

## Sunrise Over Me

Before I even open my eyes this morning I am reminded of where I am: loud yelling fills the cavernous open bay dormitory, my back aches from the hard metal bunk beneath me (covered only by a three-inch thick, stained cloth mat), bright fluorescent lights burn my retina through closed eyelids, anxiety unfolds as I awaken to another day of incarceration, and a gray sorrow fills me deep within - hammered and forged on an anvil of regret.

Begrudgingly, I open my eyes and see men gambling at 5:06 am while sitting on rusty footlockers; gaining volume while smoking cigarettes and swearing in Spanish. Inmates covered in gang tattoos stalk the dorm for prey and I wake up defensive - preparing my game face for the inevitable, Machiavellan struggle of daily life in prison - and drop down to do one-hundred push-ups. I will not be weak. The weak will not make it through. I say a morning mantra to myself: You're a fucking warrior, Ryan. Never give up, and never let this place change you into an animal. I sit on the edge of my bunk bed and mentally force a positive thought into my monkey mind - attempting to practice the Middle Way of the prince. The concrete block walls around me are painted drab and peeling, with black mold growing in each corner of the leaky building, and the smell of body odor and stale smoke permeates the humid air.

I've been awake for five minutes, and I cannot fight the despondancy inside me. I put on my headphones to listen to the radio, drink coffee, and try to wake up. I feel melancholy, but still strong-willed; stoic, but not numb; destroyed, but not defeated (like Ernest says). I know that I am worthy of great things, but those things are in a future that doesn't yet exist. Nor is it guaranteed.

There seems to be some hostile activity back in the rear of the dank dorm. I know that it's pretty early for a fight, but my stress levels still rise at the commotion. My amygdala works on overdrive and my heart starts to beat faster. I've never liked violence. I relate to pacifism, but unfortunately I've become a bad mother fucker by necessity - I'm a white kid from the suburbs.

I put my plain blue uniform on and now I'm a convict like everyone else, yet different. An anomaly. I strap on my black boots and tighten the laces, grab my identification from my footlocker, make my bunk up (folding the itchy wool blanket and making my bed military-style - inspection ready), and wait to hear the cattle call of "chow" over the crackling loudspeaker - announced by the bored correctional officer ready to end his twelve-hour shift in the bubble, and not giving a shit what the one-hundred and fifty felons in the dorm are doing. At all. Whatever. I realize that I could be jumped or killed in a split second, and no one of authority would even know. I'm unnerved by that reality often.

While I wait for the door to open so I can go to breakfast, feeling hunger pangs from my empty stomach, I finish my coffee and lock the combination Masterlock onto my box - a three-foot by two-foot by two-foot-high black Footlocker holding every possession I own in this cruel world. Inside, the box holds Ramen soups, family photos, poems, new t-shirts, Playboys, a cleverly hidden shank (like the nuclear button, only to be used when all efforts at diplomacy have been exhausted because it will mean end times for either me or them) ... all of my belongings squeeze into a well organized, compartmentalized storage unit of my current life.

I sit for a moment and breath out deeply, breath in deeply ... I meditate briefly on peace, on the vast land of suffering around me. I visualize the aqua-green ocean and try to smell the salty air. Then I definitely hear the tell-tale sounds of a scuffle in the back of the dormitory, as sneakers squeak on the tile floor, fists thump soft flesh, and heavy breathing and grunting fills the area. It only lasts twenty seconds before the two misfits get broken apart by their brothers - just a couple of gangbangers fighting over a newly acquired poker debt. My situational awareness is heightened and my hands shake imperceptibly from the cortisol flooding my rigid body. I'm about to leave the bunk area and go into the t.v. room just to get distance from the conflict when I hear the distorted speaker order me to the feeding troughs. "Chow! Chow! Chow!" the officer yells into the microphone.

It's now 5:41 am, and I'm locked away in a maximum-security prison. This open bay dorm is my entire existence right now. For eight years. Brawls, rape, gambling, jailhouse sissies, confinement, sadness - all part of my crazy world gone mad. This is what I think about as I wait to go eat powdered eggs. A frenzy of starving inmates line up to walk outside onto the gigantic compound; a snaking line of desperate souls shuffling their feet towards a meager meal and the next uncertainty of their dangerous days - a chow hall crowded with three to four-hundred angry, mentally unstable, drug-influenced, and very impatient wards of the Florida Department of Corrections. This-eating-is a battle in the warzone of the concrete jungle.

I am weary and loathing another calendar day without freedom<sup>as</sup> the fresh air hits my face when I step out the steel door into the complex. The five to seven minute walk to the dining facility is a personal respite - three times a day, I know that I'll feel raindrops on my thankful head, or sunlight on my pale white skin, or gaze wondrously at the dawn's late stars, which fade away as a crescent moon hangs in the sky above. But on this very morning, I am simply blown away at the beauty that surrounds me. While walking to chow we have a three-hundred and sixty degree view of the sky - a panoramic kaliedascope of colors that nearly brings a tear to my eye as I look around at the evanescent purples and ethereal pinks of a new day in humanity's web. I'm in the midst of eight dormitories holding thirteen-hundred malevolent criminals; ~~and~~ am surrounded by the full weight of the justice system; ~~but~~ at this very moment, I am awestruck with sublime contentment.

To the east is a monumental sunrise gaining ground; to the west, the most mythical and bright rainbow I've ever seen; all above are the cumulus-nimbus clouds of a distant, pending rainshower. The rainbow is so omnipresent that it takes my breath away - canary yellow, mint green, purple lotus, ruby red, tangerine... the colors are slathered onto the heavens and painted on the firmament like brushstrokes by Monet.

The morning air is filled with the staccato birdsongs of sparrows and sandpipers, and dew lies upon the grass and clovers and weeds. This morning owes nothing but another day to the dawn - a soft cradle for the vermilion sun. Daybreak brings a nourishing freshness and an aurora of vitality; it shines wide with good tidings of bold might, a gift of nascent light.

Men serpentine through the gates past barbed-wire fences; over cold concrete pathways and followed by officers with pepper spray and broken dreams on their hip. I send a fleeting glance towards the AR-15 rifle that is pointing down from the guard tower at us, and step out of its long, looming shadow hanging over the heads of the disenfranchised men next to me. I think that I can be free if I choose to be in my mind, that I don't have to be part of the wasteland. Before we enter the decrepit building for our meal, I turn around and face the early sunrise once more, for one last time. The ephemeral rebirth over Gaia is a sun of life and possibility; a painted fire circle on a bone-blue sky; a crimson crown floating on the far horizon, and lifting up like a burning vision of hope. As I enter the fray I think to myself... I can make it if I never give up.