

Never Turn Away

by Christine Holmstrom

“Come here, Marilyn, let’s look in this window.” Wedged between an untrimmed bush and the home’s front wall, I’d motioned to my friend, inviting her to join me. Pressing my face against the glass, I peered inside.

Drat. It was the kitchen.

From what I’d read in the *LA Herald Examiner* a few days ago, a man had murdered his wife, then his four children as they slept, right here in our placid suburban enclave. Afterwards, he’d killed himself.

“What’s there?” Marilyn whispered, glancing backwards to see if any of the neighbors had noticed us.

“Just a messy table.” It sat in the middle of the kitchen, a butter dish near the edge, the contents slumping onto scuffed wood, victim of the valley’s summer heat.

No blood here.

We’d have to find the bedrooms where the kids were stabbed.

Marilyn and I were both twelve. Curious. Or maybe it was mostly me. Did I believe that viewing the crime scene would answer the unspoken question—why? The question had taunted me from when I could first read newspaper stories about strangled starlets, missing children, and trussed bodies found in steamer trunks.

Horrible as these neighborhood murders were, they provided the most excitement we’d known in quiet Canoga Park. If we’d thought to examine our motives, Marilyn and I likely would’ve recalled how drivers slow and stare, braking to look across the highway at smashed vehicles, the corpses—covered in blankets—lying on a sloping hillside.

“The bedrooms must be in the back.” Freeing myself from the clasp of the unruly shrub, I’d surveyed our surroundings. A tall wood fence encircled the sides and back of

the home—a locked gate the only access.

“Wait, what’s that?” Marilyn pointed to the large rust-red stain that blossomed over the asphalt driveway leading to the two-car garage.

Could it be blood? I stopped, transfixed. Was this where the father committed suicide?

I always wanted to know more. Maybe that curiosity is part of the reason that I’d ended up as a correctional officer— a prison guard—at San Quentin decades later.

After walking through the heavy iron gates into the prison yard, I witnessed things that can never be erased from memory. There is no turning away.

As a “fish cop”—a new correctional officer—I was frightened yet mesmerized by stories of staff murders. During new officer orientation, Sgt. “Flip” Fernandez recounted how he’d been the first to find the body of Officer Richard Ochoa in the prison laundry back in ’76. “You couldn’t even recognize him. He didn’t have no face—it was hamburger.”

“So why would someone kill him?” I wanted to know.

“Not sure. Ochoa was well liked.”

“What happened?”

“Well, my guess is that Ochoa stumbled onto a drug deal.” Fernandez frowned. “The convicts must’ve panicked. Grabbed a weightlifting bar and...”

I held my breath, trying not to imagine a man without a face, the torn and battered flesh, the splintered nose, bits of pink tissue splattering his khaki uniform shirt, the pooling blood...

It could be any of us; could be me. Being a good cop wouldn’t save you.

During my first years at San Quentin, the prison was a war zone. Alarms screeching, whistles blaring daily. Shouts of “shots on the yard” as gun rail officers fired warning rounds or tried to stop a knife-wielding assailant with a bullet. Then the piercing wail of an ambulance racing down Sir Francis Drake Blvd to deliver the wounded and dying to Marin General.

Once, stepping out of the housing unit to respond to the blare of whistles, I’d flattened myself against the wall as four officers ran past, a badly injured prisoner on

their gurney—his forehead split open, brain matter exposed.

Try as I might, I cannot erase certain scenes. Like this one: It was late morning—a cold day. There'd been another stabbing. I needed to ID the victim and sign the Warden's Check-out Order prior to transport. The inmate lay naked, except for his boxer shorts, in the prison's battered old ambulance. His pale belly heaved; his breath labored. Thin crimson stripes pierced his abdomen—the marks left by repeated stab wounds. Unaware of me, his eyes remained fixed on the vehicle's gray metal ceiling. He was my age, handsome—no tattoos or gang symbols on his bare skin. Except for his longish hair, he reminded me of a man I'd once dated. I examined the ID photo that the gate officer had handed me, verified the match. Would the prisoner ever need it again?

There are many ways to die in prison besides assault—accidental deaths from bad “pruno” laced with wood alcohol or a suicide gesture gone wrong.

Or miscalculation. Like the two inmates in Badger Section.

Walking through the sally port—the prison's double-gated entry—I'd nearly bumped into a lieutenant from the Investigations Unit. In his hand he'd held a few eight by ten photos. The bright colors drew my eyes.

“What are those?” Curious, I'd pointed.

“Evidence.” He fanned the glossies like playing cards. “Remember the cell fire last week?”

I'd heard about it. Late one night two prisoners had set fire to a blanket tied on the bars of their shared cell. Nothing especially unusual, although most convicts simply pushed a pile of burning garbage onto the tier. Inmates started tier fires when they were angry or drunk or just for the hell of it. The gun rail officer yelled at them to put out the fire. They'd ignored him. By the time another cop got to the cell with a fire extinguisher, the flames had spread. Their TV, also attached to the bars, ignited, exploding in a shower of sparks shooting across the cell. Decades of paint began to burn, the walls a flaming oven. By then the convicts were screaming, hurling water at the conflagration, plunging their heads into the toilet bowl. Some cops unfurled the unit fire hose from its red painted box and lugged it up two flights of stairs then dragged it down the tier towards the cell. It proved too short. Other cops were already on the tier, aiming fire

extinguishers at the blaze without success. Intense heat had expanded the cell door, jamming it shut.

“No way could we unlock the door,” one of the cops later said. “It was the frickin’ *Towering Inferno*.”

I held out my hand for the photos. At first, I thought I was looking at an enlarged shot of two overcooked hot dogs—the pink skin splitting sideways—tattooed with charcoal bits. Then I noticed the blackened bunk bed and realized what I was seeing.

There was no pleasure in these sights—only a slight salve for the curiosity that had been itching since my childhood.

Friends sometimes asked why I kept working at the prison. Many reasons—the adrenaline high, the glory and notoriety of being a female correctional officer, the pay, promotional opportunities...

Although I could never erase what I witnessed during my time at San Quentin, I’d chosen not to turn away either.

There was too much to see.

Christine Holmstrom’s work has been published in Bernie Siegel’s book, *Faith, Hope, and Healing*. Her nonfiction has been published or is forthcoming in *Dime Show Review*, *Gulf Stream*, *The Gravel*, *Jet Fuel Review*, *The MacGuffin*, *The Penmen Review*, *Rougarou*, *Streetlight Magazine*, *Switchback*, *Stonecoast Review*, *Summerset Review*, *Two Cities Review*, and others. After surviving riots, an armed escape and a death threat while working at San Quentin prison, she finally had the good sense to retire. Christine is now working on a memoir about her prison years.