

THE PRISON

Night winds blew down from the snowcapped Cascade Mountains, spitting a cold, slanting rain into the face of the prisoner staring fixedly at the barbwire topped chain-link fence.

No guards walked the yard. No lights lit the towers.

The prisoner took a step – then another – breaking into a run. Hitting the fence six-feet above ground, he scrambled to the top. Grabbing barbed wire, he ignored the slicing pain and threw himself over the top. He landed on his feet, mud splattering his black state boots and brown khaki pants.

No whistles blew. No alarms sounded. No guards shouted.

Keeping low, he zigzagged through chaparral, climbing to the tree line. He listened for harsh voices calling him to halt. None. There was no sound of tires crunching gravel on the security path. No dogs barked. He kept climbing, and as he climbed he felt a renewal of his spirit with that of the land, as had his ancestors who came to the land seeking the same freedom he sought now.

Wind chilled his wet body, clothing soaked through. Still, he ascended. Rain became snow. Flakes dappled his face. He shivered, and a smile slowly crept across his lips. The cloud shrouded sky was his ally. Rain and snow would cover his tracks, take away his scent.

He raised his hands and face to the heavens, gave a rebel yell.

His legs were strong, and he reached the peak undetected. Looking down, he saw only a black pit where the prison should be. He shook his fist in defiance.

Using his heel, he kicked away the snow and scooped a shallow hole in the earth. From his pants' pocket he removed a beaded pouch. Then he knelt. Very reverently he poured tobacco from the pouch into the hole, whispering an ancient prayer as he did so. He pushed dirt over the hole, rose and looked once more at the black pit in the valley. He turned away.

Light from a distant farmhouse beckoned him. He walked toward the light.

Hours later, fingers and toes numb from the cold, he stole into a barn, hoping to find warmth among the animals. Horses snorted, and a few chickens fluttered as he stumbled about in the dark. A cow lowed. He bumped into a bale of hay. With crooked fingers he clawed at the hay. Maddeningly, tufts were reluctant to be pulled free from the bale. He cursed. As he worked, his fingers warmed, and eventually he was able to grab handfuls of hay. A pile formed around him. He sank into it, buried himself, and fell into a deep sleep.

A sharp kick in the buttocks rudely awakened him.

"Huh? What the hell?" He skittered away from the foot which continued to prod him.

"Get up. You got no call making a mess of my barn." There was no anger in the man's voice, just reasonableness. "Get up."

The prisoner turned to look at the man, but the glare of the lantern made him squint. His eyes teared.

"Suppose you come from the prison over the mountain?" Again no anger, it was simply a question.

"Are you going to turn me in?" He stood, ready to bolt.

"Since I was eighteen. Mostly solitary. I was released to the general population the day before the guards disappeared."

"You a danger?"

Mike smiled. "No. My spirit's just too large for those who want to confine it."

"Son, for what you'll find, your spirit will have to be large to break free."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, 'bout ten years ago, they – the authorities – just up and stretched the fence, barbed wire and all, oh, some miles down the road." Grover nodded to where Silas was looking.

"Never told the boy. He weren't too bright even before he tried to leave, so I figured why tell him."

"You mean the authorities expanded the prison?"

"Yep. Me and Annie ran afoul of the law on taxes. The Carters down the road apiece was makin' moonshine. There were so many laws, laws piled upon laws, until it was near impossible to live and not break one or another. There's a bunch of folks around here who crossed one line or another."

"No guards?"

"Used to be. Like at your prison they just up and left." Grover sucked on his pipe. "That's when Silas decided to leave. Just packed up some clean clothes and said goodbye. I figured he'd be back soon enough."

"Why?"

"Others had escaped, even when we had guards. Came back."

Mike waited for Grover to go on.

"Fences. Barbed wire. Towers. Out forever. Appears the authorities just kept expanding it 'til everything's a prison far's a man can walk."

"And the guards?"

"Don't rightly know for sure. They must be out there somewhere, wherever the last fence is."

Mike spent a week with the Millikans, then packed up some of Silas' clothes.

"Perhaps I can," he said to Grover before leaving, "discover what those who have abused people through multiple and virulent laws have done to our world. Maybe it's all of New York they have in lockup. Or maybe the fences go all the way to Mississippi. The guards might be watching the western borders of Georgia. Wherever they are, I'll find them – then I'll break out. Free. Once and for all."

He took off to see what lay ahead of him.

He came to the first fence from the farm in half a day. Someone had torn a hole in it, and he crawled through. The second fence was two days walk. Whole sections of it were gone. Mike walked on, through farmlands, towns and cities. Everywhere he met people, learned that they too had violated some law, and that yet another prison fence lay ahead.

The weather warmed with the coming of spring and Mike's descent into the country's southern region. One Sunday, seeking respite from the heat, Mike slipped into a university library whose doors had been battered open. Inside, he found it filled only with law books, and they were strewn about, torn, and trampled on as if a frenzied mob had attacked the sanctum.

The farmer just chuckled. "No, son, I ain't. You hungry?"

"Yeah."

"What's your name?" The farmer walked to the barn door, opened it. Outside, it was still dark and cold, though the storm had now stopped.

"Mike Lowery." He followed the farmer. "What's yours?"

"Grover Millikan. Wife's Annie, son's Silas."

The warmth of the kitchen hit Mike like a guards baton. Annie eyed him from the stove. Silas, a lanky boy in his late teens, stood blank-faced at the kitchen sink. Looking around at the family's fresh-scrubbed faces, Mike became aware of how he must look: clothing torn and dirty, raven hair matted, hands and face grimy.

Annie wiped her hands on a floral-printed apron, brushed a strand of gray hair from her forehead. "You got to clean up before you sit." She showed no surprise that he was there. "Saw you come across the north field last night. Figured the barn would do 'til morning."

"Bathroom's upstairs," Grover said, pointing toward the steps. "Reckon you got to use the facilities, then you can wash up."

The family was already seated around the table when Mike came back downstairs. He took the empty seat.

Annie held out a plate of fried eggs.

"Yes, Ma'am. Thank you."

As he ate, Mike noticed that Silas never looked at him, or even at Grover or Annie. The boy kept his eyes on his plate, which Annie filled. Grover cut the food into small pieces for the boy.

After breakfast, Grover stepped out onto the porch. Mike followed. The sky was changing from purple to blue, with only a few fluffy clouds in the distance, the sun just peeking over the horizon.

"Got milking to do," Grover said. "Want to help?"

"I don't know anything about it but I'll help if I can."

Grover milked. Mike forked clean hay into the stalls. Taking a break, he leaned on the pitchfork and said, "You folks don't seem to mind that I'm from the prison."

"Nope."

"No one's followed me here?"

"Nope. Won't be no one."

"I didn't think there would be. I hadn't seen a guard in days at the prison. They just all disappeared one night."

"Don't need 'em no more. Only one's left is prisoners."

Mike wondered what the old man meant, but didn't ask.

As they left the barn, Mike noticed Silas standing at the road which shot straight away from the farm. He was looking with longing into the distance.

"If you don't mind my asking," Mike said to Grover, "is Silas ... retarded?"

"Nope. Been locked inside himself since he came back three weeks ago from tryin' to leave."

"Trying to leave?"

Grover sat in a rocking chair on the porch, putting the pail of milk beside him. He pulled a pipe from a pocket in his overalls, filled it and lit up.

"You been locked up a long time, ain't you son?"

There were books about laws governing all aspects of human behavior, and, some Mike could not even imagine. The books in the library seemed to stretch on into eternity.

Mike moved west.

And as he journeyed, his heart sorrowed. Earth, his mother, had been raped by those who neither honored man's free will nor respected Earth's sovereignty. Yes, he accepted law, but man – or some men – had corrupted the nature of law by shackling men with every kind of restriction. Not to protect or to preserve, but to fulfill some supposed moral purpose, to supply their own inflated egos with glory and to fill their pockets with filthy lucre at the expense of other's pain.

One clear night, shortly before dawn, as Mike lay upon a beach south of Mobile, he looked toward the Eastern horizon and knew where the authorities had gone.

As the Earth rotated, sunlight not only reflected from a quarter moon, but also glinted from huge strands of fencing and barbed wire being stretched hundreds of miles above Earth.