

Big Shoe Dance

On the Count: I found out on the fifty-third day of dating Lyle that he was going to jail. We had watched the season finale of *The Have and The Have Nots* and I pressed him to go out for drinks. I lived across the street from a casual place called Velvet Taco, so a beer with smoked poblano salsa and corn tortillas against the backdrop of the Reunion Tower seemed fair for having to watch a Tyler Perry production. Lyle rolled up his pants leg exposing a black device attached to his right ankle. He wiggled his finger between the thick plastic bracelet and his skin. “This my monitor,” he said and gave one of those inglorious half-smiles. I wasn’t shocked that he was in trouble with the law, nor was I alarmed by the black callus protruding from his leg. Strangely, all I felt was peace—finally, after almost three months of dating, he had revealed his flaw.

“I can’t drink,” Lyle said, “It records my blood alcohol level through my sweat glands.”

Another reason why I only seen him at night! Maybe he had lied about working the graveyard shift at a distribution facility. I started to become concerned about my imperceptibility, for all those years of schooling and that job I had in military to “observe,” how had I not seen that damn thing before?

“Don’t look like that,” he said, rolling his pants down, “It’s nonviolent.”

“Doesn’t matter,” I said, trying to ease his shame. Of course it did matter that he wasn’t a thief or murderer, but jail and Black men are simpatico, it comes with our experience. He told me that his lawyer and the District Attorney had tried to reach a deal but having a second-degree felony meant he had to serve a year in jail with five years of probation, in addition to paying restitution to the state.

“When do you leave?” I asked.

Lyle put his thumb to his mouth and sunk back into the couch. “Five days,” he mumbled. I heard him but I wanted him to own it for wasting the last few months of my life.

“What?” I asked.

“I get it,” he said, “I’m not trying to hold you down.”

Shep has a round face with a bald pointy-head. His white uniform swallows his small frame making him look like a little-boy wrapped in a white sheet. He stares at me while he delivers his testimony. I squirm and shift in my chair trying to get out of his line of sight. "I knew what I was doing," he yells. His voice is high-pitch and croaky and consumes the room. "I don't think about the time I've spent in jail, but I think about what I did every day." The room is still except for the three horseflies orbiting above us. The tiled floors are waxed so well you could see your shoes reflect. The chairs are arranged like a grade school assembly, and I sit alone in the last row. The guards are positioned behind me and I keep reminding myself not to turn around, that there's nothing to be afraid of.

It's June 2017, I'm sitting in the Cummins Unit, a 16,000-acre prison-farm operated by the Arkansas Department of Corrections. It's the first day of a two week "Death Row Facilities Across the South" tour with the Embrey Human Rights program. Last June, I gassed my car, headed east on I-20, with my friend, Chas. We spent a month on the road visiting plantations throughout central Louisiana. Chas lived in Pineville, or what people in the nearby city of Alexandria referred to as "across the river." I was investigating the creativity of the slaves, the tools they made in captivity, for a book idea. After a week into the trip, while trying to pry more information from a tour guide at the Melrose plantation, who seemed to be an expert on the slaves' happiness, Chas made a joke: "You'd have better luck talking to a prison inmate, she not telling you nothing."

John Henry "Shep" Sheppard, at 72, is the oldest prisoner in the unit. He leads the MTT, or "Making the Transition," panel that was established in 1985 by a group of confined men. Their goal: assist "new arrivals" on how to adjust to prison life as a way of survival. These days, the MTT panel is mostly called upon when middle school administrators decide to give kids "shock reality."

"These are my children," Shep said, smiling proudly, exposing his teeth.

4 Days to Report: Lyle and I decided that we would make the best of the measly days we had left. We budgeted time down to the second. I figured there was no sense in us departing with bad beef between us, besides he was going to jail for a year, and although we'd both be punished, he'd get the bad end of the stick. It seemed like ironic retribution.

We were at Zipper's Bar that evening when I discovered Lyle used drugs. I had ordered vodka with lime and swirled the red

sippy straw while Lyle held firm to his bottle of water. He bounced his head awkwardly offbeat to country western tunes. His wavy hair glistened under the strobe lights. I glided my finger from the bottom of my vodka glass to his side of the bar and rubbed the top of his hand. He jerked a little as if I had stung him.

“You’re not drinking?” I asked.

“Nah,” he chuckled.

I had thought we would get drunk and fuck all night assuming the dire circumstances. Disappointed, I gulped down what was left of my drink and nodded toward the patio exit.

Outside, Dallas Friday night traffic kept the hot wind in circulation—warm enough to want to strip naked while the vodka was doing its work. We sat across from one another under the dim patio lights. The fluorescent 7-Eleven across the street cast a perfect glow. Lyle lit a cigarette and passed it to me. I took a few pulls, because alcohol makes me crave it, and passed the cigarette back to him. Tires rolled by at a steady pace on the road, creating a rhythm with the faint bass from the club, circles of chatter and laughter.

“What’s on your mind?” I asked, breaking the silence between us.

“I’m embarrassed,” he said, “I can’t even enjoy you right.”

He didn’t look at my face the entire time as he explained his first DUI, how he had followed a guy to a small college in Hawkins when he was 18, how he didn’t know how to love so young, or how to drink and party. He’d tried to pledge Kappa and got pulled over on I-20 going to Fort Worth. He rambled, trying to connect the dots to trace his mistakes.

I told him I didn’t want to talk about the past. Time gave us a clean slate. I needed to close the distance between us. I imagined him going to the bar and ordering Tito’s with no filter—gulping it—and somehow, newly unshackled, we could discover authenticity. I needed something else to remember him by besides that black cancer attached to his ankle.

“One drink won’t hurt,” I interrupted.

“I’m worried about the fourth and fifth drink,” he snapped. He reached into his pocket and unraveled what appeared to be snot tissue and put what looked like a white pill in his mouth. He took a swig of water, “I’m good.”

On a farm off Libson Road ten miles west of El Dorado, Arkansas, Frank Willet went to work, just like he did every morning, leaving his wife, Annie Yocum Willet, at home. Their son, Buford, arrived some hours later to visit with his mother and

quickly realized she was not there. He became concerned about her wellbeing, remembering a prowler who had been in the barn the evening before. The kitchen stove had also been pulled from the wall, which seemed odd to him. Buford grabbed a flashlight and a gun and searched the barn. Around the house, Buford noticed "a man's footprints, barefoot tracks, and the track of a woman's wedge type heel." He then knocked on neighbors' doors and called relatives inquiring about Mrs. Willet's whereabouts. With no luck, Buford informed his dad, and they searched the woods voraciously before calling the police. However, it was Frank who discovered his wife's nude body in a shallow mud puddle covered with scratches, brusies, and other "evidence of violence." Frank told the police he walked up an old creek bed and followed the creek to a bridge that he could not cross, so he went around to the other side looked under the bridge and discovered her body. The autopsy would later reveal that Annie Willet had been raped, and that her death was caused by drowning. Once the police canvased the crime scene, they found "torn clothes, broken eyeglasses, a pair of yellow gloves, a woman's slip, a woman's shoe," and they cast a footprint from the mud near Annie's body.

In my mind, it's a hot and humid morning on July 1, 1964, in the Natural State. I envision Buford's eyes swelling with rage as soon as he realizes the yellow gloves belonged to "their tractor driver and farm hand," John Sheppard. Even worse, it was a Negro who had raped and drowned his 68-year-old mother.

Shep had secured a job on the Willet farm two weeks before the murder. He later told the police, "he had hidden in the barn overnight and put on some gloves and entered the house after Frank Willet went to work." Court records noted scratches on Shep's arm and blood on his shirt and pants.

Shep had told the officers that after he surprised Annie, he "hit her in the face with his fist" and "dragged her to the water hole" where he "held her head under water until she stopped kicking." Later that morning, Shep went to work for another farm three miles away. He was arrested that afternoon on his way home.

"About 30 minutes after the arrest, he was interviewed by Officer Taylor. Sheppard freely admitted his guilt, giving an account that dovetailed with the physical evidence already discovered," the case notes reported. However, the notes also revealed that Shep had originally denied committing the crime.

2 Days to Report: I had just finished running on Katy Trail and was lounging on the couch when Lyle appeared at my front door. He said he had finished his arrangements and was in my

area and he'd tried calling several times but the phone kept going to voicemail. I lied and told him my phone was dead, because revenge doesn't have to be grand.

"You wanna be adventurous?" he asked, taking off his shoes. For the first time, Lyle was wearing shorts, and that monitoring device had left the brown skin around his ankle beige. It was awkwardly obvious that it had been there, so I didn't question him regarding what happened to it.

"As long as it doesn't land me behind bars," I said.

Immediately I wished I could take those words back. Yet, deep down, I wanted to get into an argument. I needed to hear his reason for not telling me he was being caged sooner and not the reasons I told myself. The *carpi diem* mood had slowly dissipated over the days and the more I realized I'd never been on a *real* date with Lyle, the more I realized I'd never have him as a boyfriend without the justice system.

"Yes or no?" he asked, "I thought we agreed to make the best of these last days."

I felt obligated in a twisted kind of way, since Lyle was only guy I had been with in Dallas to honor my no-sex-until-three-months rule, and just when we had arrived at the okay-to-fuck-day, everything was suddenly complicated. His cheesy, cunning smile was cute, and I was curious as to what he had planned.

"I don't know," I said, playfully, "Yes!"

"You sure?" he asked. "No turning back."

He took something out his pocket and threw it on the coffee table—it slid to the end and stopped just before falling off. I picked it up; it was a small clear plastic bag with four blue pills in it.

"What the fuck is this" I asked.

"Relax," he said, "It's Molly."

I googled Molly: "often refers to pure crystalline powder from MDMA, usually sold in capsules." Lyle was now sitting on the couch. He leaned back into it and stretched his arms across the back.

"MDMA?" I threw the little bag at him, which landed in his lap.

"You act like you never had ecstasy before," he said. He took a pill out of the bag and placed it on his tongue. I wondered if this was how my Mom had been pressured to use drugs. Had she, too, been caught between honoring her word and trying to accommodate a man? He closed his eyes and mouth simultaneously and swallowed.

Thirty-minutes later my stomach had dropped into my pelvis. I felt the air tickle my nose-hairs as it traveled to my lungs. My body jittered like I was nervous, my jaw hurt, I was fatigued, and

my sight kept zooming in and out of focus, "How does this shit supposed to make me feel," I think I asked. And then we were dancing in our socks and underwear to Chicago house music. "You're rolling," I think he said.

We rolled to the kitchen where we drank water and smoked cigarettes. Then, we were back on the couch watching reruns of *The Have and Have Nots*. He explained how "brilliant the cinematography was," and how Tyler had captured "perfect shots" of the characters' facial emotions, "Right here," he said, pausing the show, "It's dramatic." I was impressed that he understood cinematography and I turned the television off. We talked for hours about trivial things and drank water, orange juice, and smoked more cigarettes.

We each took the second molly in my bed, mesmerized by the ceiling fan. This one took less convincing because the mood was good, and I no longer wanted to have sex—not totally confident that I'd be able to control what would happen. We held hands and listened to the smooth jazz radio from the Pandora app on his phone. In that moment, I understood why the drug was so popular: no worries, smooth floating. And then I was pulled down like a balloon losing altitude.

"I'm sorry I didn't say anything," Lyle said, releasing my hand so he could scratch his discolored ankle, "I didn't know how."

Then he told me about his second DUI. He was depressed and heartbroken and struggling to get over his ex-boyfriend. "There were days I could just end it," he said. My mind spun. His baritone voice was blending well with the flutes and trombones coming from his phone.

I squeezed his hand and didn't utter a word as he navigated me through his late twenties and early thirties. His bitterness towards his dad for being incarcerated for eight years, leaving him to take care of his mother, his fear of planes and regret for not traveling outside of Texas, the unhealed resentment towards his mother for the things she did for money.

"This the last one," he said, "I'm done drinking."

I lay there trying to find the best way to tell him goodbye, that I was not willing to sacrifice a year of my life while he went to jail, but my legs were numb, not that tingling numbness that you get when your feet fall asleep, this numb was good and painless and I enjoyed it.

I heard the fire alarm from my phone going off but ignored it and went back to sleep. When I did wake up, my phone was glowing like an ornament. I dragged myself out of bed and made my way to the bathroom sink. I splashed water on my face and

tried to recall the last two days. I refused to believe I had slept an entire day away. I took an Advil and hauled my feeble body back into bed. I had fifteen missed calls: eight from Lyle, two from Chas, and a few other numbers I did not recognize.

I called Chas because Lyle's phone was probably in that room where the Deputy stored people's personal belongings when they reported as sentenced. Chas was babbling about this new project, that he was commissioned to display his paintings at Hotel Modern in New Orleans. Then, out of nowhere, I confessed to Chas that I had used molly. "Bitch," he said, "That shit puts holes in your brain."

I hung up the phone and googled "Side Effects of Molly." After an hour of reading MD blogs and My Molly Experiences, exploring the reported side effects, the diagnosed side effects, and even the potential side effects, there were no holes in my brain. Although my skull felt like it was broken and glued together again, the only hole I was left with was one in my heart after reading the sticky note on my headboard: "Thanks for the adventure. I'll write soon, Lyle."

On appeal at the Arkansas Supreme Court, in 1965, Shep's new attorney, George Howard, argued that Shep did not initially receive a fair trial and that his confession of guilt was inadmissible. According to Howard, the case was widely popular across Union County and newspapers and radios had formed a narrative of the crime, making the jury pool biased. Four Negroes and two whites were disqualified because they had professed to the court that they were against the death penalty. The attorney argued Shep "is of such low mentality" that he was incapable of making an admissible confession "or of intelligently refusing to request the aid of counsel." Although the State Hospital records show that Shep was committed from August 1960-October 1962, and although he was found to have "mild, idiopathic, mental deficiency," with an Intelligence Quotient score "putting him in the class of moron," and witnesses had testified about Shep's mental deficiencies, it was determined that he was "not mentally ill to the degree of legal irresponsibility." The defense's only win was to exclude the defendant's boots from being linked to the crime scene evidence, since they were deemed a violation of Shep's privilege against self-incrimination.

Time Served: A month after Lyle is gone, I struggle to decipher what is real. I slack on my running. The only exercise I get is the eighty-nine steps from my back door to my mailbox and back.

The fact that I have to wait for him to contact me because the county hasn't assigned him to a unit makes me irrational. Now, I monitor the mailbox.

It has been forty-two days and I receive a letter from Lyle. He informs me that he has tried to write sooner, but he has been moved to several jails across the county, and he's not sure where he will land, and that I need to register with the state so I could be "approved" to visit. A week later, I get another letter: "This letter is to let you know I am being transferred again."

I receive two more "transferred letters" and when he finally calls, ten weeks after he has reported, he asks me to send him money for commissary, find "approved" books for him to read, and get in contact with his mother. I send him one hundred dollars, and have no luck contacting his mother. Then, the next time he calls, more demands: money for storage fees, commissary, and more books. I send him more money for commissary, pay his storage fees, and get "approved" to visit.

Seventy-four days after Lyle reported, I drive to Huntsville for our first visit. I've gained more than twenty pounds, I haven't had a haircut in months, and I struggle to keep a smile on my face when I see him. He's wearing a white sweatshirt with white pants and blue "karate-kid" shoes. He has a ring around his head from his durag. His hair looks freshly cut, and I'm lost for words. "You look good considering where you are," I say.

"Did you bring quarters for snacks?" Lyle ask.

I empty ten dollars in quarters from my pocket. He lists his favorite vending machine snacks on a mini notebook-pad sheet, and I wait in line with other visitors to fulfill his requests. Before I know it, our hour is over and all we talked about was his hair and all we did was snack on junk food. I say, "I'm not driving here anymore." He's nonchalant, shrugs his shoulders.

Six months after Lyle reported, I stop accepting his calls. I stop waiting for letters.

Shep concludes his MTT speech and makes his way around the room to shake each visitor's hand, thanking us for listening, thanking us for coming. When he approaches me, I extend my hand first, and we hang on to one another as though we are life friends, as though his twenty-minute spiel is enough to bind us. And then, the hand-holding goes too long and I yank my hand from his grip. I smile and tap his shoulder, "Thank you for sharing your story."

On the bus everyone is quiet. Rick, our tour sponsor, encourages us to write down our experiences for the travel blog. I'm lost

in the endless soybean fields as we ride down the country road. I think about if Shep will remember me. Did the sincerity and love transfer from our handshake? I am agitated that I care for him, that there is no *why* he has killed Annie Willet, and that I did not see him as a violent murderer, but as a sick child unable to comprehend that he will be buried in the Cummins Unit Cemetery. I close my eyes and try to think of something that will make me smile.

There's an old white man with gray hair wearing a blue "Witness to Innocence" tee shirt waving as the bus arrives in the hotel parking lot. He leans on his thin wooden cane and ashes his cigarette into the grass.

"How was the prison?" he asks to no specific person, as we unload our bags from under the bus. Rick gives him a warm hug, "It's good to see you, Gary."

We arrange the hotel lobby chairs and couches into a circle around Gary Drinkard and listen as he shares how he spent five years on Alabama's death row before being exonerated. He blows his nose with a red bandanna shoves it in his front pocket as best he can while sitting. He was sentenced to death for the robbery and murder of a 65-year-old automotive junk dealer despite being at home at the time of the murders and suffering from a debilitating back injury. "These old slave states," he says, "they want to kill people and I don't understand it."

Gary is standing alone outside the hotel waiting for his ride. I take out a cigarette and walk outside and stand beside him. "Got a light?" He gives me the lighter and flicks the half-smoked cigarette he's working on into the ground and steps on it. I try not to get caught staring too long at the Mickey Mouse jailhouse tattoo on his forearm.

"I couldn't imagine being on death row for a crime I didn't commit," I say, afraid to ask him what creative things he did while waiting to die, afraid that I'd appear self-serving and insensitive to his experience if I ask the wrong question.

"You learn to do the dance" he says, holding out his hand for his lighter.

I flame up the lighter and cup it. Gary puts his cigarette in his mouth, brings his head towards my hands, lights his cigarette, and blows out the smoke.

"When you in the legal system," he says, "Everybody's doing the dance. The prosecutor needs to convict. The defense needs to acquit. Victims' families need closure. And the public don't want murderers on the streets. Then, when you in the jail, the inmates become trustees. They learned to do the dance on the guards. The

guards do the dance on the staff. The inmates do the dance on they families. I had to learn to dance too, if I wanted to survive.”

In the beginning: It’s a wet August day in 2015, and there is no indication that the rain will slow down.

I arrive at the gym at a time when no one in their right mind would drive in this weather. I make my way to the cardio room and begin to stretch before a long slow run on a treadmill. I’m sitting on the floor with my right leg extended. I lean forward and reach for my toes, close my eyes and count for thirty seconds. I open my eyes to a pair of black and white Turtle Dove Adidas in front of me. These are high-quality running shoes, and as *Runner’s World’s* reviewer notes, “They have an open grid pattern that adapts to your foot’s movement and makes for a smoother transition from heel-strike to toe-off.”

I know the owner has to be a more serious runner than me because those shoes cost well over two thousand dollars, and only a serious runner, more serious than me, will pay for them. I can’t help myself. “Are those *real* Turtle Doves?” I ask, pointing at the shoes.

He takes out his earbuds, “They are so comfortable.” He lifts his foot off the floor and shows off his shoes.

“I’m sure they were worth the money,” I say, slightly jealous.

He chuckles, “So worth it.”

I untie and retie my worn-out shoes and mount the treadmill. He gets on another treadmill nearby and we both run at our own pace often glancing in each other’s direction until the glances are uncomfortable. I stop peeping on him but I feel his eyes on me, which makes the temptation not to look damn near impossible. Then suddenly, he’s gone.

I am drenched in sweat when I walk out gym. Somehow, we converge in the parking lot and I give him the peace sign as I’m walking to my car. The rain has slowed but it is still drizzling, “Nice talking to you,” he says.

I nod my head and keep walking towards my car. And then it hits me, this guy must have been waiting to say goodbye so I pullout out my phone and share my contact info with him because surely a guy wearing two-thousand dollar shoes fits within my standards.

Once I make it home, I receive a text, “Hey this Lyle, from the gym.”