JONAH

by
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A young man of twenty, who has spent five of those twenty years "locked up in some place or another" tells his true story.

We talked to the boy in a cell at Bridewell.[1] You could see the free world through the bars of the cell window and the boy seemed enthralled by the sight of the sun bathing the green, growing things and the flow of movement in the free world beyond the wall.

"It looks pretty out there," the boy said. "It looks real nice."

There is nothing pretty within the old walls of Bridewell; the buildings are rank with decay, as are many of the men imprisoned there, and the grounds are barren. Only rarely, on a brief visit to the front buildings, does an inmate get a view of the flowers and shrubbery cultivated to please the eye of a passer-by.

"It looks pretty out there. . . ."

When you hear something like that from a young man who is locked up, it grows in your mind like a gigantic echo. For you know that a hundred thousand times a day—in all the jails and reformatories and prisons—someone is saying or thinking something like that as he looks through the cell bars at the world outside.

The boy, whom we called "Jonah," had engaged in frightful struggles. He was a large, slow-moving boy, with big, watery, brown eyes set deep in the black plainness of his sensitive face. He had a large head and seemed utterly destitute; he had the manner of someone who is friendless and resigned to the emptiness of his existence.

Yet, as we sat there with him, there

1. *Bridewell,* Cook County House of Corrections (a division of Cook County Jail) in Chicago, Illinois.

was no sign of the crises that bubbled within him.

"I was born in Tennessee and I have been in Chicago since I was one year old. Now I am twenty."

"When was the first time you were in trouble?"

"When I was a little kid, eight or nine. It started out with playin' hooky from school and stuff like that, and stayin' out late at night, and they picked me up and took me to Juvenile."

"Did they put you in the Home itself? Juvenile?"

"Oh, no. Well, every time I went to Juvenile, they would let me go; aah, my mother came to get me, you know. And so it was something like playin', you know, 'cause I always felt that my mother would come and get me. But after a while things didn't turn out that way. . . . They started keepin' me at Juvenile. Then I went to Parental School and I was there a month and I got out and they sent me back again and so on. Well, I got with some friends of mine and we all stole a motor scooter and when we got picked up I was the only one that got caught. So . . . well, I went back to Parental School and then I got picked up with some more friends of mine for burglary, but only two of us got caught—there was my friend and I—and we went to St. Charles."[2]

"What did you burglarize?"

"It was a A & P store."

"What did you get?"

"Well, we didn't get anything. We got caught. Attemptin'."

"And they gave you time at St. Charles?"

"Well, they didn't give me any time, but I was there for about three months and I ran away. It is easy to run away."

"And how old were you then?"

"I was fourteen. It was six years ago."

"What happened after that?"

"Well, when we ran away from St. Charles I was with three other guys and we stole a Buick and we ran out of gas. And we started to walk on the highway and we got took to the Kane County jail and the Warden of St. Charles—well—he didn't want to take us back. He said we was what they calls 'incorrigibles.' So we had to stay in jail, so we got sentenced to one-to-three each and that was in Sheridan."[3]

"What did you get that for? Stealing the car?"

"Yes."

"What did you do, put a jumper on it?"

"No, it was a Buick and the ignition key was left in."

"So you were going on fifteen when you went down to Sheridan."

"Yes."

2. *St. Charles,* the Illinois State Training School for Boys in St. Charles, Illinois.

3. *Sheridan,* a detention center similar to St. Charles in Sheridan, Illinois.

"Do you like Sheridan better than you like St. Charles?"

"Well, it's a lot cleaner than St. Charles and they feed you a little better there and it's more *secure* than St. Charles."

"All right. When did you get out of there? Sheridan?"

"Well, I made the parole from Sheridan five years ago and I was out five months, and I went back. It was for stealin' a car that I went back and I was supposed to have robbed a guy, but that I didn't do. And so they sentenced me to two-to-four, running concurrently with one-to-three; so I done four years—no, three years and a few months. And then I was released."

"How old were you then?"

"I was nineteen."

"A year ago."

"Yes. Less."

". . . Did you ever have a job?"

"Well, I had a job and I've had odd jobs like dishwasher and being a bus boy. But I mean the jobs were hard to get."

"You were a bus boy?"

"At the Edgewater Beach Hotel."

"Well, that ought to have paid pretty well."

"You make good tips."

"So why didn't you keep that job?"

"Well, I wanted to go into the service. I tried to join and they said I couldn't because of my record, that I had committed a felony. And they said something about the Army not passing any waivers. So I went to my draft board and I enlisted to be drafted and I was drafted. And then I got my papers and . . . well, I got my papers and I got into this trouble and when I was supposed to take my physical test—I was in jail and so I couldn't. And, well, I didn't get to go take my test, you know."

"Why were you in jail this time?"

"Well, it's for stealin' an auto, but I was with the boy that stole it. So, as they say, I'm just as guilty as he is."

"You're taking a fall for being in a stolen auto, is that what you're saying?"

"Yes."

"You think you're going up again?"

"I don't know, I haven't any idea."

"You are almost twenty and you've spent . . . you've spent about five years of your life locked up in one place or another?"

"Yes."

"You mentioned when we began to talk . . . looking through the bars at the sun shining and the green things out there——"

"It makes you feel bad by bein' in, you know. It makes you want to be out there. And all kinds of things run through your mind. Like, say, you say, 'Well, there might be some hope.' And then again you say, 'Well, I'll probably be out there again.' And so you just set and wait to find out what happens. But doing time is hard on everybody. There isn't anyone

can say he can do good time. Like I been in jail here three weeks and it seems like maybe three years."

"But whether you beat this or take a fall, you get out only to get in again; you're out and then you're in again. Is this for the rest of your life?"

"Well, I've talked to lots of guys that have done time, you know, and these guys think like this: they say, 'The people don't care what you do, you know. People don't care nothin' about you.' And they say there's only one thing for them to do because it's all they know, and if they keep goin' to jail and comin' out, then they haven't got a chance to learn to do anything else. Burglars and such."

"Car thieves too?"

"Well, a guy that steals a car now, that's something altogether a little different. Like these young kids, they steal cars because it's exciting, you know. And then there's some of them steal cars because they have to go places. And some only steal cars because, you know, it's something like a business."

"You mean, you can sell parts of them?"

"Yes."

"And nobody argues if you have four new tires off a new Cadillac?"

"That's right."

"You can peddle them?"

"They steal the hub caps off them. The radio you can take out. That's about all. And the battery."

"You can always peddle these things?"

"Yeah, and the people they buy 'em. But then when you get caught and they hear about it, well, they always say, 'I always knew he was a bad egg.' They down you, when they're the ones that actually buy the stuff."

"Down you?"

"Yeah, when you are in trouble. Then they are not going to help to get you out of trouble, but yet they'll buy the stuff that you got."

"And they know it's hot?"

"They know it's hot."

"Gives you a funny view of human nature?"

"Well, people are very strange. They are very hard to understand, you know, and everybody's mind just don't work the same way."

"You think about people when you are serving time?"

"You do. Yes, you do."

"Does it make a boy coming out of a place like Sheridan sort of . . ." I was searching for the word ". . . desperate?"

"Well," he thought it over, "I wouldn't say that. Rather, I could say—Well, an institution cannot change a boy, you know, no matter what they do to him. And not people. I mean, I've had it pretty rough, you know, every place I've been. But when you get out, it is different. The boy himself has got to decide if he wants to change, you know. Because the mind,

that's a very tricky thing. What's in the mind, it's what people have you to believe and it is the people around you who teach you certain things. And you learn from everybody that you're around. At Sheridan, when I left there . . . . Well, I mean, there was times when I was there that I believe I could actually have killed with my bare hands for what had happened, for what had been done to me, the things I never had and the punishment, I mean. For instance, I tried to escape there and I was punished for it. It wasn't any brutal stuff, you know, just thrown in a dungeon; it was something like a dungeon. Well, they were feeding me bread and milk and every third day you would get a full meal. It was in the wintertime and it was pretty cold and I didn't have any clothes. . . . The guards, well, they made things hard on me and I felt that I had a grudge against everybody and you can kill with your bare hands—— But then when you get out, somehow it is different." He turned away and looked through the window.

". . . What kind of a home life did you have?"

"Well, I've never had a father."

"Never had a father?"

"Well, I mean, my father—— Well, when I was small, well, he just didn't come around. I never knew him."

"Is he still living?"

"Yes."

"Do you ever see him?"

"Well, I have seen him . . . . Well, now I'm almost twenty and I've seen him around six times, I'll say, in all those years."

"Did he ever help you?"

"No, never."

"In any way at all?"

"No, he never bought me no socks, clothes, nothing."

"Give you any money?"

"No."

"When was the last time you saw him?"

". . . It was this year, around about three months ago."

"How did you happen to see him then?"

"Well, my stepmother died and I went over to see him and ask him how she died and all that, you know. And so, I mean, we didn't have too many words to speak to each other. I mean, I have a dislike for him, you know; I don't know why, but it's just that way."

"Because he neglected you?"

"Well—yes, because when I was small, well, he never done anything for me; then too, I think if I would have had a father, I think I wouldn't have been in this trouble. Well, I mean, all kids, you know, they need both of their parents, their father *and* their mother. In most cases you know, the kid's in trouble—well, they haven't got no father or no mother. If there is a divorce and it breaks up their home—the kid feels bad behind that, feels

like he's not wanted. Like the rest of the kids have something you haven't got, you know. Like some kids can say, 'My father, aah, have done this for me and he've took me here' and you can't say it. And my own father have done this to me."

"Do you hate your father?"

"Well, I mean, that's a pretty hard question to answer, you know, because he *is* my father. But I have a dislike for him, yes."

". . . When was the last time you had a gun in your hand?"

"This year."

"Where?"

"Well, my mother had got a gun. I stole it out of the house."

"What kind of a gun is it?"

"It's a .38."

"Did you ever point that gun at anybody?"

"Yes."

"Who?"

"Well, it was in my pocket and he didn't know it."

"Who?"

"My father."

"You pointed the gun at your father?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Well, I was drunk. I don't know what made me feel that way. But it was right after I got out of jail and she called him because I didn't know where he lived. And so when he came to pick me up in the car, he wanted me to spend the night with him. So all sorts of things run through my mind, but actually I wanted to kill him for what I believed he had caused. I started to kill him, you know, but I keep on thinking, you know, and . . . well, I didn't kill him."

"You had the gun on him for a long time?"

"Yes, all the time he was drivin'. But he didn't know."

"How long?"

"Well, about close to a half hour."

"With the gun pointed at him?"

"Well, it was in my coat pocket. Layin' across my lap, while I was plannin', tryin' to decide if I should shoot him or not, you know."

"Did he ever know that you had the gun?"

"He never knew."

"And what was it that kept you from killing him?"

"Well, when you go to kill somebody— Well, my mind just drifted to the Bible and stuff like that and so I just remember, you know, that it says if you kill a person that you go to hell, you know. And so, well, I just thought to myself, 'No, I can't do that.' But I still had it in my mind that I would kill him for what I think he done to me. But then, I mean, we get to his house and I went into his house and then I see some kids that are my half-brothers and sisters and that changed my mind entirely, you know, because now, you know, I knew I couldn't

do it. . . . I looked at all them little kids and I thought, 'Well, if I kill him, they will have to go through the same thing that I've been through.' So, you know, I knew it wouldn't be fair if I should kill their father. And, I mean, I kept the gun in my pocket and I played with my half-brothers and sisters and then I went back home, you know, to the house of my mother. And then I feel peculiar and feel good that I have not killed my father and I read the Bible a little bit and that part where it say about the little children, the things you should do for them, and the part where it say whatsoever you do for whosoever the Lord will repay and I have ask the Lord will He help me and fix me up so I stay out of jail, spit me out of here like Jonah was spat out of his whale, and I don't know how the Lord will work it out for me but I feel good now, inside, and it will be all right. I feel this boy will be all right."

Comment

1. Did you feel sympathy for Jonah as you read this selection? Explain.

2. *a.* What are some of the bad influences in Jonah's life?

   b. What are some of the good influences in Jonah's life and some good qualities that he possesses?

3. Some people believe that the only way to treat people who commit crimes is to put them in jail. But Jonah says that "an institution cannot change a boy . . . no matter what they do to him. . . . And not people. . . . The boy himself has got to decide if he wants to change. . . ." Do you think that prison is the best way of dealing with all convicted criminals? Explain.

4. Look up the word *hypocrisy* in the Glossary. Explain why the people who bought Jonah's stolen auto parts were hypocritical in their actions.

5. In your opinion, what are Jonah's chances of changing and leading a productive life when he is released from jail? Explain.

6. "Jonah" is not the real name of the main character in this selection but a fictitious name given to disguise his real identity. He compares himself to the biblical Jonah, though, at the end of the selection. In what ways is he like the biblical Jonah?