got a job at a garage, got canned for stealing. I've stolen cars, broken into houses and stores, had a pretty good sideline selling coke and speed. A guy I hung out with and fenced stuff to—a real pro who'd been sent up twice for armed robbery—kept calling me a pussy 'cause I only did grab and run.

"One night I got all coked up and decided to kill two birds with one stone. I needed cash for a speed buy, and I decided to show him what kind of balls I had while I was getting it. So I held up a liquor store. There was an old lady behind the counter. She wouldn't open the register, so I knocked the shit out of her. While I was grabbing the cash another woman came in. Her boyfriend was coming over for dinner and she wanted a bottle of wine. Instead she ended up getting a dislocated jaw, four broken teeth, a concussion, and a night in the hospital."

Billy's voice dropped even lower. "It wasn't*personal* . They were just, y'know, in my way. It was like I was screamin' down the highway at seventy and they was nothin' more than two rabbits that ran out in front of me. I ran 'em down without even thinking about it."

Billy sighed and stared at his hands, remembering how he had used them that night, and realizing that if he'd had a gun with him he would have used it just as thoughtlessly. That realization was so chilling he had to hug himself.

"Billy?"

"Yeah?" Now she would scream at him, tell him what a monster he was. He wouldn't be yelling back. All his anger was gone.

"Are you—are you sorry for what you did?"

All of a sudden he was crying. It just came over him and he was helpless to stop it. “Yes,” he managed to gasp, “*Oh Jesus yes...*”

“Because you got caught and it landed you in prison?”

He shook his head, unable to look at her. “No, it’s—” He groped for a way to explain. “It’s like those women ... they could be *you* . You could be one of them.” He gestured helplessly. “You, you’re what I did to them.”

“I see.” There was a long uncomfortable silence. Billy waited it out, hunched around his misery and counting the seconds until she kissed him off for good. Who could blame her for hating him? He hated himself.

“Billy?” she said at last, “Will you look at me?”

He did as she asked, bracing himself for the hatred and revulsion he would see on her face.

Instead she gave him a wan smile that made the breath catch at the back of his throat. Something like hope sputtered and lit weakly inside him.

“I think we should keep talking to each other,” she said gently. “Only—”

Billy wiped his eyes on his sleeve. “Only what?” Anything she wanted, he’d do it.

“Only now we should both talk. About everything. Maybe try to help each other.”

He nodded. “I’d like that.” He came up with something like a smile. “You’ve already helped me a lot.”

* * * *

Billy was pacing again. What he had just gone through with Jean had left him feeling wiped out, as if he’d just climbed out of a pit a hundred miles deep. But he had this nagging feeling that there was something he should do. Something important. Something to do with something he’d said to Jean...

Then he had it. Jean could have been one of the women he’d hurt. And those women could be Jean—or at least in the same shape. Thanks to him.

“Darth?”

“*I hear you.*”

“Could I please have a pen and some paper?”

“*Why?*”

“I want to write to the women who were in that liquor store I robbed. I want to, y’know, say I’m sorry. To tell ’em that if they’re blaming themselves even the least little bit they should stop ‘cause the only one to blame is me.”

“*Pen and paper will be in your box shortly.*” There was a pause several seconds long. “*Would you like some coffee to drink while you write?*”

Billy grinned up at the ceiling. "Thanks, Darth. That'd be great."

* * * *

"Well," said the rumpled, overweight man named Genovese as he began filling a white paper hot-cup from the coffeemaker. "What do you think?" The guard's uniform he had worn when he had taken Billy to his cell hung from a hook on the wall. Now he wore a dark turtleneck and baggy jeans, both of which looked like they had been slept in. So did the cot in the back corner of the equipment-filled room.

There were two other men in the room with him. Darren Samuelson was from the Governor's office. He swiveled his chair away from one of the several monitors, his long narrow face professionally neutral. "Not bad. But just because you can make one young thug—"

"Not just one, Darren," put in Warden Fisk, a wiry, waspish black man with a shaven head and gold wire-rims. He was as impeccably dressed as Genovese was slovenly, his manner crisp as the creases in the pants of his tailored suit. "Billy is the fifteenth subject we've put through Geno's program. Two are still in process." He indicated two other monitors. "We can show you the tapes on the rest. We just showed you Billy because you arrived at the right time to see his breakthrough."

"All right, it was fairly impressive," Samuelson admitted grudgingly. "How many failures out of the fifteen?"

"None." Fisk held up his hand to forestall argument. "I'll grant you that we've been picking the subjects quite carefully. They have all been fairly young, all repeat offenders, but none of them real hardcase incorrigibles." He crossed his arms. "You saw Billy's sheet. You tell me what he would have been like after two years—or even two months—of regular hard time."

"I know the statistics as well as you do," Samuelson said tiredly. "But why should I consider this punk rehabilitated?"

"He isn't, yet," Genovese said diffidently as he put pen, paper, and coffee inside one of the three small cupboards along one wall. When he closed the inside door it opened from the front. "But now he can be. He's a lot less likely to go back to crime when he gets out because now he's begun to identify with his victims instead of other criminals."

"Like a hostages sometimes start identifying with their captors?" Samuelson asked.

"Sort of, but not exactly," Genovese answered, not looking at Samuelson directly. He lit a cigarette, ignoring the NO SMOKING sign. The number of overflowing ashtrays scattered around the room said the he'd been ignoring it for quite some time.

"What's important is that he now understands the consequences of his acts. Not in terms of punishment, but in terms of the pain he causes someone who doesn't deserve it."

"This could be an end to the revolving door," Fisk said. He arched an eyebrow. "Wouldn't that be something?" He watched Genovese move restlessly though the room, checking monitors, and then the small mainframe set up along one wall. Genovese had spent most of the past five months in this room. If this meeting was a success, he vowed to take him out for the best dinner money could buy.

Fisk turned his attention back to Samuelson. "When Geno first came to me I almost didn't hear him out. I mean, what would a computer nerd with a couple degrees in psychology know about dealing with prisoners? But it was a slow day and I read his proposal. It made sense."

He ticked off points on his fingers. "Isolate the prisoner from all human contact—or contamination. Lull him into a receptive state by giving him nothing but a monotonous routine and environment, and nothing but TV for company. Make him so starved for human contact that he will do anything to maintain the first contact he does get, namely the victim of a crime similar to the one he committed."

"I see all that," Samuelson put in. "I understand that he, um, 'imprints' on the victim instead of other prisoners. But the victim isn't human! It's a goddamn computer!"

Genovese looked up. "The prisoner doesn't know that," he said mildly. "The computer matches the subject's personal victim to him. There are carefully made points of congruence in both their histories, but not so many that it smells fishy. The computer's set up as an expert system with only one goal: cracking the subject's defenses."

He pointed to one of the three instrument packages on a wall-mounted rack with his cigarette. "It responds not only to verbal cues, but physiological input. We monitor his heart rate, galvanic skin response, and blood pressure. The sensors are in his coverall. His voice is analyzed. If he lies, the computer knows it. If he says he's sorry we not only know if he is, but just how sorry he is."

"What's deaf, dumb, blind, has ten legs and would buy the Brooklyn Bridge if you gave it a chance?" Samuelson said sourly. "A parole board." He turned to stare at Billy's image in the monitor. The young blond prisoner was sitting at the table in his cell, hunched over the paper he had been given and slowly writing. His face was intent. Behind Samuelson, Genovese and Warden Fisk exchanged hopeful glances. The small grant that had gotten the program started was all but gone. Samuelson could renew it, give them funding to expand the program, or torpedo them.

The man from the Governor's office faced them once more. His face gave nothing away. "What happens to the kid now?"

Warden Fisk answered. "We have a special ward set up for the test subjects. We'll transfer him there in another few days. He'll get to talk to others who've learned the same lessons he has, get counseling, maybe get some schooling or start learning a trade. After a while he'll even get to have visitors."

Samuelson frowned. "Won't he smell a rat when he talks to the other subjects?"

"Why should he?" Fisk shot back. "Each one has been told that they are part of a special social activities program—and they are. Each of them has met a different 'victim', and gotten to their breakthrough in a different way."

"All right, but won't the kid want to meet, what's her name? Jean? Want her to visit him?"

Fisk smiled. "Billy will be seeing less and less of Jean after a while, and eventually she won't need him any more."

"But isn't he so, ah, fixated on her that taking her away will cause a problem?"

"No, it shouldn't. Not only will he end up pushing her into trying to make it on her own, he'll have the problems of other victims to deal with. He'll be far too busy to pine over just one of them."

Samuelson looked past Fisk to stare at Genovese. "Other victims? You mean you plan to keep every prisoner pacified with that computer the whole time they're here?"

Genovese's eyes widened in surprise behind his thick lenses. "Why would we do that? The next victim Billy has to deal with will be real." He sighed, butting out his smoke. "God knows there are enough of them, and they can use all the help they can get."

Fisk hammered the point home. "Does the phrase 'repaying your debt to society' ring a bell, Darren? Or how about 'making the punishment fit the crime'?"

Samuelson didn't answer. He swiveled his chair around for one more look at Billy. He watched the boy labor over his letter. He wasn't feeding some slick line to a parole board. He wasn't getting a crash course in violence, sodomy, and being hard enough to survive in prison. He had to admit that the kid was already a better person than he had been when he was brought in.

The prisons were overcrowded, and a terrible drain on the budget. The present system wasn't working. Maybe one prisoner in a hundred came out better than he went in. He wanted to believe that this could really work. Still...

Billy looked up from his letter. "Darth? Can you hear me?"

Genovese went to the microphone, turned the switch to where BILLY had been written on a piece of tape. "I hear you." His voice came back through the monitor sounding alien and strange.

"How do you spell apologize? Is it a-p-a-l-a-g-i-z?"

Genovese, as Darth, spelled it out for him correctly. When he turned back Samuelson was staring at him.

"I still want to see those tapes," he said, "And the ward where you keep the other subjects." He glanced back at Billy's intent face, nodding to himself. "But I think you've got your funding."