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## Attica on My Mind

My day begins by getting up before the contemporary version of Pavlov's bell rings, a half hour before count, which starts at 7:00 AM. While performing my morning ritual of washing my face, brushing my teeth, and combing my hair, with such mindless devotion it would send a marine sergeant into authoritarian fits of glee, I subconsciously search for a way to affirm my humanity.

The breakfast list is being taken, and naturally I sign up. Every morning for the past twenty-five years I've been participating in the ritual we prisoners call chow, which means that I and thirty-nine other men physiologically goose-step to the mess hall in columns of twos. The echo of eighty feet reverberates down corridors built like the proverbial tunnel with the light at the end of it. Except ain't no light in Attica, just bitter darkness that seeps into your soul, corroding and corrupting your very essence.

Penitentiary legend has it if you speak like men instead of whispering like shadows you could disappear down these corridors and never be seen again. The story goes like this: If a prisoner is talking while in company formation, the guard can and will order the column to stop. Sometimes, guards ask who's talking. Other times, they arbitrarily pick a prisoner, calling for backup. After reinforcements arrive, the column is ordered to move forward without you. Dread pervades your being as you watch your buffer against brutality and death march down the corridor without you.

Whether the legend is true or not, we believe. As the saying goes, every prisoner in Attica gets his chance to dance with the devil. Simply put, we prisoners are fair game to marauding bands of guards, who wear black gloves like the Klan wore white sheets, striking fear in our hearts because the law in Attica is no talking in company formation. This piece of legislation is brutally enforced.

With prayers on our lips and taps playing in the back of our minds, we enter the mess hall; it's a poor depiction of a medieval cathedral. The first thing one focuses on are the twenty-six pillars, thirteen on each side of 700 mushroom-styled stools that even pre-school children would rebel at the thought of sitting on. The second thing one perceives is the cave-like darkness and wonders why no one bothers to remove the pane that stains the glass windows, allowing no sunlight to enter and preventing not a sliver of hope to escape. The third thing one notices is sixteen cameras watching your every move; two of the sixteen are equipped with Orwellian technology, panning our faces for riotous thoughts. We wear blank expressions to elude detection.

As you can imagine, in any rundown cathedral there are birds that dive bomb over our heads, leaving a drop of shit here or there. Actually bird droppings are a pleasant thought compared to twelve units with three individual canisters each of tear gas strategically inserted into the ceiling ready to be released upon our heads at the slightest provocation. Twenty feet above the mess hall floor and measuring fourteen feet across is a fortified booth with prisoner-proof glass. From this secure nest one man has the ability to control at least five hundred prisoners with a flick of his finger. He can release all or some of the tear gas canisters. If the gas fails to quell the disturbance,



built in the shatter-proof glass are rifle holes.

After the riot in '71, Attica was remodeled with the theme in mind- Never again. The mess hall is considered a high security area where the slightest incident could bloom into a full-scale riot. If you stand up without permission, you're subject to being tackled by the guards, handcuffed, and dragged to the hole. If you stop the chow line, raise your voice with passion or anger, if you're engaged in fighting, you could be severely beaten or worse.

It doesn't help matters much knowing that the state has a no hostage policy for its officers. At any given time in the mess hall there may be twelve guards in the midst of hundreds of prisoners. Guards know once the mess hall gate is slammed no one leaves until everything is under the state's control again.

Today, they're serving a continental breakfast with a side order of concentration camp ambiance. From my position in line, I notice twenty-nine prisoners have already accepted scrambled eggs in a bowl. Everyone in the Western world knows it's a universal right to eat eggs from one's plate. As I approach the serving counter, I ask the prisoner who's serving, "Where are the plates?"

He states, "We were told to use the bowls." The lines stops and people behind me are listening to our exchange. A guard comes over with his brutish voice and demands, "What's the problem?" I state, "I want a plate for my egg." To which he replies, "Is that right? You're not special." Someone behinds me says, "It ain't worth it, leave it alone." The guard bellows, "I am giving you a direct order to move." The tension is mounting; a lot of other people are starting to notice what's going on.

Caught between hubris and being humiliated, it's my move. Before I can act, the man behind the counter looks at me with sympathy and fear. Not only was I capable of bringing down the wrath of the state on my head but his also. He hands me a plate. I smile the way I always do when I've won a victory for the soul. Of course, I am special. I am human. I take my plate with the powdered eggs, my head held high and regally walk to my stool feasting on the best eggs I ever tasted.



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