

COUNTY

I was lost trying to find my way back home. I felt trapped, driving my Jeep through unfamiliar streets. Tires screeched around the turns. The freeway entrance must be close; if I could only figure out where I made the wrong turn.

Earlier, mango margaritas ruled the day under the Hollywood sun. We sipped and lounged. An aspiring band, the Tombstone Ashtrays, played at a swimming pool party. The host, a dear friend, spoiled us with party favors and far too many drinks.

I raced faster around this strange neighborhood. I wanted to be with my sweetheart, Aracely. But then tunnel vision crept up on me. I didn't mind; nothing new. I had driven like this plenty of times.

Ahead of me, a homeless person wandered aimlessly onto the street to take a look at something on the asphalt. I swerved to avoid hitting him and continued driving, and then flew past a stop sign. I crossed my fingers, but it didn't work. Behind me a bullhorn blared. In my rearview mirror danced the unmistakable lights of a police interceptor. I slowed my Jeep and pulled over. I took a deep breath, slowly blew out, and gripped the steering wheel tighter.

I wished I was at church praying for my salvation and deliverance. The officer approached my SUV and illuminated my face with his flashlight. He demanded my license and registration, and then said, "Get out of the car, idiot."

Everything that followed happened in slow motion: a street sobriety test, a breath into an alcohol breath analyzer, and then the cuffing. As he brought me over to the police interceptor I focused on the words written on the side of the door - *To Protect and to Serve*: the classical definition of the word hero. I must be the dragon he slayed for the night; maybe he was making sure I didn't steal someone's life tonight. Then the officer drove me to the Los Angeles Men's Central Jail.

At the jail, he handcuffed me to the bench before a deputy moved me to a large empty cell. It smelled of urine, puke, and feces. The metal door slammed shut. I sat down and buried my face into my hands and held back tears.

Who do I call: my girl, my parents, or my roommates?

A few minutes later, a batch of fresh inmates filled the room. I could feel their stares, measuring me. I glanced around and wondered where I stacked on this jailhouse totem pole. Back home I punched a speedball once and hit a karate punching bag a few times. Some of these inmates were big and angry. Others were small. Yet, some of these guys appeared docile, maybe wave at each other like neighbors back home. Then again, this situation might be going primal - a face in the crowd ogled and smiled at me. Damn, I wished I hit that punching a few more times.

I made a telephone call to my parents and explained what happened. I was going to get out soon, hopefully in six hours. I hung up the phone and waited. Hours later, the iron door swung open and a troop of deputies entered. They looked fresh, buff, and mean. A barrel-chested, commanding deputy, called Slovak ordered us in a line facing a black door.

We marched into a change room, then stripped and donned L.A. County underwear and orange jailhouse uniforms. Unbearable was the stench of strong body odor. This felt like a new low. If only I stayed home instead of going out to that pool party.

The deputies filled us into another holding cell like sardines and then left.

A little later, several young toughs came around the room asking for donations. Most of the inmates gave these young toughs some money: a dollar here, two dollars there, someone even gave them everything he had. When it came time for a heavy-set man to make a donation; he didn't bother to give them a verbal reply; he simply stood up and started swinging. A brawl was on. The troop of deputies returned and peppered sprayed everyone. The deputies quickly separated the belligerents and removed them from the room. The rest of us were left crying, spitting, and desperately trying to wipe the chemical off our faces.

Moments later, the deputies returned. "Who's in a gang?" Slovak asked. Silence became the room.

Slim, Slovak's assistant, pointed at someone, "He looks like a duck." And like a magnet, this inmate became a fixture for the sharp eyed commander.

"You, come here," Slovak ordered. The overweight inmate approached Slovak.

"Yeah, he even walks like a duck," Slim said, "there's another one." In all, four more inmates were separated and removed from the room. Slovak then ordered all the inmates to wait in a line out in another hall.

By now I was getting anxious. When am I getting out? Should be soon I hoped. My asthma was acting up. There was a lack of good ventilation and the walls seemed to be creeping up on me.

"What the fuck is that?" Slim said, pointing at the ceiling. An air vent door appeared askew. Something inside was ready to pop out. Slim scratched his groin and ordered everybody to 'look ahead.' Minutes later, a jailhouse janitor climbed a ladder and pulled an unconscious inmate from the vent. Medical orderlies appeared. The orderlies took their time and talked to Slovak and Slim before giving the unconscious inmate treatment and finally moving the victim to the medical ward.

We meandered around several corners before entering a large cell. A group of inmates, those with privileges, spoke loudly. A large man with a scar on his face took one

look at me and said, “Look at this Rufus, another college boy. What you doing here college boy? You know better. You old enough to know right from wrong. There. There’s your tray and utensils. Don’t ever let me see your pretty face in here again.” And with that, I got into the chow line.

The chow room had signs high up on the wall: NO TALKING. Once at the kitchen counter, an inmate slapped a bologna sandwich and a cup of fruit juice onto my tray. I found a seat at the end of a table. I paused and looked around to make sure it was OK. I knew enough to know I just can’t sit at a jailhouse table without approval - no one gave me any mind so I sat down. Around me, a whale of a man carried a tray full of five bologna sandwiches. I didn’t hesitate and swallowed mine.

Somehow I didn’t fit in. I don’t think I was cut out for this kind of life. But as I glanced around it seemed some of these crooks embraced this lifestyle. Not me.

Slim, limping around the hall, ordered us, those who were finished eating, to leave the chow hall. I put my tray away and followed the rest of the inmates. At the line, someone got elbowed to the face by another inmate. Who knew what jail house infraction he broke.

We entered a block. Loud complaints emanated from one cell. He was a teen, taunting the deputies, “You ain’t shit out on the street. We rule the streets. I’ll kick your white ass if I see you out on the street.” This juvenile dribble was usually reserved for someone called a Cell Warrior: a brave behind the bars, but quiet as a mouse once released into the general population. His cell clanked open, and sure enough, he quieted down.

“Come here motor-mouth. We got a new home for your special punk-ass,” Slovak said. He placed Cell Warrior inside a different cell. And it housed a monster of a man who lied in his bunk bed eying his new cell mate as if he were a taco. This big fellow’s name was Grizzly G.

“Here, this will be your new home; make a friend,” Slovak said.

Going down a corridor I peered into some of the cells and faces glared back at me. God help me if I ever ended up in a cell with someone like Grizzly G.

I entered a cell. Three other inmates stared me down: one white and two Hispanics. I coughed up phlegm and then swallowed it. There was a lone top bunk on a far wall. I motioned to an inmate with a tattoo on his jaw if it was all right to get that bunk. Tattooed-Jaw nodded. I jumped on the bunk, trying not to look scared.

“What did you do?” A gruff voice said.

“DUI,” I responded. “What did you guys do?” I said, not wanting to show I didn’t have any grit.

“Fighting at a party,” Tattooed-Jaw said.

“Sniffing paint at the park,” Skinny said.

“Statutory rape, she was younger,” Casper grated his words.

“All is welcome, nothing is expected,” Tattooed-Jaw said.

I didn’t have a clue as to what to make of this last statement, so I played it safe and nodded. My cellmates went about their business. I lied down and tried to rest. I realized then I couldn’t undo the past, I could only do my best to survive my current situation.

The two Hispanics gathered in a corner of the cell. They spoke in hushed tones.

“Who are you?” Tattooed-Jaw asked.

“I’m Loco Chucho from big Hawthorne, I’m notorious. Call a shot. I’m down for anything, ese,” Skinny said, dithering side to side.

“Orale, follow me homie.” They exited the cell, walked down the corridor and out of sight as if they were ninjas seeking adventure.

“Gone fishing,” Casper said.

His face was full of acne pimples like uninvited guests. This was when I noticed Casper wasn't wearing braces on his teeth. His mouth was wired shut. “What happened to you?”

“I talked back to Slim. He punched me, knocked me down, and then he kicked me in the face with his steel toe boot.”

“Fuckin sorry to hear that.” I said, trying to sound concerned.

Casper shrugged.

Both Hispanic men returned. Skinny clutched a pair of new sneakers. Casper grinned at me. I heard about these jailhouse crimes; I was determined not to be a victim. No one was going to steal my sneakers. That night I slept with them under my pillow.

The cell door slammed shut. An hour later the lights went out. It was dark, but I saw everything in the cell. I was now more anxious and uncomfortable than ever. Why am I still in jail? What’s going on? I’ve been here a full day. I should be out by now. I closed my eyes and tried to think of something pleasant. Reminisce about a walk on the beach with Aracely, or better yet, a fun night with her. I tried to sleep, but it wasn’t easy.

THUMB! A loud sound reverberated throughout the cell block as if a sack of cement hit the floor. Immediately, all the inmates hugged their cell bars, glimpsing at what’s going on. I was the last to the bars. Everyone was staring at one of the cells. “That’s Grizzly G and the Cell Warrior,” Tattooed-Jaw said.

I focused on the cell: I saw shadows and heard loud slapping sounds as if it were two men playing a ferocious game of paddy cake. Slim in the control tower ignored the mayhem and flipped the pages of a book. Madness had replaced sanity.

The Cell Warrior’s voice got louder. “Stop! What’s wrong with you? I don’t know you.” The slapping sounds died down; they were substituted by wrestling grunts. Clothing was torn. I gulped. My cellmates remained quiet and fixated on the dark cell. The cries of Cell Warrior continued, “No man. Wait. Let’s talk. Don’t do that. Goddamn. Oh shit, that hurts. Fucking, stop already.”

When it was over the shadow of Grizzly G moved; he got off the floor and then went to his bunk.

Then the Cell Warrior moved; he sniffled, limped to his bunk, and cried for the next fifteen minutes.

I heard enough and returned to my bunk, wary of my cellmates. They chuckled like hyenas in the dark. Mercy cared not for the weak in this place. What was happening to me? Was karma slapping me in the face? What sins had I committed to belong in humanities rectum? And what must I do to get out.

In the morning, the deputies were unusually cheerful. “Did everybody get a good night sleep?” Slovak asked. They opened the cell doors and guided us to the showers.

At the showers, I was nervous and shaking. I quickly finished my cold shower and dried up with a towel that I casually grabbed off a hook. Fists reigned down on Casper by my two Hispanic cellmates. He grabbed the wrong towel.

They returned us to our cells minus Casper, who was sent to the infirmary. We played a game of dominos; Skinny picking his nose and Tattooed-Jaw smacking his mouth while he ate his grill cheese. Then we took a lunch break.

On the return to our cell block, Slim made Cell Warrior run up to the front of the line, while going the up stairs. “Hurry up,” Slim yelled. I didn’t think he deserved it, but it went to show that the deputies ran things around here and it was best to keep your mouth shut and mind your own business unless you want a broken jaw or get prison raped.

At the end of the third day, they removed Cell Warrior from Grizzly G’s cell. I read his lips: “Thank you, lord; thank you, lord.” I never saw Cell Warrior again.

I took this as a good sign and asked Slovak about my situation. “Shut the fuck up, they’ll get to you,” Slovak said.

The fourth day brought some relief. We went to the gym. It wasn't much of a gym: a few barbells, a dip bar, and a pull-up bar. Two large muscled-inmates handed out towels to us. I put aside my leeriness of the other inmates and began to work out, hard.

There were no windows in this room. I had yet to see a window anywhere in this place. This place was one enormous building with no visible exits. For the first time since being locked up I was actually considering an escape. How was that going to be possible? I was doing sit-ups when we they kicked us out.

At the cell, I took notice of their tattoos. Skinny had *Wrongfully Convicted* written above both eyebrows; behind his right ear, *Fuck a Bitch*. Tattooed-Jaw had the words *Street Tested* written inside a stenciled drawing of knuckles on his right jaw. Tattooed-Jaw stretched his arms back and I noticed something. I took a chance.

“Are those people’s names on you armpits?”

“Yeah, what of it?”

“Nothing. I’m curious, why?”

“Because they stink,” Tattooed-Jaw said. “They sleep in the ground.”

I nodded as if that explained everything. In reality, I didn't get it. Does this mean he killed them and buried them? Or does it mean they somehow died and he just never liked them to begin with. Why put a needle on a sensitive part of your body like your armpit, face, or neck? Even more so, to have that much hate that you're willing to endure the pain of getting this done was beyond my understanding. This truly was a strange place with strange people.

The lights went out for the fifth night. Someone came over to my bunk.

“Hey, you want to buy some stuff?”

“No man, I’m cool. Thanks.”

“All right, suit yourself. It's primo stuff,” Tattooed-jaw said. He showed me a baggie with powder in it. He laid the stuff on a small table then cut two lines. My two cellmates snorted it up. It had the rites of a ritual; a communion that they broke, shared, and consumed at an altar.

Two more days went by before I found myself sitting in front of Slovak. The commander signed off on several sheets then said something to me about my file.

“Found my paperwork?” I responded.

“Yeah, you boozers are usually out of here in six hours. But shit happens. Your paperwork got misplaced.”

I was dazed, but I didn't let my confusion hold me back any longer. “When do I get out?”

“You can get out now. Jump in that line over there.”

The process-out line led into a secured hall. Benches ran the length of it. I sat down and waited. Hours went by. I listened to a *monkey mouth* explain the various hash flavors he could get a hold of on the outside. I got tired of his talk and left.

I went to the farthest end of the hall, where an old man sat on a bench as if it were under a bodhi tree. I asked if I could sit; he nodded. He was staring down a hall when a group of deputies came into view. The deputies escorted a group of eight inmates: each inmate cuffed at the wrists and ankles and all chained together at the waist. “These youngsters have a long way to go before they're ready to learn.”

“Is that right?”

“If they're not learning then they're not growing.” His sharp eyes focused on me.

How were these wise words going to help me get out? They weren't. They were meant for me not to come back. I was out of my element and I didn't belong. There was no love in this place only hate. This old man was letting me know that I needed to change

if I never wanted to come back. I wheezed - my asthma was getting worse. I needed to get better - both physically and mentally, and who knows maybe spiritually.

They transferred me to another cell. There I thought about how I could right my life. Drinking and drugs led the list; next was my choice of friends; crossing some of them if not all made sense. The end of the day would determine which ones.

Next to me sat two young Asians. The first explained to the second how he had been stabbed in the back while in a jailhouse bus. The fellow said he was getting into the bus to get transferred to Wayside. Later, he heard this guy did it just because he liked stabbing people, no particular reason for it just random violence. The second Asian gave him two Tylenol pills. The first asked how he was going to repay him. The Tylenol Asian said that if he would help out another brother then that would be enough repayment for him. This was the only expression of kindness and goodwill I ever saw in jail.

They called my number. It came at the end of the day. I was removed from the cell and taken to a room full of people and told to stand there for a moment. The cheap perfume caught my attention. I carefully looked around and noticed these inmates had make-up on their faces. These were male prostitutes. They murmured. I was getting edgy. I felt someone grab my ass. To my relief, Slim called me over to his workstation and asked for my right hand. I complied but strangely he screamed, "Your other right hand," even though I'd given him the correct one. I removed and replaced the same right hand. "The ink is dry," Slim said. He rolled over my fingers with the ink roller without giving me an opportunity to remove my hand. Then he made me face the wall and stand there with my forehead against it for some time before being led out.

On the seventh day, I was a free man. The night was cold and dark. I called my parents and roommates, but none of them answered. My girl, Aracely, was the one who picked me up and finally brought me home.