

NEITHER RHYME NOR RIOT

By

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“Can you make someone die by wishing him dead?” Corrections Sergeant Frieda Ferguson twisted a plastic ballpoint pen between white-knuckled fingers. “How can he blame me for something that happened on my weekend off? I don’t get it.”

The pen snapped in two. “Ah! What a scrawny neck you have, Harry.” Frieda tossed the pieces over her shoulder in the general direction of the wastebasket. “Do I provoke him somehow, or does he hate me on general principles? My shift supervisor. He’s supposed to be on my side, but he’s more of a threat to me than my houseful of criminals would even want to be. Bah!” Frieda threw her hands in the air. “What a bass-ackward way to run a prison.”

Frieda was slender, not very tall. More than a few white strands showed in her short brown hair. She was dressed neatly in jeans, shirt, and sweater vest. Jogging and working out kept her weight down and her strength up, and she felt confident and competent in her job as housing officer in the minimum security correctional facility. Jogging was also supposed to relieve stress, so why was she feeling so stressed?

“It only happens to people who let themselves get pushed around,” Hendricks said. “Harry’s a pervert. When you gonna start fighting back?” Officer Hendricks was slouched in the orange plastic upholstered chair on the other side of Frieda’s desk, one

booted foot atop his other knee. “He’s got the hots for you, and he’s trying to get your attention. You know, the old pigtail in the inkwell trick.”

“Phooey! He’s destroying my career.”

“For twenty-five thou I’ll waste the S.O.B. for you.” Hendricks took a long swallow from a can of soda that boasted *Twice the Caffeine*. His heavy leather jacket hung open, exposing a Harley Davidson motif on a black T-shirt over an ample chest and belly. A walkie-talkie was attached to one side of his studded belt. A ring of ten or fifteen keys on a metal clip, with another ring of a dozen or so swinging freely beneath them, was fastened to his belt on the other side. “Twenty-five’s a good price for a hit, ain’t it? With that much cash I could ride away from this eff-hole.”

Frieda snorted. “Couldn’t tell you,” she said. “But we’d both be in the hoosegow before you could get out of town.”

Hendricks drained his can and hunched forward, wiping his sandy mustache and beard with a beefy hand. He stared hard at her. “Where are you now?” he asked.

Frieda took a deep breath. “Ahh yes.” She said. “Work Furlough in reverse.” She shuddered, shaking away the mood. “I’d better go count my chickens,” she said, rising from the battered swivel chair. “You know, it’s been really weird in here tonight. I’ve been whining about my past problems, but I may have some future ones.” She searched through the desk drawer for another pen, took up a clipboard and flashlight, waited at the office door for the patrol officer to exit, then carefully locked the door.

“Weird how?”

“It’s so quiet. Eyes move, but mouths don’t. Maybe this reprimand has me paranoid, but I feel like I’m going to step into a trap that everyone knows about but me.”

“You want me to stay?”

“Nah, I’m probably just over-sensitive.”

“I’ll stop again in a little while. Watch your back, Freddie.” Hendricks gave her a thumbs-up sign and stomped out into the frosty night. He would patrol the grounds and look in on other housing officers, checking back with Frieda more often than usual.

The time was two a.m. Or more properly, zero two hundred hours.

Frieda entered the TV room. Three men who had been talking quietly, fell silent and watched television with blank, bored expressions. The glow from the screen was the only light in the room. Frieda watched them ignore her, a faint smile in her eyes. She noted their presence with little checkmarks on the chart on her clipboard. Without looking up she said, “My calculator does that when I move it away from the window.”

Three faces turned toward her. “Say what?” said Manny, the man closest to Frieda.

“Fade blank.”

The men relaxed somewhat, but Frieda could feel the tension. Or was it expectation?

“UH, hi-ya, Fred,” said Otis, who sat in back. He called her Fred Fergustone and was doing his Barney imitation.

Why not? “Yabba dabba doo,” Frieda said softly, and made a point of looking at her wristwatch. At two o’clock the men were supposed to be in their rooms.

Frieda went from one door to another, raising the privacy curtain that covered the small glass window to observe the man within. If the room was dark, she shone her flashlight beam on the sleeping form. Number six was empty, door open, light on. Otis's room.

Each resident cottage had approximately the same floor plan. The day room was at one end of a central corridor, the dining area at the other end. Six inmate rooms, a bathroom, and the office lined the downstairs corridor. A stairway at each end gave access to the second floor with nineteen inmate rooms and two bathrooms.

Frieda checked the rear exit and basement doors to see that they were secure, then went upstairs, taking care to make no noise.

She wore rubber-soled running shoes and held her keys tightly so they wouldn't jingle. She stopped at the top and listened to the faint sound of a door closing. Stepping from the lighted stairwell into gloom, she scanned the hall. Nothing moved.

In number fifteen, Homer sat at his desk braiding cornrows in his hair. He winked at Frieda in the mirror. Frieda marveled at the perfection of the hairstyle—tiny braids, perfectly straight partings. Aha. She remembered the sound she'd heard. Homer hadn't been doing this by himself. She moved to the open door of the bathroom next to Homer's room and rapped twice—her code, which meant *call out your room number or I'll come in to see who you are*.

"Twenty," said a voice from within one of the three stalls.

"Thanks." Frieda finished counting and waited outside room twenty.

In a few minutes a young man shuffled from the bathroom in rubber shower thongs clutching his striped cotton robe, which didn't quite cover knobby knees and bowed legs.

Frieda stood aside while he unlocked his door. Benny was young—barely eighteen, short, with a slight build, almost delicate. His face wore what Frieda called his clown look. His dark eyes held fear and resignation mingled with hope, and Frieda wondered what his childhood had been like. She wanted to move him to a room downstairs where he might be a little safer, but the security supervisors had denied her request. Frieda wasn't surprised. She had observed a pattern of behavior among the staff that allowed homosexual violence to occur, then “busted” it with anti-gay violence of their own. She tried not to worry about Benny. This was minimum security. These men were on the honor system, preparing for release.

Benny looked brightly at Frieda, his clown smile pasted on.

“You do neat work, Benny,” she said. “Nice straight lines.”

Benny's smile stayed in place while his eyes grew sad. He'd been busted. The rules didn't allow one inmate to visit another's room after ten p.m.

Frieda left him standing there to ponder his transgression and went back to room fifteen. She knocked and opened the door in one quick movement. “You can finish by yourself?”

“I ain't makin' no noise,” Homer said, grinning broadly. His television set flashed silent pictures, the sound turned completely off. Although he pretended innocence, Homer knew that Frieda was referring to his hair.

“You should’ve asked first, Homer. Tomorrow night when you get in from work, we need to talk.” Homer worked an evening shift in a restaurant in the nearby city. He had all day to fix his hair.

Frieda ran lightly down the stairs into the TV room. She sat down in a chair that gave her a view of the length of the hall and waited patiently. It was past two now, and the three men were not yet in their rooms. Frieda didn’t like to remind them. She wanted them to discipline themselves, but now and then they would test her. She could be patient.

The three men rose as one and walked out. Otis went to the bathroom down the hall. Manny and John plodded upstairs. Frieda turned off the television as the phone in the office began to ring. “Ferguson, Five,” she said into the phone.

“Where the hell you been?” It was Officer Ron Aikens in the security office. “I been callin’ for half an hour.”

“Counting,” Frieda said shortly. Half hour, my foot.

“Me ‘n the lieutenant was worried somethin’ happened to you.”

“And you weren’t here to watch, oh my.”

“Your safety is our first concern,” Ron said sweetly.

“Horsefeathers. What do you want?”

“What every man-jack in this institution and the world at large wants, Baby.”

Frieda waited without comment.

“Tenant wants a special count,” Ron said finally. “Make sure you see skin, not just humps.” He cackled wickedly. “Bet you see a lot of humps when you’re counting.” He hung up, cutting off his own bellow of laughter.

Clipboard in hand again, Frieda opened wide both glass paneled doors of the empty TV room and turned on the lights, then ran upstairs. Manny and John walked slowly toward their rooms from the bathroom, toothbrushes in hand.

“Night, Miss Frieda,” the older man said. John had a quiet manner, always courteous. He’d been in the system for a long time. Frieda knew he had committed several murders, but he did his time calmly and had been given trustee status in other more secure institutions. His quiet manner had finally earned him the privilege of minimum security custody.

John entered his room and closed the door. He was a ruthless man in many ways. Ruthless but honorable, Frieda felt. According to his reputation, he never interfered in any man’s business unless that man attempted to cheat or betray him, and he would never betray a friend even to save himself. Many a security officer had tried to get John sent back to a more secure institution. Some had even tried to set him up. So far, he’d been too clever for them.

Frieda respected John and was not afraid of him. She thought how frighteningly ironic it was that she should feel less threat from twenty-four felons led by a man like John than from some of her co-workers and superiors. The inmates were all definitely more courteous, she thought, recalling Ron Aikens’ crude suggestion. And sadly, Ron

wasn't the only officer who acted that way towards the women officers. He was the most boorish, though. Lieutenant Almost was treacherous but not obnoxious.

Manny hesitated outside the door to his room and watched her with hooded eyes. "Special count?"

She met his eyes briefly, nodded, and continued along the hall, carefully checking each room and marking her chart.

Manny followed. "Something happen?"

"I don't know yet," Frieda said. Her eyes held his for a moment, then slid to the intercom box staring like a Cyclops from the wall. From the security office, the supervisors could listen in to the cottages to determine whether an officer needed assistance, since their only means of communication was the telephone in the office. Lieutenant Almost listened so he could hear something he could use against an officer. Almost didn't work with his subordinates, he waged war on them.

Manny winked. He always knew everything that was happening in the entire institution. Whatever had prompted the special count, Frieda was sure he knew all about it.

Frieda hoped she wouldn't be blamed for whatever it was. Hendricks was right. She should start fighting back. She'd call a union rep in the morning. She wondered how wars were won if military officers also treated their subordinates and the enemy as one.

John's door was open about four inches. No light showed. Frieda had watched him enter just minutes before, but she shone her flashlight through the glass panel. John

was fully clothed, sitting on the edge of his bed, hunched forward, his hands between his knees. He didn't look up.

Downstairs in his room, Otis waited for Frieda, his door open. He had put pink foam rollers in his hair and covered it with a plastic cap. "Walk on cat feet," he said softly.

"I try." Frieda reached to close the door.

"Cat feet," he repeated, looking grave.

Frieda frowned and nodded.

"Night, Fred," Otis said.

"Night, Barney."

Otis was warning her to protect herself, to watch her back, just as Hendricks had. Something was going to happen, and Otis, John and Manny knew about it.

Frieda telephoned her count to Ron Aikens in the security office. "Twenty-five present, twenty-five total."

"Tenant's sending an officer to your house," Ron said. "To help out," he added sarcastically.

"Good."

"Good? I thought you liked to be alone with your twenty-five *veer-isle* men."

"How would I notice a flyspeck in the pepper?" Frieda hung up, and the phone rang again immediately.

It was Ed in Cottage Nine. "What's the special count for, you know?" As usual, Ed was munching on something. "Wait a minute," he said before she could reply. Then,

“Hendricks just came in. He said there’s a van in the parking lot that wasn’t there when Vehicle Patrol last checked. Nobody in it, in the front anyway. They can’t see in the back. You okay?” he asked. “You’re not saying much.”

“Ron said Harry’s sending me a man.”

“Hoo! He’s not coming himself? I’d think he’d be right there to protect you if he thinks there’s going to be trouble.” Ed paused. “Or to do you in. Come to think of it, I’m never sure which it is that he wants. Does he love you or hate you?” When Frieda didn’t answer, he added, “You’re awfully quiet tonight. You sure you’re okay?” he asked again.

“I’m listening.”

“To what?”

“Nothing. Total silence. This place has been holding its breath since I got here. When we all start to breathe, you’ll think it’s a tornado.”

“You’ve got a sixth sense. I’d be too spooked to go upstairs if I was that tuned in. I’d have to come in soused every night like old George.”

“How could you save yourself if you were soused?”

“At least I wouldn’t feel the shiv when it plunged into my back.”

“I’m going to cruise the halls, Ed. If doomsday is creeping up, I want to be out there where I can see it.” Frieda rang off.

The lights were still on in the TV room. Frieda shut them off and stood, invisible, behind the door, listening. Through the windows she could see the road and several other

cottages. She saw the patrol vehicle stop and discharge Lieutenant Almost. Heaven help me, she prayed.

The cottage door opened and creaked shut on its closing mechanism. Still hidden behind the door, she watched the lieutenant step into the hall. He was short, a little overweight, and full of his own importance. He had a wife who was some kind of public official, and teenage children. He was at least ten years younger than Frieda, who would never see forty-four again. Ed and Hendricks were right about Harry Almost's ambivalence. He vacillated between protecting her and persecuting her, both of which caused her to lose credibility on the job. What have I done to deserve such devotion? She wondered.

Harry looked both ways without seeing Frieda, went to the office door, and, finding it locked, continued toward the dining room and into the back hall. Frieda ran swiftly up the front stairs while Almost panted heavily up the back stairs. She ducked into the nearest bathroom and listened to the swish, swish of cloth rubbing cloth on heavy thighs as Almost walked along the hall.

The phone began ringing in the office downstairs. Frieda stepped into the hall directly in front of Almost. "Lieutenant," she said in a respectful greeting, smiling at his startled look. Before he could speak, she wheeled and ran lightly down to the office and the ringing telephone.

It was Ron. "If 'Tenant's there, tell him that Sam in Two thinks he saw something moving through the woods in back, heading your way. Expecting someone?"

"I'll tell him," Frieda said flatly.

Ron hooted. “He’s there? That sly mother... Said he was going to Ten.” Frieda held the phone toward the lieutenant, who had followed her into the office. Ron’s voice was clearly audible in the small room.

Almost took the receiver, then held up his hand as Frieda started to leave the office. She waited in the doorway listening, not to the phone conversation, but to the silence in the building.

The clock said two fifty a.m.

A door slammed, the sound echoing through the quiet. Angry voices blasted forth, spewing filth as the speakers assaulted one another with words. Another door slammed. The sound of blows, flesh against flesh, grunts, and the sound of scuffling rose amid the curses.

Frieda made a movement toward the stairs, but Almost leaped up and grabbed her arm. He threw her back towards the office and scuttled up the stairs. Off balance, Frieda struck her head on the corner of the door jamb. She blinked and rubbed her face, trying to force away the cold blackness that threatened to engulf her. Something about this disturbance bothered her. Something seemed unnatural, out of sync. But her head hurt, she was having trouble focusing her eyes, and she wasn’t able to identify the thing that puzzled her.

Ron phoned again. “Tenant hung up on me. You having a party there or what?”

“Send some muscle with cuffs, Ron.” Frieda was annoyed. Ron should be on the radio getting help. Unless the same thing was happening in every cottage. That would be

interesting, she thought vaguely, stifling a giggle. She was beginning to feel nauseated, and concentrated on controlling the spasms in her throat.

The disturbance was moving downstairs. Lieutenant Almost shouted, “Get help!” Frieda looked out the door in time to see a powerful black fist ram toward a frizzy blond face. The face ducked. The fist hit Almost in the head, the force of the blow raising his feet off the stair. He sailed down and across the hall, where his head struck the wall. He fell heavily to the floor and lay still.

In the silence that followed, Frieda stared at the two men. Strangers. They didn’t live in Cottage Five. That’s what had seemed wrong—Frieda hadn’t recognized the voices. She wondered if anyone upstairs was hurt. Should she check? Should she guard the lieutenant: Should she protect herself? She mentally flipped a three-sided coin. It evaporated in the air. To her astonishment, like twin jesters, one black, one white, the two men winked in unison, gave the thumbs-up sign, and walked quickly down the hall. Frieda heard the back door close. They would disappear into the woods behind the cottage.

Frieda looked at the clock in the hall. Only about five minutes had passed since the first door had slammed upstairs. She shook her head in disbelief and winced at the pain, then knelt to check the lieutenant’s pulse.

Otis came from his room yawning and stopped some distance from where Harry Almost lay. “Dead?” he asked

Frieda moved her head carefully from side to side.

“Too bad.” He returned to his room and closed the door.

“That van pulled out about five minutes ago, Aikens said nervously when Frieda called to order an ambulance. “Same time the crap started in your house. What the hell is going on?”

“When you find out, let me know, Frieda said flatly. “Get someone in here to watch the lieutenant. I’m going upstairs to see if there’s any damage.”

Frieda checked every room, opening each door and speaking the name of the man inside. If there was no response, she turned the light on and shook the man awake. Some had actually slept through the noise. She opened John’s door. “John?”

“Take care, Miss Frieda,” he said from the darkness.

When she reached Manny’s door, before she could speak, he asked, “He dead?”

Frieda paused. “No,” she told him. She finished checking the rooms and went downstairs. No one was hurt. There was no damage. The entire fight has been a put-on. An act. And Otis, John, and Manny were deliberately letting her know that they knew about it. It didn’t make sense. Why take such a risk? It could’ve been, might still be, murder.

Officer Hendricks was squatting near the lieutenant, his fingers lightly holding Almost’s wrist. When he saw Frieda, he stood and, grinning wickedly, drew back one large booted foot, aiming it toward the lieutenant’s head. He shrugged and said, “You okay? You look kind of green.” He looked closer. “There’s blood on your face. Were you in the fight?”

“Lieutenant threw me aside. Cracked my head against the corner here.” Frieda put her hand to her head. “Wow, nice lump.”

“Better let the medics look t you,” Hendricks cautioned.

Ambulance attendants and two more officers clumped in. The officers went upstairs. Frieda left the lieutenant’s care to the others, swallowed some aspirin, and began writing the report. “Just the facts, Ma’am.” The cliché from the old mystery series taunted her as she wrote, and it occurred to her that the warnings from the men had nothing to do with her safety. She had been in no danger. She’d been warned so she could protect herself from the administration by being careful what she said about the incident.

That senseless flash of insight must be from the blow to her head, she thought. But she could see clearly how to avoid the kind of tar pit Lieutenant Almost had her trapped in. It was so simple. Everyone in the corrections business seemed to expect everyone else to be vague and clueless. She’d always tried to be sensible and reasonable. But she could be vague, and she would start now.

“Nobody’s going to believe any of this,” she said to Hendricks. She told him what had happened and described the men. “It was a perfectly staged drama. Choreographed, actually, like a dance. I don’t believe it myself. And I was here for the previews.” She didn’t mention the subtle warnings from Otis and the others. She’d already told him about her skin-crawl feelings. Frieda recalled the thumbs-up sign the two men had made and wondered for a second if Hendricks knew them and might be part of the conspiracy. But he couldn’t be. This hadn’t been a spur of the moment plan after their conversation earlier. “Be careful what you wish for,” Frieda said, more to herself than to Hendricks. “I wonder who those men were and who organized this. I’ll probably

never know,” she said, staring past him. Her headache was getting worse. She began filling out an injury/accident form. “Should we be trying to find out how those two got in here?”

“You should be going to the hospital to make sure you don’t have a concussion.” Hendricks stepped out into the hallway and spoke briefly to the medics. “It’s not our job to investigate,” he reminded her. “They’ll be calling the sheriff’s office. If you mess up their crime scene, you’ll be in trouble for sure. Almost probably unlocked that door himself so he could write you up for leaving it open. He’s done it before.”

“Maybe you’re right. But during an alert?”

“Maybe he planned this whole thing so he could ride to the rescue and be some kind of hero for you.”

“Yuk.”

“Or maybe it was supposed to happen just the way it did. Could be someone meant to kill him. The man’s gotta have enemies. He’s done some heavy damage to a lot of officers and convicts over the years.”

“If this were planned to happen to Almost, how would they know he’d be in this cottage at this time?” Frieda asked. “Oh,” she said, knowing the answer.

“What? I’ve been wondering that, too.”

“We’re so predictable. What happens when vehicle patrol finds a strange van in the lot in the middle of the night? We do a special count, and security is doubled at most cottages.”

“Aha! And who is likely to come to your cottage? Dirty Harry, of course. The whole institution would expect him to be here.” He thought about it for a while. “You know, you must have some very clever friends.” Hendricks looked at her with new admiration. “Let’s hope nobody else figures this out.”

“Oh God. Don’t even think it, Hendricks. The gossip’d have me servicing every man in here, and they’d say I’d put the guys up to bumping Almost off. If that kind of rumor gets started, they’d close this whole cottage down. And tar-and-feather me. Got. I’d have to leave the state. Wouldn’t that make a juicy story, though? Why are men so anxious to believe the women only work here for access to men? Do they think we’re so hard up? Don’t they have lives of their own? Are they just dogs? Sorry.”

“No offense. You’re right on all counts. Probably the deed was done for the good of society and not specially for you,” Hendricks said. “I wish I’d thought of it. He may die yet.”

“I was just thinking that someone could stand in the dark in a corner of any room in here without my flashlight beam’s picking him out. We really take a lot for granted.”

The medics came into the office just then to examine Frieda’s head. “Hospital,” they agreed.

“Don’t worry about the house, Fred,” Hendricks said, following Frieda out to the ambulance. “I’ll keep an eye on it. And don’t come back before you’re ready,” he called. “The war ain’t over yet. You’ll need a clear head.”

Frieda wasn’t worried about the house. She’d always felt that even though security had a certain control of institutions, the inmates had the real power. They could

take care of themselves. Maybe they'd explain all this to her when she got back. Or maybe not.

Otis was standing by the office door when Hendricks returned. "Fred's a good kid," he said. "But she don't know nuthin' 'bout war."

"Could be that's why she's a good kid." Hendricks looked over the reports Frieda had written, smiling at the dry, factual statements, so different from the colorful reports she usually wrote. "She's learning, man," he said. "She'll be okay."

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