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Claire Perkins

Cameron's Death

I had a son. Tonight I found a pair of his old, smelly socks in the camper, the last place I saw him before he died. The socks broke my heart all over again.

I can't bring myself to wash them. They stink to high heaven. Lord, that boy's feet stank! He often wore shoes without socks, or wore the same socks for five or six days. When he was on the streets or bouncing from place to place, he didn't always shower regularly. Whenever he'd show up back home to crash for a night or two, that's the first thing that would start to annoy me. "For Christ's sake, Cameron, go wash your feet!" But, truth be told, even after washing them they still stank. I always thought he probably had some kind of disease or infection. Nobody's feet could smell like that otherwise. But his medical care had been beyond the realm of my control for years and so, like so many things, it seemed there was nothing I could do about it.

I try to figure out what to do with them—the socks. I don't want to wash them, but I can't have them stinking up the house. I finally decide to put them with the rest of his clothes in the box in the garage. Then my heart breaks again. He had nothing but the clothes on his back when he died. Well, he didn't even have those at the moment he died, because he was wearing Sheriff Joe's pink boxers and striped jump suit.

He died in the county jail.

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When they came to tell me, they brought me the clothes he was wearing when they arrested him: athletic shorts, baggy jeans, a T-shirt and some old, worn out hiking boots. No socks. He couldn't find them when they came to drag him off to jail, so he went with just the boots on his feet.

All this was in a plastic bag, sealed and tied with a tag bearing his name, inmate number, mug shot and date of birth.

That was all that was left of him. That and those smelly socks.

He'd come home Sunday, the night before he was arrested, asking if he could spend the night here. He knew there was a warrant out for him from the drug mess he'd gotten himself into. He'd tried to turn himself in at the county jail on Saturday night, but when he couldn't produce a picture ID, they wouldn't take him. I don't know where he slept Saturday, but Sunday he showed up at home. I told him he could spend one night, but not in the house. I set him up in the camper and told him in the morning I was going to drive him over to the MVD to get a duplicate driver's license and then drive him back over to the jail so he could turn himself in.

I never got the chance.

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Don't get me started on the "justice" system around here. I'll never be able to figure out why you need a picture ID to turn yourself in, but a posse of five armed lawmen can drag you out of bed on a Monday morning, cuff you and haul you off, no questions asked, no ID required.

They came pounding on the door in the early morning, before eight a.m. Well, I shouldn't say they, because most of them were hiding in case a middle-aged woman wearing nothing but a bathrobe might try to ambush them. Just one of them came to the door. He wasn't wearing a uniform and he looked like a young man around Cameron's age. He smiled and asked, "Is Cameron around?"

Stupid me, I thought he must be a friend of his. I said, "Yeah, but he's still sleeping."

The smile faded and he turned, calling his cohorts out of the woodwork with, "He's here! He's here!"

Next thing I knew, there were five of them shouldering their way right into my house. Then I saw badges and guns. They started to move right on down the hallway toward the bedrooms.

"He's not in here," I said, gesturing toward the arcadia door that led to the backyard where our camp trailer was parked on the RV drive. "He's out in the camper."

Immediately they all changed course and started to push their way past me toward the sliding door.

"Wait a minute! Wait a minute!" I protested. "Just let me wake him up, okay? He's not gonna run. He tried to turn himself in already

on Saturday but they wouldn't take him. Please, he's really hard to wake up and you're gonna scare the life out of him. Just let me wake him up. Please!"

I was saying all this as I tried to stay just one step ahead of them. We were all working our way to the arcadia door. The lead guy saw my two Queensland Heelers in the backyard and asked me if they were going to get rowdy. I told him the dogs would probably lick a burglar to death. Just to prove my point, as soon as we got out the door, Cheyenne ran to get her ball and brought it to the lead guy to throw for her. She kept dropping it at his feet every couple of steps, ever optimistic that sooner or later he'd throw it for her. She's crazy about playing catch and completely indiscriminate about with whom she plays.

I was still pleading for them to let me wake Cameron and they finally conceded.

"Can you tell me just one thing," I asked? "Why is it, a kid tries to turn himself in when he's got warrants out, and the damn jail needs to see an ID? He wanted to turn himself in. Why couldn't you just give him that much dignity?"

The lead guy said, "We don't have any control over what the folks down at the jail do. We're just here to do our job. But we'll be sure and let 'em know when we take him in that he tried to turn himself in."

I knew bullshit when I smelled it.

I got to the camper door, opened it and stuck my head in and said, "Cameron, get up. Cameron, you've got to wake up. Now!"

I heard his typical morning grunt of protest. He'd always slept like the dead. I knew that if he was roused too abruptly, he'd immediately startle into fight or flight mode and that would just make everything worse.

"Cameron! You've got to get up!"

That was as much leeway as they were going to give me. I got shouldered out of the way and three of the five pushed their way into the camper to drag him out of bed and order him to get dressed.

Cheyenne was still trying to play ball with one of the cops outside the camper. He was trying to bite back a grin, and I was trying not to cry.

Inside the camper, Cameron couldn't find his socks. He finally said, "Forget it," and shoved his feet into the boots without socks.

They already had him cuffed when they escorted him out the door.

"I'm sorry, Cameron," I said to his back as I trailed them out to the front yard through the RV gate. "Call me when you know which jail you're going to be in."

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On the street in front of the house, all the little kids were walking to school. The neighbors were out, seeing their kids off and picking up their newspapers. Did the police plan the timing of this so it could be the biggest spectacle possible? I watched my son's back and zip-stripped wrists disappear into the police cruiser. The contrast between this bright Monday morning, my silly little ball-playing dog and all of life going on as normal while my son's life was collapsing before my eyes was surreal.

I watched helplessly as five armed men dragged a sleepy and completely cooperative kid, whose only crime was trying to kill himself with drugs, out into the bright morning sun and off to face "justice."

That was the last time I saw my son. I thought at least he'd be safe in jail, but two weeks later, half-way through his 30-day sentence, he was dead. The greatest irony of all: lock up an addict, then let him overdose in jail.

He'd spent the last several years doing crystal meth, selling crystal meth, living on the streets mostly, renting (and trashing) apartments when he could, mooching off of friends, and bouncing into our house when he thought he could get away with it. Every time I picked up the newspaper, I expected to find a story about an unidentified male found dead somewhere and it would be him. So, jail sounded good to me. He wouldn't be able to do drugs in there. He'd have a roof over his head and food to eat.

I figured 30 days in the county jail might be just what he needed.

How wrong could I be?

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I had spoken to him on the phone several times since his arrest, but I hadn't gone to visit him. I figured 30 days would go quickly and I'd had bad experiences with jail visits in the past.

On Sunday evening, two weeks after his arrest, he called me. He sounded self-assured and optimistic as he told me, "Two weeks down, two to go." I told him I'd just ordered some books for him from Amazon and that he should watch for the package. He tried to get me to three-way the call to his girlfriend, but I refused, knowing it was against jail rules. He was disappointed that I wouldn't connect him because his girlfriend's parents would not accept his collect calls from jail. I told him to hang in there and that he'd see her in a couple of weeks. He thanked me for the letter I'd written, and we said goodbye.

I had closed that letter by saying,

I surround you with a field of love and protection. I hope that you will use this time to make some decisions and deep inner changes so that your life can be better once you are out. Believe me—you have within you the power to change and the power to make of your life whatever you choose.

Impulsively, at the bottom of the letter, I'd drawn a little stick figure representation of him surrounded by a spiral and rays of light. In the end, though, my love and protective power were not enough to keep him safe.

The next morning, another bright Monday dawned. I heard the doorbell followed by pounding on the front door. I checked the clock: eight a.m. I was sleepy and annoyed at the disturbance. It was probably the UPS guy or the mailman. Why couldn't they just leave the package on the porch? I tried to go back to sleep.

The pounding continued, insistently. I pulled on my bathrobe and snuck a look out my upstairs bedroom window, which is right above the front porch. Damn. I saw two very official looking men, and they were showing no signs of leaving. I went downstairs and opened the door. I could see by their badges they were from the sheriff's office.

"Ma'am, do you have a son named Cameron Perkins?"

Christ, I thought, couldn't they leave him alone? What did they think he'd done now? How many times could you arrest a person?

"Yes," I said, with all the venom I could muster. "He's already in the county jail, why are you looking for him here?"

"Yes, ma'am, we know that. Can we step inside for a moment? Is there anyone else at home with you?"

It still hadn't dawned on me why they were here.

One of them told me his name was Detective Fax, and he introduced his assistant, whose name I have forgotten.

Then he told me my son was dead.

The shock of it hit like an icy dagger in my heart. The blood seemed to drain from me and I fell to the floor with a wail that sounded like it was coming from somewhere in the distance. The tears didn't come right away. There was just a sense of utter disbelief, followed by a certainty that all my life I'd known this day was coming. I just didn't know it would be today. When the finality of it filtered through, the tears began, followed by hiccupping sobs.

I asked them how it happened and they gave me what detail they had. His cellmate had awakened to find him in convulsions in the middle of the night. The guards and medics came right away. They tried to revive him, but he was gone. The cellmate reported that Cameron had been huffing on an asthma inhaler all day.

Detective Fax asked me if Cameron had asthma and I told him no. I told him I imagined he was trying to get high. It crossed my mind to wonder how he got an asthma inhaler. Why would that have been available to him? But I didn't have the presence of mind to ask the question aloud.

Detective Fax asked me if he could call someone to be with me. I told him to call my husband, David.

"But don't tell him on the phone," I pleaded. "I don't want him driving home in a state of shock."

I gave them the office phone number. I heard Detective Fax ask my husband to come home. David wanted to know why, wanted to know if I was okay. Detective Fax told him the news, and I could hear David's strangled cry clear across the room from the phone.

Along with the anguish there was an eerie sense of calm, like the stillness that comes after a devastating storm. Perhaps it was only a blast of endorphins triggered by emotional trauma, but it felt like some kind of window opened up inside of me, giving me a glimpse of incomprehensible peace and light. Even in those first moments of grief, something in me recognized there was a blessing wrapped inside the tragedy. I experienced a kind of release hand in hand with

the pain. I felt relief. The drama was over. Cameron didn't have to suffer anymore. None of us did.

Although it would not take long for the light from that window to be dimmed by the darkness of my grief, I knew in that moment that grace was working to grant us all healing at long last.

