

The van sliced through the dense morning fog like a jet through vapor. It was dark, the mood somber, as ten of us, two guards and eight prisoners rode in a terrible silence. Icy air streaming in from a slightly opened window numbed my face. I shivered with cold, uncertainty, and dread. My heart, fueled by fear and anger and adrenaline, raced like that speeding van down the highway. I didn't know where we were headed, but I knew that by the end of the day, I would be in a maximum-security prison somewhere in Indiana.

At first, I was concerned that we weren't going to make it off the highway. The fog had reduced visibility to fifty feet, but the guard was driving obscenely fast, nearly twenty miles over the speed limit. As the world zipped by under a heavy blanket of mist, my focus shifted to thoughts of prison. Disturbing images from movies, like "Midnight Express" and "American Mi," played out in my head, except I was the character who was savagely beaten or stabbed and thrown over the rail of the uppermost tier in a cell house. There was no reason to think of my past or of my future. I only thought of surviving the day. Everyone else seemed to be equally lost in their thoughts.

The van came to life with quiet chatter when we left the highway. There was more than just fog, highway, and other vehicles; we could now make out landmarks. "This is the road to C.I.C.," someone called out excitedly. A young man behind me talked about how he did time there not too long ago, how clean it was, how we would love the food, and how he had a lot of friends there. He made it out to be more like a summer camp than a prison. The Correctional Industrial Complex was a modern medium security prison and, according to what I had just heard, it was a much better place than where I was going.

At RDC, the Receiving and Diagnostic Center, the central intake of all prisoners to the Indiana Department of Correction, I had met with a counselor who gave me a choice between

two places: the Reformatory and the State Prison. I had already heard the horror stories about both maximum-security prisons. A guy in the cell next to me suggested that I request to go to the State Prison, where things were more organized and a man can do his time without constant hassle from the guards and administration. The counselor was memorably kind and respectful, and he seemed to accept my request. I had already realized that I had been lied to when the van headed south from Plainfield.

Minutes later, I heard the same voice call out with obvious dissatisfaction, "Nope. We're not going to C.I.C." The fog masked any details of the houses and buildings we had passed. I couldn't make out any street signs or billboards that would betray our destination. It wasn't until the van slowed and entered a parking lot that I felt my ride was nearing its end.

Stones popped under the tires as the van crept along an unpaved road. I peered intently over the driver's shoulder and into the haze in order to catch a glimpse of our destination. Then, unexpectedly, a monstrous castle-like structure, complete with an iron gate and turrets, loomed in the mist. An aged concrete wall, cracked and mottled from erosion and time, dominated my view as if it were the only thing in the world. Others behind me groaned and commented on the hideous sight. I strained to make out the top of the wall, expecting to see battlements or men at arms dressed in leather and chain mail and brandishing crossbows. The van stopped at a huge twenty-five foot high iron gate that looked as if it was built to keep people out than to keep them in. The entire scene was surreal, as if I was looking back in time to the dark ages. I imagined a scene from stories of King Arthur, where the mythical Merlin conjured a heavy fog to cloak the approach of Uther Pendragon to Castle Egraine. I couldn't fathom how such an ancient structure had survived until today.

Nearly a hundred feet from the imposing iron gate, the driver cut the engine, unfastened his safety belt, grabbed his liter of pop, and stepped out of the van. He slowly walked away and disappeared into the fog. Curiously, I kept my eyes trained on where I thought ought to be.

"Whetzel," the other guard called out. "This is your stop. Welcome to The Reformatory." It seemed odd that he was so relaxed when he had revealed my fate, like he was mocking me. Is there a kind way of announcing impending doom? *Hi there. Welcome to your personal nightmare.* I wasn't surprised. In fact, I was already prepared to enter The Reformatory.

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When Jake had first entered the cellblock at the Floyd County Jail, no one paid him much attention. He was a small, old man, unimposing and inconsequential. He sat alone, kept to himself and read his papers. But when it got around that Jake had just come from the Indiana State Reformatory for a Modification of Sentence hearing, he quickly became popular.

Many in the cellblock – myself included – had never been to prison, but we all expected to do time. It was natural for each of us to want to know what awaited us. Prisoners swarmed around Jake as if he was a prophet bearing good news, and they fired question after question at him. I didn't want to seem overly concerned with details like everyone else. As they talked with Jake, they seemed scared of his words, as if they had the power to inflict pain. Not wanting to appear the frightened new guy, I stayed away from the crowd, but I kept within earshot. Jake had lived at the Reformatory for more than a decade, and he spoke of the prison as if he had lived there his entire life. He described everything: food, water, clothes, buildings, library, jobs, programs, other prisoners, gangs, and violence. The stories of violence were of particular interest to everyone.

"You two," he said to two young men, boys really, "will have a very hard time there." Jake explained that sexual predators, mainly large, black, muscular homosexuals, lusted for small, young 'white boys.' He chuckled as he spoke to them. For the predatory black men, it was a symbol of status to *sport a white boy*. Upon entering prison, before they could become affiliated with gangs or make any friends, many young white men were targets of well practiced hussles and vicious assaults. Jake called it a breaking in process. If a youngster could be broke early, he was more likely to give in. Once he gave in, there was no going back. He would forever be an outcast, a punk.

Jake told an old man convicted of child molesting to take a plea bargain for a reduced sentence. He warned that should the old man be convicted at trial, he would receive the maximum sentence and would more than likely end up at the Reformatory, where child molesters were regularly beaten, raped, and sometimes killed. It was a hard life for prisoners with sex crimes, especially those against children.

I dismissed much of what Jake had to say. He seemed over eager to talk about the violence, as if his stories were to elevate his stature instead of reveal the true nature of prison. I saw him as a cruel old man who enjoyed scaring people. I realized that Jake had survived the Reformatory without being stabbed or crippled, and he didn't come across as a mob kingpin, gang leader, or tough guy.

One day, when Jake sat alone, I struck up a conversation with him. "Is the reformatory really that bad?" I asked.

"For some it is." He replied. "Here," he said, sliding a thin folder across the table. "Check this out."

The folder contained his Motion for a Modification of Sentence. In the back, listed as exhibits, were numerous newspaper clippings that depicted the violence at the Indiana State Reformatory. I read the ghastly details. Sgt. Sheets was stabbed in a cell house. Some one was killed in the gym. A man was killed in front of the Captain's office two days before his release date. The prison was on an extended lockdown for riots and acts of violence. The Reformatory was listed in an article as the third bloodiest prison in America. One reporter described it as "The Butcher's Block."

The articles captivated me. First, I couldn't believe that I was reading about a prison in the United States. Second, I couldn't believe that such atrocities were everyday occurrences. This place was rough, and it was about survival. I found the articles quite enlightening.

As if he could read my mind, Jake spoke up. "You shouldn't worry about anything. You'll be OK." He explained that trouble finds those looking for it, and to him, I didn't seem like a troublemaker. A person can be the toughest and meanest in the joint, and do horrible things to the people around. But everyone has to sleep sometimes. Even the biggest bullies can be taken down by a little guy with sharp knife, or a lock in a sock, a boot, a sharpened broom handle...

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The large gray iron gate creaked loudly as it lumbered open, allowing the van to enter. Once through, it was shut and secured behind us. The van stopped in front of a matching gate, its twin. We were locked in a staging area. Shackled and cuffed with my wrists chained to my waist, I was helped from the van. There was no one around except for the guards who brought me to Pendleton and the two guards who let us pass through the gate. One of the guards ushered me into a small cell. My restraints were removed, and I was told to sit on a thin wooden bench.

Before leaving the guard said coolly, "When they're ready for you, someone will come to get you and take you inside."

The walls were stained with dirt, tobacco, and trails of dried spit. The floor was bare concrete. Three open toilets were on the other side of a three-foot high partition. I was alone, left to think about what lay before me.

I passed the time in a daze, tossing around thoughts of my life. Convinced that I would be in a fight by the end of the day, I focused on turning my fear to useable anger—anger towards those who would hurt me, anger that can push a man to be cold, callous, vicious. If I survived my first fight, I would probably go to a lockup unit and be placed in a single cell. I would have more time to think. It seemed such a good plan at the time.

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"I'll never forget sitting in that tiny cell at the railroad gate." Damon Slaughter said. "I was there for hours." He said the words *hours* as if he meant years.

Like most new arrivals to the Reformatory, Damon was directed to sit quietly in a small cell until someone could take him into the prison. Having never been to prison before, he feared that evil awaited him on the other side of the second large gate. Damon, a young, white, lanky young man, saw himself a far cry from the brutish tough guys he expected to see in prison. In the county Jail, he had heard all the horror stories of The Reformatory, and now that he waited upon its threshold, his mind raced with thoughts of violence. He expected to fight someone that day, and he was prepared to kill in self-defense.

Two forces worked within him: fear and the desire to live. Damon didn't want to die, especially in prison. He feared being a victim. In prison, malevolence is a raging river that can easily consume anyone caught in its path. The more victims it devours, the stronger it becomes.

He focused on remaining calm, in control of his fears. He thought of his family and practiced breathing exercises learned in an eighth-grade gym class. But just as he reached a state of calm, a vision of being stabbed or beaten or raped would enter his mind, sending his adrenaline levels skyward. Then, he would have to start all over to calm himself down. With no one to talk to, nothing to read, or anything to keep his mind from engaging the hideous violent future ahead of him, Damon endured several cycles of meditation-like calm alternating with heart-pounding adrenaline spikes.

"By the time I came into the prison, I was exhausted," Damon said. "I didn't care about anyone attacking me or robbing me. All I wanted to do was sleep."

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"Are you ready, Bud?" asked a stocky, heavysset guard, sloppily dressed in a blue uniform. He sounded more like a friend than an overseer.

"Sure," I replied. The guard's laid-back attitude was a surprise. He led me out of the small cell and towards the second large gate. He was a big man, taller than me, and fat around the waist. He walked with a limp, as if he had a bum hip or knee. It creaked and groaned open just as its twin had a few hours earlier. We stepped through it together and entered the prison. I expected to see a world turned upside down. "Here we go," I thought to myself. I peered through the opening expecting a mob to greet me—a gangbanger looking for a new member, sexual freaks looking for a new plaything, predators looking for an easy score. My stomach was a knot of apprehension. I prepared myself for the worst. However, after coming through the gate, I was met with a surprising silence. No one else was around, and the place looked more like a modern commercial complex or public school than a prison. Cream-colored brick buildings lined a

blacktop road. Planters contained bright yellow, red, and blue flowers. It was an image far from what I had imagined.

We moved slowly along the asphalt roadway. It all looked too clean and overly manicured to be a prison. The sky was clear and the sun cast an idyllic glow. It felt no different than walking down any other street in America. My spirits were elevated a notch. Logically, I thought that people who would keep their immediate area this beautiful couldn't be all bad. They obviously cared about something.

"So, what's going to happen to me today?" I asked the guard, hoping he would reveal my *real* fate.

"Well," he replied casually, "first we are going down here to get you some clothes. Then we'll get you some boots. Then, we will get you to your housing unit." The guard spoke as if he didn't have a care in the world, and I soon looked to him as someone quite likeable. Having spent many months in the Floyd County Jail, I wasn't used to guards treating people like human beings. My experience put jail guards at the low end of the human spectrum.

We stopped at one of the cream colored buildings and entered a door labeled "Clothing." It was cool and dark, like a cave, and my eyes had to adjust to the low lighting. Racks of clothing stretched to the high ceilings. Two prisoners were behind a counter and a person dressed in regular street clothes, their boss, sat at a desk. With a wave of his hand, the guy at the desk dismissed me, instructing me to go see the two prisoners. As I walked away, I could hear the two staff members make small talk.

"Here," one of the prisoners coolly said, handing me a crisply folded set of clothes, jeans and a shirt, complete with underwear, socks, t-shirt, and a belt. "Put these on." I stripped buck-naked right there in front of them and put on the clothing. They all fit, and my number was

already stamped in red on each item. "It will be a minute while we finish putting your number on the rest of your stuff."

It felt good to have clothes on, instead of the loose fitting jump suit. The clothing had a fresh, brand-new smell to them, with a hint of a chemical odor from the red marking ink. I watched as they worked on my clothing. The entire time, they worked in near silence. These were the first two hardened convicts I had met. Each item was stamped and placed in an extra large black trash bag. Sheets, blankets, towels, and a jacket made their way into the bag. When they were done, one of the prisoners yelled out to the guard. Within a minute, we were off again.

The guard led me out a door into a spacious and steamy laundry room. Washing machines and dryers lined one wall, and pressing equipment and folding tables were at the center. It had the feeling of a sweatshop. Dozens of prisoners were folding and pressing clothes and sheets. I felt a bit uneasy walking through a room with so many prisoners, strangers, but I looked into the room defiantly, to see if anyone's gaze was fixed on me. No one seemed to care or notice as I made my way upstairs to the shoe shop.

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"Every time I smell the ink they use to stamp our clothes," Larry Houchell explained, "I think of when I first got to the Reformatory."

For nearly all new prisoners, the first thing they receive is an issue of clothing and linens stamped with their Department of Correction identification number. The permanent red ink used in marking clothes has a distinctive, pungent smell that has become associated with new clothes. You can smell it on someone ten feet away. Even today, when I catch a whiff of a similar chemical odor, like spray paint, I flash back to the days of receiving an issue of new clothes.

Most find the smell of the ink nauseating. It wasn't so bad for me, but I wouldn't say it was a pleasant smell. Smell is the sense most closely tied to memory. The smell of the ink can cause many to think back to their first frightful days at the Reformatory, when they were unsure if they would live through their first night. For Larry, the smell of the ink was soothing. It signaled something new or fresh—the polar opposite of what one expected to find in prison.

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The guard led me back the way we came, back onto the asphalt road that led from the railroad gate to the clothing shop. Again, I looked around for other prisoners, any threat, any signs of danger. A few people, prisoners, were tending to flower beds. They seemed to be moving freely about the prison, carrying gardening tools and pushing wheelbarrows. Some looked in my direction, but none of them seemed to pay me any attention.

A squawk on the guard's radio caused him to stop. "I have to go," the guard said. "You follow this path, take your first right, and you will run into O-Dorm." He pointed down the alley I was to take and motioned to the right as if he was merely reminding me how to get to O-Dorm. "A guard will be waiting for you at the door."

"OK," I said, trying to remain calm. I couldn't believe that he was going to turn me loose to walk around alone in a maximum-security prison. The guard must have sensed my apprehension.

"You're going to be OK," he told me. "If you have any problems—any problems at all—you call for me." He pointed to the metallic nametag on his chest. Inscribed in black was "Partain." I would never forget his name.

I heaved the large black bag over my shoulder and headed down the alleyway. My head was down, but my senses were in overdrive. I looked but saw no one. I couldn't help but wonder

where everyone was. As I walked deeper into the prison, the physical conditions noticeably changed. The smooth asphalt gave way to cracked and pitted concrete. The buildings were made of reddish-brown, well-worn brick. Bars covered nearly all the windows. During my walk with the guard and the few minutes I had spent in the laundry building, I had relaxed. Now, made to wander alone in a maximum-security prison without an escort or an idea of where I was headed, I became nervous. A guard was supposed to be waiting for me at a door. He was the next face I wanted to see. I walked faster.

In no time, I reached a building with a guard by an open door. He locked the door behind me, and told me to follow him. We walked up a short flight of stairs, down a hall, to a cell door. Along the hall were several other doors that were more like cage doors. I quickly looked around. I could see prisoners moving about behind bars. They never paid any attention to me. The guard opened the door and told me my bed was in the first row. Then the door, creaking to a close, was locked behind me.

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Cliff Elswick was a young, thin, 130-pound white man when he arrived at the Indiana State Reformatory. Like most new arrivals, he was sent to O-Dorm, to the A and O cell, the Admissions and Orientation Dorm. While sitting in the county jail, Cliff had heard many stories about the Reformatory, about the usual violence, about the psychotic sexual predators. He understood that he fit the profile of prisoners that would be preyed upon by black, aggressive homosexuals. He hoped to blend in, to be insignificant, to be unnoticed. Perhaps he would be able to find some allies before anyone would try him. Still in his teens and without previous prison experience, he felt utterly terrified.

"Hey," a tall, thin black guy called out, "come here." Cliff, having just arrived, not wanting to be rude, approached cautiously.

"What's up?" he asked through the bars.

"You're going to be my new bitch." He said coldly.

Cliff, shocked by what he heard replied, "You've got life fucked up." He said it as mean as he possible could. He did not show weakness, but he was glad that bars were between him and the black man.

"Oh yeah," the black man said, walking away, "We'll see about that."

Other men in the dorm advised Cliff to be vigilant for the next few days. They had heard that the black guy was a known for attacking people he viewed as helpless.

Minutes later, a buzzer sounded and the cell door opened. It was chow time. Cliff decided to wait a minute or so for the bulk of the prisoners to exit the building. With a possible enemy nearby, he didn't want to be caught in a crowd. He waited for the black guy to get up ahead of him before leaving. Then he walked down a short corridor, down a short flight of steps, to the exit door manned by the guard. He was out in open air with several people around him. "I made it," he thought. He felt relieved that nothing had happened.

Cliff didn't see the brick before it slammed into his face. He reeled from the blow, momentarily blinded. Instinctively, he put his hands up in defense and struggled to see through the tears that welled from his eyes. But his assailant was nowhere in sight, neither was the guard. Having been behind the Reformatory's wall for a brief 45 minutes, Cliff did not know where to turn to for help, so he staggered to the chow hall.

His nose was broke, his face was swollen, and blood streamed from his mouth and nostrils. Still, he made it into the crowded chow hall, picked up a tray, and sat down. Not a single

person asked him what had happened or if he was OK. Like most smart prisoners, they all minded their own business. Even the guards went about their business as if nothing was out of the ordinary.

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I quietly walked to my bed, the only one in the room not occupied, and sat down. After a quick scan of the cell, I realized that nearly everyone was asleep. It was a small dorm with a total of eight beds. A large TV was at the far end of the dorm. Closer to the door was a shower and several toilets. Large windows were on the wall away from the hallway, and outside the windows were rows of large bars. The dorm was clean and tidy. I quietly made my bed, put my things in an empty footlocker, and climbed into bed. I kept on my clothing and boots.

It felt good to lay down. When I closed my eyes, I could relax. I guessed that everyone else in the room were also new to the prison. I surmised that they would have no reason to mess with me. If anything, they might have the same concerns as me.

An old guy in the bed next to be began to stir. He coughed, and then moved out from under the blankets. I watched as he sat up facing me. He gave me a quick glance. He didn't seem surprised that the bed next to him was no longer occupied. The old man picked up a can of Bugler tobacco and some rolling papers, rolled a cigarette, and lit it. After a few long drags, he glanced over me. "Do you smoke?" he asked.

"Not really." Actually, I did smoke, but I knew better than to accept gifts from people in prison.

"Do you want one anyway?" When I hesitated, he continued, "Look, I'm not into any funny stuff. I'm just offering you a smoke."

The man seemed sincere. Besides, he was an old man, and I was much larger than him. If it were some kind of trick, I could have defended myself easily against him. "Sure." I rolled my first cigarette.

We talked quietly while we smoked. The old guy seemed friendly. He had been to the Reformatory several times, and he told me that it wasn't that bad. His advice was to mind my own business and to stay out of everyone else's way. A lot of things go on in the Reformatory, and its best not to notice anything. The troublemakers, loudmouths, and bullies usually end up in trouble.

"You look tired," he said. "Why don't you get some rest?"

"You think it's OK?" I asked.

"Don't worry. You'll be OK."

I was exhausted, more tired than I had ever been before. I lay down and willed myself to relax. Still, I paid attention to my environment. I fought to maintain a level of vigilance. For a moment, after my heartbeat slowed and my breathing deepened, I didn't really care that I was in a maximum-security prison. I would deal with the gang bangers, rapists, thieves, and murderers in the morning.

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