

# THROUGH THE COT AND INTO THE FLOOR

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By John Eric Ellison

Travis woke up coughing and rolled on to his side. His eyes opened and then closed. They were staring at him again, his two fellow prisoners. Did they not have anything better to do with their time? Cursing, he turned away from his cell mates and felt the uncomfortable mattress supported by a squeaky metal frame. He absently studied the cracks in the wall as unpleasant memories developed like a headache.

It all began at the end of one more failed relationship, followed by a road trip to anywhere his dark mood and another cheap car would take him. He chose throwaway vehicles for these trips due to the simple fact that they were disposable. He would not have to care one way or another if they broke down and had to be traded or abandoned for another.

These trips should be as free of complications as possible. After each disastrous breakup, Travis always felt like an irrational wreck, still spoiled by childhood delusions that made him the family hero and somehow unique. So, when life failed to flow along an acceptable path, he threw temper tantrums the best way he knew how, by running away. This time was no different than before. He drove all day and into the late evening until he arrived at this back-water town filled with simple folk. It was not a destination, merely a place to rest for the night before continuing his vacation to nowhere.

Painfully, Travis remembered driving into this town and passing an attractive young woman dressed in baggy jeans and a loose black sweater, hitchhiking. She looked healthy enough, so he slowed and backed the car to pick her up. His boyishly harmless face never failed to charm the ladies. She carelessly jumped in his vehicle on the passenger side and said that she needed a lift to the grocery store.

During some brief conversation laced with sexy innuendo, he told her that he was looking for a halfway decent motel. She winked and suggested that he wait and then drive her home for something to eat and a place to stay for the night.

He agreed. Of course, he cared little about the fact that his track record for knowing who to trust and who to throw out into the street was mediocre at best.

While he waited in the store parking lot, she was arrested for shoplifting; and if that was not bad enough, she told the police that her ride was waiting for her in the parking lot. Travis was arrested as an accomplice. Selfless acts of charity seldom repay as expected. He, passed out, blacked out, in the backseat of a police car and blearily awoke as he was carried by stretcher into a jail cell. He heard someone say, "What's wrong with this guy?" And, "Can't stay awake?"

Travis's court hearing was set for ten in the morning. So, he had roughly thirteen hours left to contemplate bugs, spider webs, peeling gray paint, the licorice and lye smell of industrial disinfectant, claustrophobic paranoia, and his two fellow inmates. For some reason, all these things combined reminded him of a dozen years back; grade school.

Sleep was what he needed to pass the time. If he could doze, then his bladder might not fill as quickly. Travis worried about this for a good reason; he dreaded the moment he would have to use the jail cell toilet, which was exposed in the middle of the room. Anyone with a nervous bladder would need to adapt to this disturbing lack of privacy or explode.

He worried, and sleep finally took him until he felt a tap on his shoulder. One of his unhappy companions loomed over him and whispered, "Breakfast."

The man's bristled face appeared concerned as he wiped stringy black hair out of his eyes and continued, "You don't want to miss 'em when they call your name, or you go hungry. They don't call you twice."

The clock on the wall said he had slept over eight hours. Travis raised himself on an elbow and then sat on the edge of the cot. His bladder was so full now that nervous or not he would pee with all abandon regardless of who was watching, so that was what he did as all eyes stared at him with measured amusement. When he finished, he looked for some way to flush.

"Can't do it from in here, boy." Bristled long-hair said. "You have to tell one of the guards, and they flush it from out there, but not until they come in and check it to see if you were smuggling something in your nethers – if you take my meaning." He chuckled.

"You mean they got to check your –" Travis grimaced and rolled his eyes. "What kind of town is this?"

The other man next to long-hair lisped through broken front teeth and said, "The end of the world, my friend. You found it right here in this beat-to-hell town."

Travis washed his hands and face, although his eyes remained sticky and resisted all efforts to scrub greasy road dirt out of the corners of his eyes. He could smell coffee and heard the rattle of metal dishes.

A guard sitting at a small table outside their cell opened the door to an adjoining hallway allowing another guard to roll a little food cart over the concrete floor,

stopping outside their cell.

Two guards exchanged stories and pleasantries long enough to let the food grow cold. Finally, the second guard left, and breakfast was served.

There were other cells further down the garishly lit hall, but apparently, those were empty. The guards had crammed three people into this one cell for their convenience and amusement. At least there were enough cots in this cell.

Three names were called. The food was school cafeteria fare. It provided about ten minutes of distraction before Travis finished his small meal and was now forced to decide how to spend his remaining time behind bars.

He was confident the judge would let him go, although there would probably be a penalty of some kind. He nodded to the guard and passed his tray through the slot in the cell door.

The guard left the hall and holding area. The three prisoners were now alone for the time being.

When he turned back around, his unhappy cell mates were staring at him again. Travis said, "What's with you guys? Why are you eyeballing me all the time?"

Chipped teeth frowned, glanced at long-hair and said, "Better make this quick, while that guard is away." He nodded. "Be back soon. We recognize you from somewhere." He spits into a napkin he held and added, "Don't know exactly where though. Have you been on TV or something? Might have been on the news. That's what Jordy here thinks. Me, my memory's not so good." Grinned. "Or, maybe I do remember you. Yeah, like maybe you should pay us to keep our mouths shut." Winked and rubbed his chin. "Call it truth for hire, if you want."

Travis cringed and shook his head. "There's no way I'd forget either of you guys. Never seen either one of you before."

"I got it!" Jordy clicked his fingers and said, "You're that kid from the news. They showed your picture. You were the one they called – let's see now – oh, yeah – 'a person of interest' in that murder case – the fire one."

A passing wave of Jordy's hand. "See, we're both hanging out at the same bar last night when the news came on about – you, maybe. Said your girlfriend was burned up in a fire at her place."

Jordy gave Travis a hard look, then continued, "When they found her body, they said she'd been stuffed in a closet before the fire started. Now that I recall, they said she'd been bound, gagged, and then locked up. Said she was wearing her mother's necklace, but the pendant was missing. The news did keep on repeating that person of interest thing and showing your sweet young picture. Hey, it sounds like you might be in for a heap of trouble, boy." He winked, "Maybe you'll luck out, and the guards and judge won't recognize you. Could get messy if they do."

Stopped talking, looked Travis up and down, and asked, “So, did you do it? Lock her up and set fire to her house?” He pressed, “Come on, spill it. Did you set that fire? Are you on the run? Did you lock her up as they said? Media leak said they didn’t find any evidence or suspicious fingerprints on anything. So, no worries.”

After hearing all of this, Travis appeared to be shocked, hurt, confused, emotionally mutilated, and there were tears in his eyes. He was a great actor, and smart; he had taken a trophy but swallowed it when he was arrested.

Now he sounded outraged. “What?”

He shouted, “Of course I didn’t do any of that!”

Strung out aspect in his eyes. “I didn’t even know about it.”

Travis looked frantic. “I have to get out of here and go back. See what I can do to help!”

Jordy mocked, “Yeah, yeah, yeah. Sure. You care. Nice young men like you don’t set fires. I think you didn’t expect to end up in a place like this.” He nudged his friend and winked evilly. “Right, Ned?”

Ned smiled in return and made an oily titch-tiching sound between his chipped teeth. He playfully shoved Jordy. “Set fires?” He shook his head. “Don’t you mean nice young men like him don’t kill young women?”

Travis didn’t know how to respond or even if he should. Why bother to talk any further with either one of these two foul breathed hicks? He put his face into his hands and then slowly laid down on his squeaky cot. He sounded like he was sobbing when he rolled over onto his side away from them. He said, “You guys are just trying to hurt me. I don’t believe you.”

Jordy shrugged and said, “Suit yourself, stay in denial, or maybe pay us to help you with your alibi. Ned and I could use the money.”

At that moment a guard re-entered carrying some papers. He sat down heavily at the table and started filling them out.

Jordy and Ned looked away from Travis and muttered to each other, growing bored of one topic after another. As Travis brooded, he felt a madness rise that made him want to jump up and scream to be let out.

Most people could not or would not be able to sleep in any situation remotely resembling this one. But Travis had a physical condition that shut his brain off into unconsciousness under stressful circumstances. So, he fell into a fitful narcoleptic sleep.

He heard something that caused him to wake and roll back over to confront his cellmates. “I heard one of you just now say that I belong here.” He accused. “Take it back. I don’t belong here. I was giving some woman a ride.”

Ned waved as if to say roll over and go back to sleep. He said, "I didn't say you belong here, I said you have long hair. You must be one of those California funny boys."

Jordy snickered and smirked. "Look, kid, you can't sleep so soon before the hearing. I don't know how you can sleep so much anyway."

Travis indicated the guard with his eyes, but then shrugged and said, "I didn't do anything wrong."

Jordy wagged his head. "Should keep your mouth shut."

Travis felt a strange sensation tapping at the back of his skull. A memory, perhaps? A warning? The cot beneath him felt insubstantial, and then he fell and continued to fall through the bed, the concrete, the earth – unconsciousness took him.

"Hey!" Ned shook Travis by the shoulders and drew close enough to gaze into his now opening eyes. "Are you sick or something?" Maybe you should lie on the concrete. That helps, sometimes."

"No. I'm fine." After recomposing himself, Travis said, "You're right. I shouldn't sleep now." He felt the acid in his stomach, trying to digest his indigestible breakfast. Then, the unthinkable happened. He had hoped to avoid this until he got out of here.

"You guys have to look away," Travis moaned and stood. "I gotta go again, only worse for that food."

Ned and Jordy both laughed and turned sideways, although the guard scrutinized with jeering pleasure while Travis used the open toilet one more time. He wanted to reach through the bars and choke the life out of the grinning face that watched him squirm from embarrassment.

Their eyes locked for a moment, and in that instant, the guard's expression changed from amusement to amazement. He pointed at Travis and said, "Wow!" Eyes widened. "I know you. You're that kid from the news."

Humiliated, Travis cleaned himself and then moved quickly away as the guard stood up from his desk and said, "Just in time, boy. In a couple of minutes, you'll be standing in front of the judge."

He pushed an intercom button and asked for backup while he unlocked and entered the cell. The hallway door opened, and two more guards appeared to stand ready if the prisoners were stupid enough to try anything idiotic.

"Get back against the wall." The first guard said as he stepped into the cell and moved quickly before reluctantly looking down.

There was a moment's pause. He bent further for a closer look even as the other guards laughed and groaned mirthfully.

The guard inspector scowled and stood upright. He glared while pointing into the bowl. “Is that jewelry mixed up in there?”

Travis blinked – and collapsed.

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***John Eric Ellison** has an audio-book released through Audible, “Wind Cave.” Another audio-book is in the works for release in March-April, 2020; “Descending Circles Ascending Earth.”*

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