Ninety Days

ShelliRae Spotts
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by ShelliRae Spotts

At six o’clock, on a smoky fall evening in September I planted pansies in my front yard as my twin brother reported to the county jail to serve a ninety-day sentence for charges stemming from “unethical business practices.” I did not hear about it until almost midnight, but it was an occurrence we had foreseen for weeks. He had spent the last month making provisions. He made sure his wife and children would be taken care of, called his six siblings to make sure we knew, witnessed the birth of his fifth child, and was gone.

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I know of many people who have gone to jail. Lindsay Lohan, Martha Stewart, Stephan Fry, Bill Gates. My father. Now my brother. I don’t know how to feel about this. My head hurts. My chest hurts.

I hurt.

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I remember specific moments so clearly, it is as if they just happened.

It is cold, even for December and the night lies heavy against my teenage brother as he huddles on the sidewalk. The lights are stark pools against the flat black night, illuminating the lot of cars guarded by a cold steel fence. Dad has gone to see if anyone will let them in, only for a moment, just to get the homework out of the old blue van parked in the corner. No one is there. It is locked—the gate closed against my brother’s need and my father’s pride. Then suddenly up he goes, my daring twin. Over the fence, along the line of cars, and into the side door, emerging moments later with a math book in his hands. It is a moment he will never forget. The embarrassment, the furtive back and forth, eyes watching, shame beating in every heartbeat for the father that could not pay the bills, for the cars repossessed, for the electricity unpaid, for the groceries eaked out of children’s babysitting money. It is a way of life we both try hard to put behind us, in radically different ways.

It has made me cautious, timid, inflexible. A saver of money, of clothes, of the unwanted and unneeded, of stuff. A cushion against the bad times. An inability to live in the good.

It has made him brave, a risk taker, an all-or-nothing money man determined to find his way to success, to more, to even more than more. And what now?
And from even earlier, when I was eight or nine. I remember the gray. The sky never seemed to clear, reflected in the faces of those around me. The whispered shadows in the corners of that long ago, the phone calls we were not supposed to hear. Business was bad. Don’t answer the phone. “No, he’s not here.” Round robin, a child’s game. Rob Peter, pay Paul, rob Paul, rob Paul. Do I remember when my father went to jail or is it a story I’ve only heard? It wasn’t long, a few days, a week, maybe two. Then I remember him on the phone in the corner of his room, shrunken and colorless in the red wing chair with the worn piping on the arms. He is crying, tears leaking down his face slowly. They too are defeated, an echo of the man. He doesn’t see me there, a child who has learned to be small, to stay in the background. “If I thought it would do any good, if I had any insurance at all I would throw myself off of a bridge.” I remember these words. Seared on my mind. Etched in granite the gray color of his face. How much do I remember, and how much have I created out of fear?

“Pack a bag, hurry, in the car.”
A sudden after-school drive.
The questions.
“When are we coming back?”
And the silence.
We never look back, we never go back.
I have never been back.

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I admire my brother. His courage, his strength. His determination. “Never. I will never live like this,” he would whisper in the dark of the unfinished room we shared as children. And now—he is a good man, a good brother, a good husband and father. My kids love to go to his house, the place with all the toys. But it is more than the toys. When he wants to talk to the children, he gets down, eye to eye with them. On their level. When he speaks, they listen. When he speaks, we all listen. It is what has made him successful in business, until now. The listening.

They always listen.

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There is a short story they made me read in high school—I don’t remember the name—but I hate it. The one with the small bird in the cage. “Let me out. I can’t get free. I can’t get free.”

He can’t get free.

I picture the poor bird beating against the bars of the cage, wings bruised and bloody.

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We had a parakeet around this time. Blue and yellow. Happy-looking, happy-sounding. I was cleaning the cage, outside. Who cleans a birdcage outside? I opened the door. Just opened it
and watched the bird fly away, a blue and yellow speck against the blue and yellow sky

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I don’t know where my parents had gone that night, but I was stuck with no way to get home. I was fourteen and taking music lessons with a professor on campus. I waited and waited, alone in an unfamiliar building, but no one came. Finally I called my brother, distraught over the lateness, the darkness, the aloneness of the hour. He rode his bike five miles across town, put me on the back seat, and pedaled us the five miles home again in the still dark night.

This is my picture of my brother.

Loyal. Reliable. Protective.

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My dad's financial and legal problems originated not in deliberate deceit, but in a relentless and unrealistic optimism, a belief that things would work out in the face of all indications to the contrary. He would promise someone payment, confident in the ability to meet his obligations, only to have reality intrude harshly on his world. He approached check writing in the same way, with very little care for the actual amount in his checking account, but an endless tally, a list of check marks, mental bills, and invoices tagged paid and unpaid.

His balance never quite meshed with reality.

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In ninety days you can plant a garden and watch it grow.

In ninety days you can begin a program to recover from drugs and alcohol.

In ninety days you can hot air balloon around the world.

In ninety days you miss 90 bedtimes, 270 meals at home, and thousands of unforgettable moments.

In ninety days a newborn learns to recognize its parents, to smile, to laugh. To roll over.

In ninety days the average heart beats nine million seventy-two thousand times.

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My father has been very matter of fact about my brother’s situation. Stalwart almost. He has been the practical one, the person my sister in law calls when she needs to talk to the lawyer, to take care of the kids, to get things done. He has set up phone accounts, commissary accounts, has called the jail every night. He jokes about it, the only one able to laugh. Or maybe he needs to. I can’t help thinking, what if he doesn’t laugh?

“He needs us,” he says.

“Even if he says he doesn’t.”

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I have never learned to spend money comfortably. The balance in the bank always seems more real than any physical need. My husband is exactly the opposite. He is the one who clothes our kids, buys the groceries, pays the school fees. All this while I watch the checking account dip lower and lower throughout the month, my anxiety increasing exponentially. It is a constant ledger in my head: Subtract, add, multiply, divide. Circling through the whispers in the night, trying to make it all fit; the bills, the needs, the breaths of want.

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Twins are a unique phenomenon, even the fraternal like my brother and I. There is strong anecdotal evidence that says that a twin shares an inherent understanding of their co-twin’s emotional state, an understanding that has even been labeled ESP, or telepathy. I have never experienced this phenomenon, the sense of knowing when my brother is suffering or hurt. It seems strangely egotistical to assume his feelings, to adopt his problems and pains as my own. To assume I know, or can comprehend with any degree of honesty, his feelings.

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The call came late that night as the family was winding down, the children and the house quiet in preparation for bed. He didn’t ask for me, talking instead to my husband.

So much of this experience has been second hand. My brother says, my father says, my husband says.

But I feel.

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No matter what he has done, and we were never really sure on that point, how could I get over the fact that my brother knew better? Not in some abstract moralistic sense of right and wrong, but in the absolute certainty of what happens to a family, of what impact it has on children. He has felt the fear, the insecurity, the shame and embarrassment, the denial, the messy convoluted whole of it. The fact that he would, no matter how inadvertently, visit the same down on the heads of his children, on his four sons, makes me incoherent with rage, bright red and hot against my chest. It rattles my faith, my sense that there is anything you can do to stop the endless cycle from repeating, again and again, an endless melody in fugue form, playing in tonal keys down the scale.

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I did not visit him, but in my mind I could see him, an amalgam of every bad prison movie ever made, dim lights flickering on orange jumpsuit. The flowers I planted in the fall faded, turned gray and indistinct, crumbled into dust, a musty perfume clinging to their softness and decay. I had wanted to take him something; my way of consoling, of offering comfort. To fuss with flowers in a cut glass vase, to fix food that no one will eat. But nothing is allowed into the prison. Nothing but letters full of the words I am unable to write.

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My friend and I are in the home of a neighbor, a young woman who has taken in her sister’s small boys while the sister serves time for drug distribution, selling “spice” out of the
backroom of a local tobacco shop. The story was big news at the time, a lead on all the local news programs, a shockwave through our small community.

She fumbles in the drawers of her kitchen as we visit, her long blond hair spilling in a messy braid down her back, a baby on her shoulder. We are uncomfortable, an awkward trio.

“What can we do?” my friend asks.

The tears come suddenly, filling her dark lined eyes, locked tight in my chest.

“There is nothing,” she says, as the baby begins to squirm in response to her mother’s distress.

“No one understands what it is like, to have everyone know,” she starts, and stops, calming the baby with soft pats and slight swings of her body.

She is wrong.

I understand. What it is like to have to walk in the shadow of another’s failures, to feel the weight of another’s actions. But I can’t speak. Instead I offer up empty condolences, punctuated by awkward silences, and in moments we will leave, and she never has to know, and neither does my friend, and I can go home. For really, there is nothing to say, and so we never really talk, but only sit together, a silent trio. Alone.

Together.

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I took my scout troop to visit the local police station, one of the requirements for passing their rank advancement a visit to a government location in the community. Our tour guide, Officer Friendly as he was called, was completely unprepared for the graphic nature of the eight-year-old imagination. Questions about guns and chases and blood and shooting ran rampant as we made our way through the mostly beige halls of what looked like an ordinary office building. Officers in blue and white uniforms, official business radiating in waves as they hurried away from the noise and the dirt, and the chaotic confusion surrounding us.

Two things stand out about that afternoon: the boys’ fascination with the dispatch office, with the immediacy of tragedy as they watched an officer receive a call and rush others to help; and the lock-up. The cells where they keep people for processing until they can be transported to the county jail. It was occupied, so we were not allowed to tour that area of the station, but in the dispatch office, there were closed circuit TV’s overhead that showed a solitary figure, blanket wrapped, lying on the bench. It was an indistinct silhouette, anonymous in a dark shroud, formless. Without height, weight, race, or gender.

And all I could think of was my brother. Had he sat there while others observed him from some room far away? Had he felt the weight of judgment in the eyes that watched, without ever revealing themselves to him? Had young boys, proud in the respectability of their scout uniforms, in the security of their lives, clamored to know what he was there for, what crime he had committed, what law he had broken?

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I did not see him until he was released, shortly before Christmas. The flowers of summer and fall were buried under the knee deep drifts of an early snowfall. To my surprise he looked good. He had lost forty pounds, and despite the lines on his face and the grey in his hair, he looked more like the brother I had grown up with than he had in years. Less jaded and more authentic. Less absent; more real.

There were still complications. Ankle bracelets and parole officers and family events that had to be reorganized, moved, and rearranged, allowing for distance and travel restrictions. There was the chance comment to my grandmother; how was I supposed to know she wasn’t to be told? But the truth was that after a relatively short time, he was home, and I can’t help but think of my neighbor’s sister and her sons, and the others who go to jail, and the people who love those other people who go to jail. I think of the months and the years and the decades; of the judges and the officers and the inmates. I think of the flowers, brown and grey under the weight of the snow, and of their roots growing deep and strong. And I think of the spring, the tender strands of green emerging from the frozen ground, thin and pale and translucent, and eager for the sun.

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