

### "HEART CHECK"

In 1996, I was sent to the Terrel unit in Livingston, Texas, 14 hours and worlds away from my home and family in the mountains of New Mexico. At that time, the Terrel Unit was one of, if not THE, worst of the "gladiator farms" in the state. Nicknamed "Terrible Terrel" and "The TerrelDome", it was filled with young inmates convicted of violent crimes and/or with assaultive records within the prison system itself. I was 130 pounds, 19-years old, and fresh-faced with no prison ink on my skinny arms as I stood before the Unit Classification Committee (UCC) of one of the most dangerous maximum-security prisons in Texas - the first prison I had ever been condemned to call home. The UCC consists of three prison officials - a unit warden or assistant warden, a ranking correctional officer, and the classification officer. This committee decides the fate of incoming inmates, "new boots", regarding housing and job assignments and such.

I had heard the horror stories about the "Terrible Terrel" unit, so I was only moderately surprised when the assistant warden coldly told me, "Look, you have a life sentence. I have enough punks and hoes on my unit. You get out there and you fight."

Shortly thereafter, I was carrying my prison-issued mattress and linens to the building I had been assigned to. It felt surreal, like a nightmare come to life, as inmates and guards I passed along the way looked me up and down and asked me if I was going to "stay down". (I had been told that "staying down" meant that you would stand up for yourself and fight to keep from being punked out by the other inmates.) That walk took about ten minutes that felt like ten years, yet as I approached the cellblock I had been assigned to and met the evaluating and predatory stares of a dayroom full of the convicts I would be living with for the foreseeable future, I found myself wishing that the walk had never ended. I knew what lay ahead...

In those days, it was a given that any non-gang-related new boot would undergo a "heart check" upon arrival at a new unit, especially the white inmates who are by far the minority in this environment. Like a severe hazing ritual with dire consequences for any who fail to pass, a heart check could mean being jumped by several inmates at once or fighting a procession of inmates one after another in a practice called "backdooring". In either case, after being beaten to the ground, the new boot would be given the opportunity to get back up and either give up or keep fighting. Giving up meant complete ostracization by the other inmates, being left to the wolves and being forced to pay for protection or worse, and resulted in one becoming a prison pariah. Staying down and continuing to fight meant that you would be accepted by and shown respect from the other inmates.

other inmates. In such an environment, this could often mean the difference in life or death or, at best, the difference in life and life in hell.

Knowing that such a heart check lay in store for me, I dreaded walking on to that block. When I did, it was like walking into a wolves' den. I could feel the eyes boring into me, hear the whispers, and feel the tension like electricity in the air as I crossed that dayroom to place my mattress and property in my cell. When I stepped back into the dayroom, a tall redheaded guy covered in tattoos approached and motioned for me to join him in the corner. He introduced himself as "Red", asked me where I had come from, and after establishing that I was in fact a new boot and not affiliated with a gang, he explained to me that I was going to have to "fade a heart check". I would have to fight six inmates, three blacks followed by three hispanics back-to-back. My heart was racing and my mouth was dry as I scanned the faces in the dayroom, wondering who was going to start it. I didn't have to wait long.

Shortly, a stocky black guy, also covered in tattoos, approached and asked Red if I was one of his "homeboys". When Red told him that I was not, the black guy who I would later learn went by the moniker "Jawbreaker" shifted his attention to me. "What's up? You gonna stay down?" The "Yes" had barely left my lips before he had punched me in the face, knocking me on my ass. By the time my eyes had cleared a bit and I had regained my feet, he was in one of the dayroom blindspots, waiting on me. I pulled my bloody t-shirt off and went to fight him. I don't remember much, but after he had dropped me for the 3rd time, asking me each time if I was going to give up, he said he was done. "I'm not gonna kill this dude. He's not quitting."

I was pretty bloodied by then so Red handed me my t-shirt, telling me to catch my breath and clean my face in the shower stall. I ran water over my face, wincing ~~at~~ the sting of it on the splits and scrapes, and had enough time to drink a few gulps of water before my next challenger called me out. And so it went until I had fought my 6th and final fight of the day, whereupon I was declared to have "stayed down".

Later that afternoon, as I walked past one of the guards who had asked me earlier in the day whether I was going to stay down or not, he asked me what ~~had~~ happened as I resembled the elephant man by then. I shrugged and replied that I had fallen in the shower. With a knowing grin, he asked me if I'd gotten back up. I replied "Of course." to which he nodded and said, "Good."

As I said, these heart checks were a given in those days. Believe it or not, I was one of the lucky ones. Many people were hospitalized and some were even killed when there was noone like Red around to intervene and keep things ~~from~~ going too far. Often, the intent was to "break" a new boot more than anything else and those situations always had the potential to end tragically.

Twenty years later, such heart checks are all but non-existent. They are no longer as openly accepted by prison officials, so the few that do occur are not anywhere as severe as they were in the past as people have to try to get away with and hide any fighting that occurs now. I envy the new boots who enter the system in this less violent era. Most don't know what they are missing and I am glad for them.

Yet, there are times in which I am almost thankful for the trial by fire that I endured when I first entered this madhouse. I found a level of courage and a strength I didn't know I possessed and those things have helped me through the darkest of times over this past two decades. When this life sentence, the separation from my home and loved ones, some fresh injustice inflicted by prison officials, or any of the myriad daily heartaches and stresses of prison life threaten to overwhelm me, I look back and remember the physical and mental trials I overcame when I was thrown into this hostile alien environment. I remind myself that this, whatever it may be, is nothing in comparison. And I dig deep, check my heart, and I drive on.

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