

Fiction: Release by Matias Travieso-Diaz



Photo Source: Negative Space

Billy Waters was serving a twenty-year sentence at the United States Penitentiary in Thomson, Illinois for running a Ponzi scheme that defrauded thousands of people who sought to invest in vacation rentals. In prison, he resented the curtailment of his former opulent lifestyle by jail conditions. He took every opportunity to rail against his confinement:

“I get to be in the yard only an hour a day. I don’t play basketball or mingle with the ruffians; I spend my time walking back and forth, always watching my back against being jumped on or skewered with a shiv by some crazy bastard; the food is so bad that even the raccoons don’t touch the garbage; there is only one TV in the common room and all the others want to watch is NCIS and other cop shows.”

And so on, ad infinitum.

His wife had divorced him and he had no children or friends, so he spent the prison’s visiting hours alone in his cell, brooding.

In mid-January, he received a visit from his pro-bono lawyer with some news.

"The President has set you free."

"What???" shouted Billy. "How come?"

"I can't explain it. In the past I've written to the parole board a couple of times seeking a clemency reduction of the time you have left to serve. All my requests have been denied outright. I don't know where his pardon comes from."

"But I don't know the President."

"Well, there may have been a bureaucratic clusterfuck. I found on the Internet lists of convicted felons for whom pardons had been solicited from the President. There are several hundred people whose names have been brought up as potential recipients of pardons in exchange for donations. There's a guy whose name is almost identical to yours and hasn't been included among the pardons issued to date."

"Do you mean the President may have made a mistake?"

"It's possible. But if he did, you are in luck. He'd never admit to having been wrong."

"What happens now?"

"The release papers are being finalized. In a few days you'll be a free man."

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As the prison gates closed Billy inhaled deeply the cold fall air, savoring his first breath as a free man. He decided he would walk back to the apartment he was to share temporarily with his younger brother Lucas, four miles away. He welcomed the exercise and felt his atrophied limbs coming back to life.

The stroll put him in an increasingly upbeat mood. He would start over again! He would turn the corner on his former worthless life.

As the afternoon wore on it became increasingly cold and a drizzle began to descend on the city. Billy had only a thin coat and no umbrella. By the time he reached his brother's apartment he was soaked.

Billy knocked on the door but there was no answer. Finally, he pushed the door and found it was open. Lucas was not in. There was a note on the kitchen table:

"I had to leave for work, today is my turn as late shift nurse at the hospital. There is some lasagna in the fridge. Help yourself."

Billy was disappointed, for he was so looking forward to sharing his first day out of prison and revealing his future plans with somebody, even a brother with whom he did not get along. He took a hot shower and changed into his other set of clothes. Things would for sure get better tomorrow.

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The following morning, he woke up with a cold, which only got worse over the next few days. It had been snowing and there was a layer of ice outside the apartment, so he had to remain indoors. He spent several days lying alone on the sofa that

served as his bed, watching daytime tv soaps and evening serials. When the weather improved, he finally got out of the apartment, but his outings were limited to going to a convenience store to get cigarettes and beer.

In a few days he had given up on his dreams of exercising more.

When Lucas was around, they had monosyllabic conversations that highlighted his brother's displeasure at having to put Billy up and feed him. After a while, Lucas began hinting that perhaps it was time for Billy to move away.

The second week after his release from prison Billy began to look for a job. It was not an easy task. Searching online he found companies that asserted willingness to employ ex-convicts, but most of the jobs available were ill-paying and no better than those he used to perform in prison. At the end, he had to sign up for a position as delivery driver for a pizza chain.

Very soon he got tired of cardboard pizza and decided he was too smart to do honest work. So, he gravitated towards traffickers he knew from his teenage days, when he sold drugs on street corners. These people were a violent lot and Billy did not relish having to work with them again, but he felt he had no other choice. He pleaded and they agreed to let Billy in on their operations.

Billy became messenger, driver and retail salesman for the group. He quickly rose within the ranks so that, by the six-month anniversary of his release from prison, he was near the top of the gang's chain of command.

Alas, a smuggling operation by another gang drew the erroneous attention of the authorities. Billy was carted off to prison for a crime he did not commit.

As he sat in his cell awaiting arraignment Billy felt he was back at home. Despite his grandiose plans for redemption, his life had been the same whether outside prison or within.

He then realized that the walls of his prison were ones he had erected himself, and was unable to tear them down. Freedom is a relative state; you are only as free as you allow yourself to be.

Matias Travieso-Diaz was born in Cuba and migrated to the United States as a young man. He became an engineer and lawyer and practiced for nearly fifty years. He retired and turned his attention to creative writing. About sixty of his stories have been published or accepted for publication or use in paying short story anthologies, magazines, audio books and podcasts, most recently the Grantville Gazette, After Dinner Conversation, Red Room Press (YEAR'S BEST HARDCORE HORROR VOL. 6), and The Copperfield Review. Some of his stories have also received "honorable mentions" from a number of publications.