

# REALITY CHECK



ELIZABETH HAYSOM  
REALITY CHECK

— IMPRINT —

ISBN: 978-9464928068

ELIZABETH HAYSOM: REALITY CHECK

Originally published under the title ›Glimpses from Inside,

in the ›Fluvanna Review‹, Palmyra, VA, 2003-2008.

›Reflections by Elizabeth Haysom (Page 130)

on the Website [soeringguiltyascharged.com](http://soeringguiltyascharged.com)

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for the reintegration of long-term prisoners.

Printed and published by Brave New Books,

Weteringschans 259, 1017 XJ Amsterdam

Typesetting font: Garamond

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# Editor's foreword

ELIZABETH ROXANNE HAYSOM (\*1964) is the protagonist of one of the most spectacular crimes of the last decades. In March 1985, she had her parents Nancy and Derek Haysom murdered in Bedford County, Virginia, by her lover Jens Soering (\*1966), the then 18-year-old son of a German diplomat.<sup>1</sup> To this day, there is speculation as to whether Haysom herself was at the crime scene. The court agreed with the version that she was in Washington D. C. at the time of the crime – 180 miles from Lynchburg, where her parents lived. Soering set off alone, was greeted innocently by her parents and then brutally murdered them in the house with a total of 42 knife stabs. Both had their necks cut, Derek Haysom was almost decapitated, and the living room and kitchen were covered in thick layers of blood in places.

This was preceded by a fierce love affair between the highly gifted students Soering and Haysom, in which they wrote passionate letters to each other and raged at Elizabeth's parents. There are indications, but no evidence, that Elizabeth was sexually abused by her mother, while her father may have known about it but did not intervene. Elizabeth Haysom did not give a conclusive statement about this issue in court.

The letters that Haysom and Soering sent to each other before the crime, as well as the joint diary they kept while they were on the run after the crime, are noteworthy for several reasons. On the one hand, they shed light on the dynamic relationship between the two and provide clues to the crime; on the other hand they are characterized by high literary quality and intellectual brilliance – and this primarily applies to Elizabeth Haysom's writings.

Sentenced to 90 years each, the two perpetrators were released on probation in November 2019, after serving 33 years in prison. Soering was deported to Germany and denies the crime to this day. Canadian citizen Elizabeth Haysom admitted her guilt and was deported to Canada, where she now lives near her family. While Soering wrote books in his prison-time, appeared on talk shows and podcasts after his release and became popular as a media phenomenon, Elizabeth Haysom remained and remains silent. One can only imagine her great writing talent. A column that she wrote between 2003 and 2008 for a regional newspaper, the ›Fluvanna Review‹, provides a little insight. It is the newspaper of the region where she was imprisoned for decades, at the ›Fluvanna Correctional

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<sup>1</sup> Netflix released a four-part documentary about the spectacular case in 2023 under the title ›Till Murder Do Us Part‹

Center for Women in Troy, Virginia. These essays – originally printed under the title ›Glimpses from Inside‹ – are published here for the first time as a book, under the title ›Reality Check‹.

The full truth about the events of March 1985 will probably never be revealed. But whatever happened, Elizabeth Haysom spent more than 33 years in prison – and obviously deeply regrets her deeds, as shown in one of her last recent public statements ›Reflections‹ (see page 130), emitted in November 2019 – written shortly before the announcement of her release by the Virginia Parole Board. We publish this book with respect for her personal development and her achievements in prison – and not least with regard to her writing skills. In contrast to Mr. Soering, who publishes a lot, I think she is a real talent. – Royalties from this book benefit an international organization for the reintegration of long-term prisoners.

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# REALITY CHECK

## 1. The Shakedown *(March 13, 2003)*

ONE OF THE MOST stressful things in a prisoner's life is a shakedown.

By policy, we have them every quarter, but anyone is subject to a search (and seizure) at anytime. Every shakedown is different and we never know quite what to expect, so it strikes like judgment day. Some last for days while the officers carefully root through every single thing we own. Some last but an hour. Very often, but not always, they will tell us that we are going on lockdown and to throw away all our contraband. All of us know exactly what we can have in our possession and what the prison does not allow.

This self-weeding method is popular with both inmates and officers. With inmates, because we can judge for ourselves rather than have someone else dig through our precious things; and with officers because paranoid inmates like me ruthlessly purge our belongings more effectively than bored and exhausted officers. Of course, there are always the elements who loudly claim that ›they're not gonna throw nuttin' away – let the po-leece do their job.‹ They apparently enjoy officers trashing their cells and are the ones who also boast on the debates they have won arguing over a cardboard trashcan.

Since, however, I like to boast about how I live ›transparently,‹ shakedown time is a quarterly personal shakeup. Because unless one is a vegetable, it is impossible to live for any length of time exactly according to DOC<sup>2</sup> policy. Even if it is an extra spoon or too many pencils, seemingly innocent and unimportant items, it is contraband if it contravenes the DOC personal property quotas. In other words when the officer announces a shakedown and 20 minutes to throw away all our contraband, I race to the trash with armloads of magazines, folders, puzzles I haven't yet completed, plastic ware, paperclips, cleaning rags, bars of soap, plastic containers and old mail. If nothing else I always have too much paper and too many books because in order to function properly, I must have lots of books and paper.

Every time this happens, I vow I will not allow myself to keep envelopes of saved pictures (but I need them to make my stationary), or letters from my family (but I enjoy rereading them and savoring their company) or interesting articles (but I might need that information for something). No matter how hard I try, no matter how great my intentions to kick the paper and book habit, I fail. I am, therefore, grateful for the grace period to throw away the junk in my life. If I were not under the gun, I would hem, haw and dither about trying to keep this and that. Instead, I dump vigorously.

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<sup>2</sup> Department of Correction

When we come off lock, I am shaken by my perennial inability to live up to the ideal asked of me. Consequently, I feel humbler and freer. Humbler because I have had to recognize my inescapable shortcomings; freer because I have made choices. I do not feel duped for throwing away my contraband. I am relieved that those in charge are realistic enough to know that inevitably we will fall short and are generous-spirited enough to let us make our own choices. Besides now that I have cleaned out my box, I have room for that book order.

## 2. My Plain Shoes Fit Well *(April 10, 2003)*

HERE AT THE FLUVANNA CORRECTIONAL CENTER for Women we have outside exercise that we call »walking rec«. For walking rec, each unit has an assigned time to cruise the courtyard, a large rectangle in the center of the prison. Five times around makes one mile. I usually power walk on weekends for an hour as it is the only form of exercise I enjoy and can commit to. I listen to my Walkman, fall into stride and disappear into the freedom of my own mind.

One breezy Saturday morning, a young friend asked if she could join me and, since I am known for walking at a run, she expressed concern that she might hold me back. I assured her that I would enjoy a change of pace and encouraged her company. However, after 10 minutes of what I considered an »old lady« hobble, she began to limp and slowed further. In another 10 minutes, she informed me that she had to go in because her feet hurt.

As I am prone to do, I snapped off some biting words about her age and getting herself in some kind of order, and then she shyly admitted that it wasn't the walking which had crippled her but the shoes. I stopped, took a deep breath, peered at her feet and asked what in blazes was wrong with them.

A whistle trilled through the air and an officer shouted at us to keep moving. We immediately started shuffling along again.

I put my hand on her sleeve and looked at her hard. »What is wrong with your shoes?« I demanded.

»Well«, she said with a giggled sigh, her eyes skittering around. »They're a size five.«

She shrugged-off my hand. »And I'm a size seven-and-a-half.«

»Why in Sam's tarnation would you wear shoes that are too small?« I shouted.

»I like the way they look on my feet!« she rebutted.

»You're completely insane!« I sneered. »Why are you trying to walk? Why don't you just sit around with your feet propped up for us to admire?« I

jammed my face in hers. »Oh, my«, I preened in a falsetto voice, »what small beautiful feet you have.« I turned away from her red-stained face. »O po-leeze!« The young woman stomped (delicately) back to the building.

I raced around the courtyard muttering and mumbling, pontificating and exhorting the mesmerized audience in my mind on the »insane foolishness of that child«, when a quiet thought brought me up short. What blisters do we all carry? What rubbed raw places do we all live with? What shapes do we contort ourselves into for the sake of appearances or expectations? How many times in my own life have I limped along wearing shoes that didn't fit? It had never occurred to me that more people might be laughing over my limp than impressed by my cool shoes. How long is it taking me to learn the joy of striding freely in my shoes, plain though they may be? In shoes that fit, I go a lot further, I go a lot faster, and I enjoy the walk.

I want to apologize to my friend for being a self-righteous jerk and thank her for giving me an excellent workout.

### 3. Haysom Responds to Criticism *(May 15, 2003)*

WHEN I FIRST ARRIVED AT FLUVANNA in 1998, I got my head stuck in my four-inch window. At Goochland (VCCW<sup>3</sup> or the Women's Farm) we had large casement windows. They had bars, of course, and screens but they cranked open and afforded magnificent views of the rolling farmland, the James River and old growth trees. I spent hundreds of hours staring at the life cycle of insects and birds and plants. And, here at Fluvanna, in spite of the impossibly narrow window and its design to allow only forward viewing, I cannot seem to shake the habit. Even with deep bruises on my temples and ugly dents down the side of my face (»window face« we call it), I still find myself straining at the window to see.

What? I don't know. There is nothing to see – dreary barracks-style buildings, struggling grass and a patch of sky that never holds the sun or moon. Perhaps in my isolation It's an instinctive reaching out to the world outside my window as though I could transport myself there on eye-beams. And I am isolated. At the time of this writing I don't watch any television – by that I mean it is unplugged and packed away. The radio reception is terrible. I see no newspapers. I live in deep exile, which made it all the more startling when a variety of people, several weeks ago, began to contact me and advise me not to become discouraged. Discouraged? I thought. Discouraged, they continued, by the negativity leveled at you over these columns.

My initial reaction, I'm ashamed to admit, was pure ego. I was ecstatic that anyone was reading them and reacting to them. I was provoking thoughtful

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<sup>3</sup> Virginia Correctional Center for Women

discussion! Sadly, this reaction was followed by darker musings about thought police and Pharisees of perfection. I had an urge to wax long if not eloquent on Moses, David, Saul of Tarsus – all murderers whom they might read without qualm. (And what about Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Oscar Wilde, Fjodor Dostoevsky, O’Henry, etc? There is a healthy precedent for felonious writers). It was not until much later when I was at walking rec., that I heard and listened to that other, truer, voice – the quiet piercing one.

»Glimpses From Inside« is written for my fellow ragamuffins. You know – those who get their heads stuck in windows a third and fourth time; those who like myself are deeply faulted but are straining for something just out of reach, for those who need a little encouragement; that even in the basest and most mundane of lives, there is the possibility of goodness and the hope of transformation. This column is for those who flunked English, or maybe never even finished school, but who struggle anyway to express their truth. It is for those who think and feel that their lives are meaningless, without value, and they are stuck in a perpetual dreariness but who refuse to succumb because they know perseverance and endurance, compassion and generosity win the race – not perfection.

This glimpse is for you. Do not be discouraged by the view. Get unstuck and be encouraged that if a wretch like me can be put to constructive service, imagine the possibilities for you.

## 4. In Praise of Food *(June 12, 2003)*

INMATES THINK ABOUT FOOD, talk about food, dream about food. Not that most of us are fainting from hunger or malnutrition – most of us are getting larger everyday – but we seem motivated by a sense of deprivation. We, therefore, eat as much as possible, whenever possible, just in case.

We also cook elaborate dinner parties without utensils, pots or bowls, or without any essential or normal ingredients. We use hot but not boiling water, potato chips bags and a small assortment of junk food. From this we create antipasto plates, pizzas, pasta of all kinds, chilis, rice dishes, scalloped au gratin potatoes, burritos, cakes, cookies, fudge, a wide assortment of sculpted handmade candies and bon bons ...

Our creativity knows no bounds when it comes to satisfying our stomachs. Nor are we selfish with our knowledge. We share techniques, methods and recipes freely with others who admire our tasty concoctions and ingenuity. More than this our energy is limitless in the preparation of these feasts. I, an average Jane, on more than one occasion, have spent eight hours on handmade sweets with a relentless concentration that I have never applied to anything else in my life. And I had a roommate a few years ago

who spent 12 hours conjuring up a cake for a party to which neither of us were invited.

Other than the obvious conclusions that we're gluttons driven by our food fantasies, and that food is the only thing we feel we can control and is one of the few means by which we can explore and express our individuality, I am impressed by our hospitality. After studiously avoiding involvement with sororities at UVA<sup>4</sup> (I was just plain silly), I am now an active member of a sisterhood of hospitality.

This weekend my cellmate and I are hosting a party in honor of an older resident. I am trying out a new recipe for petits fours, and my roommate has created a thematic table ensemble from brightly colored construction paper.

The success of the party, however, will not depend on our elaborate preparations. It is the party motivated by kindness and nourished by generosity and laughter that is successful.

I learned this lesson early when an invited guest spotted lonely-looking souls and included them to my party. This spontaneous kindness puffed me up with offense. I whined, »I cooked for nine and 12 showed! Who are they to invite those people to my party?« But I discovered that even when food disasters strike our parties don't flop. One of my best-ever feasts was the time when I, cooking meat in an illegal fashion, thought the officer was coming and, in my panic, threw dinner in the trash.

In the midst of the laughter and camaraderie, I learned that the art of being a good hostess is not in the techniques of social maneuvering or clever small talk but in the heart of making others feel welcome and special. It is not the guest list of the food that creates hospitality but the size of the host's welcome. Only then is hunger satisfied.

## 5. Sallying Forth a Moving Experience

*(July 17, 2003)*

»MASS MOVEMENT!«

The robotic voice sounds over the intercom. Numbly I respond to the big voice in the sky. Grab my coat. Grab my glasses. Check I have mints. Close my cell door and join the herd around the living-unit door.

We surge forward as if our momentum, our willpower alone, will let us out.

The door unlocks, after much mumbling and complaining about the slowness of the officer, and why they always let other wings out first and we're always last. The door pops open. We stream through into the bubble area and converge on the sally port. I hope It's open. It is. Push on, water plunging into a dam, we fill the sally port, squashing in as many as possible.

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<sup>4</sup> University of Virginia, Charlottesville

Perfume, loud voices, kissing, whispering, someone smoking illegally. Shrieking laughter. Cussing. As last, the first door closes. The air tightens. The second door of the sally port doesn't immediately pop open and a ruckus begins. »Open the door.« »I'm going to faint.« »Open the door, you lazy good for nothing. Do your job.« Nothing happens.

I close my eyes. I could be on the New York subway, the London Tube or the Paris Metro. We could be stuck in a tunnel, air closed, pressure building.

The work hour crowd also wears uniforms and is just as ruthlessly self-absorbed.

This is the mundane anthill activity of everyday life. Who are these people trapped in it? Who are the people who rise above it? Circumstances, rules, social mores and expectations bind us all. Prisons with or without bars are fundamentally the same. But are these physical confinements and mindless scurrying truly the prison? The externals bear similarities but what about the insides? The woman in front of me just got her General Education Development certificate. She's glowing and her words tumble and garble about college. The woman whispering in the corner just lost her visit with her children and she is telling an elaborate lie to avoid responsibility for her predicament. The woman at the front of the pack is negotiating a deal. The one behind me is praying. I am too but for air.

She is praying about »other people.« As Sartre wrote: »Hell is other people.« One could then say, heaven is that ability to be teflon in the face of other people's toxicity. Or perhaps for some people, heaven is solitude.

Or maybe heaven is the ability to embrace other people. Become your enemy, say the Buddhists. Love your neighbor as yourself, says Jesus. Those people who rise above the rat race are neither rats nor in a race.

The door opens. I dash into the fresh air, my nose straining to remain upwind of the cigarettes lighting up. As a reformed smoker, I am a demon about cigarette stink. I breathe deep. Air. Clean, sparkling air so fresh and bright it makes my teeth ache. I suck it in, gulp in the sky.

A sky smeared with bold electric colors, constantly shifting shades and cloud shapes. I turn a slow 360 to take in the horizon. Now this is heaven.

## 6. Life Among the Clutter *(August 14, 2003)*

I CO-FACILITATE A COMPUTER-AIDED DRAFTING CLASS, and every month an official from the Richmond main office of the Department of Correctional Education comes to check on the progress of the students. On his last visit, Mr. G. brought a box of old papers: junk from 30 years of drafting. He brought the box partly because he couldn't bear to throw it away and partly