

Bardo

by

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EXT. PRISON - DAY

In the early light of dawn, the robins are singing as a bread truck pulls up to the gates of Huxley State Penitentiary. Only the right gate is ajar. The BREAD TRUCK DRIVER puts down his coffee, looks around puzzledly, and drives around to enter the prison grounds.

The bread truck driver parks and walks around to open the rear door of the truck. It slides up loudly and he sees a row of crows watching him from above.

He pushes his cart loaded with bread up to the loading dock, but the overhead door is closed.

BREAD TRUCK DRIVER  
Hello? Hey! Wake up, you guys.  
I've got the doughnuts!

He tries the loading dock side door, but it's locked. He grabs a tray of doughnuts and walks across the yard to the Main Entry door as the crows continue to caw.

A buzzing sound grows louder as he approaches the door. He sees that the noise coming from the electric lock release and he opens the door cautiously.

INT. PRISON SECURITY LOBBY - DAY

Through the security glass, we see the bread truck driver enter the lobby. He looks into the window and we can see a man's contorted hand is pressing down on the Door Lock button. The driver's eyes go wide and he drops the tray of doughnuts.

BREAD TRUCK DRIVER  
Sweet Jesus!

EXT. GARDEN - DAY

ASHFORD DIAL inspects the wilted roses in his garden. He grabs a spade, digs around one of the decrepit plants, and pulls up the stalk to see a clump of roots infested with worms.

ASHFORD  
That's organic, all right. I knew  
I should have used the sterilized  
soil.

Ashford's cell phone rings and he answers.

ASHFORD  
Homicide. Ashford Dial here.

KOWALSKI (OC)

Hey, Ash. Sorry to bother you on your vacation. Are you out on the boat?

ASHFORD  
(looking at his bale of worms)  
Actually, I just picked up some bait.

KOWALSKI  
Listen, there's been some kind of prison break out at Huxley. Has your brother called you yet?

ASHFORD  
No. Haven't heard from him in about a week. Why, what's up?

KOWALSKI  
It's really bizarre. Somehow they all got out last night.

ASHFORD  
All of them? You mean *all* the inmates? (laughs) That ought to keep the Marshals busy. Good time to be on vacation.

KOWALSKI  
Ash, the *guards* are gone too. And they found a body. Well, part of one anyway. Damnedest thing you've ever seen.

ASHFORD  
(drops the plant)  
OK. I'm coming down.

EXT. PRISON YARD - DAY

Ashford pulls his car into the prison yard where KOWALSKI stands waiting. A FEDERAL MARSHAL with a police dog approaches Ashford's car. Ashford shows his badge and the Marshall leads the sniffing dog all the way around the vehicle.

KOWALSKI

You seem to have passed the sniff test.

ASHFORD

(stepping out of the vehicle)  
And here I thought dogs could smell fear. Have they found anything?

KOWALSKI

No trace of the prisoners yet. The Marshals are out looking for a *tunnel*.

ASHFORD.

You're not buying that?

KOWALSKI

It's a freaking *swamp* out there. You can't tunnel through *mud*.

A police helicopter whizzes by overhead and the two men watch it disappear behind a line of crows on the prison wall.

KOWALSKI

I think you better come take a look at the stiff.

INT. PRISON SECURITY LOBBY - DAY

Ashford and Kowalski enter the lobby. Ashford stops cold as he stares through the glass.

ASHFORD

Good God! What on Earth could have done this?

A camera flash diverts Ashford's attention. The CORONER is in the room taking pictures of a dead guard sitting at his security desk. The body is deflated, gray, and somehow half-dissolved into his chair. The guard's forearm seems to be sticking out of the desktop itself, his hand poised over the door lock button.

CORONER

(continuing to shoot pictures)  
What on Earth, you ask? Nothing maybe. More like the Earth came to swallow him up.

ASHFORD  
What do mean?

CORONER  
His feet. They're sunk into the  
concrete floor all the way up to  
his ankles.

Ashford and Kowalski walk around the side of the desk to  
take a look.

ASHFORD  
(looking closely at the  
guard's hands)  
Hello. What's this?

Ashford pulls a pen from his pocket and pushes a small piece  
of paper from the guard's hand. He flips it over to reveal  
the handwritten word "BARDO."

ASHFORD  
Bardo? Someone's name, maybe?  
Kowalski, see if you can get the  
inmate manifest and staff roster.

KOWALSKI  
Sure. The warden wants meet with  
us as soon as you're done here.

ASHFORD  
(turns to Coroner)  
Has anything been moved?

CORONER  
I pulled his hand off the buzzer  
after I got enough pictures. The  
noise was driving me nuts!

Ashford takes the pen and presses the button. The outer and  
inner doors buzz loudly and Ashford opens the inner door and  
gestures to Kowalski to come with him.

KOWALSKI  
What? What are you thinking?

ASHFORD  
The door. Was he buzzing someone  
in or was he buzzing *something*  
out?

INT. PRISON BLOCK - DAY

Ashford and Kowalski's footsteps echo in the empty cell block as they walk up the WARDEN and TWO GUARDS in the center aisle.

ASHFORD  
Morning, Warden.

WARDEN  
It's been a long time, Dial.  
Shouldn't you be out fishing  
somewhere?

ASHFORD  
(looking around at the empty  
cells)  
I thought I caught my limit, but  
then the big ones got away.

WARDEN  
Well they didn't just walk out of  
here, I'll tell you that. The only  
way out of here is through that  
hallway and we checked the  
surveillance tapes.

KOWALSKI  
So how many of your convicts fell  
off the planet then?

WARDEN  
482 inmates. Here's the manifest,  
smart guy. (Hands Kowalski a  
clipboard) We're going to find the  
sons of bitches and they're going  
to wish they stayed lost.

ASHFORD  
How many of your men are missing?

WARDEN  
Forty one were on the clock. Forty  
two if you count Henderson at the  
door.

ASHFORD  
I found a note on the body. It  
said, "Bardo." That name mean  
anything to you?

WARDEN

Bardo? No. Doesn't ring a bell.

KOWALSKI

There's no Bardo on the manifest.

ASHFORD

So, Warden, any theories on how they got out of here?

WARDEN

They did some kind of Houdini shit. I don't know. Look, detective. Let the marshals get the cons back. You're job is to figure out who killed Henderson and help me find my men.

A GUARD runs up to the group from the other end of the cell block.

GUARD

(panting)

Warden, we ahhh, we found a survivor.

WARDEN

What? Who is it?

GUARD

It's Aldoux, sir. He was down in solitary and I guess we forgot to check.

WARDEN

Shit! Put him in irons and bring him to my office. I want three of you on him at all times. If he resists, I want you to kick his sorry ass!

ASHFORD

Mind if we question this Aldoux?

WARDEN

Yeah. No problem. Let's question the one bat-crazy survivor. Just freaking great!

INT. HALLWAY IN FRONT OF WARDEN'S OFFICE

Ashford and Kowalski are waiting outside the Warden's office. Kowalski is looking through the papers on his clipboard.

KOWALSKI

Ash, you said you said you hadn't heard from your brother.

ASHFORD

Yeah. But he works days, so we don't talk much.

KOWALSKI

According to this, he never punched out yesterday. Ash, your brother's missing.

INT. WARDEN'S OFFICE - DAY

ALDOUX is seated in chains in front of the Warden's desk. He's an older man and his head is shaved.

WARDEN

OK, from the beginning. What happened yesterday?

ALDOUX

My day is benchmarked only by meals, Warden. Breakfast came at the usual time. The eggs were a bit salty. Then, umm, egg salad for lunch.

ASHFORD

Did you see anything? Hear anything *last night*?

ALDOUX

It's awfully quiet down there, detective. Did you know our fine Warden here has had me in solitary for some 14 months now? I've gotten quite used to the quiet. It's meditative, really.

ALDOUX

There was something, something around midnight, I think. A scream. Yes, I heard someone scream once and then it stopped. You hear that sometimes from the med ward when they strap them down.

ASHFORD

One scream?

ALDOUX

And then nothing, Detective. In fact I didn't hear a single sound until this afternoon. I was beginning to think the boys were going to let me go hungry forever.

WARDEN

This is a waste of time. Put this asshole back in his cage.

Guards grab Aldoux from both sides and help him to his feet.

ASHFORD

One more thing, Mr. Aldoux. What do you know about Bardo?

ALDOUX

Bardo? As in Tibetan?

ASHFORD

Tibetan Buddhism?

ALDOUX

Do you know anything about Buddhism, Detective? In Tibetan, Bardo is the in-between place you go after you expire. It seems the dead go there for some period while they wait for their next life to begin.

KOWALSKI

You know a lot about this shit?

ALDOUX

I read a lot about this and other kinds of *shit* down there, Detective. In fact, I was reading just the other day that Bardo offers the spiritually advanced a great opportunity for liberation.

WARDEN

Right. And what would it offer for a killer like you?

ALDOUX

Well Warden, for some, it can become a place of danger. Karma can impel one into a less than desirable rebirth.

ASHFORD

And this danger, what do you know about that?

ALDOUX

In some traditions, it is held that the Bardo is inhabited by the Gaki, or Hungry Ghosts, as it were. As punishment for their mortal vices, they've been cursed with insatiable hunger.

INT. PRISON SECURITY OFFICE - NIGHT

Ashford and Kowalski are seated in a dark room watching television monitors.

ASHFORD

This doesn't make any sense! (points to the other monitors) One minute they're sleeping in their bunks and the next they're just freaking gone! We have to be missing something. Run it again.

C.U. ON VIDEO MONITOR showing two convicts mopping the cafeteria floor as an armed guard stands watching. The inset timecode says 11:59 pm. The cons stop for a moment and look up. The screen flickers and rolls and the cafeteria is empty as the time code changes to 12:00 am.

ASHFORD

Stop there. Can you go back one frame at a time?

Kowalski turns back the dial on the tape machine.

TIGHT ON VIDEO MONITOR showing empty cafeteria. Screen rolls up to show guard falling backward as if he was violently pushed. The cons are not in the room. Screen rolls back another frame showing the guard standing upright, eyes wide, reaching for his weapon.

ASHFORD

Stop there. Look, he sees that the cons are gone. Like they vanished in front of his eyes!

Ashford's CELL PHONE RINGS and he answers it.

ASHFORD

Homicide. Ashford Dial. Yeah. Yeah we found some things, but it's still a puzzle. When do you need the report? OK. I'll come right down.

Ashford closes his phone.

ASHFORD (CONT'D)

I have to go in and file a preliminary. You coming?

KOWALSKI

It's after 11:00 already, Ash. Go file the report and get some sleep. I'll see you here in the morning.

ASHFORD

OK, thanks for keeping on it.

KOWALSKI

We'll find him, Ash.

ASHFORD  
(looking at the screen with  
the guard being blown  
backwards)  
Yeah. We'll find him.

INT. LIVING ROOM - DAY

Ashford is sleeping in his easy chair. In his lap we see a photo of Ashford and his brother Johnny wearing fishing hats. Johnny is smiling and hold up his pinky and index finger, making the "surfs up" sign.

Ashford's CELL PHONE rings and he rubs his eyes and brings the phone to his ear.

WARDEN' VOICE(O.C.)  
Dial? It's Warden Parker. You up yet? Listen, it happened again.

ASHFORD  
What? What are you talking about?

WARDEN  
The prison. Everyone that was in there last night. They're gone. The guards, the Marshals, even their dogs. I got in early this morning and they're all gone.

ASHFORD  
Wait a minute--Kowalski. He stayed last night to finish the tapes.

WARDEN  
I'm sorry. Kowalski didn't sign out.

Ashford closes his phone and notices his message light is blinking.

C.U. CELL PHONE shows a text message from Kowalski, time stamp 11:59 pm. Ashford presses the VIEW button and the message says: "SAFFRON."

INT. SECURITY OFFICE - DAY

Ashford is seated at the video control console. The Warden enters the room.

WARDEN

You still here?

ASHFORD

Yeah. (looking at watch) It's getting late. I might ask you the same thing.

WARDEN

My staff bugged out already. No one wants to go missing.

ASHFORD

Kowalski was on to something. I have to find what he saw.

WARDEN

So you're not leaving?

ASHFORD

No. I'm riding this one out. Aldoux is the key to this. I'm sure of it. Your guys rigged the camera so I can watch and learn.

The Warden points to the cell monitor that shows Aldoux sitting in the lotus position.

WARDEN

So it's just you and me and the happy Buddha in solitary. Christ! They're coming in the morning to transfer the son of a bitch to the Jordon state pen.

The Warden stops and looks at the monitor labeled "Med Ward."

WARDEN

Wait a minute. What day is this tape from?

ASHFORD

Um. Two days ago. The night this shit started. Why?

WARDEN

No one was admitted to the med ward this week. Who's that in the bed?

Ashford rolls his chair over to the tape machine under the Med Ward monitor. He fast-forwards the tape and as the time code passes midnight, the sheets deflate.

ASHFORD

The Med ward. Take me there.

INT. MED WARD - NIGHT

Ashford and the Warden enter the room, which is lit by a blue glow from a heart monitor machine. The barred window is open and the wind is blowing in from the prison yard. A crow sits on the window sill.

Ashford looks up to see the security camera pointed to an empty bed. He walks up to the bed slowly and grabs a corner of the sheet. He then pulls it away quickly and reveals a contorted body that has somehow melded with the coverless mattress springs.

ASHFORD

Oh no! Johnny! No!

WARDEN

Poor devil. He must have been working late and came here to crash.

ASHFORD

Aaaaggggh! What the hell is happening here? Shit! Johnny!

Ashford stops and bites his lip. He pulls out his weapon.

WARDEN

What are you doing?

ASHFORD

I'm going to go talk to Aldoux.  
And if he doesn't talk I'm going  
to send him straight to that Bardo  
of his with a bullet in his head!

INT. SOLITARY BLOCK - NIGHT

Aldoux is sitting silently in the lotus position as his cell door slams open. Ashford takes half a step in and points his weapon squarely at Aldoux.

ALDOUX

It's almost midnight. Shouldn't you two be on your way out of here?

ASHFORD

I want to know why you're still here. (pulls back the hammer on his weapon) Tell me.

ALDOUX

Really Detective. You think that gun of yours is going to do you much good against the hungry ghosts?

ASHFORD

Who are they?

ALDOUX

Why they're the inmates you seek so badly, Detective. See, here in my quiet meditations one day I discovered the door to Bardo. I had read that the monks in saffron have been doing this for thousands of years. But instead of just slipping through and escaping, I did something no one's ever done.

ASHFORD

You held the door open, didn't you?

ALDOUX

Precisely. I thought it a great favor to let my fellow inmates escape as well, if only for my own tasty revenge against our friend the Warden here.

Only when I held the door open, the Gaki were waiting. Seems they weren't too fond of the next life of hell they were headed for.

ASHFORD

So they came here.

A HUMMING SOUND fills the room. Aldoux laughs as the clock on the wall strikes midnight. WIND BLOWS through the hall. A ghostly specter appears down the hall, it's mouth wide over its incredibly thin neck and bloated body. It shoots down the hall with a terrifying banshee scream.

The Warden, steps back eyes wide. The hungry ghost opens wide to consume him in a single gulp. Aldoux continues to laugh as the ghost swoops into the cell and looks him up and down in his saffron jumpsuit. He tries to grab Aldoux, but is seemingly repelled.

ASHFORD

Saffron! That's what Kowalski was  
trying to tell me!

A shot rings out. A blood stain appears above Aldoux's heart and his body crumples. The ghost turns to Ashford, who drops his gun and runs down the hall.

Ashford comes to the gate at the end of the hall. It's locked! He looks around wildly. An open cell. There's a jumpsuit on a hook!

He jumps inside and rips the saffron jumpsuit off the the hook. The ghost is screaming as it comes around the corner.

Ashford puts his arms in the sleeves hurriedly and has one pant leg on as the ghost burst into the cell, knocking him full force into the rear wall. Blood dripping down his face, Ashford sees the specter of the Gaki rear up on him as he fades into unconsciousness.

INT. HOSPITAL CORRIDOR - DAY

Ashford pushes his wheel chair down the hospital corridor. His head is bandaged and his left leg is gone below the knee. He passes the nursery window and looks inside.

A NEWBORN BABY BOY sleeps facing the window. One of his hands are stretched above his head, pinky and index finger extended to make the "surfs up" sign.

Ashford smiles and watches the baby for a short while. Then he wheels away.

A crow caws from an open window behind him at the end of the hall. Ashford turns around to see a ANOTHER BABY in the window, only this one is standing, mouth open wide and holding the bars of his crib.