
I SWERVE, PURSUED. Fear compels me forward through the milling chaos of prisoners. Recreation has ended. Men exchange last minute good-bye's and fist bumps.

I glance over my shoulder. Still following—gaining.

To my left stretches a row of thirty-eight dimly lighted five-by-seven foot cells. On the right, a wall of paint-chipped bars. The gallery is over a hundred feet long, but barely twelve feet wide. A cramped space for the seventy men to jostle about. The stench of festering winter and unwashed bodies saturates the air. They are too blinded by the mass of bodies to notice anything suspicious. So they search for unusual movements: rapidly parting crowds, a sudden hush of noise in an otherwise constant din, and the obvious, flying fists.

I snatch bits of conversation as I careen past. I have never been more focused in my life. I assess every hand gesture, arm movement and eye glance for indicators of danger.

He's still there. A pressure below my ears speaks of my anxiety, fear.

Chiprock, a 6' 3", 240 pound man has been chasing me since we came in from the yard. He's always there, towering over my 5' 7", 140 pound frame.

I adjust my course to the left, away from a prisoner's flailing arm and

another's hand in pocket. I weave, and weave again. Slowly I'm shunted closer to the cells. Another danger. One could reach out from the darkness to grab and stab. Stay close to the bars, Chiprocks' right handed my mind warns--give him no room.

Making my move, I edge to the right. Too late. From my peripheral I see a flash over my right shoulder. A hand rapidly descends toward my face. My mind slows to a crawl. Men walk in an exaggerated, silent display of movement. Laughs and conversations ribbon out in no-time.

Finally, my muscles respond. I shift my weight to the ball of my right foot. First my head, then a desperately long turn. A strike upon my shoulder. Then, time comes crashing back to speed. Walking backwards now, my pursuer is just six feet away, face twisted menacingly, his two gold fronts gleaming. The prisoners around us part into an impromptu gladiator circle, all while we still move inexorably toward the CO's.

My eyes dart to his hands. A razor blade, blood dripping from its gleaming edge. It doesn't register to check my face for the gaping tear.

This is a common occurrence in prison. Cut from behind, never from the front. Enough to make a gunslinger turn over in his grave with disgust. This is the story of how I learned the art of aggression.

Before I came to Great Meadow (Comstock) I was in Elmira "reception." A stop-over point between County Jail and a Correctional Facility "upstate." My days were spent walking the recreation yard. Several guys and I would talk, tentatively, of the prisons we could be transferred to. Such places as the fabled Attica, said to be the most violent. Cocksakie, a prison where adolescents are sent and rumored to be just as violent as Attica. Comstock,

nicknamed "gladiator school," and many other prisons, shrouded in second-hand information. I was an adolescent then, just seventeen years old, and knew deep down which places I feared to go.

Up to this point of my incarceration I hoped prison would be like reception. Confined movement, twenty hour lock-downs, and relative stability in the daily routine. Every time I stepped out of my cell, not sure of what violence the day might bring, I was scared and nervous. Yet, by some freakish streak of luck, there was not one fight during my time in reception. Even with the fear and uncertainty of what prison I'd be transferred to, I blocked most of the feelings out. I lived each day as if transfer would never come—playing basketball, cards, and writing letters to my family.

I wasn't the praying type, but I prayed every day to be sent to a "safe" prison, if such a place existed. In reception you have no choice where you go. When you're told to go, you go, no questions asked.

The transfer day eventually arrived, snapping me back to reality and sending a chill of fear over my skin. After packing my scant belongings into a burlap sack, shackled and hand-cuffed, I still did not know where I was heading. Only on the bus did the CO inform us of our destination. Gladiator School. During the seven-hour drive my mind began inventing the worst scenario possible. I imagined mayhem: stabbing, cutting, rape, extortion. I was ignorant and in for a reeducation into the "upside-down kingdom."

The first week in Comstock, while waiting in line to go to dinner, I saw a prisoner stabbed four times, his lung punctured twice. The next day in the yard, while sitting on the concrete bleachers, a guy came and sat near me. At first I didn't notice anything amiss, until he turned his head. From temple to lips, a jagged rip spewed blood down his neck and shirt; he was cut with a can lid. I was astounded by how an innocuous item, such as a can lid, could cause

so much damage. I got up and walked away. The first lesson I learned about prison is mind your own business. I'll never forget the looks of horrified panic on those men's face.

It was there on the bleachers that I realized how much I didn't know and had to learn fast if I wanted to survive, uncut and without holes in my lungs.

So there I was, fresh upstate, at an age when the average boy [just] gets his driver's license, begins to date seriously, and is planning for college. I would be earning a Master's in Prison Survival: etiquette, weapon smithing and smuggling, group dynamics, armory, fear and aggression. All of which trumped everything I had come to know about prison from TV, movies, and reception rumors.

For instance, gate etiquette. Yelling on the gate of your cell is just like shouting in the school yard--two boys taunting each other while a jeering crowd circles. The tiers in Comstock are open from the first floor to the fourth. On the first floor (the flats), I can call up to the fourth and be heard clearly. So when a prisoner is talking on the gate, everyone can hear what's said. In most cases this is not a good thing.

A couple days ago two guys from the floor above me were arguing. Back and forth they traded insults, punctuated by "Suck my dick," and "You's a bitch." No one jeered, silence spoke louder. For an hour and a half this went on, until both became hoarse. They moved on to blasting tape players and violent hip-hop lyrics. Later that day, one of the men ended up with a knife in his neck. That's the gate. A stage, and once you put it out there, there's no getting it back.

I've lived on this tier for six months and because of my location and age, I have formed a tight friendship with several of the men who live around me. Goldie, an African-American named after a pimp, locks on my right side.

He's a few years older than me and also from Rochester. We hit it off right from the start.

The first time I saw Goldie was when we were going to lunch. Exiting his cell, the 6' 2" man ducked so as not to hit his head on the door frame. Wearing glasses, he greeted me with his ubiquitous smile and a head nod.

"What chu plan on doin' tonight?" said Goldie.

"Probably call home, or some shit," I responded. "Why, what you gonna do?"

"Hit the weights, you heard. You?"

"If I got time." Thinking of something to occupy myself with until recreation, "Ay yo, Goldie, got somethin' I can check out?"--the something is pornography.

"Naw. All mine's out."

"Does Carlos got?" Carlos is another guy close to my age who I hang-out with playing handball, dominoes, and cooking meals.

"Naw. But Chiprock does, you heard."

Raising my voice from the gate, I called down the nine cells, "Chiprock." A couple seconds passed.

"Yo yo yo, what up son?" said Chiprock.

"Got somein' I can check out?" I said.

"What you want?"

He must have the mother-load of stashes, "Don't really matter--got some Tabitha?"

"A'ight. What you got?" he shouted back.

Confused by his question, "Nottin' right now."

"Well I ain't got unless you got somein' for me, you heard. I don't let my shit out like that."

"Damn man, can't get nothin'?" I responded with disappointment.

"What I just said? Give me somein' and I give you somein'."

Giving up: "Yea a'ight. I don' wanna talk. Goldie, see you when we come out. Gonna do some reading," I said.

Turning to my locker, from a stack of magazines I picked up a Scientific American, laid down, and waited three hours for recreation.

After calling home and having my collect call refused, I walked the yard with Toño. Of all the guys that lock near me, Toño is the oldest. A 5' 3", Puerto Rican, with a pony tail. He wobbles slightly side to side when he walks, as if his feet constantly hurt; but I'd never tell him that to his face. After being around him a few weeks, observing him interact with others, I noticed how respected he was. Toño was the first person I began to trust. Much of our time walking the yard was spent enlightening me to the ways of prison. I asked questions and he gave me answers, honest answers. He explained the gangs, CO's, gambling, drug use, how to sharpen metal into wicked knives. . . everything I wanted and needed to know.

The yard in Comstock is often referred to as the "parking lot." A black-topped space large enough to hold three football fields. The concrete gray wall surrounding the prison is part of the yard. Stretching along two sides are courts for playing handball. There are three TV's, a baseball diamond, volleyball court, two basketball courts, a soccer field, cement bleachers, twenty-five phones, steel tables scattered around, and plenty of walking space.

It must have been the second or third week into the snowfall of winter when I noticed something peculiar. The snow remained pristine white. Because there were no exhaust fumes, mud and other such muck, the snow remained white.

Always white. A stark contrast to the clothing the prisoners wore. Brown, burgundy, green and yellow jump-suits appeared drab in the snow. It's an eerie sight.

Even with winter in full swing there were plenty of men outside. Close to 350 prisoners walked the compacted snow trails crisscrossing the yard. Occasionally someone would slip on a patch of ice. Some found their balance, others fell hard.

As we walked I constantly surveyed groups of men. Most hung out in their staked out territory: the Latin Kings, Bloods, Crips, Five Percenters, Ñetas, Christians, Muslims. . . everyone had a place.

Toño and I approached the "hole." The spot farthest from the officers' station one can get. A choice place for men to fight, get their "shit off, gun-to-gun," that is, knife-to-knife.

When Toño and I were as close as the snow trodden path allowed, I saw Chiprock and fifteen or so men. Talking, huddled in a tight circle. Chiprock glanced up as we passed.

I turned to Toño, "Yo, Chiprock's bugged out, you heard," then proceeded to tell him about our earlier conversation.

"Word to mother son, dat's the way he is. Keep people from keeping his shit, jackin' pages, oíste," said Toño.

"Yea, I hear you."

As we reached the side of the yard opposite the hole, my neighbor Goldie approached, "Yo dude, I need to holla at you."

"Go 'head," I said.

"Over here," he indicated a patch of vacant snow. "Watch you back. Word is Chiprock gonna try cut you."

"What! Man you trippin'. What the hell for?" I struggled to bury the

panic in my voice.

"Remember when you asked to see some books? And you said, 'I don't wann talk,'" he shook his head, shrugged his shoulders. "He got offended."

"When did you hear this?" Toño asked.

Goldie thumbed over his shoulder to the Rochester area of the yard, "My peoples' told me."

"That's the dumbist shit I ever heard. Just for sayin' that?"

Goldie raised a fist, "Man, those fightin' words, you heard. Specially on the gate. His homez might be ampin' him to do it, that's the word." He looked around cautiously, "You ain't heard it from me, you heard."

I clapped Goldie on the shoulder, "A'ight, good lookin' for the heads up."

As Goldie walked away I turned to Toño, "Can you believe that?"

"Chiprock's got a complex, oíste. And he got position wit' Bloods, reputation, face, all dat shit." He nodded toward a neutral place by the wall. "Let's play the wall and wait for yard close. Too cramped to be walkin' 'round this bitch."

Great, I thought. Not only is it my first prison beef, it was with a Blood; one of the nation's most violent gangs. This situation had gone from bad to seriously messed up.

Exasperated, Toño said, "It's the gate dude. Chu gotta watch what you be sayin', peoples' listin' all the time." He went quiet for a moment.

As we stood by the cold gray wall, stomping our feet, fighting old~~man~~ winter from biting our toes, I watched the yard. Men walked in protective groups of threes and fours. Other prisoners stood watching a volleyball game, Buffalo vs. Brooklyn. Bright flood-lights spaced around the yard and wall cast long shadows that followed the men at their heels. The night sky a dark gray,

starless from the prison's many bright lights. And as each group passed by, I imagined eyes buried in winter hoods watching me. Speculating, weighing.

Toño said, "Think he's gonna try cut chu on the flats, oíste. So when we line up I be behind you. Keep movin' don't stop."

"I got it. Move, get to the cell, then tomorrow see what's up."

I hoped I sounded sure, unafraid. I was petrified.

A CO called over the PA system, yard closed, and instructed everyone to line up by blocks. Toño and I walked over to A-Block's designated area.

I made sure to look out for Chiprock. I spotted him, twenty feet behind me. Toño tapped me on the shoulder, "Remember, move."

My heart began to race when we were ordered to return to our cells. With dry mouth, jittery hands and numbed feet, I swerved through the line closer to the front. Every so often I glanced over my shoulder checking Chiprock's progress.

Still there.

The line of prisoners entered through a side door next to the mess~~h~~all, then turned down the main corridor. Evenly spaced along its length are security cameras. I wonder what the CO saw at that moment.

I checked over my shoulder. Is he gaining? My mouth dry, saliva thick as cotton.

When we reached the flats, men broke from formation and scattered about while walking the narrow tier. I picked up speed, focused and occasionally bumped a prisoner as I passed, leaving him with a pardon and excuse me.

I looked. Fifteen feet away now-gotta keep moving.

So this is how I find myself on the flats, face-off with Chiprock, his hand holding a razor, blood dripping from its edge. With a ringing in my ears,

through a red haze of mounting rage, I peer into Chiprock's eyes and release the animal within me. I look at Toño: "Fuck it, let's get 'em."

I move toward Chiprock. But to my astonishment he hands off the razor to Carlos, then melts into the crowd. Two Blood cronies take point, preventing me from getting to Chiprock.

"Hey, keep it movin'," a CO yells.

The circle breaks up and we move on again, as if nothing happened. That's when it occurs to me to check my face. With trembling hand, I touch my cheek, nothing. I rub the rest of my face, expel a sigh of relief, nothing. Did he cut himself when he hit my shoulder? A minute later, I'm in my cell.

I don't pace, or sit; just stand at my gate fuming. I can't believe this mother-fucker tried to cut me. I want to get him, get a knife, forget a razor, and put a hole or two in his lungs.

I'm not sure how much time passes. The only stimuli registering in my mind are the sounds of men in their cells shuffling about and the aroma of cooking late-night meals of fish and meet.

Toño calls, "Se," a shortened form of my name.

The suddenness of his voice causes me to flinch, "Yo." My hearing so acute it's as if he's in my cell, next to me.

A green knit hat lands in front of my cell with a thunk. I snatch it up, knowing exactly what it is. A knife. It took me six long hours in my cell, grinding on the concrete floor, to hone the double edges. Toño and I rotated nights holding it so there was a better chance that the CO's won't find it.

Untying the string holding the open end closed, reaching inside, I grasp the warm steel blade; the hat falls to the floor. Fluorescent light from the tier gleams along its edges from tip to hilt. The knife is eleven inches of chrome-plated steel.

Bright red electrical tape served as a grip, complete with a strap to fit around the wrist. That was Toño's idea: "There lot of blood when you stab someone. You fucked if you drop it and you enemy get it and stab you."

Made sense to me.

I recall a scene from a prison movie where the two would be combatants passed the night doing push-ups and sit-ups. The next day they fought in the prison chapel, with knives duct-taped to their hands.

I'm not calm, nor panicking, merely quiet. This situation has come to a place of no return. What can I do? There's only one choice, fight Chiprock. Carefully placing the knife under my pillow; I move on to cook a meal of rice and beans. It's amazing I have any appetite at all.

With the lid from a can of beans, I chop onions, garlic, and green-peppers. An exercise in distraction. But still, fear and anticipation worries my mind. By two forty in the morning, my body is wracked with fatigue; I fall into a restless sleep. Under the pillow lies the first shank I've ever made.

I wake not in a gentle rousing, but startled from a nightmare I can barely recall. The lingering memory is of shouting on the fringes of dream and wakefulness--I hope it was only in my dreams. My eyes open; steel bars and concrete walls greet me. I hate this stinking place.

By the light of a gray dawn I retrieve a small wash-bucket, filling it halfway with winter-cold water, drop in a heating coil and wait. The morning is silent. An occasional flush of a toilet scatters the stillness. Blazing steam pipes sap moisture from the air and wreak havoc on my nose. It is dry and raw and oozes blood. As a child I can remember being plagued by bloody noses, even once having to be taken to the hospital for hemorrhaging.

After the bleeding stops, I make my bed, straighten the cell and wash up with warm water. Boiling water in a small hot-pot, I nurse a cup of instant coffee. I stare at the pillow, mindful of what lay beneath it. With a hand-held mirror I peer down the gallery, checking for CO's, though there's still thirty minutes till the count. I have program today and the thought of waiting until two thirty for my confrontation with Chiprock unnerves me.

I reach beneath the pillow with a shaky hand and grasp the blade. As my fingers meet metal a vision emerges of thrusting wildly, recklessly, through a world of red, bloody red--liquid fire splashing the pristine snow beneath my feet. I release the blade like a hot iron, unable to reconcile necessity with fear and doubt. I sit on the edge of the bed, sipping coffee, staring at the stack of magazines, desperately trying to figure a way around this insanity but coming up with nothing.

A conversation Toño and I had a few months ago comes to mind.

"Chu know what a vest is?" said Toño.

"What, like a bullet proof vest?" I said.

"Sí. You can make one. Get magacines and tape dem 'round you chest, stomach and back." He bangs a fist along his torso, "That way it harder to stick you, oíste."

I grab some magazines and line the elastic waistband of my pants; testing the range of motion and bulkiness beneath the hooded sweatshirt. I wonder if I can pass the numerous checkpoints to get to program. Hastily pulling out the magazines, tearing covers, I put them back. I can't do it. Sure I can pass the CO's, but it feels like a silent affirmation, acceptance of the dark road I'll have to travel. The idea of having to stab Chiprock leaves me despondent.

Sitting on my bed, the only sound I hear is the thundering of my heart. As the blood courses through my veins, doubt races through my mind. The walls

and bars close in around me. I can't take this silence anymore and reach for my favorite Nine Inch Nails tape, "Broken," then wait ten minutes till the count.

Just before the doors open for breakfast, I check the blade again, secured in a cardboard sheaf tied to my left forearm. Two escort officers pass my cell heading to the back of the gallery, wave all ready, and the doors open. Extending my neck, I peer to my right towards Chiprock's cell to see if he's going to breakfast. I don't want him to catch me off guard. I don't see him. To my left Toño steps out nonchalantly, dressed in a brown hoodie and green army jacket, and greets me with a smile. "You got it?"

"Yea," patting my forearm.

"Good, I see you in la yarda, meet at volleyball court."

Toño and I line up with the other prisoners for breakfast. I feel a looming danger. Recalling my first few weeks here—the prisoner who was stabbed in the lung twice, the guy cut with a can lid—I see enemies in the faces I examine as we wait. My unease mounts with each passing second. As we walk to the messhall, I keep an eye out for metal-detector checks. The CO's try to keep the prisoners off guard by randomly administering a check. The CO's try to keep the prisoners off guard by randomly administering a check just before entering the messhall and yard. Today I pass by unexamined, still in possession of my gun.

Entering the messhall the noise and my paranoia picks up considerably. Glances from men seem to say good luck, hold your head, or, you're going down. In this place news travels fast.

After breakfast I exit the building into the cold winter wind. Frigid air numbs my lips and sets fire to my lungs. The sky is azure and a light breeze stirs the snow. As I walk to the vocational buildings, I check the men around

me. When none are looking I pull the blade and stash it in a snowbank. I can't take it with me to welding. Prior to leaving, all the prisoners are sent through a metal-detector.

For six and a half hours I mindlessly work my projects. Welding pieces of metal together, not caring how well the beads are placed. Tension builds, fear slowly takes over, and that old mechanism, fight or flight, wants to kick in. Where can I run to? I could tell the CO's about Chiprock, but I'd have to sign into Protective Custody (PC) and that would make me a rat. Something like that never leaves a man. No matter what prison you transfer to, or how many years pass by—you'll always be remembered as a rat. Even though prisoners cannot write prison to prison, there is a way around it. No matter where I went, within a week of arrival a letter would be sent around the prison, telling of my cowardice. I have to face this situation, no matter the outcome. For the rest of the day the other guys in welding give me space. Alone with my thoughts, I recall going to trial and worry about the verdict. This waiting is worse.

Two thirty arrives. Shivering in the icy wind, I stand under a leafless tree in a small patch of snow-covered grass. It is not the cold that has me shaking. I'm hopped on adrenaline. The CO calls recreation and I walk back along the frozen sidewalk. Not caring who sees me, I quickly find the knife stashed in the snowbank. When I grab the blade it feels warm and I wonder if that's possible after all this time lying in the snow.

As I enter the building, eight CO's line my right and Toño's instructions come to mind. Don't look at them, walk like you're supposed to be here, as if you run this place, but never look at them. Over and over I repeat his advice and pass by, like I'm supposed to be there, it's perfectly natural to have a chrome-plated knife tied to my forearm. They don't give me a second glance.

I realize this is my way out. All I have to do is look nervous, make eye contact, anything to draw attention and I won't have to worry about Chiprock. But I can't do it. All I keep thinking is how could I live the next twenty-six years behind the wall with that following me around? Guys have done just that, it's called "pulling a stunt." Instead of carrying out a beef, guys conveniently get caught by COs to avoid facing an enemy. By the time their disciplinary sanctions are up, the situation has cooled off.

Exiting the yard door I head straight toward the volleyball court. The sun reflects glaringly off the white snow. As my eyes sweep the yard I'm taken back by the number of men. There must be four hundred. I wonder if they all came out to watch the spectacle. There is a cruel fascination in watching a prison beef transpire, like driving by a car wreck. You don't want to look but can't avert your eyes. Toño and a group of guys are huddled in a circle. They look up as I approach. Some slip away.

"Oye, it all good?" says Toño.

"All good. What up wit' Chiprock?"

"Well. I talk wit' him and leader of Bloods." He nods in the direction of the hole. "Says he leave you alone, but you gotta pay 'em hundred dollars a month."

"Get the fuck outta here, you serious?" The idea of paying him anything offends me and in that moment anger kicks in, the perfect counter for fear. "I ain't payin' shit."

"I know that, an' wouldn't let chu, oíste. How you live if you did." With hands in pockets he shrugs his shoulders, "What chu wanna' do?" The look in his eyes and tone of voice says it all--there is no choice.

I look around at the men assembled on the volleyball court. They watch, weighing, examining me. I finally realize what this is really about. I'm new

and they don't know what I'll do. So they maintain a safe distance. I'm sure some want to help, but if I won't fight my own battles, stand up for my respect, I'd be a liability to their reputations.

"What you thinkin'?" says Toño.

"You know. Go tell 'em to meet me in the hole."

Is that satisfaction I see in his eyes?

As Toño walks to the hole I notice two groups of Puerto Ricans shadowing him a short distance away, like an army force securing the perimeter. Is that posturing, or is Toño's safety threatened as well? I glance around the area and notice other groups of Latinos gathered. Some wearing the yellow hoodies of the Latin King gang. While others are Ñetas, and neutrals, those not affiliated with any of the gangs. What's their interest in this fight?

While I wait for Toño to return, I check the tension of the yard. It is visible. Too many men are playing the wall. Cliques are gathered in their designated turfs; the Rochester crew has gathered to see what will happen to one of their own. The controlled noise suggests anticipation. That's when I notice something else--where are the ∞'s? They usually walk the yard in groups of threes, but I don't see them. I spot them gathered at the entrance of the tower. Twelve guards, gloved and gripping their batons, watching the yard. They feel it too. Readiness, to move suddenly and violently.

After a ten-minute wait, Toño returns. "He say okay, meet at the hole." He grabs my arm, looks me in the eye with a firm resolve: "Keep the wrap 'round you wrist. Stab up to his chest or face. He got lot of clothes on. But if he don' come back in cinco minutos come back." That last part is strange, but I don't say anything about it.

"Okay," is all I can muster. Gripping the blade in my army coat pocket, I make my last walk to the hole--the farthest spot from the tower. I pick out a

place undisturbed by tracks, the snow almost knee deep fills my boots. I am hot, sweating, oblivious to the cold. When I reach the wall, I lean up against it, right foot propped up, and wait for Chiprock.

In this desperate moment a thought occurs to me. I should be home, not in prison. Not in this crazy place. I should be playing on my ice-hockey team, at prom with my girlfriend, having fun with friends. I may not live past seventeen. I could die, today, in this yard. The heart break would surely destroy my aunt. She's barely holding on now.

Five minutes pass. I don't see Chiprock anywhere. Every eye in the yard is trained on me, waiting, anticipating a gladiatorial event. From deep within I muster up courage, or insanity, and wait an extra five minutes.

When I look over in Toño's direction, he flags me to come back. I reach him and he pulls me aside, "I'll go see what up, oiste." He walks to the assembled Bloods. In the group I spot Chiprock dressed in a red hoodie, green army coat and red sweat-pants—he doesn't look my way. After a few minutes Tono returns.

"Dis mother-fucker's a cower. Chu know he go home in two weeks? He don' wanna fight chu." He laughs, "Said it no fair cuz you too small. Hay, I told you come back in five minutes."

"I heard you, but I felt like waiting."

"Chu crazy, but that was good, it sho cajones, you got cajones. I think it scare him a little," he laughs again. "Okay. Bloods say you gotta fight one they people—"

Shaking my head, on the verge of growling, "Hold on. My beefs wit' him. Fuck these dudes gotta do wit' it?"

"I know, but dis the way is." Hands and shoulders shrug all in one motion, as if to say what can you do?

"This is crazy." But I have committed myself. My anger drives me further down this rabbit hole. I need to send a message--violent as possible--that I won't be anyone's victim. I have to prove that in this upside-down kingdom I can get just as crazy as the next guy. "Fine, who?" I ask Toño.

"Day say a guy in a purple hoodie will come. Remember everythin' I say," his eyes gleaming.

For the second time I make my way to the hole. A little calmer, my heart beats a little slower, as if soothed by necessity and anger. I lean up against the wall and wait: a posture of violence in check. Men gather in their areas, the guards by the tower. To my left I see a purple hoodie approach. I will do this. Then three more men in purple hoodies join him. My body stiffens. I hear a grinding in the distance and realize it's my teeth. Slowly I unclench my jaw and tighten the grip upon my knife. I'm not going to live past the next few minutes, I have never been more sure of anything. I should have known it wouldn't be a fair fight.

As the purple hoodies approach they look in my direction, glaring and eyeballing me. But they continue on past, around a bend and head back to the group of Bloods. Confused, I look over at Toño. He shrugs his shoulders. He's just as confused. As the purple hoodies join the group of Bloods I check my watch--five minutes. I decide to leave, not wanting to press my good fortune. I don't know what happened and I don't really care. I thank God, the gods, and all the sacred beings in the universe.

Walking up to Toño, I catch myself from slipping of a patch of ice, "What the hell happened?"

"Yo no se, but I find out." He wobbles over to the group of Bloods. His waving hands and stance tell me he's not happy. After about ten minutes he returns.

"Beef's off. You did it, faced em, an' he wan' no problemas. Oh yea," he laughs, amused, "He cut he's thumb last night when he try cut you."

I nod my head. I feel the pent up anger, fear, and anticipation straining for release. Outwardly, for those who are watching me, I act as if it doesn't matter that the beef is off. Inside I feel like Rocky jumping up and down with both fists in the air after he ascended the steps of Liberty Hall.

Toño continues, "But don' sleep 'round Chiprock. They could be tryin' to fool you in believin' all's good."

"Yea, I know. Rockin' me to sleep and get me when I ain't lookin'."

"Yo, po-po commin'," someone says.

A group of COs are heading in our direction. Toño reaches his hand out to me, "Dame esa pistola."

I pass him the knife and he passes it off to another Puerto Rican who sticks it into a nearby snowbank.

"Everyone stay where you are," one of the guards shouts, while another points to me: "You, get on the ground now, asshole!"

Quickly I lie on the ground while four COs approach with handcuffs. The others sift through the snowbanks. A warm blanket of relief envelops me. I have survived, that's all that matters. I stood up for my respect.

The COs found the knife and I was "keep-locked," confined to my cell pending a disciplinary hearing. Charged with passing a weapon, I escaped a possession charge because I wasn't the last person to have it. I received sixty days keep-lock, the regular time for first possession. It was a small price to for my respect from the other prisoners.

Before I was released from keep-lock, Toño had a beef with another Blood on the gallery. On his way to breakfast he stabbed the guy in the face and

neck with two pens.

Goldie got into an argument in the yard over a basketball game. In classic prison style he got cut from behind. It would be twelve years before I saw him again. Sadly he passed away a month ago.

Chiprock pulled a stunt and received three months keep-lock. He did it so he wouldn't have to leave his cell before going home.

Over the next year and a half I had many more situations. The last earned me a ten month keep-lock for weapon possession. Transferred again, I was sent to Attica. On the bus ride my mind reinvented the mayhem: stabbing, cutting, extortion. A few weeks prior to my arrival a prisoner was stabbed to death in a stair-well--a portentous note to arrive on.

Experiencing the effects of social deprivation, I emerged from keep-lock emotionally and psychologically shut down. Waiting all those months, day after day for release back into general population created an irrational fear of violence lurking around every corner. I expected all out war. However, the COs run Attica with an iron fist. More confined and controlled, there is the usual stabbing and cutting, but it's not as frequent. Reputation has a way of growing larger than life.

I never expected to see anyone from Great Meadow again. Prison is like that. You meet guys, make friendships, or enemies, but in the end everyone either goes home, dies, or transfers out to another prison.

I was surprised to see Toño in the yard one day, walking toward me with that wobbling gait of his. It was good to see a familiar face, but a cloud of violence followed him and I worried about its shadow. Toño and I caught up. He told me about Chiprock: two weeks after his release he was gunned down and killed.

Toño didn't last long here at Attica. An enemy from his past caught up

with him. While he was at lunch, his cell was set on fire. Prison security placed him in Involuntary Protective Custody. I haven't seen him since.

With the constant problems I was having with prisoners and COs, I knew two things with certainty: one, I would not survive another extended keep-lock; and two, by the law of averages, it was only a matter of time before I killed a prisoner--or was killed. A grim revelation.

Even understanding that, I failed to notice the cloud of violence I had gathered over my head--until it rained down upon me. After getting into an argument with another prisoner, he attempted to stab me in a shower stall. Somehow I managed to escape unscathed and the COs none the wiser. Thankfully several influential prisoners mediated the beef. One happened to be a Blood--go figure. That was the last straw. I had enough of constantly looking over my shoulder for enemies, new and old.

Since this last incident I have been--to use a phrase from my peers--on some Chuck shill out shit, staying out of fights. Still, I know I'm never far from the next beef, and the descent into savagery is swift.