

## Ohio, 1930

## Scott Pettipas

*(Although the characters in this song are fictional, it is based on an actual event which happened at the Ohio State Penitentiary on April 21, 1930; a prison fire which resulted in the death of 322 inmates. It was the deadliest prison fire in United States history.)*

My name is Jensen Dean McNeil, and the sins of my life will soon be revealed;  
in a time when it felt like a week between meals, when the dust bowl seemed too bad to be real.  
See I can't read or write but I can use my hands, but that ain't no good when they ain't hiring hands.  
And wouldn't be so bad if it was just me, but I got a couple more mouths to feed.

And Ethel's been getting real scared lately, 'cause she can't lift her legs up from the bed sheets.  
We tried to get some help for her strange disease, but Doc said she got something he ain't never seen.  
So now we cling to our hope in the Lord, ya see. 'Cause our angel is five year old Anne-Marie.  
She's as beautiful and pure as a child could be. She's exactly like her ma, 'cept born free.

In Ohio, in 1930.

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One day I say to Anne-Marie "you look after mum, I'll be right back, but now I have to run".  
Then I go through the alleys and the garbage cans, but they's already picked over by countless hands.  
So I try one more in behind McCoys; and from real close by, I hear a popping noise.  
Four men jump me and leave me in the street, to answer to a cop and to his deceit.

He grabs me by the neck and says "On your feet. This looks pretty open 'n shut ta me"?  
"No sir, I didn't do nothin", I plead. "Maybe, but that don't mean shit to me."  
Besides boy you're in for a real treat, 'cause where you're going you'll have lots to eat".  
Then he laughed, and said with a malice glee, "Lots of moldy bread and rancid meat".

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By noon I'd already had my sentence read. I was shackled and shipped and even misled,  
into thinking I could call home like the judge had said, once arriving at the jail, but now I dread;  
That even that was a lie and I can't call home. That Ann-Marie and Ethel will be all alone.  
While I's banished to this house of stone, by supposed men of merit and the Church of Rome.

When they marched me in, I weren't alone. Two dozen of us, in this world unknown.  
And it wasn't for the walls that I started to cry, but because I didn't get to tell my girls goodbye.  
We was screamed at, spit on, and enticed a roar, when we was pissed on by Cons from the third floor.  
But the chaotic noise faded like never before, the first time the guard slammed my cold cell door.

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I peered through the bars as the evening set in, and could see the celled man across the atrium.  
I recognized who he was but all I knew of him, was he lived five blocks away and liked to sing hymns.  
He stood six foot four and name was James McGinn, but everyone I knew just called him Big Jim.  
I thought could all this really be happenin'? Then as I stepped about my cell my head began to spin.

I caught myself on the bars to keep from fallin', then remembered I was taught to find my strength within.  
So I sit on the cot and try to make sense of the day. While my girls and the Lord seem a lifetime away.  
What did I do wrong? What had caused this day? I feel so broken, misguided, utterly betrayed.  
And as I lie to myself that I will be brave. I lay my head down, close my eyes and begin to pray.

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Ya see it started outside of the East wing, when a fire broke out on the scaffolding.  
It quickly spread up to the roof because of the wind, and in blankets the black smoke began rolling in.  
At first I could still see 'cross the atrium, and the cell bars which looked like Jim was stranglin'.  
I saw the horror on his face, as he stared back again. 'Cause he had a better line of sight of what was comin' towards him.

There was panic now, and terror and the guards runnin'. Then the smoke got so thick that I couldn't see Jim.  
All around there was nothing but coughing and screamin'; then a lull, before the second wave would begin.  
When my view cleared a bit, I looked over for Jim. But his cell was full of smoke all I could see was a limb  
on the floor through his bars and the picture was grim, cause of the skin on his arm which was bubblin'.

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In all the bedlam the guard's still wouldn't let us out, and in particular I remember one deafening shout,  
At the Screw that was closest, it came from his rear. The Cons voice cried out "You can't just leave us here!"  
See, they was as scared as us, but with their backs to us, trying to save their own skin, without a damn for us.  
They's trained to guard and to protect, it was much worse than unjust. Our mortal judgements upheld in their sickening mistrust.

But smoke & fire don't hate, they don't discriminate, they don't care if you're consumed or if you finally do escape.  
And we all turn into animals amongst the disarray, 'cause I was slightly glad to know they didn't get away unscathed.  
Ya see, there ain't no hiding places when the devil comes to play, and that's an honest message through my bars I could convey.  
'Cause I personally watched in anger two burn to death that day, when the prison East Wing roof finally gave way.

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Two inmates grabbed the keys while reaching from their cell, off a fallen guard's body which was lying deathly still.  
They started with their own door, then worked down the corridors. Bravely freeing others, much like Key had done before.  
With my cheek against my cell bars an eternity had passed, I noticed in the atrium some guards had reamassed.  
The Cons had freed about a dozen now and I was next at last; but just before they stepped towards me I heard the rifle blast.

One inmate had fallen dead with the keys just out of reach, the others ran for cover no matter how much I beseeched.  
I was overwhelmed with panic now anxiety and fear. But then I heard the sirens and knew the firetrucks were here.  
They was in the nick of time 'cause I started gasping for my breath. This solitary hope in a day that steadily transgressed.  
But as the firemen approached and tried to help the rest, the prison mob swarmed and stoned three of them to death.

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My cell was full of smoke now from the ceiling to my waist. And I know I wasn't thinking straight 'cause in my frantic haste,  
I started clawing at the walls, at the mortar and the stone. Aimlessly hoping they weren't stronger than human flesh and bone.  
I thought it can't come down to this. I just can't die here alone. What would Ethel think, and will the truth ever be known.  
And how will Anne-Marie grow up without a father of her own; but the heat got so intense my thoughts were finely overthrown.

I knew my senses were reduced, my body was shutting off, 'cause I could only feel the burning smoke inside me as I coughed.  
I couldn't smell my cindered hair which had started burning off, and didn't realize the stone walls tore my fingernails off.  
See, my girls gave me the will but I had no strength for fighting back, and I remember calling out for them just as my lungs collapsed.  
But I didn't have the sense of knowing that would be my final gasp, nor the sense of falling over as everything went black.

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When morning rolled around, and when all was done and said, three hundred twenty-two was the number of the dead. The East wing all but gone, yet it seemed that all the talk, was about repairs before the smoldering had even stopped. The papers called it 'tragic', some thought 'tragic' was absurd. 'Cause lots of privileged folks felt we got what we deserved. But our families never knew the truth in all the aftermath, and still nobody knows who to point their fingers at.

Little mind was paid to me as they laid me in my box, save the penal record number written on the top in chalk. Which became my ticket home, my salvation, my release. This lone parting gift to us recently deceased. Over the coming days with several teams of carts and horses, they delivered next of kin coffins containing blackened corpses. And when it was my turn I was finally home to stay. I told my daughter I'd be back, but never thought it'd be this way.

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