

Thirty Seconds

by Keith U.

I get by on thirty seconds of each day.

For those thirty seconds, I endure the other twenty three hours and fifty nine and one-half minutes.

Thirty seconds keep me alive.

Nothing about my life is my own.

Nothing.

When I go to bed. What time I wake up. When I eat. What I eat. When I shower. What I wear. When I am allowed into the yard and how long I am allowed to linger — which, on a good day, is just long enough to reintroduce myself to that stranger the sun, and steal a few gasps of air that is not thick with despair.

I choose nothing, control nothing, have nothing.

Except during those thirty seconds. Then I am free.

Some guys get by on hope or hate or both. Some lose their minds, if they brought them in the first place. Me, I know I am never getting out of here alive. I am already dead. Even if I walked out tomorrow, the hell would I do outside? Nothing. I am done. There is no outside. There is no after. This is it. Now I live for something I used to take for granted and what it does for me, and my fix lasts all of thirty seconds every day.

This shithole was not built to hold a third of the current population. A long time before I got here, maybe when this place was only twice as full as designed, a room got converted into a second shower. Two dozen nozzles drop like stalactites from pipes that run along the inside of the cement ceiling. Either the walls and ceiling were too fucking thick to drill through, or they were too lazy (or maybe just did not want to put tools that powerful into the hands of inmate labor, except for the drain in the floor) so the feeder pipe runs out a tiny ass window high up the wall, and from there, shoots

up the outside of the building onto the roof, where it runs to the source. I figure the run is maybe a hundred and fifty feet, if it is a two inch pipe. That would explain the thirty seconds. Not that I have thought about it much.

I have never been on the roof. But I know that all the water that feeds this shower flows from a pipe on the top of the building.

We shuffle single file into the shower room every day at the same time, eyes down, until each stands under a nozzle. My group is the first of the day, the floor is mostly dry from the day before. Once we are in, a bull turns the valve, and a shock of cold water — stale and metallic — rains down. The smell reminds me of the trunk of my first car.

The cold takes my breath away, at first. Does not matter how many times I have done it, does not matter that I know it is coming, does not matter that I live for what is coming after. The gasp is involuntary, instinctive, by some part of the animal inside of me that still reacts.

So I gasp then grin when the cold comes, because I know the cold is going to make everything all right.

See, after the icy water — the water that has been sitting in the pipes that dangle from the ceiling all night — runs through, that is when the miracle happens.

Because when the first cold water has run through, then the water that has been sitting in the pipe on the roof in the sun all morning takes its turn.

And the shower runs hot.

The instant the first drops of hot water touch my skin, I am lifted up, away, to *my meadow- lush with shin-high wildflowers, a gentle breeze, and an ancient Live Oak just up the hill. She sits underneath the tree, waiting for me on a plaid blanket, and she*

smiles because she is glad to see me. She is happy that I am there, because she was waiting for this moment, for my arrival, for me.

As I run to her, my pulse quickens as much from anticipation as exertion. She stands as I approach, her smile as wide and inviting as her arms. We embrace, and hold each other tightly as I bury my face in her hair.

Her hair.

Her hair is soft and shiny and slippery as silk, and smells of jasmine- new, fresh blossoms, just opened at dusk. Still holding each other, I lift her straight up and spin around, twice, counterclockwise. She laughs with schoolgirl innocence and glee as we revolve the second time, her dress billowing further out this turn than the first — the notes of her laughter, bells with soft edges, wash over and through my ears, fill my brain, then warmly flow down to my heart. I set her feet gently back down where they had started, yet still we hold on.

She smiles, and I am finally able to smile back: her light blue, almost gray, eyes prove warm enough to thaw my frozen soul. When she sees my smile, her eyes open a little wider and burn a little more brightly, and we reflect one another's soul back onto the other. She removes one of her hands from my back, and very gently runs her fingertips across my lower lip, as an artist might if studying both the thing and the thing underneath simultaneously, or a sightless person might etch a mental image of form to associate with a voice for later retrieval, thereby robbing the darkness of its strength, keeping the cold at bay

Cold.

Thirty seconds after it began, all the sun-heated pipe water is down the drain, and only cold well water remains. The rest of the showers for the rest of the day will flow cold, the water never sitting in the pipe long enough to heat again.

Until tomorrow.

When I will go to her again.

I shuffle out on cue to endure the next twenty three hours and fifty nine and one-half minutes.

