

The Third Prisoner

By E. M. Lewis

E. M. Lewis
www.emlewisplaywright.com

Characters

Prisoner #4588930

Prisoner #8836729

Prisoner #1439872

Time

There are no calendars or windows here, so no one knows what time it is, or how much time has passed.

Setting

A prison.

In the cell where Prisoner #4588930 and Prisoner #8836729 are held, there are no windows. Just gray walls and not enough room for two beings. Each of them has a thin blanket, and they share a bucket, and occasionally a tin of not-enough-food is pushed through a small slot under the door. There is nothing else, and there has been nothing else for a long time.

Prisoner #4588930 sleeps under their blanket and Prisoner #8836729 sits with their back against the wall, knees up, hands moving listlessly.

Wake up.
Prisoner #8836729

Prisoner #4588930 doesn't move.

Prisoner #8836729 gives Prisoner #4588930 a strong shove with their foot.

Prisoner #4588930
What? What's happening?

Prisoner #4588930 sits up, groggy and afraid.

Wake up.
PRISONER #8836729

PRISONER #4588930
I don't want to wake up.

PRISONER #8836729
I don't want to be alone anymore.

PRISONER #4588930
You can talk to me while I sleep. Quietly. Very quietly.

PRISONER #8836729
I want you to talk back.

PRISONER #4588930
I hate you.

PRISONER #8836729
I know.

PRISONER #4588930
I was trying to have a dream.

PRISONER #8836729
Was it working?

PRISONER #4588930
No! Someone woke me up!
(beat)

(MORE)

PRISONER #4588930 (cont'd)
It wouldn't have worked anyway. I don't dream anymore. Who knew that that was something a person could forget?

PRISONER #8836729
Let's play the game.

PRISONER #4588930
No.

PRISONER #8836729
Please?

PRISONER #4588930
I don't feel well.

Prisoner #4588930 lies down again.

PRISONER #4588930 (cont'd)
You should try to sleep, too.

PRISONER #8836729
I can't sleep.

PRISONER #4588930
Maybe if you exercised for a while.

Prisoner #8836729 turns onto their stomach, and puts their hands beside their shoulders, as if they are going to do a push-up, but then they just lie there.

PRISONER #8836729
How long do you think it has been since we got here?

PRISONER #4588930
Forever.

PRISONER #8836729
No, really.

PRISONER #4588930
Long enough that I don't want to be alive anymore.

PRISONER #8836729
I hate it when you talk this way.

PRISONER #4588930
Honestly?

PRISONER #8836729

We could play the math game. Or we could exercise together and see who can do more. Or...

PRISONER #4588930

Or?

PRISONER #8836729

Something. Anything.

PRISONER #4588930

Maybe later. I'm going to try to sleep again now.

PRISONER #8836729

You do nothing but sleep!

Prisoner #4599830 lies down again, and pulls the blanket over their head.

A moment. Then Prisoner #8836729 cocks their head. Then presses their ear to the wall.

PRISONER #8836729 (cont'd)

I hear something.

PRISONER #4588930

Food?

PRISONER #8836729

Not so soon.

There is a sound of keys in the door.

PRISONER #8836729 (cont'd)

Get back against the wall and cover your head. Hurry! Hurry!

The two prisoners moved to the back wall and curl in on themselves, heads down, hands curved around their necks in submission.

The door creaks open, and a great lump, wrapped in a blanket, is thrown into the cell. The door closes.

A moment. Then the two prisoners warily raise their heads and look to see what's happened. They stare at the lump.

PRISONER #4588930
Is it another prisoner?

PRISONER #8836729
I think so.

PRISONER #4588930
Is it alive?

PRISONER #8836729
Why else would they throw them in here?

PRISONER #4588930
To torture us?

Prisoner #8836729 nudges the lump with their foot, then leaps back when it moves.

Prisoner #1439872 sits up, and then looks at the other two prisoners curiously.

PRISONER #8836729
Hello.

Prisoner #1439872
Hello.

PRISONER #4588930
Are you a spy?

PRISONER #1439872
No.

PRISONER #4588930
Why are you a prisoner?

PRISONER #1439872
No good reason. You?

PRISONER #4588930
Same. (beat)

(beat)
There's not enough room for you here. Or enough food to share with you.

PRISONER #8836729
Don't be inhospitable. Would you like a crust of bread?

PRISONER #4588930

Where did you get that?!

PRISONER #8836729

I was saving it for later, to give you as a gift or to eat myself, I hadn't decided yet. It could have gone either way. But now, I think we should give it to the newcomer.
#1439872.

PRISONER #1439872

Call me Zara.

Prisoner # 8836729 and #4588930 both pull away, pressing their backs against the wall, listening to see if anyone has overheard.

PRISONER #8836729

We're not allowed to have names!

PRISONER #4588930

No names!

PRISONER #8836729

You'll be beaten!

PRISONER #4588930

So will we!

PRISONER #1439872

We won't tell them.

A long moment.

PRISONER #8836729

PlaiTor.

(beat; shakily)

My name is PlaiTor.

PRISONER #4588930

You shouldn't!

PRISONER #8836729

What more can they do to us?

PRISONER #4588930

I don't want to be hurt more.

PRISONER #8836729

I know.

Plai-Tor smiles.

PRISONER #8836729

Hearing my name on someone else's lips makes me feel real again.

PRISONER #1439872

Were you doubting your realness?

PRISONER #8836729

We were beginning to wonder. When there is no time, when there is no light, when there is no work...

Plai-Tor turns away, trying to hide tears.

PRISONER #1439872

Don't cry! I'm sorry.

PRISONER #8836729

It's okay.

PRISONER #1439872

I'm sorry that my being here means less room and food for you.

PRISONER #8836729

Better that than being alone. For some time, I was alone, and that was unbearable.

PRISONER #1439872

Me, too.

A moment.

PRISONER #1439872 (cont'd)

But it was when I was alone that I discovered my magic.

PRISONER #8836729

Your magic?

PRISONER #1439872

Yes.

PRISONER #8836729

I don't believe in magic.

PRISONER #1439872

Neither did I, until I woke up with it.

PRISONER #8836729

Now I am beginning to be as wary of you as #4588932.

A long moment.

PRISONER #8836729 (cont'd)

Show me. I don't even care if it's a trick.

PRISONER #1439872

Tell me something you miss, from the world.

PRISONER #8836729

I try not think about my life before.

PRISONER #1439872

A small thing.

PRISONER #8836729

(a moment, then...)

There was a place I would go, a forest that was filled with birds. All kinds of birds. My job was with birds, and that place was filled with them, and I could sit amongst the trees and watch them take flight -- swooping and turning in the big, wide sky.

Zara takes one finger, and uses it to draw a window on the wall of the cell. They draw trees. They draw birds in the sky, flying, and then a bird perching on the windowsill. The birds in the sky are moving, the trees sway in the wind, and the bird on the sill turns its head to one side, to look at Plai-Tor.

PRISONER #8836729 (cont'd)

Oh....

Plai-Tor reaches out a trembling hand, and touches the bird, gently petting its feathers.

PRISONER #8836729 (cont'd)

Oh, Zara!

Plai-Tor looks out the new window, and feels the air on their cheek.

PRISONER #8836729 (cont'd)

It's been so long!

Prisoner #4588930 uncovers their head,
and looks up at Plai-Tor and Zara.

PRISONER #4588930
I don't believe in magic.

PRISONER #8836729
But look! Birds! There are birds!

PRISONER #4588930
Their finger is bleeding.

Zara looks at their bloody hand.

PRISONER #1439872
It will stop after a while.
(beat)
Would you like something? I have another drawing finger, on
this other hand.

PRISONER #4588930
Will it hurt you?

PRISONER #1439872
It would please me. I am happy to not be alone anymore, and
grateful to be with you.

PRISONER #4588930
I don't remember my name.
(beat)
Isn't that terrible? Do I even exist if I don't have a name?

PRISONER #8836729
You exist.

PRISONER #1439872
What do you remember? Let me give you a gift of it.

Prisoner #4588930 shakes their head,
and shakes their head. Nothing.
Nothing. But then...

PRISONER #4588930
My... mother.

PRISONER #1439872
You had a mother...

PRISONER #4588930
Warmth and sweetness and safety and the smell of... cinnamon.
She sang to me.

(MORE)

PRISONER #4588930 (cont'd)

I remember being held close, in that cinnamon sweet warmth, feeling safe, because she was singing to me.

Zara draws musical notes on the other wall of the cell, with the drawing finger of their other hand, drawing and drawing, and suddenly we can hear a woman's voice singing, with great love and sweetness, a lullaby.

PRISONER #4588930 (cont'd)

Oh!!! Oh!!!

Prisoner #4588930 lurches up from the floor and throws their arms around Zara, who is surprised, but receives the hug and lets themselves be held.

PRISONER #4588930 (cont'd)

Aylen!

PRISONER #1439872

Aylen?

PRISONER #4588930

She would call me Aylen. I am called Aylen. I have a name.
(shouting at the wall of the cell)

I have a name!!!!

PRISONER #8836729

Shh!!!

PRISONER #4588930

(turning to Plai-Tor)

I have a name.

PRISONER #8836729

Aylen.

PRISONER #4588930

Plai-Tor.

PRISONER #1439872

I'm going to sleep a while now.

PRISONER #8836729

Okay.

PRISONER #4588930

Okay.

Okay. PRISONER #1439872

Zara tucks their bloody hands in their sleeves, and lies down under their blanket to sleep.

Plai-Tor... PRISONER #4588930

Yes. PRISONER #8836729

Is this really happening? Or have I remembered how to dream? PRISONER #4588930

Take my hand. Do I feel real to you? PRISONER #8836729

Aylen takes Plai-Tor's hand.

Yes. PRISONER #4588930

I like your mother's voice very much. PRISONER #8836729

I like your birds. PRISONER #4588930

We can keep going. PRISONER #8836729

Yes. We can keep going. PRISONER #4588930

They keep holding each other's hands, and watching the birds soar in the open sky, and listening to the music. Aylen sings along. Plai-Tor whistles like a bird.

They keep going.

<end of play>