

Life Without

by Ken Klonsky

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Reviewed by Shawn Syms

It's Sunday, June 14, 2009 – and Joel Ascher is having a *really* bad day. The erudite New York cabbie's a huge opera buff, but that specialist record shop in the Village doesn't have the rare Callas recording he's after. Then his train malfunctions on the way back to the Upper West Side condo where he's headed to meet his law-student wife, Marsha – so he's forced to march through the rat-infested subway tunnel in a sweltering heat. But these inconveniences pale next to the tragedy he encounters at home. Marsha, pregnant with their first child, has been murdered, stabbed in the chest with the paring knife Joel had used just that morning to make fruit salad. Joel says he found her in their bed and turned her over to reveal the terrible, bloody wound.

Though they had recently quarrelled over minor things – what food to order in a restaurant, which shelves to buy from IKEA – Joel says he loved Marsha, even if he didn't always express his adoration very effectively. But the cops and the jury are far from convinced. There's no sign of forced entry into their home. Marsha's blood is on Joel's shirt, his fingerprints are on the murder weapon. Convicted of murder and sentenced to life without hope of parole, Joel is shipped off to a prison in Kingston, New York. His tribulations and assertion of wrongful conviction form the basis of Ken Klonsky's novella *Life Without*, about Ascher's struggle to cling to hope in the face of Kafkaesque circumstances.

Despite this plot synopsis, *Life Without* is not some kind of murder-mystery whodunit but, rather, a sojourn of existential turmoil concerning the physical and psychic costs of human incarceration. Klonsky, also an author of non-fiction, short stories, and a play, possesses some real-world knowledge of his chosen subject matter. He worked with and co-authored the autobiography of Dr. Rubin Carter, a former boxer who was jailed on a homicide charge but eventually exonerated nearly two decades later. Klonsky currently serves as media director of an organization that assists prisoners who assert they've been wrongfully convicted. Though this context might hint at a risk of didacticism, Klonsky succeeds in delivering a moody and atmospheric character study of one man's response to dramatic new circumstances that are sudden, unexpected, and bleak.

The world Klonsky conjures is validated by non-fiction books such as C.W. Michael's *The Criminal's Handbook* and other instances of convict-centred criminology. It's one where everyone is on the make – lawyers, guards, and fellow prisoners alike – and no one is to be trusted. Klonsky elucidates the techniques sometimes used by police to extract confessions even from people who insist they are innocent. Life behind bars feels surreal and absurd. Hell is in the details – Ascher describes his surroundings:

I live three feet from a rancid toilet bowl. The stink, the rats, the roaches, the noise, the shouting, the garbage music never stops. I haven't slept in three years. (19)

Sharing this tiny space with a drugged-up cellmate whose most notable characteristic is an itchy testicular rash, Ascher's most reliable companion is a gargantuan volume of Emily Dickenson verse. Klonsky brings the reader inside the mind of a man who's trapped both physically and

psychologically. A job as a cleaner provides Ascher a temporary salve by creating the illusion of some small level of control:

The good thing about mopping and waxing floors is that it gives me the power to change something: keep the vermin at bay, make a dirty floor and a piss-filled common bathroom clean for a couple of hours. (69)

Throughout *Life Without*, Klonsky uses the complex and engaging character of Ascher to muse on the role of family and questions of Jewish identity as refracted through the lens of social and economic class, comparing his station in life to that of his lawyer Fiedler, his parents, and the family of his once well-heeled but now deceased spouse.

Having nothing but time, he relives every moment of the fateful day of his wife's death, his interrogation and manipulated confession, his trial, and his years of imprisonment. Eschewing a strictly linear narrative, Klonsky plays with the order in which details of each of these events are revealed, reflecting the obsessive yet disordered sense of time characterizing prison life.

With parents who believe he murdered his expectant wife, a brother who siphons off his bank account while he's defenceless, a lawyer who preys upon his despair and vulnerability, and bullying inmates who try to extract his few possessions, Joel Ascher still manages to sustain hope. Indeed, right up until the book's final pages, he probes his memory for details of the day Marsha was killed, seeking clues that could unlock the truth and allow him to escape the cage he's stuck within.

In its short set of pages, *Life Without* provides compelling access to a world many of us may never see. Just a glimpse – albeit an extended and subtly horrifying one – and then it's gone. But it's one a reader is not likely to forget. ♡

Shawn Syms has written about prisons for *subTerrain*, *Xtra*, and *Rabble*. His work has appeared in over 50 other publications, including the *Winnipeg Review* and *The Journey Prize Stories 21*.

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