

Guillotine

By Mimi Mendes de Leon

There was always that one day at my grandmother's house in the Netherlands, that one day when the lazy rays of the sun set at night not to return the next day. On that one day of rain, the constant, bitter sheets of it, we were trapped in the guest house—a building we affectionately called the Stall—left to stare out the full length windows at the pool tarp being beaten down by the shower. Our bedrooms were all up in the loft of the old barn, and to stay in bed meant to hear the old wooden frame of the roof creak and groan under pressure. That left us in the foyer, a brown and musty space where we struggled to find a comfortable surface to curl up with our books. We even lit a fire once, but even the flames could not soften the room.

Eventually, we found a solution. In between sneaking bites of chocolate and waffles, my three siblings and I would gather along the long wooden table to play Guillotine. It was our favorite game, one we never travelled without. The small brown box that held the cards always was tucked away in a Ziploc bag in the depths of my parent's luggage. "Win by getting a head"—that was the tagline. The game was based on the Reign of Terror. Each card had the caricature of a member of French society, from the Piss Boy, who was only worth one point, to Marie and Louis themselves, who were each worth five. The goal was to collect as many of these "heads" as possible by moving them with action cards to the front of the line. 'Educational' is what my parents called it, but my siblings and I now see it as dark.

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In between the l's in Guillotine on the game's box was a blade. The letters were a bright red, and stretched out down the cover. It was a fairly accurate representation of a guillotine. The guillotines used by the French were painted red since the very first was used in 1792. Nicholas Jacques Pelletier—its first victim—wore a red shirt as well. Women in the crowd wore guillotine earrings specially designed for the event, and little wooden models were sold as toys to children. Yet despite the events popularity, the French seemed particularly determined not to see any blood.

Pelletier had to wait three months for that day, three months waiting for the National Assembly to decide whether or not to execute

him with a sword or this new invention. And then a little bit longer while they built the guillotine and painted it. From what is known of Pelletier, he was a common highwayman, the usual suspect in a usual crime. For Pelletier, it was the worst timing, destined by a judge to sit and wait for that red shirt.

A year later and Pelletier's executioner, Sanson, did not have to wait. At the height of the Terror, Sanson was responsible for three hundred executions within three days. This is the basis of the card game. And like the game we played, Sanson's executions moved quickly. Sanson could execute twelve people in thirteen minutes. On the splintering wood of the table in the Stall, cards slid across the table and into my siblings' hands. The three rows of four were swapped back and forth as everyone tried to get the highest cards to the front of the line. There was no wait, except in between days when the remaining cards would be shuffled and dealt into a new line, and then our pudgy little hands would again take the symbolic place of the bright red guillotine.

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"It is a certain kind of hell," Delbert Tibbs told the audience. We were sitting, crammed together in the lecture hall, at Denison University listening to Tibbs narrate his time on death row. I was a senior in college now, and it had been almost a decade since I last played Guillotine in the Stall. Tibbs was a part of the 'One for Ten' project: a group of exonerated death row inmates who educate people on the death penalty. Tibbs stood alongside Damon Thibodeaux and Joe D'Ambrosio in the front of the lecture hall. None wore suits, but muted flannels and button-downs that blended in more with the walls than the fall leaves outside the windows. The event was hosted by our school's Amnesty International group, and they had promoted it with sidewalk art and posters across campus. Students packed the room, sipping on the free coffee as a mid-day boost and packing their bags underneath chairs and tables along the sides of the room.

Tibbs had been on death row for two years before being exonerated, and remembers it in detail. His face aged on a diagonal, and now he described how each day added up only in his own mind, how structure simultaneously disappeared and defined his new life, he allowed the words to affect his entire face. He had not hardened; he was not a criminal. But he was not ignorant either, and he believed firmly in a hell that he had already experienced.

In a question and answer session, someone on the opposite side of the room asked how the three men avoided going mad. For D'Ambrosio, it took him twenty-two years to be exonerated—8,170 days. The number was memorized, and every time he said it, he tilted his face forward in anger. Although he had lost his hair in prison, his face had been unweathered by the elements, and he gave a genuine laugh in response to the student's question. All three of the men did. They nodded their heads and D'Ambrosio told us that you cannot avoid going mad on death row. 8,170 days, he said, all exactly the same. With no gossip or sporadic encounters, none of the small, spontaneous elements that separate one day from the next, complete isolation left one destined to moments of self-destruction. None of the three men said how they broke down. Instead they looked in each other's eyes and merely acknowledged that they did.

Listening in, I found a prideful part of myself believing that I would not fall prey to madness, that I could structure my days. I would read books, or work out, or learn a new skill, but watching the way D'Ambrosio's mouth turned up with every mention of the word 'freedom', I know that I would leave as he did, finding hidden parts of myself that haunt me.

Unoccupied time terrifies us. Baggage claims, elevators, grocery stores—all the places we wait without structure have found ways to distract us rather than have us be idle. The Houston airport used to be flooded with complaints about its baggage claim, even though the wait was only five to seven minutes. Rather than speeding up the baggage, in 2012 Houston re-routed its passengers so that it would take five to seven more minutes to walk from their gates to the claim area, and complaints nearly ceased. Elevators now have mirrors next to their doors, and grocery stores fill their checkout lines with magazines. These moments in our lives are small, yet we cannot happily fill them on our own. We crave structure, just as we crave freedom from it.

But death row does not have the benefit of mirrors or walkways. No one tries to distract you from your fate but yourself. Robespierre said "Terror is nothing else than justice, prompt, severe, inflexible." And Thibodeaux said that you cannot see the system until you step outside of it. He certainly did not. Around 5'8", with glasses and dimples, he told us that he was convicted in 1996 for the murder of his step-cousin. He had confessed to the crime after being held for eight hours. His confession did not match evidence found at the scene,

nor did the police find evidence to place him there. He had never been convicted of a crime before, none of the three men had, and fifteen years later his waiting ceased. You cannot not go mad, he told the crowd. He spoke with his hands in his pockets and his shoulders squared up close to his ears. You tap your hand against the steering wheel in traffic, flip through tabloids at the store, and ring your hands talking to yourself on death row.

Tibbs, Thibodeaux, and D'Ambrosio all knew their own innocence. The unstructured days in their cells were given a cause by this, an end goal. If they had faith, there was a path other than the one that led to that sea foam green chair. But there is dread in that too. Not just fear of noises in the night but sitting in the fluorescent glow of the cell as a prison tour takes a walk down death row and thinking, just for a second, that you might lose. That this may be the last year of your life, and you are trapped behind that door for tourists to gawk at.

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My brother, Andrew, and I used to free-play with the cards when the game became too monotonous. We found the cards more fun alive than dead with the deep frown of the Unpopular Judge and the glimmering teeth of the Fast Noble. In between our sneaking sugar cubes from the tea set, Marie Antoinette, in her purple lipstick and beauty mark, would be rescued by the brooding Master Spy as Robespierre tried to stop them.

Andrew and I had the right idea. Those cards were worthless waiting in line to be points in a player's hand. Where the real excitement lie was in having them interact with each other. But those cards on the table could be anyone, and it was in the Stall where we heard about a different type of waiting, one that made Guillotine start to fade from our lives.

We were several years older by then, or at least, we felt old. I was twelve, and my siblings were fourteen, ten, and eight. My grandmother had come to cook us dinner while my parents went out with some friends. She embraced our Americanness that night and had cooked us what was meant, we assumed, to be hamburgers, only they included very little cooking and a lot of red, red meat. My sister, Emilie, whispered not to eat them, that she would put them back on the stove after our grandmother left. But then our grandmother pulled a stool over from the bar. She sat, with her floral skirts hanging around her, at the head of the table, raised up from where we sat on

the benches. The lights from the kitchen behind her cast shadows over her face, and she opened up to tell us a story.

We were lucky, she said, to have never lived through the War. It was always the War, and never the World War II of our history books. She had been only a year or two older than me when the War started, when the Nazis swept through Holland. But her daily life did not change much. Men she had never seen before marched down the streets, but she still attended school, and went shopping, and waved goodbye as her father biked to work.

Her father was the director of the hospital, and each morning his narrow frame would join the mass of bikers peddling off through the streets of Amsterdam. After Nazi occupation, my grandmother's house had submerged in whispers. The whole city seemed to as those men they did not know became more and more frequent.

One day, my grandmother came home to a house deserted by whispers. It was silent as she stowed her bike in the shed, and walked down the hallway to greet her mother. The emptiness she had felt in the hallway grew when she saw her mother, who turned to her and asked her politely to bring her father lunch. It was a simple sack lunch, with bread and milk and cheese, but it was not a simple destination. My grandmother was not headed to the hospital, but to a Nazi headquarters, where her father had been taken that day. She brought it to him, and she remembers him being silent and gaunt, sitting there and drinking his milk. That was the last anyone saw of him. The Nazis would not answer any questions, and the family did not want to risk asking too many. They retreated back to their home, relying on hopes and prayers and waiting to see if he would return one day after the war.

More was whispered to my grandmother as the war went on. Her father had been using his position at the hospital to harbor prisoners of war and Jews by covering them in bandages and I.V.s to mask their identities. She heard her older sister leave the house, not to return for weeks with only more whispers and vague, hushed words. There were rumors that her father had been taken away to a camp, although my grandmother did not know what that meant. Other people reported to her mother that he was still in Amsterdam, in the headquarters. The family waited and waited for the War to end, and when the Canadians marched through Amsterdam, they waited again.

He never came home. My great-grandfather had disappeared, and while my grandmother could put together the pieces, she still

waited, even as she sat there in the Stall. Her round face and daunting cheekbones, the same ones my father had, sat there silently in the shadows for a few moments. The four of us glanced from her to our burgers, which, bun-less, were oozing red juices all across our plates. She continued on with her stories, talking until our plates were cleared and our stomachs ached from a combination of the raw meat and family history.

Two years later, and my grandmother's wait came to an end. Although I was now fourteen, I was still only allowed in the main house for formal dinners, but I have heard the whispers so many times that I can see it happen. A Dutch historical society visited Smeermaas to see my grandmother. In my head, they are a young man and a young woman, dressed like it is 1946 with pea coats and oxfords. They are gentle as the young man hands to my grandmother a laminated document. The young woman places her hand on my grandmother's shoulder. The papers were orders of execution for her father, my great-grandfather. The date was only a few days after my grandmother had last seen him.

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D'Ambrosio, Tibbs, and Thibodeaux all discussed this period after the wait as a wrestling match. No longer is the enemy external. The fight moves inside your head. D'Ambrosio and Tibbs recalled a special trouble with doors after exoneration. Doorknobs seemed like more of a freedom than picking a restaurant, but they would catch themselves, hovering a few feet from the door, unconsciously stopping for someone to open it for them. And their keys, they said. D'Ambrosio remembered the angry glares and annoyed glances he received for the first several weeks of freedom, all because he could not stop rubbing his keys in his hand or jingling them in his pocket. Keys meant authority, and now he had a complete set.

But there is still anger. My grandmother tells her story differently now. Now she is the last to see her father before the Nazis lined him up to be shot. And D'Ambrosio, a veteran, tours with the 'One for Ten' project because after fighting for freedom, his was taken, and now it is just the keys, the keys and a cell phone that holds as much memory as the last space ship he had watched on TV.

With the cartoon sketches spread along the cracked wooden table, skipping and cutting each other, Guillotine does not feel like a game of execution. Guillotine, Uno, Farmer's Bridge—they were all cards on the table. A way to pass time until we could venture out.

In reality, we were only playing Guillotine until the rain stopped, which in Holland was unpredictable. And at the height of the Reign of Terror, those who were beheaded were not waiting long either; not, at least, if you were nobility or royalty, those cards were always moved to the front of the line. They were worth more points. In the same way, those without means, or those perceived to be without means, get shuffled to the back of our system as well. We no longer believe in Robespierre's version of terror as justice, yet we still practice it. Playing guillotine taught me the names of the French Revolution, but it did not teach me about capital punishment. The cartoon faces only instructed me in the meaning of passing time, of being constructive, of being occupied. Laying along the matted fur of the benches Andrew and I took these caricatures out of the game and into a different story. But even our stories were full of violence, the bad guy cards with their furrowed foreheads and clenched jaws being whipped down from the table to the concrete floor, stirring up dust before settling under a layer of it until the next game was to be played.