

Wagadu: A Journal of Transnational Women's & Gender Studies

Volume 17

Issue 1 *Special Issue: Telling My Story: Voices
from the Wyoming Women's Prison*

Article 7

6-1-2017

On the Run

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Wyoming Pathways from Prison (WPfP)

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Recommended Citation

Hart, Teresa (2017) "On the Run," *Wagadu: A Journal of Transnational Women's & Gender Studies*: Vol. 17: Iss. 1, Article 7.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.cortland.edu/wagadu/vol17/iss1/7>

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SEVEN

ON THE RUN

Teresa Hart

I sit here a prisoner, an inmate, property of the state, a number. I live in a cell with a number and a letter above my door. A picture of my cellie and a picture of me, both stuck to the door with Velcro. These are the only things that signify we live there. Many of us inmates like to call this place “Camp Cupcake.” This facility is comparable to a girl’s school. It is safe here, but there is no rehabilitation. If we don’t work hard on our own to grow, it can be a place where women’s bodies go to be stored, almost like a morgue. Everything in here is the same. The same doors, same pictures, same cinder-block walls, same bunks, same guards, same orange uniforms. It never changes, but I don’t feel the same.

Anyone who knows me could tell you about me. I’m that transparent, that predictable. Strange, here I am telling you what others see in me. Really, I don’t care about that anymore. I’m going to tell you what I think. Dysfunction is a trait I own. It can be debilitating. My beliefs and opinions are something I am firm in. I can be so opinionated it can come off as rough or cruel. Simply, I speak what is real to me. Good and evil are both very real things. I accept that. I love that I am unique. For a long time, I fought by living in a fantasy, this fight, my ambition to find what I longed for. An identity is all I ever wanted. Through my fantasy I did not gain an identity, I just became an extension of other people. I was empty. Nothing destroys life like emptiness.

My life started as many of ours do, full of joy, playfulness, curiosity, creativity, imagination, and wonder. Most importantly there was love – or what I saw as a loving family. When I was fourteen, my mother died. She suffered a long sickness and was blessed with a quick death. Her passing taught me that nothing in life is permanent. My father was disabled by grief and alcoholism,

just as he had been for as long I'd known him. The rest of the family was grief-stricken and unwilling to be burdened with an unruly teenager; they left me to my own devices. Her death should have been a time of grief, but my teenage self avoided any and all pain. I transformed my grief into a delusion of freedom and an ability to live life any way I decided. I spent the remainder of my adolescence avoiding responsibility and getting intoxicated. This was the birth of my reign of chaos.

This blur of drunkenness, this constant high, was a way of life for me these four years. My father was completely absent. He was there physically but gone mentally and emotionally. My drinking was a cure for the pain: a hangover or maybe the memory of my mother. Time not spent drinking was spent entangled in the arms of muscular "statues." These "mannequins," usually much older men, were used as playthings, and they gave me a feeling of belonging. No one who cared was there to help me embrace my pain. My family had left me alone.

My rescue came in the form of My Hero, a businessman who was eight years older than I was. My Hero's financial stability sparked my sense of intrigue. I knew I would stop at nothing to have him. I made sure to chase other girls away, girls that may have been better for him. My more desperate side just wanted to belong to someone or something. We moved in together within a week. Three months later, I was pregnant. I was sure at that point we would live happily ever after. Within five years, we had three children, two boys and a girl, all blue-eyed and blonde. The third person in our relationship, his business, was a rival to us and over time our arguments about the business dominated our relationship. We worked constantly. Selling tobacco, pipes, fireworks, gems, coins, rolling papers, cars, sex toys – you name it, we sold it, and we managed three websites on top of that. It was too much. I loved him in the only way I knew how. But our relationship and our family was not enough. Each day was the same old thing: accusations of cheating fueled by jealousy, never ending commercial activity, screaming children and the demands that came with parenthood. We pondered marital counseling, a change

of career paths, or exercising new religious avenues, but we never followed through. After many debates we decided to bring another entity into our marriage – a woman, our version of a mail-order bride, someone to fill our need for satisfaction.

My Hero travelled to the Philippines to pick out the specimen, one of many he had met while social networking. I remained dedicated to him, to our family, and to his business. While he was overseas, my dedication to him transformed from a sense of belonging into the weight of enslavement. When my so-called Hero returned with the woman of his choosing, a woman dubbed “the Asian Princess,” I loathed her. In truth, I was jealous. Her exotic skin far outshone my much paler tone. She was so petite, I could compare her to a schoolboy. I felt I couldn’t compete and I refused to be second string. That was the end of us. That was the end of my rescue.

With nothing to belong to, I entitled myself to nothing. To escape the nothingness, I drowned myself in alcohol and any drugs that I could acquire. I returned to my sexual escapades, but this time I had much lower standards. I had no sexual preferences: men, women, short, tall, fat, skinny, blonde, brunette, gentle, rough. Most of them quick and sloppy. Anything to feel needed.

Through all this, I attempted to act like a mother. I made an unsuccessful effort to live a double life. I wanted to be both a party girl and mother of the year. This was impossible. I loved my children, but each time I looked at them, I was reminded of everything I was not anymore. I remembered everything I had lost. I learned that not all my losses would be because of fate. Some of the most detrimental losses would be caused by my own choices.

My decisions got worse by the day. I met my Kryptonite. He was tall, dark, rugged, and five years younger than me. I got pregnant right away. Unlike My Hero, he had no ambition and worked as little as possible, as I tried to balance my life with him and my life with my other children. We scraped to get by. The birth of our first daughter was a beautiful thing, and I got pregnant again right away. I loved him but I distanced myself from him. I treated him as if he were nothing. I thought that if I treated him as

inferior I would be superior. Superiority meant that I could control him as if I were a queen. This had consequences, and things took a turn for the worse. He had always been angry. When he was upset he would scream and break things. This was different. He'd had enough. He knocked me off my throne by dominating me with abuse. My most vivid memory of this wrath was of him putting me into a chokehold and ripping the hair out of the top of my head. Everything else faded away. There was only fury and pain. I lost consciousness. Sometimes he would cry when he hit me. I never understood that.

The day my crime took place, my Kryptonite turned his poison on my children. I wish I could say that I stopped him, but I didn't. I pleaded for him to stop. He stopped when he wanted to. I got the children away from him as soon as I could. There were barely any signs of his violence, a few bruises. But I remember. I am sure they remember. I never hit my kids, but I never should have had them around him. So I am just as guilty as he is. I am grateful that my children only had to experience this for one day. I am grateful that they are okay.

For the abuse, we were both arrested. It was the standard jail experience. I was given a mat, a couple recycled fiber blankets, and a toothbrush. I listened to the girls on my block cry about wanting to go home, how they were going to get out of jail, and all the things they needed to do when they got home. I followed suit. I spent a lot of time on the phone trying to get someone to answer my collect calls. No one did. Everyone must have been appalled at what my life had become. After a week I was released on my recognizance. I had nowhere to go. An old buddy of mine let me sleep in the barn she owned. Since I was pregnant, I could not tolerate the cold floors, the insects or the loneliness. I returned to the only person who would understand, my Kryptonite. We were court-ordered to stay apart. When his probation officer caught us together, the county issued warrants. We ran.

We took what little money we had, along with a duffle bag full of clothes, and loaded up the minivan that would become our home for the next few months. When we fled, I learned something

about myself: running was something I liked. I liked trying not to exist. We just kept driving. We drove from town to town, truck-stop to truck-stop, food bank to food bank, and church to church. We conned and panhandled our way from Wyoming to New Mexico, New Mexico to Utah, and Utah to North Dakota where we finally made our home base at the (ironically named) Love's Travel Stop.

As much as I enjoyed running, I also felt the fear of being caught. I felt sorrow for the children I had left behind and the one growing inside me. I was terrified for my future. Even with all of this, I was still numb. When you fight everything inside of you, and do what you know is wrong, a kind of fog comes over you. Emotion sneaks in here and there, but mostly what you feel is nothing.

Love's was where I learned about transient communities. Most of the residents worked seasonal construction or in the oil field. Some of the workers were actually impoverished. They were homeless. The cost of living was very high. It wasn't profitable for the out-of-state workers to rent homes, since they wouldn't have anything to send home to their families. Each night, we would park in a row like pigeons on a phone line. We would talk from window to window, telling stories about days at work or on the rigs. Who was hiring, who was laying off, stories about prostitutes and drugs, and who had been in jail.

I got a temp job, and so did Kryptonite. I picked up a second job as a hostess in a Mexican restaurant. Eventually, our social security numbers betrayed us (as I knew they would; maybe deep down I was tired of running). The US Marshals came and apprehended us. I hadn't seen my Kryptonite that day. He was extradited back to Wyoming. North Dakota would not hold me because I was seven months pregnant. I got into the minivan and kept driving. Adrenaline took over. My only thought was the terror of being chained. I did not want to be locked away, never to be thought of again.

The only friend I had left on the planet was an old cowgirl who owned a horse ranch in Arizona. She wired me money, and I

drove straight there. I was there a month before I had the baby. She was beautiful. She gave me hope. I fantasized about being able to stay hidden and raise her. I wanted to be the mother to her that I couldn't be to my other children. None of that happened.

Life on the ranch took on a routine. The old cowgirl worked in town as a waitress. I was the maid, cook, and ranch hand. I tended to the horses day and night. Once in a while, a stud would break out of his pen and try to get to the mares. Corralling them was always an adventure. The repetitiveness of life on the ranch, the paranoia of being a fugitive, the isolation from society, and my loneliness eventually took hold. My daughter was my only source of joy and she filled some of my emptiness. Sadly, what she couldn't fill consumed me.

Relief showed up in the form of a male, a man whose name should have been "the Sleaze." We shared a common interest: drugs. We used dope together. I had experimented with meth in the past, but this became a way of life. Meth gave me the boost I needed to keep living and drown everything else out. Everything, that is, but the anger and paranoia. The meth added gasoline to my fire and my suspicions ran rabid. I was so scared that the law was coming to get me that I left my daughter in the care of the old cowgirl. She took me to the Sleaze's house in Las Vegas. I haven't seen my daughter since that day. She is the one child that I may never see again. That's the kind of hurt that's hard to live with. It's completely my fault.

When I saw Las Vegas for the first time, I was mesmerized. Neon lights everywhere. So many businesses it's hard to believe there are any houses. Casinos on every block, slot machines in gas stations, even Burger Kings with Keno machines in them. Everyone from businessmen to people in costumes fill the streets. Sex ads posted everywhere. Business cards, brochures, newspapers, all advertising "Girls! Girls! Girls!"

The Sleaze lived in a wealthy area of Vegas. Big houses with small yards, each manicured perfectly. The Sleaze introduced me to all the finer things Vegas had to offer: trips to the mall, dates, hotel pools, five star restaurants, backstage tickets to

concerts, VIP booths at clubs on the strip, tabs at the gaming tables, parties with celebrities, all the best champagne and liquor I could drink, and a constant parade of beautiful girls. Constantly high on meth and ecstasy I definitely wasn't becoming mother of the year, but I was the party girl I had always dreamed of being. I let my old life disappear like it never happened, like my mother had never died, like I had never abandoned my children.

Things started getting weird one day. The Sleaze hit one of the beautiful girls we were with. It was then that I realized the Sleaze was not just a drug dealer, but a pimp. I was completely addicted to drugs by this point and the Sleaze requested that I work for him. Peddling a few drugs and doing a sex scam wasn't enough for him and he asked me to start escorting. I refused. Truthfully, I believed I was too good to sell myself, no matter how bad I wanted to get high. He kicked me out of the house and I ended up on the streets.

The first day on the streets was something else. All I had was a smartphone with no service and the clothes I was wearing: a black tank top, tight jeans, and a pair of heels. For days I had been awake and the high still lingered. I walked anywhere I could pick up Wi-Fi; at a McDonalds or a Starbucks I messaged a couple of people I had met. The only person who answered was a martial arts fighter the Sleaze had introduced me to. He said he didn't know how he could help. I kept walking. Hours later I was almost to the Strip. The Strip was a safe haven; a place where I knew someone would get me high, where someone would rent me a room.

Suddenly, a little Asian guy pulled over in his Mazda and offered me a ride. I got in without thinking. My feet hurt. He didn't take me to the Strip; he took me to his house. His condo was clean, the living room nice. Sitting on a black leather couch, we drank brandy and talked about our lives. As the night progressed, he began talking about having sex with me. I knew from the tone in his voice that he would not be persuaded otherwise. There was no fear or anger in me. All I could think about was how I could get one over on this guy. There had to be a way out of this. While I asked him to pour me another drink, I messaged the fighter and

asked him if I could come over. When he agreed, I asked the Asian if he wanted to go to a party before we had some fun. When we got to the fighter's house I asked the Asian to wait outside for a minute and said I would be right back. I left him sitting out in front of the house. I never came back. I slept with the fighter that night. It was a loud, rough, pointless kind of sex. In the morning he gave me \$150 and told me I had to leave. It was a little degrading, but I figured if I had to choose between the Fighter and some little pathetic little Asian, I was choosing the Fighter.

The rest of my time in Las Vegas would be just like this: random men, money for sex, and drugs. When I eventually made my way to Boulder Highway in eastside Las Vegas, it was like paradise to me. Low-class citizens, prostitutes, gangbangers, and drug dealers everywhere. I have this joke that meth rained from the sky, but honestly, meth was easier to get than money. I had met a kid, an eighteen-year-old, on a dating website. He was looking to have a hook-up with someone. He lived at Suites, a pay-by-the-week motel. The Suites would become my refuge and a place that I would always return. My first night there, "the Kid" and I smoked a bunch (maybe a couple of grams) of dope. We went down a few doors to this weed dealer's room. He offered me a \$100 for a blowjob. I did it. I began to realize that prostitution did not have to feel degrading. It could help me survive. At this point I wasn't really alive anyways. I was just going through the motions. It could help me get high, which was all I cared about. When you're high it's like you're not even doing anything dirty. It's like you're not even there.

For anyone who is addicted to meth or heroin, Boulder Highway is the place to be. A section of housing projects lies just beyond, and the gangs run every block. The gangs strategically place sweet-talking dealers within reach. For me, the dealers were apothecaries, their product a cure for my sickness. Really, it was a poison eating at my soul until nothing was left of me and all I knew was the streets.

My nights were always the same. I'd get dressed up as best I could and look for clients aka "Johns." I had a few regulars.

Around sunset a couple nights a week, I would meet a middle-aged man at the Starbucks. He'd pick me up in his black town car, and we would find an alley to park in. He would pay me, and we would get down to business. He was a small man, and most the time I barely noticed that he was inside of me. He never made a mess. He always wore a condom. He was quick. It seemed to only take a few minutes, and I would have more than enough money for the next day. Some Johns didn't even want to have sex. All one wanted was for me to wear pigtails and talk to him in a little girl voice while he masturbated. He was a pervert, but who was I to judge? He paid well.

My days were a little different. I wore tennis shoes and carried everything I owned in a backpack. I would walk for hours and my shoes would melt on the scorching concrete. If I needed money, I would panhandle. If not, I would look for new people, meet my new connections. It's all about who you know in Las Vegas, if you're going to survive. Once in awhile, I would walk to Wal-Mart and a place a new pair of walking shoes on my feet, leaving the melted remnants of would-be sneakers in aisles as discarded trash.

I learned the hard way not to give money to other people for drugs. When you're desperate for a fix, you don't think about anything but catching that high. The one time I did, he never came back with my drugs or my money. I knew better. My protection came in the form of a local gangbanger who ran a couple of blocks. He introduced me to all of his affiliates; he got me clothes, gave me drugs, and told me to stay close to his people. I was drawn in right away. He already had a wife, so I was just extra entertainment for him. I still saw to my Johns, but life was a lot quieter, easier, and a lot less walking. Now, I belonged to his people. I loved belonging even if it was as property. I learned quickly that when you sleep with one of the homies, you sleep with all of the homies. Each of them provided different benefits for me: sometimes money, sometimes clothes, and sometimes nice houses to stay in with good food, not that I ate much at this point. Always drugs. Drugs were a constant.

When I fell in love with the Captain, Second-in-Command of one of my “Protections,” my Protection gladly gave me away. I quickly became the Captain’s wifey. He did have another wife, but he was bored with her and pushed her to the side. The Captain was a con, a thief, and a dealer. He ran some local trap houses and showed me where each of them were, so I would always have a place to get high and a place to sleep. Not that I really needed it; I knew plenty of people and places these days. But things happen in Vegas...

Trap houses were simply houses that the crew had taken over by force. They would party and sell drugs. It gave the dealers’ customers a place to use. It gave the working girls a place to shower, sleep, and get ready for the night. The houses were always changing in an effort to avoid being busted. By the time we were done with them, anything of value was gone and graffiti would cover the wall. I returned once to an abandoned house because I needed a quick place to get high. The crackheads had ripped all the copper out of the ceiling, and on the ground there was only trash and blankets. Two junkies sat in the middle of the floor, flicking their blood on the walls every time they tried to find a vein. It was obvious that they had shot up one too many times and been up for one too many days.

Don’t get me wrong, I used needles too. My Captain shot up. He taught me about rigs and how to hit a vein. For my own safety, he requested that I only use with him. For the most part, I respected that. The first time I ever shot up with him, we were in the park. He poured water into a bottle cap, mixed up the dope, and got a brand new rig ready. He rubbed my arm to find a vein and stuck the needle into my arm slowly, kissing me as he pushed down on the plunger. The first second was nothing, but then when the rush hit, a heat ran over me mixed with a little bit of nausea. I wasn’t sure if I was dying or living. As this rush came over me, I watched as he loaded the same rig. He would never let *me* use a dirty rig, but he would always use mine. I never understood the logic behind that. Either he trusted me or he was trying to set me up, but maybe that was just my paranoia. As his rush hit him, he

held me. The image in my mind is ridiculous – a six foot tall African-American man, covered in tattoos, holding a five foot petite white girl dressed for a night on the town. We both sat holding each other, waiting for the rush to pass. It was a bonding moment. To us, it was making love. When the rush passed, I was good to go. I was sure I could take on the world.

The streets will consume a person. It was like there was never anything else. The only thing that existed was the streets and drugs. I lived a “posher,” more protected lifestyle of homelessness, but I was homeless. The irony of living with nothing but a backpack full of possessions is the sudden obsession with money, fame, and riches. My Captain and his people filled me with empty promises of these. They took care of me, and I had what I needed, but I never had those things. The successes were there: I have been in houses with duffle bags full of money, bathtubs full of dope, and sawed off shotguns lining the walls. But *that* success was just beyond my reach. I had to stay in my place. I was there to take orders. I was there to service the Johns and the homies. I was there to find people we could rob. I would always get a cut, but a small one. When I found someone that was worth robbing, I would let them know. While I was riding the John and keeping him distracted, they would be robbing his house, hotel room, or car. The Johns noticed sometimes and I would find myself in bad situations. The crew would always stay nearby, get me out, and make sure I was okay. If the cops would have shown up they would have left me. Eventually that’s what they did. I was staking out a job when I got caught trespassing. The cops ran my name and found I had out-of-state felony warrants. I was taken to county jail and put into a maximum-security unit.

County jail in Vegas was a totally different experience for me. I was housed with female murderers and high-profile gang members. We were locked down in one-person cells for most of the time, but they would let us out now and again. I sat in jail for twenty days before they extradited me. It was always exciting when we weren’t locked down. I experienced the realness of the place – lots of card games, girls hustling commissary, prescription

drugs, and a lot of fights. I watched a big Black girl cut up a little Native chick in the shower. Later, we found out it was over a pack of Ramen noodles she owed her.

In the time I spent locked down a heavy burden came over me. My street life was over. I now had to face my demons: my past, my crime, and my family. Street life had been easy. I had no one to disappoint or be disappointed by. Everyone was disposable, including me.

I was extradited back home and sentenced to prison. Like the streets, prison is easy. It's predictable. They give you two rule books. If you don't follow the rules, you get a disciplinary. Too many "disciplinaries" means time in segregation. Real life isn't this black and white. I have learned a lot about myself here and a lot about other people. When you're locked in a building for years at a time with over two hundred women you learn patience. Letting other people be right and learning to walk away from stupidity has saved me from a lot of problems. It's okay to change and it doesn't mean you're weak.

I'm not going to lie, I have a lot of guilt about my past and it eats me alive every day. I long for numbness sometimes. A lot of guilt comes from what I've done to my children. I also feel bad for the way I handled my relationship with My Hero. I've never tried things the right way. I gave up. Why did I give up? I'm a fighter. Maybe I could have saved some heartache. I have humbled myself and I'm fighting again, but this time for the right things. I have made amends to My Hero and oldest three children. I fight every day to make up for the past. My Hero has supported me through my incarceration. He is no longer with the "Asian Princess." I guess she wasn't as royal as she pretended to be. He wants me to be a part of my children's lives. This is my first sign of forgiveness, my first sign that doing the right thing is worth the fight.

Drugs and men do not and will not ever complete me and they do not make me feel whole. I know that now. Being me is good enough, and I really like the "me" I am today even if I am a prisoner. That won't last much longer. Prison is just another bump

in the road for me. The prosecution that I so feared was a godsend for me, and it allowed me to find some peace. For me, prison has not been a place where I went to die, but a place I learned to live. Let's face it, I'm an addict. I might pick up again or get in a bad relationship. It happens. At least I'm not running anymore. As my release date draws near, I have a lot of fears. Can I make it in society? Can I make amends with my family? Can I avoid the streets? Only time will tell. What I do know is, up until now, I've been lucky...

A PLEA TO MY HERO

Inside I am screaming, outwardly silent.
All these people don't even know our love torments me.
Talking to you
Guilt trip,
God I want to fight
Why don't you hear me? This is my only goal
Okay, I'm lying.
I want to be right.
This term of punishment is almost over,
Headed home to you...
Why do you have to be so difficult?
It's supposed to be smooth sailing from here
Bringing in expectations is making this harder
Life is easier when you don't care what I do
Where am I going with this?
Who am I fighting?
You are not going to change;
I know that
Accepting every bit of you is something...
Something I better admit to myself
I was fake when I said I gave you up
I don't give up on you or us.
I never will
Call it obsession or my life's true purpose

You are my knight in shining armor...
My alpha...
My hero...
When I run from you I run from myself
I'm twisted. I'm torn
Shouting I fight;
God I surrender
What if I bend? I'll do what you want
Please just be mine...
Complex or
Easy
Please just be mine...
Now I see why you rule me
Weak. I'm pathetic
Why can't I change?
Even as a memory I'm always your slave
Chained; I'm bound
I hate that I love you
Weak at the knees
Where's the compassion?
Why can't you
Set me free
This is disgusting, I'm perfectly lame
Women and romance
My love insults
My pleas remain
Please just be mine...
Pure or demeaning
Please just be mine...