

GETTING UNSTUCK

NANCY BOURNE

JUST WHEN I NEEDED HIM MOST, he went and got himself thrown in the fucking hole. And there I was, stuck where he left me, locked up, just like him, with the Wicked Witch of Jesus standing guard. Ever since she got born again, my life's been hell. It's not like I was boozing or doing drugs like half the kids I know. I don't do that stuff. She didn't know how lucky she was with me. I'm good. But not good enough for her.

"No dates for you, young lady," she said to me.

"No 'dates'? What kind of prehistoric word is that? You mean no fucking?" You shoulda seen that pious face go white.

"Go to your room and stay there," she said.

"No," I said. "All I'm asking is to go to the movies with Raymond. Just the movies."

"No," she said. "You're sixteen. You got no idea what boys are like. They got one thing on their mind. Your dad ain't here to protect you, so I got to do it."

"Well, he'd let me go to the movies if he was here."

"Not if he could see Raymond," she said.

So she marched me up the stairs to my room and locked the door. I waited until things got quiet, then climbed out the window, like always, and met Raymond in the mall at Denny's, like always. He had his brother's truck, so we messed around on a back road for a few hours. But she caught me climbing back in the window.

"That's it," she said. "I know what you're doing, and I know who you're doing it with. And if it happens again, I'm going to call the cops and get you incarcerated in some juvenile facility."

"Aw, come on," I said. "I only climb out the window because you won't let me have a normal social life."

"You're not capable of a normal social life," she shot back. "And Raymond is just the type to lead you into mortal sin, if he hasn't done it already."

I laughed in her face, and she nailed shut my window with about fifty nails.

Then it got worse. On Saturday I got so mad, I threatened to hit her, and she called the cops. The officer who showed up said I had to listen to my mom or I'd end up like my dad. I didn't bother to tell him she was my dad's girlfriend. My mom was

long gone. But I did promise to behave. She locked me in my room anyway. She'd let me out to go to school, but she'd call me on the landline at 4:00 sharp every day to make sure I was home. I thought about asking Raymond over in the afternoons, but she'd have shipped me off to juvie in a heartbeat if she'd caught me.

So I called the prison. I had to talk to Dad to get me loose from this religious fanatic he'd stuck me with. And that's when I found out he was in the hole again. That's my dad, always in the thick of it. Nothing violent, at least on the outside. He gets put away for counterfeiting or passing checks or con games. He's a genius at that con stuff, flashing that grin of his, looking so handsome and respectable. Of course, once he gets inside, he gets knocked around, and they lock him away. He says it's the gangs that go after him, but that doesn't compute. I mean he's not black or Hispanic or anything.

Anyway, he was in no position to help me, and I could take only so much of the Jesus freak. So I figured I'd have to bust out. Every day when I walked in the door from school, or wherever it was I went that day, the phone would be ringing its head off.

"It's Gladys," she'd say, "Where you been?"

"School. Where you think?"

"Get your homework done. You need to fry up some chicken for dinner." Or vac the living room, clean the toilet, scrub the kitchen floor. Now that she's off the hard stuff, all *she* ever does is watch TV and fall asleep reading the Bible. So one day I got so fed up, I just didn't bother to come home. I hung out with Dolores and some friends at Denny's after school, then went over to Raymond's house. He hadn't laid eyes on me for about three weeks, and he was some kind of horny. So we messed around in his room until his mom got home from her job and threw me out.

"What's that little piece of goods doing in my house?" she yelled at Raymond.

"It's Cheryl," he said.

"Who's she?"

"My girl."

"Ain't she got a last name?" she yelled. She couldn't seem to talk in a normal tone of voice. Meanwhile, I was busy getting my clothes straight and getting out of there.

"Stiggall," he said.

"Harold Stiggall's kid?"

"Might be," he said.

"Because if she is any kin to Harold Stiggall, she is bad news. That man is locked up in the penitentiary. And for good reason."

"Well, she ain't Harold."

"I don't want to see her in this house ever again."

When his mother wasn't looking, Harold mouthed the word "Denny's," and I was out of there. I had counted on sleeping at Raymond's, but that was before I met

his mom. I telephoned Dolores on my cell, and she snuck me into her house the next couple of nights after her mom went to bed, but she said her mom would call Gladys if she found me. So I said to myself, "I can't keep this up. I got to see my dad. I don't care if he *is* in the hole. He's got connections on the outside, in that restaurant business he used to work in. Counterfeiting is just a sideline. He'll find me some place to live, safe from Gladys."

* * *

So I took the bus to Rodeo, which is a one-horse town in the middle of nowhere about ten miles from Halifax Prison. I hadn't spent much of the money I'd lifted off of Gladys. So, I had bus fare for the trip, about a hundred dollars for food, and a metal frame bed in a rundown storefront the town called a hostel.

By then I had started using a fake name, Doris Fernandez, that's my real mom's name. I figured Gladys had alerted every police station in California to arrest me for making off with her three hundred dollars. She'd also cut off service to my cell. I tried a couple of times to call Dolores on a pay phone, but I got the machine every time. I did get Raymond to pick up once, but he was in a rush. Didn't ask me nothing about myself. I felt more lonesome after I hung up than before I called. I had to keep telling myself I was going to see my dad. Otherwise, I might have given up.

I called the prison from a pay phone about fifteen times, but every time I got put on hold and ran out of change before anybody picked up. Finally, I found a bus that went out to Halifax. When I got to the visitor's center, the guard told me I would have to write a letter to the inmate I wished to visit and that somebody from the prison would send me a form to fill out.

So back in town, I started to write my letter:

Dear Dad. Guess who. I need to see you bad. I've run off from Gladys who was about to ship me off to juvie.

But then I stopped. They'll read this, I thought. They always read his mail. The minute I mail this letter, I'm toast. So I held off.

By then I'd met Jackie, a skinny lady with that white dried-up kind of skin and a mound of messy red hair. Jackie waited tables at the Rodeo Roundup, where I ate what meals I could afford. I must have looked lonesome because sometimes she would come over to my table when business was slow and shoot the breeze.

One day after I'd been in Rodeo a couple of weeks, she said, "We're looking for a dishwasher. You ever washed dishes?"

"All my life," I said.

"You eighteen?"

"Sure," I lied, "And I need the money."

"You're hired," she said looking hard in my face. "But I gotta ask, what's a kid like you doing in this dump of a town?"

I told her I was a relative to an inmate out at the prison, and I kept hoping to see

him, but they never let him out for visiting. Which was true.

It didn't take long for Jackie to get my drift. One day after I'd been washing dishes for a couple of weeks, she sidled up to where I was standing at the grungy old dishwasher and whispered so management couldn't hear, "If you make it worth my while, I'll see to it you get to visit that relative of yours."

"How much we talking about?" I asked.

"A hundred bucks."

"Twenty," I said.

"Well, since you're just a kid, I'll make it twenty-five. What's his name?"

"Before I tell you, you need to know he's in the hole."

She thought a minute. "In that case," she said, "it's fifty."

"Twenty-five," I said.

"Look, honey, it costs extra to get him out of there."

We settled on thirty.

"You only get the money if I see him," I said.

"Fair enough," she said. "What's his name?"

"Harold Stiggall."

"That's Stick," she said. "My old man knows Stick."

I looked up at her, surprised, though come to think of it, what else would she be doing in Rodeo? "He an inmate?"

"Nope, he's a guard, and he can fix it."

I looked hard into her face. "You religious or anything?" I asked.

"Sometimes at Easter."

"Good." Maybe because she looked so tired under all that mess of hair, maybe because she'd been good to me, I decided to trust her. Besides I didn't have another plan.

"I need to get him word," I whispered, "that his daughter is in Rodeo and wants to visit him, but it's a secret. And you have to make sure it stays secret."

She nodded. "Everything's a secret, honey."

I told her my plan was to sign the name Doris Fernandez to the letter asking for a visit so nobody would suspect it was me, then I'd show up. For an extra twenty dollars, Jackie offered to get me a fake ID, which I needed for the forms and to get past the guards.

"You're a smart one," she said. "That Stick is a lucky man to have a daughter smart as you."

It was the first time anybody'd said anything nice to me for ages, and I almost broke out with the whole story. But I just said, "Maybe so. My dad's always bragging on how I'm going to college someday."

"Good job your dad's looking out for you, cause you don't want to get stuck here." "Yeah," I said. "Just make sure you get him word."

"Don't worry, honey," she said, "you'll see your dad."

Look. I know she was making money off the deal, but somehow I got the impression it was more than the money.

While I was waiting for the prison to okay my visit, I put in a lot of hours at the restaurant, pulling in the dough, which I needed 'cause I had emptied my stash paying off Jackie for the ID. After work, she and I often shared a beer and had some good laughs at the customers. There were times I was so lonely I almost told her about Gladys and Raymond and why I was there; I wanted to spill my guts so bad. But I couldn't take the chance. I didn't think she'd rat on me, but if anyone came around looking for me, I wouldn't want her to have to lie. So I kept my mouth shut. And Jackie didn't pry, which was a really good thing about her.

About that time, she let me know my visit permit had showed up in her post office box, which was the address we used, and I was on my way.

* * *

The folks who rode the bus out to prison that day just stared out the windows. Too deep in their own problems to take notice of much, is my guess. But I did hear one old girl say to her daughter, "She looks just like a blue-jay, don't she?" referring to the blue spikes Jackie had helped me set in my hair.

I had to laugh when the daughter said back to her, "She looks cool to me." And compared to some, I reckon I do.

I hadn't seen my dad for about five years, and I was pretty excited. I kept thinking about the times I'd visited him when I was younger. The guards used to tease me and say stuff like: "What you done wrong, little girl? You too pretty to lock up." Stupid shit like that. But the guard that day was one tough looking bastard. I had to say it three times, "I've come to see Harold Stiggald," before he even acknowledged I was talking.

"Well, you just got to wait," he finally snapped. "I got to check it out, and I'm busy."

Ten minutes later he was back. "You Doris Fernandez?"

I nodded and prayed he wouldn't pick up on how nervous I was.

"I suppose you got ID to prove it?"

I showed him the fake ID and a one-liner from the CDC saying Doris Fernandez was permitted one visit with Halifax prisoner # 383242.

He scrunched up his eyes and stared at it. The line down the middle of his forehead got real deep. I suddenly thought I bet the poor son of a bitch can't read too good, and it boosted my confidence about a hundred percent.

"Well, I guess you're Doris," he finally said, "which means you gotta be searched," and he jerked his head toward the back.

After what seemed like hours, they took me to a dingy little room with a window into another room. The walls were that slimy Army-surplus green, and there weren't any other windows.

At the door, a guard asked me, "You Harold Stiggald's visitor?"

I nodded. He ran his metal detector up and down me.

"OK. Come in and sit here."

I sat down at a wooden table facing the double glass and waited. I kept straining my eyes to see what was on the other side of that glass, but it was blurry, and the room was so still I didn't hear a thing. All of a sudden a shape on the other side started moving toward me.

"Daddy?" I called out. Right then I couldn't hardly stand it, I wanted to see him so bad. But when the shape got close to the glass, I thought, what's going on here? That's not him. For starters the hair behind the glass, what there was of it, wasn't black. And the face had lines all over it and wasn't smiling. You could always tell it was my dad a mile off from the way he smiled. I could see the mouth was moving, but no sound came out. I kept calling out "Daddy?" and the man kept moving his mouth and not making any sounds. Finally, I made out he was motioning with his hand, and that's when I saw the chains.

The guy with the metal detector said, "Use the phone, kid. That's what it's for. You ain't got forever."

I hadn't even seen the telephone sitting on the table; I was so busy peering through that blurry glass. So I picked it up, and there for sure was my dad's voice, saying, "Hello, hello," over and over and calling out my name.

"Hi, Dad," I said, "I hardly recognized you."

"I can't believe you're here, baby. All by yourself. How'd you do it?"

"Long story," I said. It was no way to have a real conversation, over the telephone with the metal detector man staring down at me. "This room's no good," I said. "I need to talk to you in person."

"It's all we got, baby. We gotta make the best of it. Where you been, sweetheart? I been worried sick." I guess Gladys had written I was missing.

"Never mind," I said. "I'm here now, and I need help."

"Sure, honey."

I had to laugh. "Oh boy, where do I start? I need a place to live. I need money, so I can go back to school. I need a daddy who's not in the goddamned prison."

"I know, sweetheart, but that's where your daddy's stuck. Anyway, I got you a place to live, and money's no problem."

I brightened up. "Where?" I asked.

"You're not gonna like this, honey, but the only option is you gotta go back to Gladys."

I couldn't believe he said that. "No way," I said. "You got to be kidding me. I went to all this trouble to get away from that bitch and get myself up here to see you, and you tell me I got to go back?"

"I know she pulled all that religious crap on you and locked you up and stuff, but things have changed."

“You traitor,” I hissed. “Is that the best you can do?”

“Cut that out,” said the metal detector, “or you’re outta here.”

“No problem,” I said, and I walked toward the door, leaving the phone sitting on the table. But I stopped. And when I turned around, there were his eyes staring through that godawful glass right at me, and his mouth was moving. I just couldn’t leave. So I went back and picked up the phone.

“OK, Daddy, I’m not walking, but going back to that bitch is out.”

“Trust me, baby. She’s a different woman. She’s given up on Jesus, and she wants you back.”

“How come? She using again?”

“Course not.” I could tell from his voice he was lying.

“That’s it. And I got to take care of her, right?”

“You gotta have a home, honey. At least till you graduate. I got plans for you, little girl. You are one smart kid. You’re going to be my college girl. But you can’t do it all by yourself. Gladys is all you got right now.”

“No,” I said. “No, no, no, no, no!”

“Please,” he was begging. “I got nowhere else to send you. I can’t just let you run off. I’ll never see you again. You gotta do this for me. You’re my little girl.”

I just sat there watching while he kept on begging and begging. He looked so pathetic sitting there in his denims with his gray comb-over and the chains bunched up around him, talking into that phone. It was like I was seeing him for the first time.

I sat there for a long time thinking it over. Then I finally said, “OK, Dad, you win.”

“You’ll do it? You’ll go back?”

I nodded. You should have seen his smile. Like old times, all over his face, but his eyes looked sad. I’ll never forget it as long as I live.

* * *

Poor old man, he doesn’t know from nothing. If I was to go back to Gladys, that would be the end of me. When she starts using, she fucks up everything and everybody in sight. I’d be scoring coke for her, picking up fake script all over the place, bouncing checks for her, cleaning up her mess.

So, that’s it. Time to hit the road again. But before I go, I need to swing by Rodeo Roundup and say goodbye to Jackie.

She looks up when I walk in and nods to a booth. I slide in next to her on the slick plastic cushion. Luckily the place is empty.

“How’d it go, kid?”

“Great.”

She gives me a look. “Great? You sure?”

“Yeah. But I have to take off. I came by to thank you.”

She sits up straight.

“Like you said before, I don’t want to get stuck here.”

She pulls me up against her. I can smell the cooking grease on top of her perfume. And it’s all I can do to keep from crying.

“That man I saw in there, he ain’t my daddy. I don’t know what they did with my daddy. But what was left after they finished ain’t anybody I know.”

She nods. “They do that.” Then she tightens her grip on me. “Just remember, you got this far all on your own. You’ll make it.”

Maybe I will. I figure I’ll head north, find a job, talk my way back into some school. But right this minute, wrapped up in those skinny arms, I don’t feel like going nowhere.