

LETTERS IN BARBED WIRE  
(Based on a True Story)

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FADE IN

EXT. JUNGLE - DAY

SUPER - CORREGIDOR ISLAND, MANILA BAY, PHILIPPINES - 1942

Lush, intense green foliage frames a makeshift barbed wire fence leading down a dusty dirt road.

Closer to the barbed wire, a piece of paper snugged between the twines flaps in the wind. There's writing on it, but it's difficult to decipher.

Footsteps. Sounds like hundreds of them. Marching.

MEN come into view in a line. Their hands behind their heads.

Hundreds of shoeless prisoners march along the path, dressed in white undershirts and Army green combat fatigue trousers.

A Japanese Imperial SOLDIER shoves the barrel of a handgun against the head of a PRISONER.

JAPANESE SOLDIER

Koshin!

The young prisoner trudges down the path. Further back, an American soldier slips back into line from the side of the road. He goes unnoticed.

The barbed wire bounces from another letter snugged into the twines. The soldier looks back at it, then continues on.

INT. MISSOURI STATE LIBRARY - DAY

SUPER - MISSOURI STATE LIBRARY ARCHIVES - PRESENT DAY

A cavernous room with row after row of heavy wooden desks, each fitted with a yellow glass shade lamp.

The desks are framed in overstuffed bookshelves that climb to the heavens. The room nearly empty except for a lone couple at the far end.

An index finger moves down a list of names in an old telephone book.

The names fly by so fast it's difficult to read anything, then, the finger stops on a name.

Louis Seward.

BARBARA (late 70s), who looks 20 years younger with short gray hair and bright, friendly eyes, slides her cheaters into place. A delicate chain holds the glasses around her neck.

Her eyes narrow.

BARBARA

Irv. IRV! Come here. I think this might be it.

IRV (late 70s), Barbara's husband, a most patient man with a sense of humor the equivalent of a hundred comedians, yells from across the vacant library.

IRV

Aren't we supposed to be quiet in here?

Irv is shushed by someone deep between the tall rows of bookshelves. This makes him laugh.

IRV (CONT'D)

(loudly)  
Be right there my love.

Another SHUSH from the shadows.

Irv approaches and leans over Barbara's shoulder seeing a large Springfield, Missouri, phone book.

IRV (CONT'D)

Nineteen forty nine. Was Charles even in Missouri then?

BARBARA

His brother Louie was, according to mother. But never mind. Now I have my glasses on I see the name is wrong.

Irv rolls his eyes.

BARBARA (CONT'D)

The Louie part is right. But the last name is spelled different.

Irv looks down the heavy oak table. Stacks of phone books from around Missouri litter the table.

IRV

No Charles in this one?

BARBARA

Not a one.

IRV  
 You sure everything is spelled  
 correctly?

She gives Irv a look over her cheaters.

IRV (CONT'D)  
 Just asking.

BARBARA  
 Why'd you say that? We know how  
 it's spelled. S-E-A. W-A-R-D. I  
 know how my daddy's name is spelled  
 from my birth certificate.

Irv throws up his hands in defeat.

EXT. MOBILE HOME PARK - DAY

SUPER - SPOKANE, WASHINGTON - PRESENT DAY

Mobile homes and well-manicured lawns.

Garden gnomes, flowerbeds, a small Pagoda placed perfectly in  
 pea gravel. An American flag snaps in the wind.

A ribbon of blacktop meanders through and stops at a sign in  
 the development. "Home of Irv and Barbara Sussman, Managers:  
 Meadowview Mobile Home Park".

Further down the road, red and white lights flash. An  
 ambulance pulls into the driveway of one of the homes.

INT. IRV AND BARBARA'S KITCHEN - DAY

The tip of a cotton swab.

Hundreds of tiny fibers splinter off the top in every  
 direction. The hand holding the swab trembles.

BARBARA (O.S.)  
 I can't imagine this will work.

We stay on the swab.

IRV (O.S.)  
 The DNA test could connect you.  
 This could be it.

Barbara holds the swab. She looks skeptically at it, then  
 places the dry swab back in the clear pouch.

Irv shakes his head in disappointment.

IRV (CONT'D)

Ok, my love. But I sure think this could lead to something.

BARBARA

We need to go back to San Diego where he was stationed. Something we missed. I know we missed something there.

Irv takes her hand.

IRV

My love, we didn't miss anything. We checked all the records there.

Barbara neatly closes up the kit and takes it to a drawer and places it inside as Irv looks outside.

IRV (CONT'D)

Nothing else has led to any...

(beat)

Why's there an ambulance over at Mrs. Andrews place?

Irv watches, now with concern.

Barbara stays on the closed drawer containing the kit.

Her mind flashes. She's somewhere else now...

INT. CHILD'S BEDROOM - NIGHT - FLASHBACK

Barren of any toys, frilly girly things, or even curtains, the vacant gray room contains only a rickety bed.

A little GIRL (7) sits on the bed in a dirty smock that at one time was probably white. This is Barbara.

She looks at the closed door with trepidation. Floorboards creak and groan under the weight of someone coming.

Her body stiffens. She closes her eyes tight.

The door CRASHES open and through it bursts ALBERT (30s), her stepfather. Wearing a stained white tank top and filthy jeans, he staggers toward the little girl who now cowers.

Albert SLAMS the door shut just as a WOMAN (30s) appears in the doorway.

CHILD BARBARA

Mother!

ALBERT

Shut up! You don't need your mama.

Through the door.

MOTHER (O.S.)

It's ok, my sugar bear.

ALBERT

Your God-damned mangy cat got into  
the pantry.

His eyes narrow.

ALBERT (CONT'D)

We don't have to worry about your  
little kitty anymore.

Tears well up in her eyes. They watch Albert in fear.

Albert slowly slides his belt through each belt loop. The  
first one, the second. He pauses.

The girl looks up at him, hoping he doesn't continue.

Albert drinks in the fear in her eyes.

CHILD BARBARA

Mr. Albert, I'm sorry about kitty.

He stares at the trembling girl, curious.

ALBERT

Why don't you call me daddy?

Barbara looks away.

ALBERT (CONT'D)

Didn't make ya, but I'm raisin' ya.

The belt continues out. It dangles heavy in his hand.

ALBERT (CONT'D)

I'm the only daddy you're gonna  
have. Your real one is long gone.

The belt swings back and forth. Barbara's eyes grow big.

ALBERT (CONT'D)

Turn over for your whippin'.

INT. HALLWAY - NIGHT

Mother, dressed as simply as her daughter, with deep set eyes and a worn, tired face, leans against the door. She covers her mouth to stifle her own cry, knowing what's coming.

She looks down at the empty bottle of Jack Daniels on the floor and kicks at it in anger. The bottle spins away down the hall.

A SCREAM through the door, and the cold slap of leather on skin. Mother winces.

BACK TO PRESENT

EXT. IRV AND BARBARA'S SIDE YARD - NIGHT

A fire pit roars away as NEIGHBORS gather around on old aluminum chairs. Barbara stares at the flames.

IRV

Just a shame about Mrs. Andrews. We had just talked with her yesterday.

Longtime neighbor Toshi (70s), a petite Japanese woman, looks on with a pained expression.

TOSHI

Live each day as if it's your last.

She grabs Barbara's hand. Barbara's deep in thought.

TOSHI (CONT'D)

Sad, isn't it? About Mrs. Andrews?  
(beat)  
Barbara?

Barbara looks up at her longtime friend.

BARBARA

I'm sorry. My mind was somewhere else.

Toshi nods knowingly.

TOSHI

Trust the universe with your questions. It always answers.

BARBARA

Been asking for a lot of years. No answers yet.

TOSHI

Did you take that DNA test? Maybe there are your answers.

Barb swats that notion away.

BARBARA

It's hogwash, that's what it is. My spit isn't going to find my daddy.

Barbara looks around at the gathering. Many lifelong friends. A second family, of sorts.

JERRY SALSWORTH (70s), as round as he is tall and the resident jokester who competes with Irv for the laughs, overhears Barbara and Toshi.

JERRY

You still haven't taken it?

Jerry's wife SALLY (70s), long gray hair in a perfect pony tail tossed over her shoulder, tries to shush him.

JERRY (CONT'D)

Took mine. It came back and said I was from Saturn!

This busts up the group. Sally rolls her eyes.

IRV

You sure it wasn't Uranus?

More laughter, Toshi nearly falls out of her chair.

Jerry toasts Irv for his witty comeback. Irv offers a chef's kiss, and bows from his chair.

Irv lifts his glass to the group.

IRV (CONT'D)

Thanks, everyone, for watching the place while we were away.

JERRY

Where ya headed next?

Irv looks to Barbara to see her reaction.

BARBARA

Well... There's a few places in San Diego we still need to try.

Irv shakes his head.



IRV

I think we're going to see what that DNA thing is all about, before any more trips.

Barbara glares at Irv.

INT. IRV AND BARBARA'S BEDROOM - DAY

The cotton swab.

Barbara holds it delicately in front of her mouth as Irv watches, then she drops her hand.

She eyes Irv.

BARBARA

She was 80.

Irv looks on, confused.

BARBARA (CONT'D)

Mrs. Andrews. She died at 80.

Barbara looks away from Irv and her gaze drifts out the window.

BARBARA (CONT'D)

I'll be 80 next year.

He gently guides her hand with the swab, back up.

IRV

Let's give this a shot.

BARBARA

This is a waste of time, but...

...a knock on the door. They hear it open and close.

KAREN (O.S.)

Mom? Dad?

KAREN (50s), a younger spitting-image of Barbara, except for the long brown hair, enters with her son EVAN (17), lanky and awkward with mild acne.

KAREN (CONT'D)

OH! You're finally doing it!

Irv approaches his grandson for a hug, but Evan wants to be anywhere but his grandparents' home.

Barbara inserts the swab and giggles. Evan looks on, pushing hair out of his angsty teen face.

EVAN

Why are you doing that?

BARBARA

Irv thinks I'll find my real dad.

She seals the packet with the swab and places it into a dresser drawer.

EVAN

Whatever.

Barbara now focuses on Evan.

BARBARA

I need to know some things about him. Was he a good man? Did he love my mother? Did he even know I existed?

EVAN

What difference does all that make?

BARBARA

It answers questions I've had since I was a child. The most important man in your life growing up - missing. Imagine that - never knowing your dad.

Evan looks up abruptly. Something's wrong. He walks out of the room, almost knocking Irv over, who tries to stop him.

KAREN

Let him go. He's still trying to figure all this out.

Irv looks to the dresser, then at Barbara, concerned.

BARBARA

Not ready to send it?

INT. IRV AND BARBARA'S KITCHEN - NIGHT

Irv washes dishes, Barbara dries. Beautifully choreographed movements, bobbing around each other in the tight confines.

Irv grabs her hand and spins her through the kitchen.

The computer on the table chimes. Barbara dances away while whistling beautifully. Irv's eyes track to the computer. Another chime.

BARBARA  
Keep dancing with me.

She spins herself into his arms. Irv stares at the computer.

IRV  
That could be your...

Barbara stops and looks at him.

BARBARA  
My what, Irv?

IRV  
Just take a look at your email.

She sits down and opens her email. One new message. From Ancestry.com

BARBARA  
My DNA results? Irv, what is this?

IRV  
I sent it in for you, my love. We had to try this.

Barbara pulls her hand away from the computer mouse. Irv sits down next to her at the table.

BARBARA  
This stuff is nonsense.

IRV  
What if it isn't and you find him?

Barbara pauses, her finger hovers over the mouse button.

IRV (CONT'D)  
All these years searching. This could be the thing that finally connects you to him.

She shakes her head, then clicks the link. The computer screen comes to life with DNA information and a notification of a message from a possible familial connection.