

Cold

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It had rained early and the sun in the narrow window of my cell made the world look warm. But I was awake, and cold. It was always cold at the prison in Mason, Tennessee. The prison at Mason serves as a holding spot for prisoners waiting to go to trial, to another prison or, in the age of trump, to an ICE facility. The prison is owned and operated by Corrections Corporation of America. CCA recently changed it's name to CoreCivic as a prelude to expanding it's reach into other areas of the prison industrial complex and the increasingly lucrative market of community supervision and surveillance. CoreCivic rents cell space to various states and the federal government. I was assigned to O block, a prisoner housing unit that had two tiers of cells rising above a common area containing a few metal tables with attached stools. There was a small microwave on a table at the bottom of the staircase that led to the top tier. Open shower stalls were along one wall of the common area and a TV was mounted high on the wall opposite the showers. I spent my time at Mason wrapped in a blanket. Most everyone stayed covered in their blanket, which wasn't much heftier than a sheet, and the only means of warmth issued a prisoner. Reading, playing games, eating, and watching TV were all done hunched in blankets. Guards wore coats, prisoners wore blankets. Guards were warm, prisoners were cold.

I had never been locked up. I had never been in trouble. I was beginning a sentence of seventeen and one half years. I would serve fifteen years and seven months of that time as long as I stayed out of trouble. A first

timer had a lot to learn, and the cold was an effective teacher. Blanketed, confused, and cold, I learned first of all that I was no longer considered a person. Those early lessons included head counts, how to choke down tasteless boiled food, who sits where, who watches TV and who doesn't, who speaks to whom, what words you can and cannot use, where and how you look at another person if you look at him at all. All while trying to keep warm, cocooning in a thread bare blanket while curling and uncurling your toes in flimsy canvas shoes.

On the inside there are certain myths about temperature. One is that low temperatures keep prisoners subdued. There is also a belief that cold prevents illness. These are only notions. Most of the policies and procedures of the criminal justice system are based on notions. Notions are voiced enough times by enough people and acknowledged with enough nods and shrugs until finally nods and shrugs become all that are required to establish the truth of a thing. Public safety comes to rely on a mix of whim and notion.

When I climbed down from the top bunk that morning, the cold was already competing with the noise. Like the cold, the noise never stopped. Even at night after we were locked in our cells, men screamed at each other. I stepped out of my cell on the upper tier and stood at the rail, watching the activity in the common area below. Chess players yelled taunts at their opponents while blowing warmth into their cupped hands then slamming pieces down on the chess board that was painted on the table top. Men playing spades and dominoes danced around the tables slapping down cards

and "bones" in a competition of style and vocal bravado that was more important than the games themselves. Chess pieces were broken, dominoes thrown, and cards flew off tables, all in an effort to prove who was the champion shit-talking grown ass man. The TV was in a constant battle to be heard over the games. The numbing atmosphere, thick with a rambunctious mix of noisy boredom and pent up testosterone, became a wall between me and my thoughts.

The wall was breached only by the cold. I could think of nothing else. The alien world I had fallen into moved in glacial slow motion while my mind bounced between racing anxiety, and frosty sludge. When I got locked up the psych drugs that my therapist on the street had prescribed were taken away, and I was told during my intake psych evaluation not to expect any of those medications, because they were not on something called the "formulary". When I walked into the psych office, the staff member was compassionate enough to allow me to call home for the first time since I had disappeared down the drain. My family had not heard from me for what seemed like a couple of lifetimes. The staff member looked at the list of meds I had been on and said nothing further except "sign here". I never knew what it was I signed. It's easy to say I shouldn't have signed anything. It's also easy to say that it wasn't really that cold at Mason. I would eventually be given a psychotropic called Elavil without any consultation or evaluation beyond that first intake which lasted all of fifteen minutes, part of which was spent on the phone crying along with my mother. The dosages were routinely changed without explanation.

I went back into my cell, got a bar of the soap and one of the two hand

towels I had been issued and headed for the shower stalls. Taking a shower was one of the ways to fight the cold. I have since grown beyond my early fears, but taking a shower at Mason was an ordeal for me because of the arrangement of the stalls. Anyone standing on the upper tier could look down into the showers. There was a half wall in front of the stalls and a slightly taller wall in between. The stalls faced the TV, so I could look over the heads of those playing games at the tables in the common area and watch TV while I was showering. Focusing on the TV kept my attention off the thought that I was essentially standing naked in a room full of potentially hostile men. At least for a few minutes, when there was hot water, I was warm. After the shower I climbed back up on the bunk and tried again to read, but after a few minutes the effect of the shower wore off and again I was cold. I had one more possibility for warmth, and that was to go to the gym and then to the yard. It happened to be one of the days when O block was scheduled for recreation. Rain had been threatening, but the sun was shining. It was April and I reasoned there was a good chance it would be warmer outside.

Painted down both sides of every hallway at Mason there was a line. When walking down the hall prisoners were required to walk the line. There will come a time when I will aggravate and embarrass my friends and family by refusing to stand in a line. By the time I get out I will have stood in a line for fifteen years and seven months. I was ordered to stand in this line on April 10th 2008 and I will get to the end of the line on November 16th 2023. Everything that happens in my life happens while I am standing in that line, 5,699 days long. Prison is not just locks, gates, and doors. It is also lines. Lines I walk along, lines

I stand in, lines that separate where I can go from where I cannot go. On that cold day in Mason, I got in line at the door of the block to walk the line of prisoners and line up at the door of the gym, where I got in the line to go to the yard.

Around the walls of the gym were a few decrepit weight machines. A hand ball court was painted on the floor between the two basketball goals, the basketball lines intersecting with the hand ball lines to create confusion and discourage both games. There was a filthy toilet and sink in a doorless restroom. Once in the gym, I had to choose whether to go outside or stay in the gym. The gym was warmer than the block, but also potentially more dangerous. I witnessed the first of many beatings in that gym. It wasn't a fight. To call what I witnessed a fight would imply that the beaten man had a fair chance. He was surrounded and engulfed in punches and kicks. The object was to remove him from the general population of the prison. The beaten man, not those who beat him, was sent to the hole; solitary confinement. I will never know the reason the man was beaten. It could have been something as simple as cutting in front of someone in line, or having the wrong gang tattoo, or the wrong charge.

In prison there is a ritual of respect that veils everything. It is a false courtesy that is in itself discourteous. The ritual is performed to protect oneself from the violence that is always coiled and waiting to spring. Since I have been down most of the violence I have seen erupted over trivials like the placement of a chair on the wrong square of tile in a TV room. There are similarities between violence and cold. Sometimes cold comes on suddenly and you don't expect it. Violence is like that.

Everything seems fine and then all of the sudden the wind comes up and it gets cold, or someone gets hit. Violence and cold are different because I could never become indifferent to the cold. The cold at Mason shivered my body, but sometimes I think the violence has frozen my soul. I wonder sometimes what I am becoming.

I followed the line to go outside to the yard, a bare few acres consisting of a dirt track surrounding an inner oval of sparse brown grass. The track was rutted by men walking in circles for days and months on end, which was the extent of outside recreation. The ruts, trudded by unnumbered feet and full of water from the morning rains, were putrid little streams flowing nowhere. There was a small pavilion, with a metal picnic table chained to posts in the concrete and a lone exercise bike with a torn seat, rusted into immobility. There was the ubiquitous piss and shit covered toilet in a rotting wooden shack tacked onto the outside wall of the gym. Once outside, I had to stay there for the duration of the hour and a half allotted for recreation. So I joined the walkers.

Walking around in circles is what you make of it. It can be listless and tedious, purposeful and focused, or meditative. I have, as have all prisoners, become expert in walking circles. When I got to a federal prison, and was able to purchase decent shoes from the commissary, I was unable to walk without pain for a couple of months because of shin splints from wearing those canvas "bus shoes" that left my feet so cold. I first began training to walk circles when I was in a mental health facility after threatening suicide. I wondered around in circles, quoting

all the poetry I could remember, trying to find the mind and self I seemed to have misplaced. I continued the circles during a brief stay in county jail and then at Mason I became expert at pounding ruts in the dirt.

It is important to walk the same direction as everyone else. It is also important to be careful who you walk with, if anyone. Who you walk with can identify your gang affiliations, your sexuality, or your charge.

Now after years of walking, I walk with whom I choose. I am no longer ruled by fear. There are prisoners who never conquer the fear of what others will think of them, and because I am an out gay man and a sex offender, there are those who will not walk with me on the yard, or be seen talking with me too much, because they are afraid of being labeled either a "cho-mo" or a fucking fag. At Mason, I walked cold and alone. Another lesson that prison teaches is how to create for yourself an eye of calm in a hurricane of violence, mistrust, and oppression. Prison does not teach positive social skills.

I thought it would be warmer outside than it was in the block, but after the morning rain came a cold front. The porous jumpsuit that prisoners wore served only for modesty, not protection from the elements. So I walked faster to try to get warm. Then it began to rain. First a sprinkle, then a drizzle, then a torrent. I had the presence of mind to head to the pavillion during the drizzle, and when the torrent came the prisoners filled the pavilion to overflowing. I stood shoulder to shoulder toward the middle of the crush, trying in vain to stand still without bumping into anyone, which could be considered disrespectful and invite retaliation. Because there was no lightning with the rain, we would not be allowed back into the gym. As we stood under the pavilion, the rain worsened

and the temperature dropped. I stood with the other prisoners on that yard for another hour, wet and shaking.

We shape our reality and in turn our reality shapes us. I created the reality of my incarceration. I created that reality by betraying myself, my family, my friends and a community that had supported and nurtured me. Years later the memory of our children crying in confusion and fear the day the FBI invaded our home brings back the cold that washed into me that day at Mason. When I got to Mason I cried at night in my bunk out of pity for myself, for the abused child in me and for the abuse and hurt that I had furthered by searching for and downloading obscene images, trying to find a memory of the abuse that I had pushed out of my mind. The cold of Mason, Tennessee has become a part of my identity. It sharpened my guilt and shame into a spade that gouged out a raw space in me. The hole that was left was filled with cold. Cold that condemned me with a finality that no judge or prison sentence could match. Now, whenever I get cold, I think about that April afternoon in 2008, and I know that I am not that cold after all.

I finally got back inside the block at Mason. I finally moved on from that place. I finally got warm. I have spent these years working to heal. The warmth of a healed life is at least a partial payment of the debt I owe to my children, their mother who raised them in my absence, and all those I hurt. I know I will always be doubted by society, because people who commit crimes are never completely allowed back into the circle of humanity, and that is especially true for sex offenders. We are tolerated and always watched with a wary eye. I am the only one who can truly know

the whole of my restoration. I am the only one who knows completely that I accept who I am and the mistake that I made. I also know the strength I have found in myself over these years that began in Mason, Tennessee, when I was cold.