

Excerpt from:

**Incite**

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*By Raymond A. Grenier*

Smashing sounds of an enormous steel door clamping shut on my heels cause me to shutter. The crash reverberates throughout the expanse of cement and metal. Ten heads turn in unison. Motionless bodies seated along steel benches and propped against gray painted cinderblock walls begin to nudge each other with elbows and knees. I avert my glance to the foot-worn concrete path leading through the jumpsuit-clad brigade. Most are staggered in front of an overhead mounted television. A blaring news report pierces the pressure.

Blood-chilling stares pound at me like a relentless migraine. Twenty feet seems like a marathon. A plastic crate clasped in my arms helps to prevent my nervous spasms from being obvious. At least, I am praying that it does. At long last I reach the base of the steps leading to cell twelve. I start to breathe again. The electronically locked door drones open as I hop up the stairs. I scurry inside the cubicle, collapsing with my load and pulling the door shut nearly in one motion. I do not have the nerve to look back out at the festering mob.

The experience of seeing a prison from the inside looking out is new to me. I stand numbly, staring through the Plexiglas. It measures just slightly more than the width of my head by four feet tall, starting at around waist height. The double-paned glass extends to inches from the cracked and pitted, once-white ceiling. A steel bar, thick as a large toothpaste tube, breaches the length of the smoggy window which offers a strained view of the cold, hard asphalt below. The bar is securely bolted to the top and bottom of the weather-worn masonry that frames the parallel sheets of thick glass.

The edge of the parking-lot-style yard is enclosed by a double row of tall chain link fencing. The row closer to the building is densely garlanded along the top with Slinky-type attachments the size of hula-hoops. These metallic banana curls with razor like projections repeat in triple fashion ten feet away. The inside of the top, center, and bottom of a parallel outer fence is comparably fortified. I have seen them before from the highway. Now, here they are, up close and personal; so close, and so dreadfully personal.

Scatched onto the filmy surface of the narrow window, much like you might expect to see on the wall of a public toilet stall, are various slogans. "Sully sucks"; "Sully's inferno"; "Bite my dick, Sully, you bastard." I turn to face inward, tracking the etched Sully graffiti to the built-in metal desk, which sports several layers of designer prison décor. The base is worn and scraped down to the rusted metal surface. Over that, random blotches of Rustoleum Red bleed through to the next paintbrush-bristle-infused coating of stomach-churning cobalt blue. All of it is finished off with a putrid concoction of leftover paint from throughout the years. It creates an all-encompassing, dirty-underwear effect. Every inch is gouged, to various degrees, with dates and hearts, names, crosses, and messages. "God bless all. Release your hatred." A litany of sweet Sully sentiments adorn the blasé, butter cream frosting shade of semi-gloss, semi-smut walls.

A similar motif is scrawled around the toilet/sink combo. It spreads to the no-longer-usable, steel wall mirror. The pattern continues, gouged into the industrial strength, steel door. The ceiling is not to be outdone by its surrounding menagerie of muck. Markings are splayed onto the fluorescent light box fixture and scribbled incessantly into its frosted Plexiglas cover. Sully hate scapple inundates the six-by-ten foot cinderblock cell.

A buzzing sound breaks the icy stillness. The barricade opens. A dozen feet scuffle up the cement stairs, in front of my home unsavory home. A handful of guys, the ones who were hanging around the day room as I passed through, make their way past. They disburse to the other five stalls that line the second tier of the notorious N-Nancy block. The name attached to the letter is to avoid confusion with the morbid M-Mary block at Rhode Island's ACI Intake Service Center.

A handsome young Hispanic man brings up the rear of the group. He swings our door open and pulls it shut behind him. His clenched fist extends in the knuckles up position. "Hey, how ya doin' men? We jus' all saw you on TV." The look on his face is cordial, but his tone is matter of fact. I return the gesture with my fist. As our knuckles tap in mid air, I respond, in equally as nonchalant a demeanor.

“Really? How’d I look?”

He stares vacantly. “Like you, men.” A noncommittal grin spreads across his face while he leans his bottom against the desk.

“Hummmph,” I grunt, and wait patiently for him to take the next initiative. What is probably a few seconds seems like the final stretch of the Kentucky Derby. At last, his sultry bronze-tone lips take action. “Well, aah, you got some a these guys ov’r her purdy worked up.”

“Really? How do you mean?”

“Didn’ chew hear ’em men? As you walked by? A couple of ’em was sayin’—”

“Uh, noooo, I didn’t hear them. Aaaaand, I’m not really interested in knowing what their comments were, if it’s all the same to you.” Abruptly, I raise an eyebrow and half smirk while shrugging my shoulders, as if to semi-apologize.

“Oh, sure men, no problem. Ahhh, they sain’ on TV that you an’ this other dude, men, you uh, you have some adopted kids. Uhhh, whuzit, a boy an’ a girl?”

“Yes, one of each.”

“Oh yeah, an they uhh, they sain’ you both molested ’em?”

“I have no idea; I’m not following the story.”

“Oh.”

Silence besieges us once again. We stare at each other for a long moment. Finally, his penetrating black irises slowly fade into a downward glance. He turns away and begins to fidget with some strips of paper and a two-inch pencil with no eraser strewn on the desk. I let out a little huff through the back of my nose and he glances up again. I go on.

“Aah, listen, I don’t mean to make you feel uncomfortable.” With a forced grin, I shift my sight away from him, and nod slowly. “You know, the media is having a field day with this, and *everybody* has an opinion and a comment. And believe me when I tell you that none of it is the least bit flattering. And *yes*, I do know what the accusations are; and *no*, I am not the least bit interested in what *anyone*’s opinion of the situation is, especially not these inmates and *most especially* not any of the assholes who work here. I have absolutely no idea whatsoever why I’m telling you all this, but we have never had *any* sexual interaction with *any* of our children. We adopted these two kids on nine-eleven, two thousand one, and in the...”

I spring each finger of my left hand out and then proceed to the ones on my right hand, counting, “two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight; in the seven years since we’ve known them, neither one has been capable of telling the truth a day in their spoiled-rotten life. I have no reason to suspect that that would change now. They are dysfunctional, hate-filled children. They are angry because of some foster kids that we took in. The only thing I care about right now is to have my day in court, to set the record right.”

I end as abruptly as I had started. Immediately rolling my eyes upward, my chin drops and mouth opens slightly, as if to say Where did that come from? I know, and he knows too, that it is pent-up frustration. I look at him squarely, announcing, “My name’s Raymond.”

“I’m José. It’s with a J.” He smiles and winces slightly. With a little nod, he leaps onto the upper bunk, rolling lazily onto his back with his hands behind his head.

“That sucks men,” he says softly. “Once I had a cousin who was pissed at me for somethin’, an’ he started screamin’ that I molested him. Finally though, he tole his mother the truth. But *damn*, I was mad at hin for a lawn tine after that.”

I just stare out the window. In no time I hear the grumbling of easy afternoon snores emanating from my new compadré. Up until now I had chosen not to communicate with anyone, other than for mundane topics such as “I’m looking for the hospital,” or “Anyone wants my container of milk?” Many individuals have routinely approached me with the standard icebreaker, “Whadda ya in faw?” I usually retort, “Lotta bullshit,” attempting to avoid further interaction at all costs. If escaping interrogation is not automatic, I switch the subject as inconspicuously and graciously as possible. A theme like the weather often suffices.

I become adept at topic hopping. Soon I learn that introducing the ever popular, albeit stomach wrenching topic of prison food, provides a reliable exit into neutral territory. Reminiscing about the morning’s serving of cold clumps, aka oatmeal, or last night’s hockey puck supreme being passed off as a meatloaf usually does the trick. If not, I can rely on providing general descriptions about foreign objects found in the food. Hair is a favorite. Even better, the gut-curdling sight of swamp juice, oozing from under the kitchen door to the mess hall floor, definitely inspires a repulsed reaction. An effective encore theme is the slop-drenched woolen blankets, strategically tossed over forlorn spaces where mismatched tiles once adhered. *The Exorcist*-like, god-awful wretchedness conjures the desired reaction.

I am warned that I should never, under any circumstance, mention that I am in on a child molestation charge. It drives every lofty, self-appointed juror and judge—encompassing nearly everyone—to insane and belligerent behavior. A testament to that reaction occurs when we are initially incarcerated and dragged into court for the first time. We are conveniently arrested on a Friday afternoon. That way, there is no avoiding jail for at least a weekend. Monday is court. It becomes a succession of an absurd array of waste-of-time hearings. No audible mention of our charges is announced in the courtroom, due to the “sensitive nature” of the case. Yet mysteriously and miraculously, every one of the guards becomes aware of the alleged offenses. In turn, they publicize choice bits of information to the prisoners.

Pandemonium breaks out in the holding cells beneath the courtrooms. Ultimately it swells to a near full-blown riot on the return bus trip to the prison. These guys go spastic. Like a wild cluster of chimpanzees on crack, they shake and rock the bus and try spitting at us through the sectioned-off crates that we are inserted into. The lashing out continues for the duration of the rush hour ride. “Ripper! Ripper! Ripper! Ripper!”

Particularly in prison circles the term is interchanged with the pseudonym of Jack the Ripper, a legendary serial killer. His notoriety as a brutal murderer is often inappropriately translated to mean “Rapist,” probably because his victims were prostitutes. The “Ripper!” intimidation is periodically interjected with select adjectives, profane and profoundly profane in nature. Not one of the state marshals or prison staff does a thing to abate the situation. Why would any of them? They instigated it in the first place.

The gentle, guttural sounds emanating from José with a J lure me to a siesta of my own. Envious of the occupied upper berth, I gaze at my assigned bunk, which is left with no mattress. The so-called mattresses are a feeble hunk of coarsely recycled fiber, as thick and as comfortable as a clay brick. The clump is packed into a plastic and nylon reinforced, ripped-to-shreds pouch. It looks like it had gone down with the Titanic, and been sea damaged for as long. I quickly decide that I am not much worse off without one. The base of the sleeping area is welded to a steel frame about the size of a pine casket, only rectangular. It protrudes into the room from its bolts, like a shelf in a storage shed. I spread my blanket on the solid slab of steel.

Gunfire cracks the air. My head jerks and spins in the direction of the blast. I crouch with my arms swinging to cover my face. Just as impulsively, my cellmate springs from his prone position. With precise and instantaneous Samurai-like fluidity, his feet are planted on the grimy cement floor. My heart is pounding in my throat. I focus, and discover that a guard is generating the clamor. He relentlessly slams the butt end of a

steel flashlight against the ironclad entrance of my newly adopted echo chamber. My eyes bulge open, staring blankly toward the dizzying, explosive force puncturing the stillness. The unforgiving blasts persist while the monster at our doorway incessantly whacks metal on metal.

My pupils dart to the figure beyond the glass opening in the door. "Stand for the count!" it screeches. The figure looks like an apparition lurking in a damp and darkened dungeon: a stumpy old ogre with a full crown of silver-gray. His hideous grimace causes the platypus lips to contort like a wrinkled handkerchief at the bottom of a drawer. *The Hunchface of DOC* would be a fitting title for his biography. After peering briefly through the narrow aperture, he poses himself to record information on a clipboard—probably that he has counted two heads. Judging from his appearance, that is the extent of his mathematical skills.

I recognize this loathsome insect as the guard who greeted me at the mod on my first day. As I approached the window to the shadowy guard shack called "the bubble," he was mumbling something about pushing my papers in through a slit in the wall. I pushed the wrong sheet of paper in through what was apparently the wrong opening. While he was going haywire, I managed to submit the correct paper but, as it turns out, in the *wrong crack* again. With the passion of a firefighter busting out of an enflamed building, he frantically smashed the door.

"Jesus fuckin' *Christ*, what are you? Some kind of fuckin' *dummy*? *ChrrrRRiiist!*" His whole head and face were bright red; his neck muscles were bulging. His entire body began to tremor. Again, he yelled, "You got to be the *stupidest* god damn mothah fuckin' *dummy* on the face of this god damn mothah fuckin' *planet*." He flung the first sheet that I slid through to him in my general direction. I stood with eyebrows lifted. He continued screaming, grabbing the door, and slamming it behind him. I retrieved my document from the floor and proceeded through the block entrance toward my assigned cell. All I could think was *Wow!*

This is that same stunted freak who greeted me when I showed up for admittance to the illustrious N-Nancy mod this morning. My bundle of belongings was bigger this time; a few days have elapsed since my arrival. I possessed my very own deck of chewed up playing cards, a bag of white cheddar popcorn, some toiletries, and an extra pair of socks; mostly items abandoned by their previous owners. This time I knew just the right paper and just the right crack to use. My little friend was not at all impressed. He jolted the door open and stormed into the hall, huffing and puffing. "Put your stuff down over there." He nodded to a small visitor's cubicle behind me. I placed my pile on the square, Formica-topped table.

The first thing of mine he grabbed was a Tupperware-type, compartmentalized container. It held breakfast, which I had not consumed before departing from my first mod which is designated for new commits. "What the *hell* is *this*?" My mouth had barely opened to respond when the lid was ripped off; sweaty scrambled eggs and bread slices were wildly tossed in the trash can. With the grace of a street urchin rummaging through a dumpster for food, he proceeded to fling my meager stack of earthly goods. He was determined to disperse the playing cards haphazardly from their cardboard package. Like bamboo shoots in lo mein, they were tossed and jumbled with my things. "Grab it. Let's *go*. Move it, move it." I frantically tossed my meager belongings into my blanket and balled it up. Impatiently, he swung the mod door open and pointed to cell number twelve, in the upper corner. Away I marched as he slammed the door behind me.

Now the twerp is just outside my cell door, tallying the count. I shuffle a little closer to the doorway, raising my hand like a child in school. "Uuh. I, uh, I don't have a mattress."

"Talk to the C/O on the next shift," he grunts, without glancing up from his pad. Before he pivots to proceed down the steps, I catch a faint glimmer on the gold-tone name badge pinned above the chest pocket. I squint to focus in on the block style letters: SULLIMAN. I freeze. Yuk! This is *Sully!* That deranged piece-of-shit that countless men have come to disdain over the course of, god only knows, how many torturous years. I turn to my cellie who is still swaggering in an upright, semi-alert state of disinterest. "What's a C/O?" I ask.

“Corrections Officers,” he mutters, yawning through the words. “That’s what we call ’em, C/Os.” José lazily flops back up onto his bunk. He covers himself completely with his charcoal-gray and speckled-white, woolen-blend prison issue blanket. I quickly scan our tomblike chamber. I need a comfortable spot to sit and compose myself from the attack by the creature from the black and blue abyss. An alcove created by the side of the desk and the corner of the room seems acceptable. I yank my crispy-crusty blanket from where I had begun to spread it on the slab and snuggle myself in.

The first day of spring is just a couple of days off, but the Southern New England climate remains unseasonably cold. Daytime temperatures are still in the thirties and lower forties. Conditions inside the cinderblock cells are similar, with a wind chill factor several degrees colder. The “heater” vents spew blizzard-like arctic winds. I wrap myself tightly, right over my head and face. I keep thinking, “This is 2008, in what is supposed to be a civilized society. There is something very wrong with this picture.”

I faintly perceive a strained inhaling sound from above. It is a sure sign that José with a J is again on his way to dreamland. “Stand by for chow,” blares the PA system. Electronic buzzers vibrate on door latches. Like starting gates at the dog track, they all pop open to release the animals. One of our neighbors flushes and their refuse fills our toilet. José and I almost collide as I hop up from my cozy cubby of comfort and he, down from his suspended steel stretcher of sleeping bliss. Everyone filters out to the landing in front of our rat holes, awaiting the queue.

“What the *hell* are you doing up there?” resounds a deafening roar from our beloved C/O Sulliman. One of his subjects has strayed from the first to the second level.

“Chill man, I’m jes borrowin’ a piece a papah.”

“You don’t *belong* up there!”

“Aight, dude. *Chill*. Man, you’re actin’ like a child, yo.” A couple of guys half-snicker. Most of us just hold our breath.

Sully stammers, stutters, and shakes all over. “*Give me that ID,*” he finally spits out. It’s amazing that he doesn’t lose his dentures. The unrepentant sinner removes the name badge from his chest while sauntering down the steps. Sully reaches out and yanks it from him. “You’re on *lockdown* for the *rest* of the week.” He fumes for a few more seconds and furiously calls out, “And the *rest* of you fuckin’ *dummies* are locked down for the rest of the fuckin’ day.” He goes slamming into the mod door, forgetting to signal its release. Then it buzzes; he pushes it violently with both arms and makes his exit. We all glance around at each other, some shaking heads, others emitting light laughter or quietly blurting hate comments.

After chow, we return to our respective slots. The day is passing quietly. The second shift C/O begins the rounds for the afternoon count. As he comes into view, notepad and pencil in hand, I inquire, “Any chance I could get a mattress?”

He glances up and stares past me, looking like he is gazing at TV, with no evidence that he is even awake. That is the extent of it. He drifts away into the ether. I cock my head over to the direction of my cellie and shrug my shoulders. “Is it me?” I whisper.

We both giggle and José interjects, “You can take my mattress for a while. I’m gonna stay up and do some stuff anyway.” Before I have a chance to react, the transfer is underway. When the heavy lump is positioned to satisfaction, he steps back and grins beatifically. He stretches his arms and spreads his hands, as though he has just performed a magic trick. I feel awkward about accepting his kind gesture.

“That’s nice of you, José,” I concede, returning the smile. “I’ll be sure to remember you in my will.” With

an almost imperceptible wink, he swerves to step out of my way. I throw the sheet and blanket in place, and maneuver myself between them. José removes his navy blue, v-neck jump top, which is carefully tucked into the complementing, elastic-waist, non-hemmed, way-too-long jump bottoms. He faces the worn-out-beyond-use mirror over the mini sink. I had already applied a post card-size plastic mirror onto it, using the clear tape that came strapped to my VO-5 shampoo bottle.

The faucet in the sink is designed to work like a water fountain. It has a spring-controlled mechanism that shoots water into the air for fifteen seconds and then stops automatically. Our unit however, dispenses an almost non-existent dribble. It runs down the back of the sink and activates only as long as your thumb remains continuously, and painfully, pressed against the pushbutton trigger. How José plans to shave under these conditions is a feat that makes my anxious eyes wince yet eagerly anticipate.

Armed with a disposable BIC razor that comes in the prison "care package" (an oxymoron of preposterous proportions,) he deliberates the procedure. The kit, stuffed into a zip-lock plastic bag, includes a .25 ounce aluminum packet of shave gel, similar in appearance to the flavor pack envelope that comes in Ramen noodles, and a .5 ounce dispenser of stick deodorant that must have had the "de-" portion printed in error. If you do not stink before applying it, you sure as heck do afterwards. Next is a black plastic pocket comb—definitely a don't-leave-home-without-it item for the 97% of inmates who are either shaved bald or have thick, kinky masses of dreadlocks or other braided interpretations of penitentiary fashion.

There is also a toothbrush with a thumb-handle: a little stub where normally a handle is, designed to fit between thumb and finger. The Elmer's toothpaste in a dispenser the size of a Blistex tube is multi-use. Most guys use it to mount pictures and drawings on the walls, or cardboard shields on the ceiling light fixtures. A 2 ounce plastic bottle of Fresh Scent shampoo doubles as detergent for sink-laundered socks and underwear. There are two—that is correct, *two*—bars of soap. One is almost as large as a passport photo but twice as thick. It snaps to smithereens the second you press it between your fingers. The deluxe bar is as big as a credit card and easily three times as thick. Last is the personal-size, go-anywhere pen. A refill cartridge from a pigmy-size ballpoint pen is fitted into a rubber insert. It is something like the little glitter-infused swizzle sticks they have at bars, only soft. If you hold it like a regular pen, when you press down on it to *try* to write, it bends like *al dente rigatoni*.

The exhausting process of getting warm water to the faucet begins. José pushes the button for a while with one thumb. Determined, with pelvis pressed against the front edge of the stainless steel basin, he shifts his weight from one leg to another. Periodically he switches to the other thumb. Every so often, he puts a finger against the trickle to check if it is tepid.

It's a tedious process, but finally José with a J finishes shaving. His fuzzy little stubbles are gone, except for a sliver of coarse black bristles resting on the ridge of his upper lip. Dazzling, perfectly shaped white teeth appear almost incandescent in contrast to his rich, chocolate shake complexion. He pulls the hinged metal seat out from beneath the desk and sits with elbows resting on knees, chin propped onto one hand. He looks like he is setting himself up to absorb the warmth of a tranquil campfire.

Soon we begin to chat. I don't know who starts, but we go on and on about everything from buttered popcorn to philosophies of the ages. José dreamily offers a monologue about being released from jail and making things right for his girlfriend and their three-year-old son. A tear rolls down his cheek. He brushes it aside with a finger. He conjectures about plans of returning to school and starting an automotive or electrical business of his own some day. He tells about his love for basketball and distrust for authority, his propensity for double cheeseburgers and disdain for pickled beets. In a moment of vulnerability, he delves into a confession about enjoying same sex encounters. The overcast sky relinquishes its vigil in time for dusk to announce its arrival. José rubs his forearms briskly with his hands.

"Seems like the wintah's nevah gonna end. It sure would be nice to snuggle on a day like this." The pace of his hands against his golden brown arms slows. His attention remains intently with mine, eye to entranced eye. Slowly, I fold the blanket open and he kicks off his sneakers, sliding in beside me. At some point later,

we doze off.

After chow, I ask around for anyone who is alone in a cell so I can get hold of the spare mattress. I had seen a bunch of them when the elevator had gone to the fourth floor by mistake. Reportedly, before the days of closed circuit cameras, that was a notorious unoccupied floor and the C/Os would sneak guys up there for sexual favors. When the door glided open to the sight of a mattress mound, I mentioned that I didn't have one. The C/O ignored me. Cell six, just below mine, has a single occupant who offers to bring the spare mattress up when we get back. As he is transporting it up the stairs, the C/O storms into the mod screaming, "Hey, what the *fuck* you doing"?

He goes into a rage about how, if someone else is transferred into cell six, nobody would be any better off than we were now (no one except me). Obviously, the plan is to keep me without a mattress for as long as possible without running the risk of disciplinary repercussions. Shortly after 9 p.m., when the rec period that we are locked in for would normally end, our door is released and our neighbor below delivers the now-unnecessary mattress. We throw it onto the empty steel shelf above. All the bedding remains below, on my lower platform. José with a J becomes accustomed to nesting there for the duration of our few days together.

H Hotel, more popularly called "Hell mod," is the next fascinating block to reveal its untold pleasures. This block is larger than most in the north-side, newer section. It features sixty—rather than the standard forty—units designed with sliding electronic doors and no cable hookup or electrical outlets, for use as seg (segregation) cells. Seg cells are for the bad boys. "Administrative segregation" is the sophisticated lingo for solitary confinement. Now the mod is designated for new commits. The typical stay is from a day to a week, sometimes two.

In Hell, on most nights the second shift is officiated by a particularly deranged character. He can pass as the offspring of Benny Hill on stilts and Lily Tomlin on crack. Word is that this C/O, Penelope—"Patty Cake" as some of us refer to him—aspire to the ranks of state trooper. He obviously does not have what it takes to make the grade, by a long shot. That tidbit of information comes to me from his cousin, who is my first cellie in Hell. He calls Patty Cake a "sick fuck."

I arrive in Hell sneezing and dripping profusely because of time spent in the subarctic climate of N-Nancy. In anticipation of my needs, I concealed a roll of toilet paper among my belongings and successfully smuggled it into my new quarters. It was an enormous risk. A grave offense like possessing unauthorized toilet tissue could send an unstable officer like Penelope off the deep end. As an example, one night someone at chow was scooping the green beans from his tray to his buddy's pile. Lt. Armourall, another Patty Cake-variety C/O, was cruising by.

"You're gonna' fuckin' *eat* what we fuckin' *give* you," he fuckin' screams. "You *fuckin'* piece of shit *ingrate*. You're fuckin' *lucky* we even *feed* you fuckin' animals in the fuckin' *first place*." He fuckin' sprays fuckin' spit all over our fuckin' food. It didn't make much difference to me. During his tantrum, I sneezed all over my half-cooked, stone-cold steamed potato. I couldn't taste the food anyway. I did not eat but I did my best, after that, to look grateful.