

## Released

Ever since I had taken a job as a parole officer, my days seemed to move more quickly. Each day was divided into discrete chunks of time—some chunks were dedicated to paper work and office tasks, other chunks were devoted to time with parolees. This afternoon was one of the rare occasions that I had a half-day blocked off for nothing other than checking in with my once wayward little sheep to see how their re-integration into the flock of society was going.

After lunch at Rita's, the local greasy spoon, I sauntered into my office and headed straight for my desk to check my planner. I had four appointments lined up on this rainy, March afternoon. According to my schedule, Oliver Hamilton would be the first to grace my presence.

At five minutes to one, I hear Oliver's timid rap on my office door. "Come on in" I say. As Oliver shuffles over to the chair in front of my desk, I have a hard time seeing him as a criminal. After sixty-five years of being taller than most people around him, he's developed slightly hunched shoulders. His argyle sweater drapes over his frail frame as if his hunched shoulders were little more than a clothes hanger.

Oliver did 6 months in a minimum security lock up for the distribution of pirated Disney movies. The way Oliver sees it, Disney's high prices and the infamous "vault" are more criminal than his black market tactics. Oliver fancies himself the Robin Hood of full-length animated features.

"So, Oliver, how's it going?" I begin in my usual way.

He looks at me over the top of the spectacles perched low on the bridge of his nose, "I'll tell you, Sidney, it's great to be back home".

"Well, as long as you stay away from the Internet, you'll be able to stay there. Have you had any trouble with the terms of your parole?"

"Not at all. The job at Wal-Mart keeps me pretty busy, so I wouldn't really have much Internet time even if I were allowed. And, in fact, I think that my quality of life may have increased since being forced to lay off the computer. I spend more time with my family, I read more books, I take more walks."

"Sounds like you're pretty happy, then?"

"Yeah, I am happy. I really have come around to see the bright side of the situation."

"Well then Oliver, I'm happy with your progress so far. If you don't have any questions for me, I think we're done."

"No, I think I'm all set, Sid".

"Great, then set up an appointment for next month with Nancy before you leave".

As Oliver walked out, he held the door for a platinum blonde Ashley Sanders, and the bright mood that Oliver's optimism had put me in started to fade the moment I saw her. Ashley traipsed in on mile-long legs, wearing a barely-there skirt. Presumably, Ashley thought she looked attractive in this get-up. Unfortunately, the skirt did little more than expose an expanse of flesh that was such an unnatural shade of orange that it looked more like the result of extended exposure to radiation than extended exposure to the sun.

Ashley came from money and, as such, had received a slap on the wrist and monthly appointments with me for her third drunk driving conviction. Ashley spent her days wasting dad's money and taking occasional classes at UCLA. Ashley was a perennial student with no real program in mind or graduation day in sight, but as dad would only bankroll her as long as she was a student, she'd become a professional student. Ashley was the most educated air head I had ever met, and the only good thing about meeting with her was that it meant that it would be another month before I had to meet with her again.

Ashley's meeting passed without incident, and when she finally bounced out, I had about twenty minutes before the Swan was scheduled. Jeremy Swanson, a.k.a. "the Swan", has a rap-sheet as long as Obama's stimulus bill. He was only 22, but has been in and out of state lock-up since he was 10. The Swan has been picked up on everything from M.I.P.s, to unregistered firearms, to possession of narcotics with intent to distribute. The phrase "wrong place at the wrong time" was invented for the Swan. It's not that he is such a bad guy at heart; he's just been lead astray by the wrong crowd.

The Swan's parents were Baptist missionaries. During his formative years, his parents were running a home for pregnant teens. Though the parents wanted the Swan to follow their example, he was more inclined to follow the examples of the young, unwed mothers and the boys who loved them. That exposure, combined with

the rigid tenets of the Baptist church that seemed, in the Swan's mind, invented to rebel against, there were really no other options for the Swan other than to take the societal "road less traveled" and become a juvenile delinquent. Then, four years ago, on his 18<sup>th</sup> birthday, he showed his commitment to becoming a full-fledged delinquent when he went to The Ink Spot, a local tattoo parlor, to get "Soldier", a local gang tattoo, emblazoned across his chest.

For the past 8 months I've held regular meetings with the Swan. He had shown some promise early on, but lately he's had trouble holding a job. In my experience, that's the first step in backsliding.

"Yo, Yo, Sid-Vicious, what's up, girl?" the Swan bellowed as he roared into my office as subtle as a freight train.

"Jeremy, you look like you're in a good mood. How's the job at the Alcron factory coming?"

"Sid, I had to quit that job, but I've got something else lined up."

"Jeremy, you know that the terms of your parole require you to maintain a steady job. Why did you quit? That was a great job with better benefits than I get!"

"Girl, that boss didn't show me *any* respect!"

"Did you deserve any? Did you show *him* respect?" I asked with skepticism in voice.

"Don't worry about it, Sid. I'm starting at the Ink Spot next week. I'm going to take appointments for them."

"You quit the factory to become a secretary? What are they going to pay you?"

"Tattoos."

After I convinced the Swan he had made a huge mistake, I spent 35 minutes on the phone with his foreman at the factory, and eventually, he agreed to take the Swan back if I fixed a few parking tickets for him. When the Swan finally left my office, he seemed humbled but no less energetic.

Glancing up at the clock, I realized that my next appointment would arrive in about 5 minutes. Colleen Woodward, 32, was one of my toughest cases to handle. She was married at the ripe old age of 16. Within two years, her high school sweetheart and husband, Glen Meckle, started to beat the snot out of her regularly. Before long, Glen was also tearing into their toddler, Andy. The violent rages toward Colleen and her son eventually progressed to routine torture sessions. The bastard enjoyed hearing Colleen beg and the baby cry. Colleen was a fighter though. One night she decided to fight back. Had Colleen stabbed Glen once or twice, she might have pulled off the self-defense plea her attorney had been working toward. Colleen had let the abuse go too long though. She had too much pent up anger. So the night she decided to defend herself, she went a little beyond mere defense. In the end, Glen ended up with 53 stab wounds—two in the chest, probably those two were in self-defense, and 51 in the back. Those 51 additional strikes are the reason Colleen was sent up for 25 years and did ten of them before she was up for parole. Since she had been a model prisoner, and her crime understandable to most people, Colleen was paroled four years ago and has been coming to see me ever since.

As Colleen walked into my office, the contrast between her plain face and vibrant dress was striking. One of Glen's biggest complaints about Colleen was that she had been "letting herself go" since the baby was born. To spite his memory, she refuses to wear make-up even now, but makes up for it with an abnormally colorful wardrobe. The result is a woman whose features seem almost swallowed by bold prints and loud colors.

"Sidney, you'll never guess what happened last week!" Colleen seemed unusually happy as she began without any prompting from me. Colleen really hadn't needed any help from me to get her life back on track after her release from prison, but as we needed something to talk about during our visits, she and I seemed more like old friends than parole officer and parolee.

Colleen and I talked for about an hour before she headed out. Locking up the office, I reflected that today had been an easy one, and I was grateful for that.