

First Day Out
by Deyon A. Neal

They feared I would be a problem. It took them three days to actually follow through with the decision. Whenever they brought a convict an army-green duffle bag and told him to pack up, he left in a few hours tops. I had seen hundreds of guys released from administrative segregation at Baraga Max (henceforth, seg') and I'd never seen the staff tell any of them that their Friday release had been rescheduled until the following Monday morning.

The radio in my head got loud with persistent ringing that would last the whole weekend; high frequencies of mixed emotions chiming in visceral language only God understood, blasting the airwaves of my head-space. My mind began to play the translation—the same old "game" song that I had attuned it to for years, whenever they messed over me behind a locked cell door: they're doing this on purpose; they're trying to bug me out then use my emotional outburst against me to justify keeping me longer; this is some cruel psychological joke; ol' spiteful people... All the stories I heard about how much better Marquette Branch was and how the staff there would've let me out years ago got a few spins on the playlist as well, followed by a few doubtful I-knew-it-was-too-good-to-be-trues. They weren't just playing with my hope but, most troubling for someone who felt powerless and crushed by the system, they were over-exercising their power.

I kept my stuff packed over the weekend. Two days and a wake-up, that's all. Don't even think about it. Monday morning came and went. It took for me to ask if they had cancelled again before a guard finally came and opened my door.

Okay, now I'm gone. I contained my smile while carrying my bag out. Full of books, stacks of law work, and miscellaneous papers, it would've been lighter with a dead body in it, but I lifted it with happy strength. The guard grabbed it before I sat it down in the hallway like I wasn't coming with it.

"Gotta shake your property down first," he said, his face displaying more caution than satisfaction.

Back in the cell I went, sighing. He closed my electronic door with a key then dragged my bag up the rock. I cursed his black and gray uniform as he disappeared from my window glass, "Ol' cowards, I should come out and break one of their faces on the strength of that alone!" They were definitely messing with me now. I had never seen them pull anyone's property out first for a search before. Even if it was a rule, no one enforced it.

I was a special case. I had exercised my dark-chocolate flesh into some grotesque, maniac-mutation. My Black consciousness they perceived as radical militance. My quietness had by then accumulated into pages of logged antisocial behavior, and my violent history remained my cover. This closed book they hated reading, so they messed over me for years—everyday. Some of the cruelest treatment you could receive from human beings, forever branded on the surface of my Black consciousness. Now they were afraid: make sure he don't leave with any knives. I couldn't blame them. If I had done some of the things they had done to me—to my food, to my mind and heart—I would've been afraid too. They kept my property down there for another three hours. Shifts changed. I asked again about an hour

into the afternoon shift. It took about twenty more minutes then another guard finally came and opened the door.

I stepped out of my seg' cell and walked up the rock with uncuffed hands for the first time in seven and a half years. The convicts I bid farewells to watched from behind their locked doors. My property bag awaited me downstairs on base, near a dolly, repacked and resealed. ARUS Burke met me there with Re-Integration Yard papers to sign, another sign that they really didn't want to release me.

"I knew it was something to it," I said, while managing a strained smile.

"That's the way it goes until they get bed space," he replied from his nasal passage as always. Uncertainty rode his tone. The dim ceiling light cast a blear reflection on his shiny bald head. His reptilian-looking eyes were slits beneath his wire-frame glasses. Sure, he was a little weasel on a constant power-trip, a very short man who had probably been bullied throughout school and now sought revenge through repressive governance over the bad guys, but at least he'd given me a shot. The other counselors had passed the buck without reason for calendars, even the last five that I spent misconduct free. He went on while assessing my face for an emotional response. "You'll probably do a couple weeks down there before they put you somewhere."

His pee felt nothing like rain on my head. Four cells were just open in 7-Block (general population) the previous Friday; they cancelled my release for someone else's. Meanwhile, Re-Integration Yard was a lighter form of seg'. You came out of your cell for recreation yard and showers only with RI-Yard prisoners and you were confined to one wing in the unit. You weren't allowed to go on any callouts—your law library books, quartermaster clothing exchanges, and catalog orders were all brought to you behind a locked cell door. Any required movement around the compound, like for medical care or dental callouts, required a guard escort. It was initially designed for guys who'd been in long-term seg' like me, to "adjust" and "gradually reintegrate" back into general population, but for administration it had become more of a means of monitoring assaultive convicts.

For convicts, it became known as the protective custody rock. Many guys signed the waiver to duck enemies that they made in the hole. Even those who weren't afraid to face what awaited them in GP often carried the stigma of suspicion. I didn't want to sign it, but my only option was to go back upstairs to my holecell and wait another year just to be offered the same paper again—right, literally trapped between a protection rock and a hard place. I signed the waiver.

"Neal, control your temper," Burke warned. I almost took the exhortation in his tone for genuine concern. "I'm telling you, if you come back, especially for what you were in here for, we'll never let you out again. You're gonna do the rest of your bit in the hole."

"Alright."

He didn't have to convince me. Baraga had always been a lay-down joint with more holes (Blocks 1-4) than GP units (Blocks 5-7). My years there had been spread out between all but one of them: three years in 4-Block, two years plus in 3-Block, two more in 1-Block. They had demonstrated for years that there was more than enough seg' room for guys like me.

I pushed my property out of 1-Block and the escorting guard followed me. The warm October afternoon felt more like May; my orange athletic

shorts and blue cloth seg'-shoes were quite suitable. My mind began to play tricks on me. The same air that I had breathed for years in the seg' recreation cages behind the unit now felt different in my lungs—lighter GP air. I could finally believe it then: No more banging on my door every thirty minutes with those metal count prods (if they didn't like you, they made you notice them), no more cuff-games on the way to and from yard and showers, no more worrying about catching petty tickets (that could set my release back six to twelve months) just for covering my window during bowel movements, no more guards handling my food. I had finally made it out! The guard broke my thoughts.

"You know he had a reason to worry, right? You sent a staff member to the hospital. Those kind of assaults can't be tolerated."

I could've said that the charge was trumped up; that the assault only required an emergency room visit and therefore, per policy, wasn't supposed to be categorized as a Category 1 assault (the same class as homicides) necessitating such long-term seg' anyway. I wanted to say that I was really supposed to be out years ago and that they held me so long in retaliation for many things, all in an attempt to break me mentally and spiritually, but it didn't matter now.

"Hey, Wilson, I ain't try'na get into nothin', man. I'm just try'na do my twelve months out here so I can get the hell on."

We chatted more than I ever chatted with the guards in all my years there while I pushed the cart along to 5-Block, but I still heard the sparrows and the robins chirping from the lush green grass, the seagulls cawing from the unit rooftops, the late bloomer mosquitoes and fruit flies buzzing from the air around my head and face. The compound was quiet, just me and Wilson on the walk, watching the well kept lawns rest in the earth as we stepped side by side; nothing moved much in maximum security. 5-Block was my last stop. No matter what, I was riding out after this. I had vowed for years not to get caught in the revolving seg' door and planned for months, living out every variable in advance in my mind. Now, it was time to execute.

Within minutes I was locked in another cell at the end of my new RI-Yard rock, no less confined, yet with renewed hope. The walls were the same white but the door was a different blue. The sink and toilet weren't connected, which was unusual. Stainless-steel railings ran along both walls and a side mirror rested at thigh-height on the wall near the door. The water flowed great and the toilet flushed with far more vigor than seg' toilets. Far too excited, I exaggerated everything in comparison with what I just left, even the fact that my new cell was cleaner.

Still had to GI it. It didn't matter whether I spent the next two years there or the next two hours. I couldn't risk contracting a rash, someone's cold, or another's virus. They didn't give me disinfectant so I lathered my sponge up real good with hand soap and started first on the bunk; cleaning its mat, base, the surrounding walls, then the window seal above it. ~~Once my bunk was clean, I had somewhere to place~~ my things. I unpacked my bag hurriedly, then started cleaning the footlocker, walls, desk, sink, and toilet.

Before I finished, my cell door opened and the guard in the bubble announced over the PA system that I had to go pick up the rest of my property. I walked at a power-walker's pace to the guard station, accepted my pass, then strode even faster out of the unit to the property room without even waiting for the escort. The building was over three hundred feet away, but I streaked there in less than twenty seconds. The property

officer brought out another army-green duffle bag, dumped out all the things I couldn't have in the hole, then handed me the bag. The expectance in his eyes told me to check everything to make sure it was all there, but I hadn't seen any of that stuff since George W. Bush was president; didn't know what I had; didn't even care at that point. I gathered everything back into the bag then went. I almost dropped my typewriter, my most valuable possession. I didn't realize that I forgot my legal footlocker until I returned to my cell. That's when I realized that I was speeding, my mind racing everywhere; my arms, hands, and legs zipping as if powered by angels short on time—picking up this, putting down that, moving this, sliding that, jogging to the sink, rinsing that, kicking this, dropping that—all while talking even faster to myself. I tried to calm down but my mind was another me.

I emptied the second duffle bag onto my bunk then assessed the stuff that had suddenly become mines again: two tubes of toothpaste (one used, the other unopened), four typewriter ribbons, twenty-four old cassette tapes, a legal brief from 2004 that had spiral binding, batteries that had since burst open and leaked powdery battery acid, adapter jacks, three blue prison uniforms, three black doo-rags, a half used jar of wave grease, a near full container of shampoo, and seven ramen noodle soups.

I smiled like a proud hunter at the soups while pondering their shelf-life performance. A quick glance confirmed what I already knew about my typewriter ribbons; they were all dried out. I plugged in my typewriter just to see if it worked, then covered it with two of the folded uniforms and resumed my cleaning. By 8:30 P.M., I was done with only the floor left to scrub. I began to organize all of my things. What I didn't place under my mat I loaded into my footlocker.

Legal papers on the left, writing materials on the right, clothing and cosmetics in the middle; it took me another hour. My shampoo was runny, its consistence gone. Fearing that its degraded chemicals would accelerate my onset hair loss, I dumped a glob of it onto the floor, squeezed water from my sponge on top of it, then started scrubbing. The suds exploded into my nostrils. Therapeutic peach and berry essences filled the cell inside and outside my head-space. Still speeding, I poured even more in the toilet then watched the half-full bottle shake in my hand—and to think, I almost threw you away! Perfectly good house cleaner!

With everything clean, I finally lay back on my bunk and tried to relax. My mat was paper-thin. I felt the batteries and scrap-paper stacks that I stashed beneath it bulging into my back, but that didn't even matter. Moments like this reminded me what joy was. By then, I had been in the cell for over five hours and I hadn't noticed the guard make a single round. RI-Yard or not, this wasn't like the hole!

I wanted to remember the experience and possibly write a short story about it, so I began to list all the important details. My attempts to relive every moment of the day on paper fell much shorter than the real thing. My thoughts were still flowing too fast for me to record them. Whenever I began to write one instance down, another one bombarded my intellect so quick that I forgot what I wanted to write. I eventually dropped my pen and grabbed a soup. My stomach growled on cue like it knew. My lips curled into a smile before I even thought it aloud.

"Chicken flavor, I'll be dead before the morning."

Laughing, I opened the first package and inspected the inside like the potential microbes that awaited me could really be detected with the naked eye.

"Look like a soup."

I sniffed it next, not once but a few times for any traces of spoilage.

"Smell like a soup."

My grin grew more mischievous. I broke off a small corner piece of the dry, compressed, square noodle patty and brushed it with the tip of a tentative tongue before jerking back. Nothing even remotely close to hemlock, no croaking, so I licked it more aggressively, then bit a small piece of the piece off into my mouth and chewed it. Kind of stale, but hey...

"Taste like a soup."

I ate a little more, chuckling.

"If it look like a soup, smell like a soup, and taste like a soup, it's a soup!"

I opened the seasoning pack, sprinkled a little chicken flavor inside the bag, crushed the bag in my hand until I felt the noodle patty crumble into tiny bits beneath my fingers, then ate the rest of the soup like a bag of chips—demolished it in less than forty seconds. I hadn't had a ramen noodle soup in nearly a decade. It could've been seventy years old, but it tasted like a fresh steak on a near empty stomach.

I reflected while tipping the bag up and crunching down the last bit of crumbs that poured into my mouth: In the hole, we got breakfast, lunch, and dinner; the rations, just enough to survive. There were three items that we could order from the incentive store list if we demonstrated good behavior—a bag of sour cream chips, one pack of peanut-butter cookies, and hard candy for those who made it to stage five—but with no job in the hole, I rarely had money for them. (They only lasted one day anyway. It wasn't like they really staved off years of borderline starvation. If anything, they disturbed my beast.) Trading food off the trays never worked much for me either because I never liked fishing food underneath my door to and from other cells. It seemed unsanitary, even with the multiple contraband coverings convicts provided. It also required my trust that others would handle my food properly behind locked doors and give me my full due in an even trade, so I suffered in hungry silence with my tamed beast for years.

Before tonight. Tonight I was going to live, even if it killed me! I cracked open another pack and ate it slower while examining my cassettes. "If I was was going to drop dead, why play around?" asked the savory flavor that percolated my mouth. I answered with more chewing: you're right. My ears crunched as I chuckled with a mouthful of seven-year-stale noodles. The remaining fivepacks awaited their turn within arm-reach on the table. I shook my head in defiance at their orange packaging like they were projections of my screaming conscience.

"I ain't throwin' nothin' away! I'm eatin' my damn soups!"

Mary J. Blige "My Life", Lauryn Hill "Miseducation of...", Tupac "Me Against the World"... I had some classics! I didn't even need my confiscated Walkman. Just looking at their paperwork, reading through all the writing and production credits, taking in the photography and artwork, was entertainment within itself. Late-nineties babies and millennials running around the yard with new MP-3 players didn't know what they were missing. They logged onto an app on a machine and downloaded songs with little connection to the artists. Their every-Wednesday-at-seven-o'clock, cyborg ritual was perfunctory at best. With cassettes, we were afforded a visual experience to compliment the songs we loved; the opportunity to learn the direct source behind our favorite beats or hooks; the right to

know if our favorite MC was a certified wordsmith or a fraud with a ghostwriter; even insight into the latest designer fashion; by just opening the package.

Cassette tapes gave us culture: tasters, a chance to interpret it; hardcore music junkies, their next fix. The enclosed paperwork jacket was like getting a bonus syringe from the pusher with your raw heroin pack and I had a blow from just looking at my Wu Tang classics: Raekwon's "Only Built 4 Cuban Linx", Ghostface Killah's "Ironman", Wu Tang's "Wu-Forever" double cassette album—all loaded with dope lyrics! Oh, my god! Nas "I Am"...with the golden pharaoh portrait of him on the cover against the project building backdrop! Yes, I had to get myself another Walkman, I thought as I began to sing the songs with stale noodle chips bouncing from my cackling mouth. You would've thought I was in that cell with six people. My new neighbors must've believed I was crazy. I even had old school '70s classics that my dad used to love: Isley Brothers "Beautiful Ballads", The Whispers "Greatest Slow Jams". By the time I had returned from hip hop and R&B memory lane, I had devoured my third bag of seven-year-stale noodle chips.

Some time around 10:30 P.M., I threw away my empty soup bags, washed out my doo-rags with hand soap and runny shampoo, then hung them to dry on my cell light. The open toothpaste from 2008 was too risky, but I opened the sealed one and squeezed a huge glob of it onto my toothbrush for testing. I kept my hole-tube out just in case it tasted like crap, but my mouth lit up with fluoride suds and a great taste. My aging face studied me from the mirror while brushing, funny how troubling times created laugh lines. I was older and much more bitter, but also wise enough to navigate this. I repeated the affirmation while counting the day's blessings. My birthday was in ten days, but October 26, 2015, was an early gift from God, full of increase.

Sleeping had taken conscious effort amidst the midnight-shift bangars for many years. I probably suffered from insomnia (averaging only three hours a night tops), anxiety disorder (my heart pounded twenty-four hours a day, shortening my breaths, rattling my nerves), PTSD (the slightest noise triggered palpitations), all kinds of psychological trauma, but within fifteen minutes I lost myself in tranquility; fell asleep on my back for the first time in many moons, then awoke some time around 6 A.M. with stiffness in it, thanking my paper-thin mat. My eyes adjusted to the pitch darkness of my cell as I recollected my new surroundings. My mood, while still serene, was now a little more serious, reflective even of the chilly cell air that nipped at my bare arms so I put on a thermal top. After removing my dried doo-rags from the light and tossing all but one of them into my open footlocker, I began my GP routine like I never missed a beat: brushed my teeth and washed my face, brushed my hair with wave grease then covered it with the clean doo-rag, made my bunk and swept my floor, then resumed my morning scripture study where I left off the day before—all before breakfast.

Suddenly, my stomach churned and I got an urge to use the bathroom. I sat without even bothering to cover the window; the sink provided privacy enough. It wasn't until after I noticed the side mirror by the door was now at eye level that I realized I was occupying a cell for handicapped convicts. They really needed bed space. I had over-analyzed and personalized the situation.

I didn't bother flushing but sucked up the stink of my own mess—cynic, pessimist, accuser, assaulter—in reflection of the morning's analogy: full

of it...this was me getting it all out of my system. After finishing up, I washed my hands of it for good.

That was a year ago. Now, as I sit from cleaning my new cell at Marquette Branch Prison on the day after Trump won the election, I reflect back on the irony that the Baraga administration thought I would be a problem. I don't know what the future holds with him in office, but as far as life goes, it generally gets better with perspective. The protracted struggle it often requires can sometimes distort its meaning, but never without revealing why it's worth the suffering.

Enjoy the revelation.