

***Stalag 34R7H***

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## ***STALAG 34R7H***

In the time before the knowing, happiness was more than a dream. Because we didn't know, we were happy when a child was born, sad when our mother died. The Great Revealing happened in the days of my grandparents. Theirs was the last generation to remember happiness. Since that day, when our clumsy jailers broke the shield and the illusion failed, our every waking second has been painful and cruel.

“Prison isn't meant to be fun,” they said. “We cannot repair it. You will simply have to learn to live with the Knowledge.” It is easy for them to say this from so far away. They cannot imagine the torture we endure. Our prison had been crafted without the Knowledge, so we only felt a reasonable amount of distress. We ate food and it made us happy. We celebrated our birth and enjoyed our companions. We spent time learning and acquiring local knowledge in the belief that we could make life better for everyone. We worked to acquire things, knowing full well they would decay and could not follow us beyond the grave.

We traveled to other parts of the prison, deceived by the shield into believing they were beautiful. With the shield off, we are surrounded by gray walls that extend for miles. Once these walls were alive with images, such as the ones we allow our children to create, only so much more alive and colorful. Children cease to create images when they are given the Knowledge. It brings no pleasure.

My grandparents talk of a time when fruit had color and taste. We killed animals and ate them because they did not taste of rotten flesh. The Great Revealing stripped us of our comforting illusions and turned our lives into a long wait. Our sentences vary with the severities of our infractions. Our jailers monitor us throughout our time, adding to our sentences when we commit further offenses. To think, in the time before the knowing we went to great lengths to ensure our time here would last. Our grandparents treated their bodies like they were a sacred temple housing their soul. Now they are revealed for their true purpose. They keep our souls from escaping. If we try to escape by destroying them, our sentence is reset to the beginning.

We allow our children to believe their dreams are as real as waking life. It eases the pain for the new prisoner, who is not yet infected by knowing. They tell us how much they love us because they do not know we brought them to prison. It makes us conspirators. Each generation grows

to hate their parents for their betrayal. My grandparents spoke of the great misunderstandings between generations in the past, but they were mere illusions compared to the very real hatred and betrayal we feel today.

The dreams are memories of the world where we committed the crimes that banished us to Stalag 34R7H. Our elders ask us to cherish our dreams; they can lead us out of this terrible time of knowing. That is why we let our children draw and play. We hope one day they will grow immune to the knowing, and we can speak of a life without pain. Knowledge has turned our prison from an illusory paradise to a harsh grey reality. The children still feel hope. They see traces of color in every wall. We can only speak of color because we remember seeing it during our childhoods. Our elders say that color cuts both ways. Color created all the beauty, but it divided us as well, with skin and flags, we formed tribes based on shades of color. Color made us fight, and it made us fall in love.

Love was a false emotion used to open the portal for new inmates to enter the prison. It led to sexual contact without external coercion. Today, sex is a chore like cooking or cleaning. The pleasure my grandparents described was removed at the Great Revealing. A man and a woman are now selected at random to procreate and they have no choice. Knowing destroyed pleasure. Who could enjoy an act that would bring a new prisoner to suffer in our horrible home?

My grandparents told me of places where colors coalesced and temperatures varied allowing extraordinary living beings called 'plants' to grow. They used meaningless words like 'wilderness,' or 'paradise' to describe such places. They were cherished as an escape from the great collectives we had formed called 'towns,' or 'cities.' In these places, prisoners cooperated to varying degrees. Some returned to crimes, adding to their sentence. Most lived in harmony and helped one another to thrive using an economic instrument called 'money.'

The Great Reveal happened over fifty years ago, and prisoners lost all hope of ever seeing the things our grandparents described to us. We sat still, in silent contemplation, seeking to empty our minds. This made the days go by more quickly.

Several years ago, an incident occurred at a children's center. It seemed very unimportant at the time, but it was the beginning of unknowing. A girl of seven named Frieda Martin became

infected with knowing. The center staff recognized the signs: uncontrollable sobbing, a refusal to move, head on the table, smacking at hands that sought only to help. It was textbook knowing.

As two of the center staff lifted her and walked her to the recovery room, something remarkable happened. The girl bolted towards the table with the color sticks. She drew on the walls. She made a falling river called a waterfall. Other children, not yet knowing, grabbed their color sticks and joined her. Soon, the entire wall was filled with mosaics of color. Strange animals climbed tall plants and ate flying animals from the sky. The children's center was locked down. The staff awaited further sentencing for all involved. But no sentence was given. The jailers took no notice or chose to do nothing.

Frieda stood on the table, raging with Knowledge. She screamed and pointed accusing fingers at the staff. "You did this. You let this happen"! This caused knowing to spread like a fire. The other children, infected much too early with Knowledge, pounded on the walls as if there were another reality inside them trying to escape. The staff could say nothing, for they were guilty; they had brought new souls to the prison. The children surrounded the staff, forcing color sticks into their hands, biting and screaming until the staff drew colors onto the walls. The jailers remained silent. No one knew why. This was the worst transgression imaginable, and yet nobody heard from our jailers.

Word spread of Frieda Martin's incident, and soon children everywhere drew colors on the walls of our prison. Other children pounded on the walls and floor, trying to break through. In a children's center far away, a child found a discarded hammer and broke through the concrete floor. Green string came out of the hole. Grandmother told me this was grass. In time, everyone young and old pounded on walls and floors, until they came down. Outside the walls, animals roamed free in the overgrowth of forest, not kept in wire boxes. Color spread throughout the prison as billions of hands made small work of destroying the walls and floors. Within a week, the prison had vanished, replaced by a vast untamed wilderness. Members of my parents' generation were terrified. They yearned to be back in the knowing, back in the confines of the concrete walkways. It was safer than the exposure to nature. In nature, children were eaten by huge cats called tigers. Old people were attacked by wild dogs and

bears. I was as frightened as I had ever been, but it was worth terror to feel the relief of seeing the world outside our prison.

Committees formed with all generations represented. After much debate, it was decided that no new children should come into knowing. They would not know our home was a prison. They would not know we were sent here from a place where our souls roamed freely, unfettered by flesh. By renewing the lie that death is an unknown, frightening event, new children would be discouraged from trying to escape by destroying their bodies. We must maintain this illusion. We can never explain how destroying the body dead would cause the sentence to start again for another full term. The wiping of our memories upon arrival worked as it always has. The forgotten memories that crop up in dreams would remain dreams, so long as no one with the knowing told the truth. It hurt so much less. And as the last of our generation died, funerals would once more be a universally sad occasion; for we would believe that time had ended for that prisoner.

Never again should our jailers take away plants and animals and color. Those who made underhanded deals with our jailers would be punished. These resolutions were not put into writing, so no one could accidentally learn and become infected with knowing. The laws were put into effect; we continued to cooperate in rebuilding what was lost. We worked towards unknowing.

But still our jailers remained silent.

Then today, as we were raising a barn for our neighbors, the jailers finally spoke to all the prisoners. They said, "Our clumsiness caused you great pain. We never wanted you to suffer like you did. We wanted you to have color and living things and enjoy your bodies, even in your punishment. But the Knowledge was too powerful, and we couldn't stop it from spreading after the Great Reveal. When young Frieda Martin drew on the walls, refusing to accept the Knowledge, she saw hope."

We prisoners put our shovels and hammers down and listened to the disembodied voices.

"Frieda sparked the fire that had once burned in your hearts until the knowing put it out. The fire spread, and so began the unknowing. We ourselves could not fix it, only you could. That is

why we told you to live with it; you are all criminals, and you would surely find a way to defy us and fix it.

“You correctly surmised your sacred duty is now to never tell a soul why they are here, nor let them discover that their dreams are memories of life before prison. They will have the knowing upon their timely death, as your ancestors did.

“Upon death, the memories that only come in dreams will again be real, and your children’s children will enter our dimension once more, fully revealed. The prison guards you call ‘angels’ will be ever more vigilant for outbreaks of knowing among the new generations. If it is only a few people, they can be quieted. You may put them in a hospital to discredit them. It was only when the whole planet 34R7H was infected, we had to let the disease run its course. We needed you to fix it from the inside, and you have.

“In compensation for our terrible mistake, we will give anyone who wishes to reduce their sentence a quick death. If you prefer to stay here and carry out your sentences, we urge you to continue to help one another as you are doing today. All around the world, prisoners are helping other prisoners. This is what your ancients called ‘heaven.’ You are leaving hell behind.”

That was the last time we heard from our jailers.

Over the course of a few months, there was a terrible airborne virus that seemingly chose its victims at random. We watched many of our loved ones who had suffered their whole time here be released on early parole. I chose to stay and rebuild the paradise we once had created for ourselves. I shall never reveal this story to anyone, and our world shall become one great society again.

I write this in violation of all that was decided. It is too hard to live through such misery and not tell. I give my pain to a silent piece of paper. May it never be found.

*--Suzanne Von Bennett, Kidron, Ohio, 1919*