



Clemency

A story game about life after a long time in prison for 3 or 4 players.

Inspired by The Cost of Clemency by The Washington Post 2016.

Written for Fastaval 2023.

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Clemency

clemency: disposition to be merciful and especially to moderate the severity of punishment due.

Clemency is a story game for 3 or 4 players. Expect the game to take 1 ½ hours to play. The game can be played directly from the text. Take turns reading. Pass the text to the next player now.

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You were in your prime. You had plans for the future. You had a family.

You did something stupid. You got caught.

Then they put you away while your kids grew up, your parents died, and the love of your life moved on.

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Tough-on-crime policies were popular with voters and politicians in the 90ies. Mandatory minimums for nonviolent drug crimes were introduced all over the USA. Possession of drugs could lock you up for 20 years.

At the end of his second term, Barack Obama used his presidential powers to commute the sentence of 46 non violent drug offenders. Not a pardon, but a get out of jail early with strings attached.

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For many, coming home from prison meant joyful reunions, meeting grandchildren for the first time, rekindling old romances. A few decades in prison made the mundane seem miraculous: taking a bath, driving a car, eating a pineapple.

But those decades also broke up families. Parents died. Partners left. Some ex-prisoners returned to grown children who were angry with them and to a world that didn't seem to have a place for them. Work has been scarce.

One year later, a journalist meets up with one of those who have been given clemency. Is it possible to pick up and continue a life after so many years?

Why and how we play

We play to experience how it feels to restart a life in freedom after being locked up for a long, long time.

Each of you take on the role of a commuted felon. Your main task is to portray the life, thoughts and feelings of this character. To help you create and convey the character you get snippets from interviews with real persons.

You also take on the role of a journalist with no name, interviewing a commuted felon.

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Each story is told in three chapters. In each chapter we learn more about each of the commuted felons in turn. In each chapter we are in a nondescript place with the journalist and the commuted felon.

The journalist asks questions to learn about the events in the life of the other, the commuted felon answers.

Play continues with the story of the next commuted felon when the theme of the chapter has been explored.

Introductions

Take a moment to introduce yourselves: In turn, share a moment in life where you did something stupid.

Select characters

Now pick one character each: Lay out the four illustrations and pick one that inspires you. Take the corresponding character.

Take the time you need to read the character.

Picture	Character
Stove	Bart Stover
Steak	Joseph Burgos
Football	Katina Smith
Cherry blossoms	Norman Brown









Bart Stover

“I made it before the spaceships.”

Joseph Burgos

“I’m one of the fortunate ones, believe me.”

Katina Smith

“No words were spoken and everything was said.”

Norman Brown

“Now I want to do the small things that just mean so much.”

Bart Stover

"I made it before the spaceships."

Man, 60. Lives in Ashland, Ohio.

Sentenced in 2005 to 240 months in prison for conspiracy to possess with the intent to distribute marijuana and cocaine, for use of a communication facility to facilitate the commission of a drug-trafficking offense, and for aiding and abetting.

abet: to assist, encourage, instigate, or support with criminal intent in attempting or carrying out a crime

Create your own interpretation of Bart Stover inspired by the following quotes from commuted felons.

Prison

When you're inside of a confined area — that's what a prison is, a confined area — you really have a schedule. You get up a certain time, you do everything a certain time. Now you don't have to do it no more. In prison, you have to call people, they can't call you.

The judge told me I wouldn't come out until they had spaceships, and I made it before the spaceships.

Mom

My mom meant the world to me, and that's what kind of kept me going in prison. That's why I filed for clemency — I knew my mom was getting bad, and she needed somebody to take care of her.

She didn't know I was coming home. I was supposed to go straight to the halfway house. I didn't go straight to the halfway house. I had to see my mom.

When I knocked on the front door, she came and opened the front door and walked away. She thought it was my aunt.

Anything my mom needed, I would do for her. Her whole house was a disaster, and I spent two weeks cleaning the property up to make it look nice again like she used to like it.

My mom passed away December 18, and it's been rough since then. It wasn't long enough, but the last few months, I hope she had a decent remainder of her life.

Obama

I just thank President Obama for what he did because I wouldn't have been able to see her at all. I wrote him a letter saying thank you and that I would do my best to make sure that his choice with me was correct.

The halfway house

I went to a halfway house for 72 days. You have to deprogram. You have to make a conscious decision either to make it or fail. I never rode a bus before. They said: "You have to learn today. We'll print you out a bus route and tell you where the bus goes." That was crazy. I got lost three times.

The little things

But I'm just thankful that I didn't die in there. I'm thankful I got to see my mother. And the little things I took for

granted: Just walking down the street freely. Being able to take a shower, a bath, however late you want to. Cooking on the stove. I don't take anything for granted no more.

The future

I'm hoping to get a job as a custodian.

I've got a daughter who lives in Texas, but I can't go see her because I'm not allowed to leave the state of Ohio.

A lot of people that were friends of mine have passed away. I'm 60 years old. It's my generation. We're old people now.

Joseph Burgos

"I'm one of the fortunate ones, believe me."

Man, 49. Lives in Detroit.

Sentenced in 1993 to 360 months in prison for distribution of cocaine.

Create your own interpretation of Joseph Burgos inspired by the following quotes from commuted felons.

Prison

I was not in prison 24 hours when I watched a guy get stabbed to death on his bed. That changes a person. I still have my flashbacks. I'm not as social as I used to be. I used to be a people person, and I don't want to be around people. I didn't align with anyone because I was always by myself. What you see on TV? That's nothing. What's really going on in federal prison? That story has never been told.

What I did was read over 5,000 books. Read Edgar Allan Poe, read biographies, read Frederick Douglass. Anything that had to deal with strengthening the mind or making you

a better person. Edgar Rice Burroughs, stuff like that. I joined the choir and sang first tenor, which was a blessing. It soothed the soul because it was thirsty.

Detroit

When you first get out, people ask what you want to do. And I really wanted a prime rib dinner. A few weeks ago, I finally went up to a well-known place that specializes in prime rib. The meal was tasty, but I was a little disappointed. I'd been waiting 20 years, and I thought it should have been a little more tender.

In the prisons, it's like cave-man style. Now, when you go into the restrooms, the toilets flush themselves. I had to relearn the way you have to get soap or a paper towel. I went to a cafe, and people were ordering food on a screen. I had to stand around and watch for a while, see what they were doing. I felt so stupid for not knowing how to go in and order eggs and bacon and a piece of toast.

Detroit has changed. Things have been torn down, things have been rebuilt, things have been revamped. The inner city has changed into the suburbs, and the suburbs have

changed to the inner city. Neighborhoods that were 99 percent black are now 75 percent white. It's like being in Disney World.

My daughter Danielle

My daughter she's 18. I got incarcerated two weeks before she was born. When I got out, she wouldn't talk to me. Her mother said to just give her time, she don't know you like that. And she's a teenager now, and you know how teenagers are. Then she came around, and I asked her what did I do, and she basically said, "Well, you got locked up"; she didn't have a father, and that was hard on her, and it was hard on her mom financially. And she blamed me. But she's doing well; she's going to college next year.

The future

I can't get over the cost of fast food, or all the stuff I can do on my phone. The world seems more violent now. Still, I feel very hopeful about my future. I want to counsel other young men to stay away from drugs. I want to be a success story. Over the next year, I think things will really blossom for me.

Katina Smith

“No words were spoken and everything was said.”

Woman, 47. Lives in Dublin, Georgia.

Sentenced in 2000 to 292 months in prison for conspiracy to possess with intent to distribute cocaine and crack.

Create your own interpretation of Katina Smith inspired by the following quotes from commuted felons.

Prison

I find joy every day waking up and knowing I'm here and not there anymore. Inside, it was kind of hard. In 2008 I was going through a really hard time and just didn't want to live anymore. I had tried to kill myself three times. After the last time, it all clicked for me that I have this awesome family. That's when things started to fall into place.

Dublin, Georgia

Much has changed. People don't hardly come out of their houses anymore. Everybody is so consumed with their phones or their computers.

My mother

My mother is still in the same prison where I was. It was hard leaving her. She has health issues, and sometimes she wants to give up. I was her strength. Under the rules, I have to wait at least a year before I can go back to see her.

My son Demaryius

One of the first things I wanted to do when I got out of prison was go to a football game. My son is Demaryius Thomas of the Denver Broncos. I went to prison when he was 12 and had only seen him play basketball in middle school. But I had never seen him play one single football game.

I was so scared to fly there because I had never flown before. When we had turbulence, I thought the plane was

going to go down. When we went into a different time zone, I couldn't believe the time on my cell phone automatically changed.

Demaryius met us at the door. That first hug felt like, "Oh, I've missed you, I'm finally here, I love you." It just said a whole lot. You can hug in prison visitation, but you can only do it twice: when your family comes and when they get ready to leave. There was a limit of hugs you could get, a limit of affection you could show your family. It was so hard to be away from my kids. Like there was a void inside of me. This hug released a lot of pressure.

At the game, I was like a child at Christmas. Everyone wanted to have autographs and take pictures. We had a reserved box. At the end of the game, "Peyton Manning gave Demaryius a ball and said, "Here, give this to your mom."

Later at Demaryius's house, everyone had gone to bed. He and I were up. We were watching something on TV, and he started playing a little game on his phone. We were sitting on the sofa together, and I laid my head on his chest. We were just quiet. I don't know of many grown men who still

allow their moms to lay on their shoulder. He hugged me. No words were spoken. And everything was said.

Norman Brown

“Now I want to do the small things that just mean so much.”

Man, 48. Lives in Hyattsville, Maryland.

Sentenced in 1993 to life in prison for possession and distribution of crack, and for aiding and abetting.

abet: to assist, encourage, instigate, or support with criminal intent in attempting or carrying out a crime

Create your own interpretation of Norman Brown inspired by the following quotes from commuted felons.

Prison

When you go to prison, you're stuck in time. That's what prison is — a time machine. Everything on the outside continues, but for you, everything just stops. You have to reconfigure your life to be able to accept the changes you face when that phone call you make isn't answered, or the fact that family and friends forget about you. You are just not in their life. Slowly, though, I adjusted to prison.

I began to read books on history to learn more about who I am, who my people were, more about the United States and how it was established. It was so much to learn. And I had the time to do it. I never found out before that I enjoyed learning.

Clemency

In July 2015, my lawyer called for me at the prison. He says, “I want to inform you that the president of the United States has accepted your application for clemency.” I say, “What does that mean?” He says, “What it means is you are going to get out of jail.” I say, “Could you say that again?” He says, “You have been given a release date of November the 10th.” I said, “Of what year?”

Hyattsville

The city has changed. How to commute on the subway. Learning new streets. But then you have the GPS on the phone. This telephone is another world. I have a computer here. It's still blowing my mind. Google this, Google that.

Dating

I've been dating — a person I've known my whole life. I'm more comfortable with that. I don't have to do a lot of explaining to someone who might think I'm a monster because I did so much time.

The cherry blossoms

In April, I was able to go to the arboretum. It was magnificent. We went to the cherry blossoms. Now I want to do the small things that just mean so much. Like look at trees. Just smell them, even though the allergies crush me. But I'll take the punishment. Because I have to enjoy that.

Obama

I went to lunch with President Obama and six other commutees. At the end when we were leaving, after I shared the fact that I went to the cherry blossoms and enjoyed it, he said to me when he shook my hand and hugged me, he whispered in my ear, "You're not pulling my leg on the romance thing, are you?" I said, "No, Mr.

President." He said: "Man, not too many men go down to the cherry blossoms. You're picking up where you left off."

The future

I would like to hold a woman's hand. I would like to have a conversation with her. I would like to have dinner with her. That side of me had laid dormant for 24 years. Men don't like to talk like that. We have this macho-ism. But I miss that. I had to put that asleep.

I haven't been swimming in 35 years. I've been swimming. I joined a gym. I'm free, and I'm letting myself know I'm free. I'm 48, and I have a lot of life out in front of me.

Create and share stories

Next, create and share the stories. Take turns reading the instructions out loud at the start of each chapter.

Chapter 1: Prison

Life in prison and the process leading to release.

Chapter 2: The halfway house

Adjusting to life outside prison.

Chapter 3: Now

Life outside prison, one year later.

Epilogue

How life continues from here.



Chapter 1: Prison

About life in prison and the process leading to their release.

Time and place is somewhere in the USA in 2016, in a nondescript place with a journalist and a commuted felon.

Each player in turn plays a journalist that interviews the convicted felon across from you (4 players) or on your right (3 players). Use the questions as guidance.

All interviews take place one year after the felon was released from prison.

Continue with the next interview when the interviewee has shared when and how they learned about being commuted.

commute: to change (a penalty) to another less severe.

Questions

- What is your name?
- How old are you?
- What sentence were you given?
- When did you go to jail? When did you get out? How long have you been in prison?
- What did you do in prison?
- Did you keep contact with your family and friends while in prison?
- When did you learn that you had been commuted?

Chapter 2: The halfway house

Adjustment to life outside prison in the halfway house.

halfway house: a residence for individuals after release from institutionalization that is designed to facilitate their readjustment to private life

As in Chapter 1, each player in turn interviews the convicted felon across from you or on your right. Continue with the next interview when we have learned about the challenges the interviewee had to overcome.

Questions

- What was the first thing you did when you got out?
- What surprised you about life outside?
- What is one example of something you had to learn?
- What is one thing that hasn't changed?
- What is something you wanted to do you still couldn't do?
- How do you feel about President Obama?

Chapter 3: Now

Life outside prison, one year later.

As in previous chapters, each player in turn interviews the convicted felon across from you or on your right. Continue with the next interview when each interviewee has shared hopes and dreams for the future.

Questions

- Where do you live?
- Do you live with someone? Is there someone special in your life?
- Have you gotten back in contact with people you met before going to prison? Family and friends?
- Do you have a job? How do you pay the bills?
- How does it feel to be out? Do you feel angry?
- What do you appreciate about life?
- What are your plans for the future? What are you going to do tomorrow?
- Are you a different person from when you went to prison?

Epilogue

Time is up. The journalist gets up and thanks the interviewee.

Maybe a bond has been created, a bond that can be felt in that parting handshake. Maybe not, maybe it's purely professional.

The stories are written and sent to the press. Stories about people whose life has been dramatically complicated by prison. Stories about reintegrating into society after decades behind bars. Feedback from readers is good.

We leave our characters here. We will never know how their lives will continue from here. Did they make it? Did they live happily ever after? Life is not a fairy tale, life is life.

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Take a moment to reflect on the stories you created.

In turn, share with the other players what your favorite moment was. What resonated with you strongly?

Then go outside and enjoy life.