

KIT REED

ON THE PENAL COLONY

Notebook found in candy bin  
General Store,  
Old Arkham Village, Arkham, Mass.

FRIEND, IF YOU ARE READING this, I am already dead. I, Arch Plummer, am giving this notebook to Hester Phyle with instructions to burn it as soon as she knows Gemma and I and our friend are safe. The truth must out. Unspeakable secrets fester here. Atrocities. If the three of us don't make it, Hester knows what to do. The horror must be exposed!

If we make it, Gemma and Laramie and I will hold a press conference and blow the lid off this place. If we don't, Hester has promised to leave this where you will find it. Whoever you are, the future depends on you.

If you pulled this out of the barrel in the General Store instead of Olde Arkham(TM) candy corn or packaged pemmican or arrowheads or that cornhusk doll your daughter wanted, then Gemma and Laramie and I are already dead. I beg you. Call The Times and Hard Copy now. Leave no stone unturned. Contact the network anchors whether or not they can pronounce the language. Bring The National Inquirer.

"And on your right note the authentic 18th-century architecture. Every house in Old Arkham Village is more than two hundred years old! Now count the windowpanes. Every window is 12 over 12."

"Mom, can we leave now?"

"Quit hitting your brother!"

"I want to watch TV."

"...paints made from natural substances. Blueberries. Buttermilk. Now, the village tavern. Our colonists will be happy to answer any questions you have."

"Harry, that one is smiling at me."

"It's his job. Don't get too close." Dad lights a match and winks. "Watch this."

The "colonist" rips off the flaming wig. "Eeeowww!"

You come for the day and you say "Ohhh, quaint." You have no idea' what's really happening just below the surface in our idyllic colonial village, deep in the Massachusetts hills. Underneath the mobcaps. Underneath the Earth. You're malled

out so you bring the kids, drop your candy papers and Zip-loc sandwich bags, deface the property, take your snapshots and go. You cart in foreign guests to impress them with your nation's heritage -- 18th-century houses and shops; oh, wow, these things are old! Or you bring Gran because she is old.

Or something shakes loose inside you and starts rattling around. You get hungry for your past. Not necessarily your past. A past. Any past. Some commercial visionary resurrected all these old buildings and moved them here to supply an early American past for all of you late Americans to enjoy even though you never had one. At twenty bucks a pop, it's your past too.

So you pack up the kids and throw grinders and a sixpack of brewskis into the cooler and come rolling our way as if this is some kind of Colonial mecca, God's own solution to two problems: crime and rootlessness. Well I can't tell you about rootlessness -- who cares whether your great-greats hit Plymouth Rock or Ellis Island or rolled in hanging from the axle of a truck? But I can tell you a thing or two about crime.

"... scheme for a model prison." Bullfinch Warden hocks; the sound is heard clear to the back of the tram. "As our country's leading penologists you can see what we have accomplished here. Forget license plates. Forget telemarketing and Readers' Clearing House as revenueproducing activities for prisoners who turn back the proceeds to the state. We are at the apex here. The prison of the future. Convicts as capital."

Crime? You want to see crime? This place is a crime. Maggoty food and floggings in the picturesque village square, torture so deep that you never hear the screams. Murderous trusties, sadistic screws. But what do you know anyway, you stuff home-made gingerbread into the kids and buy them the thirteen-star flag and you lead them onto the scaled-down replica of the Bonhomme Richard and you go, "Oh, wow, these are my people."

You trudge through the landlocked whaler, humming to the canned gabble on the Auditron, and no matter where you came from, you're all, like, these are our forefathers. You get to feeling all-American even if you just landed on a raft. Correction. Early American; you ride Paul Bunyan's blue ox and you bong your knuckles on the genuine authentic half-sized Liberty Bell and if the screws aren't looking maybe you try to scratch in your initials, but only a little bit, and you feel as American as hell.

And, wuow, you think, what a cool solution to America's problems. Punishment and restitution, all in one place! Symbiosis. Patriotism and profit. Plus rehabilitation, us hard-timers in tricoms or aprons and mobcaps answering your stupid questions about beef jerky and squareheaded nails. And we are so fucking polite! You push a button and the National Anthem plays and the replicated flag goes up over the to-scale replica of Fort McHenry. Your heart swells up like the Barney balloon in the Macy's Day parade and you're like, America, wow!

"Note the presentation. It's based on a revolutionary new concept. It's not what you're doing, it's what it looks like you're doing that shapes society. Hence

the ideal village. Happy villagers."

Happy! What do you care about us? What do you know?

You see us sweating in our period costumes and you think, fine. Hardened criminals working their way back into the fabric of American life. How heartwarming. When they get out they'll be all-American, yes!

"I don't know, I turned the other way and the prisoner just..." The guard produces two bloody ears.

"Shut up, they'll hear you."

"But Warden, what are we going to do?"

"Shut up. The state examiners!" Bullfinch Warden snarls, "Get him out of here."

"He's so deep in solitary that..."

"Not the perp. The tourist who got hurt. We can't have this getting out."

You think we look charming. If you think about us at all. Hester lays out bayberry candles and you get all mushy: I love America. Delightful. You note the glint in the 12-over-12s that us hard-timers clean every day at dawn and you get all proud. American ingenuity. Quaint.

Well, you don't have a clue. See, you can watch us cobble or pot until you get bored and then you can buy your barley sugar sticks and take the Ethan Frome or Hester Prynne shuttle back to the Molly Pitcher or the Crispus Attucks Parking Lot and get in your RVs and go. We stay.

I could tell you about charming. I could show you the underside of cute. Old Arkham Village is our nation's heritage all right, but it's not what you think. Rehabilitation, sure: let cons do time in pretty-pretty early America. Whittle by the fireplace with the mantel painted in authentic imitation cranberry-and-buttermilk paint, except we can't have knives. Press criminals through the all-American grid. They come out the other side like potatoes, mashed. Homogenized. You can mold them into anything you want. It's America all right, America straight out of Lizzie Borden by Simon Legree. We, your model prisoners, live by the numbers. Bullfinch Warden has thumbscrews and a gift for hurting people so the marks don't show. Then there are the trusties with their Red Devils and their cattle prods. And at night, stalking the catwalks in our dormitory hundreds of feet below Betsy Ross Lot 3, the screws.

"Honey, let's fuck here."

"Eeek, what would our forefathers think?"

"Our forefathers are off duty. The place is closed."

The tourists are lying together on the greensward. A noise comes out of the ground like a great, communal groan. She leaps out of her lover's arms with a shriek. "Ernie, somebody's listening, let's get out of here!"

I AM WRITING in my own blood, by What light sifts through the bars in the subterranean part of Old Arkham Village that you never see. This is our home nights until dawn, Thanksgiving and Christmas, when even public parks in the State of Massachusetts close.

And if we look all right to you in the daytime, bowing and smiling, answering your questions in 18th-century quaint -- well. You don't see the hidden monitors, trusties ready to rat if the smile slips even a half inch. Sonic barriers at the perimeters and electrified razor wire in the woods. The anklets and the belt.

I'll come to the belt.

Meanwhile, my credentials. To prove that this is no political tract and definitely not a gag. It isn't even a cry for help.

It's a record of how things are. What it's like in this tarted-up, chintzy, early American penal colony, me to you. I, Arch Plummet, am a lifer here in Old Arkham Village; for years I have been your friendly village blacksmith, answering your stupid questions as I hammer horseshoes and craft cheesy rings for your kids out of genuine, authentic replicas of 18th-century square-headed nails. You've seen me pull glowing metal out of the forge and bong horseshoes into shape to the voice of Jason Robards reading, "Under the spreading chestnut tree..." The Village Blacksmith, piped in here on a loop, and you've seen me hammer them on to the Percherons' hooves and finish them off with the hasp while on the same loop some old mid-American broad named Jo Stafford belts out "The Blacksmith Blues." Well I could tell you a thing or two about blacksmith blues.

Right, I am the village smithy. For my crimes. If you knew how many times I've heard that track or what would happen to me if I trashed the speakers or tried to walk away from the racket, you'd understand. Burn scars on my ankles where the anklets zapped me; mossy cracks in my skull from the beatings in solitary and beginning marks around my waist from the belt. I am a lifer.

A life sentence to Old Arkham Village, when all I did was steal a loaf of bread.

Okay, okay, it was a Lexus, but I didn't know about the toddler in the back until we reached Cuernavaca, by which time the only logical thing to do was send the ransom note. I never laid a finger on him! I bought him the Pancho Villa scrape and matching Mexican hat and put him on the bus home before I even mailed the note. And here I am with the hard-timers. Quiven the decoy duck carver (murder One), and Roland the town printer (arson). Gemma the gingerbread maker (crime of passion, don't ask; her husband was shtupping her mom), sweet Gemma, whom I happen to be in love with -- and Laramie the cobbler (armed robbery, which I happen to know was a frame).

"It is well known that society's dregs are recidivists beyond all hope of rehabilitation." The warden fills the 18th-century meetinghouse, roaring like a frustrated warthog, and thirty visiting penologists flinch. "If we are going to warehouse them, let's do it creatively. There is no enterprise without its profit."

If you find this. When you read this. Know this. Everything I've done I did for Joanna. And Quiven. Because of what happened to them when the only wrong thing they did was fall in love.

See, when the screws turn us out of the rack and march the work details out four hours before Old Arkham Village opens, nobody cares who walks next to who in the double line. Hard-timers, all of us, groggy from the pills, belching oatmeal and miserable in our pointed shoes and scratchy linsey woolsey period costumes, shambling like the dead.

The screws are zoned out on these grim mornings; hung over from the orgy and bitter about being stuck on the predawn shift. Nobody notices if you're marching with guys from your tier or sidling closer to the women in the foggy dawn, and if you do collide with her -- Oh, Gemma...if Quiven collides with Joanna! -- if you mutter to each other under cover of the guards' shouting and get to know each other, everybody thinks what you say to each other leads to zilch. The vise of a maximum security prison is too tight for love.

But Quiven got close to Joanna and fell in love anyway.

"Mommy, that lady doesn't like me."

"Of course she does, dear. It's her job."

"Then why is she crying?"

"Shut up. Shut up and eat your horehound drops."

I DIDN'T EVEN SEE IT happening; I was conditioned to march on, like Pavlov's dogs or the chicken that dances on the electrified turntable, softshoe like crazy to keep from getting shocked. Want to break and run? Want to kill and burn? Light some weed or relieve yourself behind a tree? Forget it. We look free to you, but we are not. Hidden by the costumes, there are the anklets, with an extra added incentive for us. Under the shirts and leather jerkins, we wear the belts.

Electronic control. Now and ever. Day and night. We prisoners are reined in tight. We eat rotten meat and weevily bread and belch misery and resentment; we crawl out of boxes on these dank mornings and break rocks before we don our costumes for the Early American Card Shoppe or tickety-boo little Scrimshaw Junction, folding our hands underneath leather aprons and putting on prim Colonial smiles. But what do you tourists care?

We look all right to you.

"And to keep order we give them the illusion of rehabilitation. That they are learning new careers. Movement is not action, but we make them think it is. A true belief in movement can prevent action," Bullfinch Warden says.

Appearances. Happy colonists. Model prisoners. If you look at all, you don't see past the costumes and bland faces, but there is rage scorching the sweaty gauze under our wigs and murder in our hearts. Be careful what you do when you come into our shops and houses; be careful what you say! Rebellion etches the insides of our bellies; pry open our jaws and you'll see fire. We mean to destroy Bullfinch Warden, but you happen to be closer. Beware. We could just rip a hole in your face.

Some days one of us forgets himself and strikes out or makes a break for it, but it never lasts long: the belts. The monitors. The drugs. No sleep. Debilitating food.

By the time you come at ten A.M. we're so deep into it that we look right at home in the confected past. And if Quiven and Joanna fall in love and begin to plan, I don't guess it, so how could you? I am in love with Gemma, but it's only since the auto da fe.

Quiven was in love with Joanna. He couldn't leave it alone. Notes dropped in with the laundry, sweet Gemma slipped Joanna's notes into the pockets of his fatigues for her, and in the men's supply room Laramie Beckam did the same for Quiven. Quiven and Joanna had seconds to cherish and devour each other's notes; the screws turn out the beds and check the toilets on the hour. Their love fed on messages in the code desperate prisoners send, endearments tapped out on prison pipes. They kept in touch! Love grew on the most insubstantial communication veiled looks, endearments murmured in line; one day I saw Quiven and Joanna lock fingers. I whispered, "Careful. You'll get hurt!" but a trusty heard me and instead of working at the smithy I logged the twelve hours until the park closed with my head and hands clamped in the village stocks. I tried to warn him!

"But let's face it, ladies and gentlemen. These people are animals. We are a warehouse here. Good penology is optimizing it."

Quiven knew it would kill them both but he was in love. Still, love might have died of starvation if Bullfinch Warden hadn't caught Joanna dreaming over her spinning wheel: a complaint. Family of Latvians, in the hand-worked shirts and aprons with the lambs embroidered on the front. When lovesick Joanna was too distracted to answer their hundred questions they went to the warden for a refund. Mind you they thought he was the historic curator. Yeah, right. "We come so far. She look asleep!" They claimed the hostess in Cotton Mather house was not only dumb, but deaf.

The next day Joanna was ashen and drawn. Bullfinch Warden had activated her anklets. Not bigtime torture, just enough voltage to keep her on her toes. Safe. But seeing Joanna suffer drove Quiven nuts. It was around then that we had the

Indian corn pudding riot, with Quiven standing up on the table in the dining hall and us chanting and banging our cups until they zapped all the anklets and belts and we fell out senseless from the pain. When we came to, Quiven was in solitary and we were under lockdown on short rations, bread and water and fried pork rinds, don't ask.

It wasn't bad food that drove Quiven. It was compression. When he cleared solitary he was assigned to the Old Stone Jail. Then he heard Joanna scream. Fury drove him to crack the leg irons and wrench off the cell door. Compression sent him out of the jail and across the Village Green to Cotton Mather House. He went in spite of the fact that the belt's secret workings intensified as he got farther from his designated post.

Quiven was in agony by the time he reached Cotton Mather house. Screaming Joanna was bent backward over her spinning wheel by a sexcrazed tourist in a FUCK ME I'M AMERICAN T-shirt and an International Harvester cap. In spite of the teeth of pain Quiven pulled her away from the horrified tourists and took her upstairs. Security programming sent a couple of jolts into her anklets to keep her in place but love overrode the pain.

"Oh, Quiven," she said, or so Gemma reports.

Quiven looked at her with his own death written in his face. "I love you." They both knew that this was not only the first time for them, it would be the last time.

It was excruciating, but they didn't care. The anklets wouldn't kill her, only scar her, and when push comes to shove in prison, it is the moment you strive for, not the terrible aftermath or punishments to come.

So Quiven and Joanna locked themselves into a bedroom where they murmured and touched for as long as they could manage until the gnawing scorpions in the belt overrode even Quiven's compressed love and grief and he fell out of himself, never to return.

"Because of its nature, a democracy is obligated to pretend to rehabilitate. To work, rehabilitation has to be voluntary. Since it is mandatory it never works. Therefore, the state's only obligation is to make it look as if we have tried."

By the time Bullfinch's cadre in their Revolutionary war uniforms broke in on them, pain ruled. Quiven was dead. And Joanna? Joanna had gone so far back inside herself that not all the thorazine in the world could retrieve her. She was lost to us.

No deed goes unpunished and nothing in prison passes without note. Bullfinch took off the belt and strung Quiven's body up in the underground cellblock. He made us file by to see the exact cost of rebellion. They hung him upside down, so we walked by cranksided with our heads resting on our shoulders so we could see into his face.

"Sometimes you can only teach by example. That's why the state gives us the death penalty. Sometimes the example itself is more powerful than the threat of death."

Bullfinch Warden actually said, "Look on my works, ye mighty." "

And we saw. Incised around Quiven's naked waist by the constant jackhammering of a million tiny needles was the warning: LOVE IS DEATH... FREEDOM IS SUICIDE... FREEDOM IS SUICIDE... LOVE IS DEATH, words chasing each other around and around dead Quiven's waist, a warning to us all etched in pain, and if the needles penetrated Quiven's vitals, it's a testimony to physical strength and to the power of his love that he had his moment with Joanna before his heart faltered and he died.

In case you're interested, Warden Bullfinch wasn't about to leave it at that.

He stood up on the catwalk while we filed past what was left of Quiven and he made a speech. I'll spare you the details. It was worse than the anklets and the belts, and the punchline? Instead of sending Joanna to Quincy for retrial, Bullfinch Warden was conducting a witchcraft trial, a special event for the Labor Day Weekend visitors to Old Arkham Village, us on time-and-a-half rations since prisoners are never paid, and the state makes overtime provisions when they need you around the clock. The trial was slated to take place in front of high-ticket audiences at special evening showings so we could continue with business as usual during the day.

"The lessons we teach here are for the ages. They are lessons for us all."

But what do you care? You loved the trial. It went live on CNN. Hard Copy came in on it, along with Inside Edition, and Ted Koppel interviewed William F. Buckley Junior on the witch hunts of the 1950s in a special Nightline telecast direct from here.

Because you thought it was contrived just for your entertainment, you even loved the auto da fe. It's a good thing Joanna was already catatonic; she didn't feel a thing. At least we don't think she did, although Entertainment Tonight reported agents from William Morris and CAA were trying to sign her up on the basis of her performance, up to and including her dying screams.

And because you were excited and distracted by how real the flames looked and how eloquently Joanna writhed, and because the screws were busy keeping you from mobbing the stake, Gemma's body and mine touched in the crush: "Arch." "Gemma!" We fused, bonded by instant love. And as reflected flames licked our faces and we moaned in the heat, my friend Laramie Beckam, who knows every duct and pipe in the bowels of our underground cellblock because he is a trusty, Laramie fell in with us and we hatched the plan.

"The only effective facility is the maximum security facility. It has to look civil from the outside, but it must shut off all possibilities of escape."

Now our plan is complete. We've assembled civilian wardrobes and kited them over the electronic barrier. After I plant this note I give the signal. Laramie starts the fire in the paint locker. By the time it's extinguished he's shorted out the E-barrier and we're out of here. And if we don't make it; if they see us escaping in spite of the fire and confusion; if they shoot us dead, no matter. It's better than one more day in the smithy, with Gemma suffering behind the Visitors' Center desk or giving her monologue on Colonial spinning in the repaired and refurbished Cotton Mather house.

"Effective prevention is predicated on the impossibility of escape."

Quiet. You don't hear me. If our plan works, you will never read this. Instead you'll see me on all 1,000 Primestar channels, telling our story to the world. All that remains is to slip this account into my jerkin and, when the shift changes and the screws march us, the early detail, to the holding pen to draw breath before they put us back into the Colonial petting zoo, I'm going to slip away. I'll stick this notebook into the cornhusk doll barrel in the Bayberry Candle corner of the General Store. Although Hester is afraid to come with us, she's volunteered to risk her life if necessary to preserve this testament. At my signal that we're home free, she'll destroy it for our own protection as well as hers.

Live free or die.

We go tonight.  
with thanks to Paul Mercer

She lives in Connecticut and travels widely; it was presumably during her American travels that she hit upon this puritanical notion for prison reform. Perhaps you'll bear it in mind during your summer vacation...