

AN EXCLUSIVE GIFT
TO JOY ON! COURSE SUBSRIBERS

A collage of images including a chain-link fence, a birdcage, and a stack of US dollar bills.

CAGES

a short story

ALISSA MCCLURE

ALISSA MCCLURE

Cages

A Short Story

First published by Alissa McClure 2019

Copyright © 2019 by Alissa McClure

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, scanning, or otherwise without written permission from the publisher. It is illegal to copy this book, post it to a website, or distribute it by any other means without permission.

This novel is entirely a work of fiction. The names, characters and incidents portrayed in it are the work of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events or localities is entirely coincidental.

Alissa McClure asserts the moral right to be identified as the author of this work.

This short story is a gift to my Joy On! course subscribers. Please do not share this file with anyone else.

First edition

This book was professionally typeset on Reedsy.

Find out more at reedsy.com

Contents

Chapter 1

1

Chapter 1

Jonthird strolled alone down his street. He could hear the school bus airbrakes even if he couldn't see the bus anymore. But his mind was on something else. His walk was a snail's pace, but his mind was racing. His eyes stopped for a moment on the cage full of colorful soda cans beside his house. It had been there his whole life—at least as long as he could remember. He kept walking past it into his own yard. No Mercury Grand Marquis parked out front. Maybe nobody was home yet.

Then he saw a person's outline just inside the screen door. He couldn't see the outline's eyes, but he knew they were watching him.

Jonthird gulped.

His hand slid over his front right pocket. His stolen property was still there. He thought he had succeeded undetected, but now Jonthird wondered if he had been caught again. He tried to continue the same even stroll through the front yard.

His mind raced as he tried to remember how he usually entered the house and what he usually did, but suddenly everything about coming home seemed foreign. He forced his legs to lift his feet one step at a time. When he arrived at the screen door, he sighed, raised his arm to the cold, metal handle, and pulled.

"Jonthird, I went by your school today." His father's eyes squinted, even though there was no light in the confining living room. "Something about some program you ain't doin' right. I told her you ain't gonna 'mount to nothin'. That Ms. Gilber? She just wasting her time."

Jonthird felt trapped. Where was his dad going with this?

He was shrugging his shoulders, trying to play it cool. His father's hand came down hard on his left shoulder, stopping him mid-shrug.

"Look like we need a talk, don't it?"

The hand was a heavy force on his shoulder, directing him to the backyard.

Jonthird knew what his teacher—probably Mrs. Gilbert—had only just learned: there was no talking to his father.

So Jonthird sat and listened as his father yelled about missing a day of work and how his son didn't appreciate anything and how lazy it was of Jonthird to not be working at the Winn Dixie after school. His father's voice filled the chain-lined boundaries of the backyard. It was nothing he hadn't said before.

Jonthird's mind shifted to the contents of his pocket. His fingertips edged across it again, as if to reassure himself. It was still there.

He realized his father's voice had stopped. Those squinting eyes were expectant.

"Well, *do ya?*"

Jonthird shifted his position, unsure of the question. "I need to go for a walk," he said. As he waited for his father's reaction, Jonthird pulled a lighter from his left pocket and feigned a look of shame.

His father gave an understanding nod. He retrieved his own lighter and pack of cigarettes from his back pocket. Without a word, he pulled a cigarette out of the pack and lit up. He waved to dismiss the smoke and his son with the flap of his hand. With his second cloud of smoke he called to his son who'd already crossed the yard, "Don't let your Momma see."

Jonthird looked back and nodded.

He walked along the side of the house, through the front yard, and to the end of the street. At the end of the street, he turned right and kept walking. His heart yearned to run, but his mind forced his body to maintain the casual walk—feigned indifference—around the block to his sanctuary.

As he walked, his mind returned to the contents of his pocket. His

hand moved to the pocket of his stonewashed jean shorts. His fingers felt the top of his latest treasure. He slowed to a stop.

Jonthird leaned against a tree at the end of a wide driveway. He stood there for a few moments hoping no one was watching, still maintaining a relaxed façade just in case.

He watched the cats.

There were at least fifteen of them all around the head of the carport. He watched as some of the cats paced in the shade along the sides of an empty, makeshift feeding trough. Others were scattered on the driveway, some lazing in the shade of the carport, others lazing in the sun, and still more sprawled out just beside the trough. There were cats in the grass beside the driveway and more in the trees, eyeing the trough from a safe distance.

Like the cats, Jonthird knew that in a few short hours the old woman who lived here—Mrs. Ellis—would come outside and talk with her “babies,” and walk over to the little shed at the head of the carport and come out with a coffee can heaping with cat food.

He knew that twice as many cats would be swarming to eat by then. He knew all this because they would be critical details in his exit strategy.

Jonthird’s thoughts were interrupted by sounds of hisses. The once lazy, relaxed cats were now standing and arching their backs. Jonthird was captivated by the scene. An unfamiliar, collared cat approached the driveway. More cats stood, arching their backs and hissing. The strange cat inched toward the carport. Before Jonthird could even guess what would happen next, three cats ran to the attack. The carport was suddenly an explosion of hissing and front paws raising and teeth baring. The collared cat yelped in pain and bolted through the grass, away from them all.

Jonthird shuddered.

He crept past the remaining cats and around the house.

There were times when Jonthird sat in this screen room—his sanctuary—and observed everything around him: the brick floor, the

spray-painted metal patio furniture lining each screen wall, the simple pattern of chair table chair table, the unique ashtray resting on each table, the solitary light bulb mounted in the ceiling, and the towering trees that slouched in scattered positions all around the building.

But today was not such a day. He knew his time was limited and that he must return the property he'd "borrowed" tomorrow or Mrs. Pittman may notice and then he would have to face his father again. For legitimate reasons this time. That thought motivated him to devour the book as ferociously as possible in the short time he had.

He poured over the book, page after page, until he finally looked up as if just waking from a dream.

He willed his eyelids to blink, then closed the back cover of the book and stood, shoving the book back into his right pocket.

Once the book was safe, he went to work. He applied his cologne of cigarette ashes from the ashtray on the table beside him to his hair, wrists, and shirt. He picked up an old cigarette butt from the same ashtray and held it in his hand, adjusting it until it looked more natural.

He could hear cats in the distance and knew he had to hurry.

He crept through the other side of the yard, ducking to avoid tree branches and Spanish moss, until he was back on the side of the road. And then he returned to his slow, calculated pace.

He walked, his feigned indifference resumed. Only then did he allow his thoughts to surface in his mind. He thought about the characters in his book: how the older brother raised his younger brothers after their parents died in a car wreck. He thought about his father and how that man seemed to hate everybody. He thought about his mother and how all she seemed to know was cleaning hotel rooms. He thought about his neighbor and that collection of soda cans. *One of the characters in the book was named Soda.* He thought about the ache in his core that seemed to propel him in any direction that would take him away from here.

He wanted to be free.

He ambled to the front yard and waited. When his father's outline

filled the screen door again, he pushed the old cigarette butt against the tree, then dropped it into a rusted paint can. The rusted paint can had sat at the base of the tree for so long that the tree had continued to grow around it until the can and the tree were really one. One of the more picturesque elements of their yard, for sure. The Oldsmobile Cutlass rusting on cinderblocks nearby wasn't much competition.

Jonthird knew his father was watching. Probably burning with pride, though he'd never say so, to have a son so much like himself. Jonthird had heard statements like, "cut from the same cloth," "spitting image," "takes after his daddy," and "the apple doesn't fall far from the tree," for as long he could remember.

Those statements caused something to twist inside of him.

On the one hand, Jonthird resented any semblances of his father who had walked out of school during 8th grade and never returned. This man who could barely read and rarely tried, who resented anyone or anything new or different. He was not the man Jonthird wanted to be.

But on the other hand, Jonthird knew that his current situation would be so much easier if his sole ambition in life were to emulate the life of his father. He clung to the hope that he could be different—when the time was right.

Jonthird sat on the only floor space available in his tiny bedroom: a small square pen formed between the foot of his bed and the walls. Sitting there felt safe. He confined himself within this bedroom fortress and opened the contents of his backpack. He picked up the first paper: a perfect score on a biology quiz. He carefully ripped the top corner of the page with the red *100* and lit the edge of the strip with his lighter. When it burned down to his fingers, he blew it out. He crumpled up the rest of the quiz and missed the shot he made at the small white grocery bag hanging over the handle of his open bedroom door.

He performed a similar ceremony with his other graded assignments. The perfect grade on his math assignment, the B on an essay he had written for his English class (the only explanation for the B was found in the red words *NOT TYPED* across the top of the first page), the

note about not dressing out at P.E., some letter to his parents about the “School to Work Program” his school was implementing. All shot into—or beside—the grocery bag.

Next Jonthird opened his Math book. The page was already marked with a piece of folded notebook paper. He slouched into his fortress on the floor and turned his focus to equations. As he worked the second and third equations, he immersed himself in them. It wasn’t until a shadow came across his book and snatched his paper that he realized he’d been caught.

“What is this, son?”

Jonthird looked up at his father, still processing what just happened.

“My homework.”

“Hmmm. And what you think *homework* gonna do for you?”

“I don’t know. Keep me out of detention tomorrow?”

“Shoot, a little detention never hurt nobody. What you need a be doin’ is learnin’ a skill. Git on out there and help Jimmay.”

“Yes, sir,” Jonthird walked to the dark living room and crouched down as if to tie his shoe. He watched his father fold the homework and set it down beside him on the arm of the recliner. He committed the location to memory, then walked out the screen door and across the yard to where their neighbor, Jimmy, was standing.

“Hey, Jonthird.”

“Hey, Jimmy. Need a hand?”

“That’d be fine. I just need to load up a few things here. Ya wanna go out for a ride with me?”

“Yessir.”

“Alright, then. Grab a hold o’ that there end o’ the tarp. Got it?”

Jonthird grabbed hold of his end of the worn, blue tarp as Jimmy grabbed the other end. They shuffled over to the open bed of Jimmy’s F150. Jonthird didn’t mind this sort of work because while his body was busy, his mind could be anywhere. As he carried his end of the heavy tarp full of scrap metal, he thought about the book he’d read today. Two-Bit, Soda, and Ponyboy were such strange names, yet their

story was so easy to imagine. He wished he had a friend like Johnny and brothers like Darry and Soda. The first thing he noticed was its title. *The Outsiders*. Jonthird felt drawn to it. As if the book would be about him and give him all the answers he needed. Was he as smart as Ponyboy? At least he wasn't stupid enough to actually smoke.

After several minutes, the two had loaded the tarp into the back of Jimmy's truck and Jonthird lifted the heavy, rusted tailgate while Jimmy cranked the engine. Jonthird walked through a dingy cloud of exhaust and came around to the passenger side. Jimmy reached across the bench seat and opened the door from the inside. The outside door handle had been broken for as long as Jonthird could remember.

"An ol' buddy o' mine called me up today. They got some hubcaps and a couple Cadillac converters they holdin' for me."

Jonthird nodded. He pulled his heavy door closed as Jimmy backed out of the yard. Just before they reached the highway, Jimmy slowed down in front of the old Peterbilt factory. Jonthird could see a pile of something just inside the fence. Jimmy pulled in and around so the bed of the truck was facing the pile. His smile wrinkled up his whole face. He opened his door. Jonthird got out, too. Without conversation, they loaded up quite a bit of steel shelving and old machine parts into the bed of the truck. By the time they got back into the truck, they were both sweating. But Jimmy was still smiling as they drove down the highway to his buddy's shop. Jonthird and Jimmy loaded up the steel hubcaps and catalytic converters and headed back down the street. Jimmy noticed a few things laid out beside a trash can. He stopped in front of the house and the two of them loaded up a few more metallic treasures into the truck bed.

"Ooooo-eeee!" Jimmy smiled, rubbing his hands together. He picked up a toothpick from his ashtray and stuck it into the right corner of his mouth.

Jonthird half-listened to Jimmy talk about how his buddy came about getting some of those hubcaps, but most of his attention was now on devising a plan to return the book tomorrow. He sat in the truck as

Jimmy got out at the scrapyard and “shot the breeze” with a few of the guys. After several minutes, Jimmy came over to the truck again and handed Jonthird four quarters.

“Why don’t you go on in the office and get us a couple Cokes.” Jonthird nodded, took the money, and headed for the office. He could hear the magnetic crane coming closer and knew that this was Jimmy’s way of looking out for him. He was thirsty, though, and happy to step into the cool, air-conditioned office for a few minutes. A cool, refreshing drink was a welcome bonus.

When Jonthird returned with Jimmy’s Coke, the forklift was removing the last of the items from the back of the truck. He handed Jimmy the unopened can and took a loud sip from his own can.

A few more minutes of waiting, and they were back in the truck heading back over the scale and stopping at the attendant’s window. Jimmy collected his money from the woman at the window. Jonthird never asked how much money Jimmy made, but he imagined it was a lot since Jimmy always seemed to be able to buy things his own family never could.

On the way home, Jimmy chuckled, “Mr. Ricks said he’d send a crane over to my house to pick up my cage full o’ cans.” He shook his head and chuckled more, “I told ‘im I’d let ‘im know when they’s ready.”

Jonthird wasn’t usually one for conversation, but that cage of cans had been a fixture in Jimmy’s yard like the paint can and tree in Jimmy’s. Jonthird was curious. “How long you been collectin’ those cans, Jimmy?”

Jimmy squinted his eyes a little, pursed his lips, and after several seconds, he said, “Well now, I reckon it’s been about fourteen, fifteen years.”

Jonthird blinked a few times. *Woah. Fifteen years.* “Why not sell ‘em? They’re probably worth a fortune, all them cans.”

Jimmy shrugged. “Maybe. But cans ain’t worth a whole lot. I’d feel like a fool if they come with that crane and I didn’t make nothin’. Nah, I’ll just keep on buildin’ up my collection.”

Jonthird thought in silence the rest of the way home. Jimmy had built up that collection of cans in that giant cage in his yard for fourteen years? Maybe more? How could he just let it sit there? When would he be satisfied that he'd collected enough? How much more would it take before he would cash-in?

Jimmy thanked Jonthird for his help, handed him \$5, and shook his hand. Jonthird mumbled *thank you* as he stumbled on a tree root. He kept walking through the yard. He opened the screen door.

His father was asleep in the recliner and Jonthird put the \$5 bill on the arm of the recliner, careful not to make any noise. He retrieved his math homework from the floor beside the recliner. With the precision of a skilled burglar, he returned to the space at the foot of his bed and tried to complete a few more math problems. His eyes were getting heavier with each digit. A few more math problems and Jonthird gave up, returned the folded paper to the page in his Math book, shoved the book into his backpack, and surrendered in his fight with gravity. His mattress gave a heavy squeak in response.

The next morning, Jonthird sat in his usual seat on the bus. His faced was pushed so close to the window, his exhalations created temporary patches of fog. He watched the people in the cars below and wondered where they were headed and what they did all day. Were any of them greasers? Or Socs? This reminded him of his book. He didn't want to think about what would happen if his plan didn't work today.

The last time he returned a "borrowed" book, he was humiliated in front of his class and then sent to the office where he was eventually humiliated again, and far more, by his father.

This time, he would *not* get caught.

As he arrived in his Homeroom class, he rushed to work on a few more math equations. Maybe he could finish them in time. His hands were sweating. He tried to keep his focus on the math problems for the few minutes he had until the morning announcements were finished and he had to stand for the pledge of allegiance. But his adrenaline was pumping. He could feel his heartbeat in his ears.

As he stood for the pledge, his eyes darted around the room. Most of his classmates looked harmless and drowsy, except for a few girls standing together near the back of the room. They were preening and chatting. His teacher was looking right at him. *Look at the flag* he commanded himself.

After the class was seated, Jonthird tried to return to his math homework. He finished two more equations before someone opened the door and summoned Mrs. Pittman to the hall. Jonthird took a deep breath.

This was his chance.

He slid the book out of his pocket and walked his usual walk with his pencil in his right hand and the book in his left hand, pressed against his left thigh. He walked along the left edge of the classroom. He dropped his pencil just before the bookcases, trying to make it look like an accident. It slid to the perfect position in front of the same bookshelf he'd visited yesterday. Without even breathing, he slipped the book onto the shelf in the same movement that he used to bend to retrieve his fallen pencil. It was just as he'd rehearsed it in his mind the evening before.

Jonthird continued to walk the remaining distance to the pencil sharpener mounted on the wall. He bumped the empty metal trash can that sat below the sharpener. It made him jump a little. *Nobody noticed* he tried to convince himself. He sharpened his pencil like a machine, hoping that if anyone noticed him, it would be for his pencil-sharpening determination.

The energetic girls in the back of the room had been purring among themselves ever since the end of the pledge of allegiance, but had gotten louder once Mrs. Pittman left the room.

Mrs. Pittman returned, assessing the state of things. Jonthird gulped. Mrs. Pittman looked through him.

"What are you doing out of your seat, Jonthird?"

Jonthird didn't speak. Instead he held up his newly sharpened pencil as if this were answer enough.

One of the girls in the back hissed, “Hey, Jonthird! What were you doing over there by the bookshelves *this* time? We know you can’t read!”

The group of girls and a few others who were awake enough to hear laughed.

Mrs. Pittman looked at Jonthird who was not fixated on the pencil he was still holding up. Without another word, she pulled a slip of paper from a pad on her desk and wrote something. Jonthird could hear the pen clawing into the paper. Mrs. Pittman ripped the paper from the pad and handed it to Jonthird.

Office Referral.

Jonthird didn’t read further. He walked to his desk to gather his things. One of the girls snarled, “He probably doesn’t even know what it says,” and others chattered their responses.

Jonthird wanted to plead his case, but he knew that Mrs. Pittman was already convinced of guilt, even if she didn’t yet know what exactly he was guilty *of*. She would not be giving him the benefit of the doubt. Not today. Not any day. She never did like him; besides, pleading his case would make it look like he cared and that would destroy his carefully crafted persona.

And so he walked. He walked his calculated, easy to interpret as lazy, walk right past Mrs. Pittman who stood beside the door with her lips pursed, eyes wide, arms folded as if to suppress her anger.

Jonthird maintained his walk down the hall. He considered for a moment about running right out of the school, but where could he go? Could he hide out like Ponyboy and Johnny in an old, abandoned church? What would become of him then?

He decided to carry out his sentence.

The principal’s secretary looked up and pointed to seat along the wall in the office. Her face had no emotion. No judgment, no disappointment, no welcoming smile. She took his referral and placed it on top of other similar forms in a wire basket on the corner of her desk.

Jonthird knew he would be sitting for a while, so he pulled out his math book and finished the last two questions. At least he could avoid *some* trouble today.

Just as he put his math book away, Mrs. Gilbert came walking into the principal's office with a handful of papers. She handed the papers to the secretary with a smile and a bit of small talk. As she turned to go, she noticed Jonthird. She slowed, turned toward him and sat in the chair beside him.

"Hello, Jonthird," she said.

"Ma'am." Jonthird nodded a greeting, then turned his attention to zipping his backpack.

"Jonthird, why are you here?"

He stared at the floor and waited. Silence was his first line of defense. It usually worked. In his experience, a teacher moved on after a few moments of silence. But after what seemed like forever, Mrs. Gilbert cleared her throat and asked again, "Jonthird, why are you here?"

Unsure of what to do next, Jonthird looked up. He saw something in her eyes he was not expecting: concern. Concern for him? This caught him off-guard. Before he could figure out what to do next, he blurted out, "I borrowed a book from Mrs. Pittman without asking again and when I went to put it back, I got caught and now she's sent me to the principal's office and they're gonna call my daddy."

Jonthird watched Mrs. Gilbert like he was a scared, hurt animal. He didn't know what to think. He figured she was probably the teacher who had met with his father yesterday, though he wasn't sure why.

"Tell me the whole story, please, Jonthird." Mrs. Gilbert's voice was calm. Her eyes were patient.

Jonthird told about how he had borrowed Mrs. Pittman's copy of *The Outsiders* because he saw the title on her shelf and felt drawn to it. He told how he'd read it all in one day and how he was trying to put it back without any trouble. He left out the parts about where he read it or how mad his dad would be if he knew the truth or working with Jimmy and not eating dinner and not finishing his homework.

He figured she didn't want to know the *whole* truth.

Mrs. Gilbert sat for a moment after Jonthird's abbreviated story was finished. She stood with assurance and retrieved the referral from the wire basket on the secretary's desk. She wrote something on it before she handed it back to the secretary with a gracious smile. The secretary read the updated referral—still no emotional reaction—wrote something on a small, pink sheet. She tore the sheet off the stack and handed it to Mrs. Gilbert.

"Now then, Jonthird, that matter is taken care of. Please go to class." Mrs. Gilbert handed the small pink paper to Jonthird.

Jonthird stood and read the pink paper. *Hall pass*. He stared for a moment in disbelief. He pushed the little paper into his pocket, crinkling it out of inexperience. He mumbled a quick *thank you ma'am* and walked down the hall toward Biology. As he walked, he tried to regain his slow, nonchalant pace.

When Jonthird arrived in Mrs. Gilbert's class later that day, Mrs. Gilbert stopped him at the door. "Jonthird, you will still need to stay after school for detention today, but your father will not be contacted regarding the matter."

A wave of relief rushed over Jonthird. He forced his composure, nodded, and plopped into his desk. The rest of the day was a blur for Jonthird. No teacher had ever done anything so kind for him before. Would Mrs. Gilbert be his guide to getting out of their tiny town? Would she be his mentor? For the first time ever, Jonthird felt genuine hope.

Jonthird was still thinking about the possibilities when he arrived in detention that afternoon. As he arrived in the detention room, he noticed that Mrs. Gilbert was one of the teachers on detention duty that day. Jonthird took a seat away from his fellow inmates. He wanted space to think. The teachers were monitoring the room. Mrs. Gilbert walked by and placed a book on his desk.

Oliver Twist.

He looked around to see if anyone was looking. He perched the book

on his lap. His backpack rested on his desk and he rested his head on his backpack. To everyone else, it would look like he was sleeping. He opened the cover. There was a folded piece of paper inside with his name on it.

Jonthird,

I was first introduced to fine literature when I was about your age. Now that I know of your wish to read, I want to help you. I will provide a variety of books for you to read (one at a time, of course) as well as a few questions for you to consider as you read. You may turn in your responses to these questions to receive extra credit in my class. My only condition is that you stop taking books from Mrs. Pittman or anyone else. I hope this book will be the first of many I can introduce to you.

Sincerely,

Mrs. Gilbert

Jonthird read the short note several times. He kept his head down, so nobody knew he was actually reading. Finally, he folded the note and tucked it into his backpack. He would dispose of it with his graded papers that afternoon. He sat at the desk and thought. He thought about the events of the day. He thought about *The Outsiders*. He thought about his conversation with Jimmy yesterday evening. He thought about the cats fighting in the driveway. He put the book in his right pocket. He'd take it to the sanctuary when he got home. He pulled out his Biology homework and doodled on the corner of the paper. Still thinking.

Had he gathered enough knowledge to "cash-in" yet? He felt grateful for this teacher who had shown concern and mercy, but he suddenly doubted his own readiness to pursue a promising future. He feared the inevitable attacks that would come if he stopped maintaining his façade.

At last, he breathed a deep breath of resolve. He knew what he would do.

The next morning, Jonthird walked to Mrs. Gilbert's classroom while she was on-duty in another hallway. He placed the book she'd given

CHAPTER 1

him on her desk—every page read, zero questions answered. Then he walked to his homeroom class. He passed Mrs. Pittman on his way in, walked to his desk by way of the bookshelves on the wall. He plopped down in his desk and reached for his Math book to try to finish a few more equations. His fingers traced the outline of a book in his right front pocket.

