PATTY PREWITT

KILLING ME

BETTY TURNED her face toward me, took a deep breath, and began. Ron's blood spread around me, she whispered. I fell to my knees on the floor beside him. The day before. Just one day before we had dined at our favorite barbecue joint. Had enjoyed each other. Truly enjoyed. He loved ribs. I loved him.

She paused, but the nervous movement of her hands told me how difficult this was for her. She wiped away her tears with a wad of rough state-issue toilet paper, repeatedly tucked her hair behind an ear, adjusted and readjusted her state-issue khakis, wrung her hands, and wiped her tears away again. I waited for her to continue. If we weren't in prison, I would have crossed the room to sit next to her, but two on the same bunk is considered a "sexual" in prison and possibly a trip to the hole for at least ten days. Even with the door closed, conversations in the hall echoed loudly, so I leaned toward her to hear. It was rare for us to find ourselves alone in this small cell that sadly resembles a junkyard. No, more like a basement bedroom in a cable TV episode of *Hoarders*—with a barred window. Close quarters make congeniality difficult. If a top bunk girl jumps down while the woman in the bunk below is also in the process of getting out of her bunk, injuries and flaring tempers are guaranteed.

I've been in prison for nearly four decades, and this was far from the first confession I'd ever heard. Everyone knows I would never betray a confidence, but Betty had always been tight-lipped. She had never before talked about what brought her to prison even though we'd known each other for more than a decade. I had assumed she had been convicted of murder. You don't get thirty years for possession. I know. I got fifty years for killing my husband. The difference between Betty and me: I didn't do it.

Betty was pushing sixty. Her dark hair did not betray her age, and I could tell that she'd been beautiful. She still was. Her big brown eyes were sharp and her skin smooth. She reminded me of a plumper version of Lena Horne. As they say in prison, "Black don't crack." She and Ron had been married and divorced when they met at the St. Louis Ford plant in the early '90s, where she'd worked as a welder for decades. He was a floor supervisor. Their kids all had families of their own. They both owned their own homes, so neither were looking for a caretaker or

financial stability, a nurse or a purse. But Betty and Ron had one major problem. They were both alcoholics.

Dayrooms closed! Go to your cells! Get ready for count! A man's voice squawked over the PA system. The announcement caused our other four cellmates to rush back into our cell from their dayroom card game. These small cells were designed for four people, but the business of prison is booming, so we are on top of each other. Literally. Between the six bunks, the stand-up lockers, the footlockers, and everyone's stuff piled on every surface including the floor, draped over every chair, and hanging from every locker hook, six is claustrophobic confinement.

The stench has become a major player on its own, adding to the dumpster-like closeness, because two of our most recent additions, short-time druggies, exhibit subpar hygiene. Our cell reeks of unwashed plastic bowls, days-old cold wet ramen soup, nasty crotch, aged urine, soured bedding, crusty feet, and blood-soaked sanitary napkins. Evidently not all mothers are as demanding about cleanliness as mine. It isn't easy to keep an old farmhouse neat and practically spotless, but my mom demanded it in her good-natured way. But then again not all these girls had mothers. I lived with a fat pimply poorly tattooed kid I called Pork Chop because she was always hungry. She had been raised by her meth-cook dad in a rusty trailer hidden deep in a brushy Ozark woods. When she returned to our cell after a quick shower, I remarked that she must have left her washcloth. Pork Chop smiled that she never used a washcloth, so I preached the gospel about folds "down there" and how scrubbing those parts will feel good. After her next shower, she returned to the cell as a grinning convert to washcloths.

Maybe I can get these cellies to clean up like Pork Chop. Betty and I will be forced to call a come-to-Jesus room meeting later today to initiate a decontamination. As the only adults in the cell, we've joined forces before. But not right now.

Betty sunk into her bunk in silence while the four young gamblers prattled on to me, talking over each other, about who just went to the hole for a fight, what's for chow and who found a roach in their breakfast grits, who just rolled back to prison and why, and who has what drugs. Betty wouldn't talk about anything this private in front of the others. Gossip is the lifeblood of prison. As I half-listened to these fools, I looked at Betty and my mind wandered to other women throughout my many years inside who had told me about the years of violent, irrational, and unwarranted abuse they had survived. Few

prisoners have escaped cruelty at the hands of a supposed loved one.

A few months ago a skinny anorexic-looking freckled redhead who ate like a horse divulged that she and her three siblings were routinely locked in a farm shed with only a loaf of bread and two buckets. One full of water. The other for a toilet. Her parents left this pathetic quartet, all under eight, for days. Timidly smiling a jagged rot-tooth smile and hugging herself while she rocked to and fro on her top bunk, she admitted that prison was wonderful. Three hots and a cot was Luann's idea of heaven.

Count clear, the same harsh voice over the intercom announced. The Uno players hurried to the dayroom to reclaim their table. I glanced at Betty to see if she wanted to talk more. With the kids out, this was her chance to confide. The sun was out, and I wondered if we would be allowed to go out to the yard, too. While staring at the floor and with fidgety hands, Betty picked up where she left off.

We shouldn't have been drinking, she said. You're thinking how stupid we was, but we couldn't stop. We tried. We honestly tried. Alcohol was really bad for Ron, ya know. He'd get crazy mad and tear shit up. He broke lamps and dishes. Furniture. Like a fool I'd try to stop him, so he'd knock me out of the way. Then I'd get mad and fight back. Dear God, we was so stupid. I was so stupid.

I couldn't take it, so I got pills for anxiety from a doctor. They seemed to help a little. I was told not to drink when taking them. Drink alcohol, ya know. I knew better.

I hid the bruises from Marcellus and the other kids. Embarrassing, ya know. See Ron wasn't the kids' father, and they didn't really like him. They still thought their dad and I might get back together, should get back together, but that was never going to happen. So I was always defending him. But Ron's kids didn't exactly welcome me with open arms. I think they was afraid I'd get their inheritance. I don't even know how that works. This was long before I ever heard of pre-nups, ya know. They, my kids and his kids, they didn't understand that we really loved each other. We did love each other.

Betty paused, gazed out the window between the bars. Seeing something out there that she had no words for or was afraid to name. I wasn't sure if she had finished. I sat without speaking, waited for the story to continue. The telling was for her. I didn't need to know. In fact I didn't want to know. The poison that comes with pain is hard to swallow. I wonder how priests do it. And bartenders. And me?

How do I do it? Here I am, the confessor of killers and by jury's decision a convicted killer myself, while in truth I am a fake, an impostor. I did not murder my husband, my high school sweetheart. Juries don't always get it right, and rarely do the guilty choose a jury trial. They take a plea. Professional criminals know that a jury will hang you. I've heard it said that all convicts claim innocence, but that's not true. Prisoners will admit their sins with a grin and a shit-happens shrug. I, too, admit my sins, but murder isn't one of them.

My innocence holds me apart from the rest. That doesn't mean that I don't sympathize with these women who have taken a life. My heart breaks with each story of treachery and trauma. These women were hurt by those they loved, by those who should have cherished them. How can anyone come to terms with that?

I am reminded of Eve, a woman who did time with me long ago. She was into body building and was good at it. With her thick Gabor-like accent and a toss of her naturally blonde hair, this petite spitfire swore she could beef me up but gave up on me after six months of grueling weight training. Thank God. I tried to tell her that I'm stuck being long and lean.

Eve had married a soldier she barely knew. She was Yugoslavian or Romanian, something Eastern European, and married this guy overseas when he was in the army. Eve had this notion that in America everything would be wonderful like in the movies. Her husband was a violent man who beat her regularly. She had a long history at the ER with broken bones from "falling down the stairs." This terror went on for years until the night she'd had enough. She'd miscarried, lost the baby she'd protected for months, so during a beating she grabbed a knife and wildly ended his abuse. Even though she was beaten bloody when the cops arrived, the cops *she* had called, she was charged with murder and served about fifteen years of her life inside with me. She could have paroled years sooner, but her mother-in-law fought tooth and nail to keep her in prison. This obsession with body building was most likely the direct result of the abuse. Eve was never going to be physically hurt again. At least not without a fight.

Bitch! Which one of you bitches is in my washer? Right outside our door Dallas screamed at whoever had jumped her laundry time. Using the washing machine when someone else was signed up will certainly bring mayhem. *Bitch*, she screamed again as she fell through the door and into our cell nearly crashing onto my cheap little expensive TV. She

yelled that she was pushed. I pushed her right back out into the hall and used my mad momma voice to warn the world that nobody had better break my two hundred dollar TV or they'd have bigger troubles than they bargained for. I slammed our door and angrily threw myself back on my bunk. Betty was so consumed by her memories she picked up where she left off as if nothing had happened.

I really did love Ron, Betty said. When he was sober, he was fine. Great. Saturday morning at AA this one gal said it so good. She said that she stayed with her drunk man because he was a good man sober. I guess we are fools for thinking that they will change, stop drinking or drugging, and become good full-time. We just hang on to an idea of what they can be.

I was just as bad, though. I would drink with him. It all didn't seem so crazy when I was drinking, too. The beatings didn't hurt so bad when I was drunk. God help me.

Betty's eyes moved back to the window, and she stopped talking. Sat frozen. Another murderer that I shared a cell with long ago had been married to a man who became a cop. They were college students when they met, but he flunked out while Lucy earned a degree in biochemistry. Her husband started using the drugs he confiscated from the people he arrested. During a drunken binge, he pulled his service revolver and threatened to kill her and the baby. They fought, he took a bullet. I asked her how a trained cop let himself get shot, but he was out of his mind with anger, alcohol, and drugs. Someone in the building called the cops who found Lucy and the baby both hysterical and the apartment trashed. Lucy swears the cops who answered the call staged the scene to look like she had shot him while he was in bed. I read the trial transcript, and an expert testified that the blood splatters weren't consistent with that theory. The jury evidently believed the responding cops over the forensic crime scientist.

Her in-laws took custody of the boy. Lucy mailed pictures and stories to him nearly every day for all those years, even though she never knew if he received her missives. Even with all that heartache, Lucy, tall, thin, blue-eyed with sandy blonde hair, had a great sense of humor. Sharp as a tack. Resourceful. In those days the skunky marijuana smoke was thick in the evenings, so Lucy tacked wet towels to the back of the cell door and rolled towels along the space at the bottom. Currently the addicts smoke K2 using two batteries and the wire from the sewing kit needle threader to get a spark. I was top bunk above her in a tiny cell, and we shared my

nine-inch TV. I crocheted gifts for my kids while Lucy, the comedian, gave a running commentary of the shows.

Her nights were the worst. She'd wake me screaming and begging for her life, then sob into her pillow the rest of the night. These night terrors went on like clockwork and interrupted our sleep for years until I was transferred away from her to another prison. I've lost touch with Lucy, but I pray she has found a way to find peace. I also pray her now-grown son has found her. That miracle would do so much to heal her wounds.

Betty muttered Oh God which roused me from my thoughts. She turned to me and froze. I'd seen that very look before. It's the mix of guilt, remorse, hurt, and regret that battered women can wear when they remember. When they return to agonizing flashbacks of their husbands.

Because of their similarly haunted brown eyes, in that moment she reminded me of Charlotte, one of my first prison friends, who had already served more than eight years when I arrived in prison. Charlotte was a pretty brunette with big brown eyes and a genuine smile unless her husband was mentioned. Her life was Ozark-country hard. Her step-grandfather had sexually molested her since she could remember. Charlotte married at fourteen. That shocked me. I wasn't even dating at fourteen. The old saying about jumping from the frying pan into the fire applied to this decision to wed so young and to this older Vietnam vet who was a county cop. Married life for Charlotte was a cycle of beatings and making up—producing two babies. The only good that came out of those years. A boyfriend got in the mix, and the husband was shot. She wasn't sorry he was dead, but she definitely was sorry about the way it happened and that she was serving decades more than the boyfriend shooter.

One of our young cellmates burst into the room giggling obnoxiously. She was flattered and thrilled that one of the girls who poses as a boy with a buzz cut and sagging pants had been overtly flirting with her. She jumped in Betty's face while begging for a bag of jelly beans as an offering to help seal the deal: I'll pay you back next week! Promise! You're a doll, Betty Boop!

That interruption jolted Betty from her reverie, and she continued. When I took those pills and drank with Ron, I would black out. I honestly can't remember. I can't remember what happened after he got his gun. I was fighting back. He got so angry that he got his handgun. The sight of it made me crazy mad, and we fought hard, ya know. We were punching each other. I can't remember the gun going off. It makes no

sense. The sound of a shot fired in the house would be loud, don't you think? All I remember is looking at him on the floor. Not fighting anymore. Not moving. With blood all over his chest. My legs gave out, and I crumpled down beside his body in his blood. His blood. So much blood.

I loved him. How can something awful like this happen when you love someone?

That question hung for a moment between us. That question with no answer ended her story. Betty smiled shyly, eyes down, embarrassed. As she stood up, she pulled her shoulders back in a brave posture and reached into her stand-up locker, pulled out a plastic bowl, plastic spoon, and a package of dry instant noodles. As she left our cell to make her way to the microwave in the dayroom, I took a deep breath. So much pain is contained within the razor-wired fence of this prison. I pray this confession can ease her burden in some way. No amount of soul-searing guilt can rewrite the past, and some, like veterans of combat, may never ever move on. I fear that's the case with Deborah.

Deborah was also a functioning alcoholic, but while babysitting her grandson, she ran out of booze. She carefully strapped him in the car seat and took off to the liquor store. A terrible crash killed the toddler and rendered Deborah nearly paralyzed. Never have I known an inmate more racked with guilt and remorse than she. Although she's free now, Deborah will never be free of the unrelenting pain she caused to everyone she loves.

Prison is designed to punish us, but in truth we are much better at punishing ourselves than the state could ever be. I could have accepted a plea bargain that would have freed me before 1990. Because of my stupid choice to stand on the truth, my children continue to be orphans for all these decades. I live with that guilt—a different kind of guilt than my prisoner friends, but corrosive guilt nonetheless. But I can't speak for everyone.

There was Edith. I never knew a murderer who was so perfectly pleased that she'd snuffed out a life. By the time I moved into a cell with Edith, she was ancient and had had a couple of strokes. She walked with great difficulty while holding her left arm close to her ribs. That was one stubborn lady, though. The washer and dryer in our housing unit were upstairs. Our cell wasn't. I offered over and over to do her laundry for her, but no. Edith would take nearly a painful hour hobbling up one stair at a time while hugging her mesh laundry bag. Then there was the agonizing and riskier trip back down. Bullheaded. Since she was well

educated, she ran the library all by herself. In the '80s qualified inmates were assigned real staff jobs. For instance, our main nurse was an inmate with an LPN license. Just because she'd poisoned three husbands did not prevent her from taking care of us. The education supervisor's secretary had carried her father's severed head around in a bowling ball bag. At least that's the prison lore. I never had the courage to ask if it were true.

In the evenings, Edith would bring out some sort of Little Debbie snack cake for each of us, and we'd visit. One night over an oatmeal pie and a cup of instant coffee heated with a stinger, Edith regaled me with the story of her crime. With a gleam in her pale gray eye, she confided, "He was cheating on me. Had for many years, but that day I'd had enough. I followed him to these apartments and waited outside in the car until he was finished. I saw him coming out through the double doors with that satisfied post-coitus smirk on his face, so I crept around to the other side of his Mercedes and popped up just as he rounded the left headlight. You should have seen the look on his face then. Priceless. He stared at the Luger in my hand. His gun. He knew what was about to happen. With gritted teeth, I sneered, 'You'll never cheat on me again.' And he didn't." Then Edith threw her head back and cackled like a joyful Wicked Witch of the West, which caused me to join in even though I was more shocked than amused.

Life is pretty much all about attitude, and Edith had a great outlook. Although they were rich, she'd suffered throughout her faithless marriage and decided to suffer no more. When she died peacefully a few years after she paroled, one of her sons kindly wrote me. I still smile when I think of that lady. She's the only killer to affect me like that. Edith is also the only prisoner who looked me straight in the eye and told me point blank that I was not a murderer. She made that judgment call decades before my innocence was advertised in the media and on the Dr. Phil show. She said that the way I spoke lovingly about my husband and kids and our lives together that she could tell that I would never, under any circumstances, have been capable of harming any of them. She was right.

Now that I'm about the same old age Edith was when we were cellies, I understand her insight. I can size up an inmate in less than thirty seconds. Meanwhile, killers pass through this prison, and I, the high priest in this prison confessional, remain.