

We headed to court in a bucking van, but it couldn't shake me out of a major funk. For eight days, I had slept, cold and alone, in the keep of a forbidding gray monolith. I had been snatched away with no phone call home – or to an attorney – and thrown in jail with others who hadn't asked to be there. I had observed, trying to decipher where I fit, if I fit. They seemed okay, but what did I know. I'd never met a real inmate before and certainly hadn't been forced to mingle with a pack of them, eat with them or learn their language.

In the van came much brooding. I had committed a misdemeanor. Didn't matter. Guards in basic black made sure I couldn't do much except stare at – or away from – my fellow inmates. Just like me, ankles and wrists chafed in steel.

“What'd you do?” asked a baby-faced inmate with arms-full of faces and a woman's name and swirls and geometric shapes done in lots of color, like red, and with apparent skill.

Say nothing! You've done nothing to trigger awe or fear, like murder. Your response might draw unwanted attention – and laughs.

I kept my distance. That was after the steel doors slammed for the first time. And that was after the last time I texted her. And *that* was before hobbling to court that day.

Now, I took my place in a trail of orange, stutter-stepping along with about two dozen others, our hands and ankles still shackled. Even though this would be my last day in chains, I had to endure one last trial. It would come, though, without those damn doors and their metal explosion like the clap of death.

The clock said lunch time, and the Man herded us into another gray cell. As we filed in haltingly, a guard handed each of us a brown paper bag, surprisingly stuffed. Along one wall of the long, narrow cell – or spartanly fit room – ran a slender bench of concrete that proved arduous. Some sat or stood and ate and talked. I plopped on the bench and investigated my meal.

“Are you kidding me?” I muttered.

I didn’t want the others to hear. A low-profile was best, I thought. I didn’t want to be too conspicuous. Yeah, but my paper bag held, conspicuously, a ham sandwich, chips, candy bar and a drink – orange.

Wow, great chow.

While bolting down bag food, I studied the others.

They’re younger, like the dudes in my pod, Pod F. They call me Pops.

Nobody else was quiet except for one guy who sat two legs down and seemed religious or spiritual, or whatever. When the inmate between us got up to take a leak, the other Quiet Man scooted down close to me and took in my bare feet shod in standard-issue orange flip-flops. Orange may be popular with jail officials, I thought, but wasn’t my color.

“No socks?” Quiet Man asked in a voice so thin it almost dissolved amid inmate exchange.

“I didn’t get any.”

He nodded. “You have to buy them at the store. I’ve got a pair I’ll give you when we get back.” He looked at me and smiled. Thanks came quickly. (Inmates could purchase items like socks and pillows and T-shirts at the jail store to help them rest and resist the chilling air of the cells. You could call friends or family members, when allowed, and ask them to add credit to your jail-store account.)

When my attention roamed again, the others, most of them, had wadded up their brown paper and left it on the bench. Now, they fixed on the moment.

“What’s the holdup?” said one. Large, expressive eyes rolled above a lanky form. They sparked when he talked.

“They’re waiting on an attorney for one of our guys,” said an Orange Clad, who looked in his mid-thirties and sounded like he knew. He shot a look around as if to emphasize the missing man.

“Yeah, Trevon,” a voice called out.

How did he know, that guy who sounds like he really knows? I asked myself. Was he, like, a liaison between us and them? Knowing Guy held his head high and his eyes printed out alert and intelligent. His hair stood up in a contemporary spiky do. Still, he looked overall like a friend from high school who had been captain of the football team.

At the door, heads stuck in the window, gazed and pulled back.

“Nobody’s coming,” one said. “Damn, I hope we’re not here all afternoon. I want to get back, make some calls.” Some stretched out on the floor, scratched their heads, made like mummies with arms long at their sides and closed their eyes.

“I’ve been at this business since I was a teenager, and I’ve never had to wait this long.” Knowing Guy said. Last time I was here was about a year ago because I broke probation, just like now. We were in and out of here quick.”

“Yeah,” said a tall, heavy man in full, black beard like a pirate’s. “I remember. You and your son were both in here.”

“Hell, we’re in here again. Jail partners. He loves me, man. We’re never far apart these days.”

“I seen Arizona the other day,” Black Beard said. “He’s in Pod H, right next to you. He’s up on drug charges, I heard.”

“No. He broke probation, like me. But you’re right. He was on probation for drug charges, *just like me.*” He laughed. The others laughed, too.

I marveled. Not because he had set any great example as a father, but because of his charisma, a whole big chunk of cool that must have lingered from his high school days. Early in our occupation of this room, I had gazed around at the others and found him in a far corner, behind the toilet and sink. He knelt on the concrete with head bowed, eyes closed. In a little while, he crossed himself, stood up and joined an unfocused conversation.

“I think the judge today is Dugan,” he said.

“It’s Dugan,” Black Beard said.

“It is?... Then, we’re in luck.”

“Not with any judge in this bass-ackward county.”

“Fuck, man, Dugan’s okay. Last time I was here, he was just *passing* out probation. I know what I’ll do.” He paused.

“I read a lot now,” a tall man with soft eyes said in a soft tone. He could be heard above a sudden silence, replying to a question. “I probably read a book a day.”

The lanky man with expressive eyes cut in. “Hey, man, don’t fuck with Walmart. I can’t get outta there with anything.”

As he continued, he unleashed inmate laughter. Knowing Guy weaved through the pack, stepping gingerly over those stealing sleep and lowered himself down on the bench next to me. Baby Face from the van with the sleeves of colorful tattoos moved up to him and spoke in muffled voice.

“All I remember is being with my girl and kissing her,” he said. “We were drinking, and I went to sleep. When I woke up, they were hauling my ass out of there.”

Knowing Guy looked him dead in the eye. “Plead guilty I’m serious. You’ll get probation, I’m telling ya.”

Baby Face nodded hesitantly, slumped away. Knowing Guy seemed distracted, eyes wandering

“Ah, hey man,” I said, directing my greeting straight at him. “I don’t have an attorney. I can’t afford a court-appointed one and I should have seen somebody – whoever – by now ”

He took in a far wall. “What are you in for?”

“Misdemeanor stalking.”

He hit me with an Elvis sneer, blinked.

“Texting and emails, with sexual stuff.” I looked at him. “A lot of sex. She told me not too, but we’d been at it four years. I didn’t get the message.”

“That’s it?” His eyes bore through me.

“That’s it.”

“Like I told the other guy. Plead guilty. You’ll get probation, man. Trust me.”

“That means no more jail time at all, right?”

He glanced at me, walked away.

I acted unflustered and once more tuned in Expressive Eyes turned Comedian. His eyes widened and his face stretched as he broke his individual rant and exchanged takes on the local drug scene with one who looked like a druggie, He wore long hair.

“I’ll tell ya, man, I think the molly at your high school is shake and bake,” he said and scanned all around as if waiting to be challenged. “Okay, yeah, and watch out now if you get caught for anything. Those mother fuckers. It’s bam (he held tight to an imaginary weapon in his

hand) and uh, uh, uh-uh-uh-uh.” His body contorted in violent twitches as if exposed to a stream of electrical bolts. Everybody laughed. “Fuck!”

Baby Face broke in when the laughter faded. “I never had no trouble getting food or whatever I want. At Walmart. All you really got to do with some of their stuff is grab it, wait and then just walk out.”

It's true. Jail is an incubator of crime, either for the first-timer or for continuing education.

I heard myself calling loudly to Baby Face. “You know what? You and this guy who always gets caught should get together.” Everybody laughed. I grinned, felt a surge of pleasure offsetting the pain shooting up and down my legs and around wrists.

The watch at the window intensified.

“Man,” said one. “When are we going to get outta here? I want to go back to jail.”

I laughed.

After a while, a older guard appeared at the window, mimed a reluctance to let us out, laughed and opened the door. We hobbled out, saw a van, hopped in. I clambered in last and stood with all seating space taken.

“Here, Pops,” Baby Face said. He shifted over for me.