

"Blue Bird" by Jason Gallegos

The time was drawing near for my departure. I had 13 months built up in the county jail. I was convicted and sentenced to prison, and I was ready to leave, to start serving out my long-term sentence in the Texas Department of Criminal Justice Division.

Before my departure, I had the privilege to be laced up by the old-school veterans that had already been in and out of the system most of their adult lives. These convicts prided themselves as they explained in detail what I should expect once I stepped onto the "Blue Bird" that would take me to my final destination, which was prison. I couldn't help but notice how excited and enthusiastic these convicts were, as they shared with me their personal experience riding on the Blue Bird. It was definitely therapeutic. Their stories eased my fears and they became joyful as they shared their stories.

Their stories enabled me to prepare for what lay ahead.

Doing 13 months in the county jail meant confinement inside of a building with no direct sunlight and very limited movement. I was getting restless because towards the end of my stay in the county I was deemed too dangerous to be kept out in population. So at one point I was kept in isolation for 23 hours out of the day behind a double steel door.

I was only given an hour to be outside of my cell and I was given three options to utilize my hour: shower, recreation, or use a phone. Being in solitary confinement gave me a strong desire to be sent off to prison. At that point I didn't care if prison was a dangerous place, all I knew by the many stories I heard, in prison I would be able to roam freely, although it would be behind a fortified double-linked fence with barbed wire rolled out like a slinky on top, that stretched all the way around the prison compound. I was ready to go.

Towards the end of my stay in the county jail, I was let out of solitary confinement for good behavior. I was allowed to spend 12 hours outside of my cell to watch TV in the dayroom or spend my time telling war stories among the convicted brethren.

It was March 28, 1998. I was 19 years old and two days shy of my 20th birthday. The day of my departure had arrived. The Blue Bird was finally here to take me to my new dwelling place.

I was called out of my cell at about four in the morning. I had a gut-wrenching knot in my stomach. Not because I feared going to prison, but because I was leaving behind my mom, two sisters, and brother for the first time. I wasn't able to say my goodbyes. The emotional pain was intense. Inside of me was a young boy crying out in agony for the care and comfort of his mother.

I wanted to be rescued out of this nightmare. My nightmare was becoming a reality. I was feeling the powerful grip the State of Texas had on me, and nobody, not even God, could deliver me out of this situation.

I was placed in a holding cell with about 30 inmates that were also catching chain. Together, we were all going to take the bus ride on the Blue Bird.

I wasn't very talkative like the others but I was listening intently at the conversations they were having, paying attention to all the faces, and most of them fit the prison mold. They carried on in conversation as if we were all headed out on a field trip.

Then an inmate asked me, "What are you in for and how much time did the courts give you?" I responded to his question by saying, "I was convicted of murder and was sentenced to 50 years in prison," and everybody in the holding cell got quiet. It wasn't the word murder that shocked them—it was the mention of 50 years that made them cringe. I realized I was the only one in the group who had the longest prison sentence. There was light at the end of the tunnel for them, but for me prison would become my home.

I kept looking out of the holding cell because I knew the prison guards would arrive at any moment to collect their bounty, which happened to be us.

At a distance I heard the sound of chains being dragged on the concrete floor and the knot in my stomach grew even tighter. The appearance of three white men with cowboy hats, dark ruddy faces, wearing gray uniforms and distinct cowboy boots, stood on the other side of the cell door, looking through the plexiglass window, directly at us with disgust in their eyes.

I kept reciting this mantra in my head, Jason, pretend that you've been through this a million times. You are a veteran. Better yet you are a pro. You were born for this. These men are scared, you're not. The more I recited this mantra, the more sane I became. Courage began to replace the fear that tried to penetrate my heart.

The prison guard began to call out our names in alphabetical order and pairing us up in twos. Once all the names were called out, we were led into a dressing room to remove our orange county jumpers including what I had on underneath, such as a T-shirt, a pair of boxers, and socks that I would leave behind.

We all stood naked, ready to be searched by the prison guards. I was next. The guard stood in front of me and shouted, "Don't reckless-eyeball me, boy! Run your fingers through your hair! Flap those ears! Open your mouth and stick your tongue out! Lift your arms up and with your left hand lift up your nut sack! Turn around and let me see the bottom of your feet! Bend over and spread your ass cheeks! Now squat and cough!"

Going through this drill made me feel violated but I knew I had to get used to this because it was going to be the new norm for me, from here on out. While I put on my white jumper suit, I felt very cold. I was nervous, and my body shook uncontrollably. We stood in pairs once again but this time in a white uniform. We looked like a flock of sheep being led to the slaughterhouse. One more item needed to be added to my prison costume, which was the shackles. My feet were shackled so close together I was only able to take very small steps forward.

Then a small metal box was used to bind my wrists together. Another small chain hung heavy that kept my hands and feet chained together causing me to stoop over.

The metal door swung open and there it was, the Blue Bird. My eyes were now able to see the Blue Bird in all of its glory. I've seen a prototype like this bus many times in those Hollywood movies and I had heard many first-hand accounts by criminals that also rode on a bus similar to this one.

It was time to experience this event for myself. Behind the Blue Bird a prison guard held a shotgun in his hand with the butt of the gun resting on his hip. In a hunchback posture, we marched in pairs toward the bus. The echo of clanging chains reverberated loudly, rattling the drum in my ear. It was a pathetic sight.

I stood in the front entrance of the bus. I had to crawl up the steps of the bus because my hands and feet were chained too close together. I had determined to sit by a window. I sat down toward the center, on the left side of the bus. My window was covered with a 16-gauge metal sheet that had dime-size holes cut into it that allowed me to peer out, as if I were looking through a peephole that would give me a view of the city one last time.

The garage door began to lift upward and the morning light poured in like a rushing flood. The Blue Bird began to move forward. The guard with a shotgun entered a cage through the doors in the back of the bus. In the front of the bus stood another guard holding a shotgun right by the driver.

I still couldn't believe my life would end this way. A year and a half ago on Thanksgiving day I proposed to my girlfriend Theresa. I sent a notification to a recruiting center stating my interest in joining the United States Marine Corps. Life for me was just getting started, or was I just feeling sorry for myself? In between thoughts I stared at all the happy people walking on the sidewalk, riding in their cars, and others going about in their daily lives, a freedom I'd taken for granted. As I watched, the free people squinted their eyes at the prison bus as we rode by, and I could almost hear their judgmental thoughts. I was glad we could only see them but they couldn't see us.

As we rode through the city everything seemed to be moving fast. Everybody seemed to be in a rush. But as I sat by the window I simply enjoyed the view. Every building, person, car, or tree that we passed gave me delight.

The Blue Bird finally made its way onto Highway 37 South. I kept my eye on every green sign that we passed. The most memorable sign that I read that day said, "Now Leaving San Antonio City Limits."

I wanted to cry. I felt like I was being kidnapped. Deep inside I was crying. This was not how I imagined myself entering the adult world. Boy, did I have the most painful emotional blues during my bus ride to prison. I realized then why this bus was famously dubbed by the convicts of old, "Blue Bird."