

Kirk #AK-1772

“PRISON”

(The Sentence I'm Serving)

By Justin Kirk

My name is Justin Kirk. I'm a 34 year old prisoner in California serving a life sentence for double murder and a shoot-out with police. While awaiting trial, I escaped, taking an officer hostage and hijacking the transportation vehicle. I spent six and a half years fighting the death penalty only to receive 155 years to life.

To a normal person I might seem evil, one who should be put away in prison. I'm automatically judged a monster. You read about the worst of me and naturally you judge me in the worst way. Some even say the sentence I received was too lenient, that my stay in prison is too comfortable and that I'm granted too many amenities and privileges. When my friends and family tell me people say these things, my reaction isn't hatred or anger. I say, "Well they just don't realize the reality of my life, but if they were in my shoes, they'd understand what it's really like".

This account of prison life is my reality. This is the sentence I'm serving for the rest of my days.

CELL LIVING

My cell is 8 by 15 feet. My mattress is an inch and a half thick. I have a desk, toilet, and lockers made of steel. A window runs down my back wall, too thin to put my head out, but enough to allow me to see the sun. On a beautiful day I can see the wind blow dried leaves across the dirt landscape, but I have no idea where the trees are. I can't feel the warmth of the sun or the coolness of the breeze and on rainy days I long to stand outside my window and let the rain drench me. Once that door closes everything in life is out of my reach. I long for everything I ever took for granted: family, food, walking down the street, going into a store, the

feeling you get when you're about to kiss someone and the look a woman has when she smiles.

I have to live with another prisoner even if I don't like him. He could be any race. He could have committed any crime. He could be dirty or clean, a grouch or happy-go-lucky, a religious zealot or an atheist. I don't decide who I live with, and if we can't get along I have to wait for a bed move that could take weeks. Imagine living with someone you just can't see eye-to-eye with in an 8 X 15 foot room.

I'm allowed a TV, radio or a typewriter as appliances, that is, if I can afford them. I'm allowed to go to store once a month for up to \$220 (again, if I can afford it) and I may receive quarterly packages of food, hygiene items and clothes. I have yard time for up to two hours at least three times a week. I'm neat and orderly, so living with a messy person is very hard. I keep my books lined up, my mattress rolled up and my lockers in order. I use my bunk as a makeshift office and sit on a folded blanket on the ground as I write, even now. I clean my floor everyday using shampoo and a towel.

My cell is my home now, so I decorate it with pictures, postcards and art. But it's still just a cell. Once that door closes, I start longing. For some reason I always think of The Temptations song "I just want to go outside in the rain...."

MAIL

Today I waited morning 'til night for mail, but didn't get any. Mail is my only contact with humanity, the only thing that lets me know I'm still a part of this world. Mail is my freedom with my family and friends. We do everything through mail: We dance, read books, laugh and visit every place our imagination can take us, but it also causes worry and panic.

I heard from my aunt and cousin two weeks ago, but to me it seems so long ago. My cousin is in her teens, my aunt drives too fast, my grandma is 85, my brothers are going through a lot, and my uncle is in pain all the time and they all need money to live on. I just hope they are ok.

Mail gets backed up for weeks, sometimes longer. It usually takes 10 days for a letter to reach me. I try to think positively when I don't hear from people, but sometimes I wonder if I've said something wrong. I can't just pick up the phone at will or drive over and check up on people, so I just sit in my cell, waiting and hoping that everything is ok. I feel helpless, and, just when I think I can't take it any longer, I hear from someone. The process repeats itself at least once a month. Imagine the solitude. You think that someday you won't have anyone (no family, no friends) and you'll be alone in a world you are already isolated from. You never get used to that.

THE WAITING

I wait for everything. Toilet paper? I have to wait for weekly rations. A shower? I have to wait for my door to open. Phone? I have to wait for sign-ups. Dayroom? I have to wait for unlock. Hungry? I wait for breakfast, lunch and dinner.

No longer can I get what I want when I feel I need it. Sometimes the wait for a shower proves too much for me. I feel too dirty to wait so instead I "birdbath". I fill my sink with water and use a milk carton to pour water over me, soap up and then rinse off.

Having to wait for everything makes you feel helpless. It shows how much you depend on the prison for everything. You learn to be patient and to rationalize. But waiting for simple things such as a shower is a hard daily ordeal.

DEPRESSION

Every day in prison isn't all bad. Eventually you get used to a routine and adjust to your circumstances. But when it's bad, it's bad in the worst possible way. When depression sets in, you feel like it's the end of the world. Sadly for some, it ends up being just that, and they commit suicide. Every prisoner everywhere (criminal or political) feels the pain at some point, when people need you and you

can't be there, when people belittle you and you can't speak your mind, when you lose someone you love, when you have nothing.

When I watch TV and I see a father playing with his daughter, the look of joy in her eyes breaks my heart. I think, "Why can't I have that?" Surely I could have.

I see my little cousin who is like a daughter to me and I feel like I betrayed her. I hate myself for letting her down, as I did my brothers. I start to slide into that deep depression, and then she pulls me out either with her letters, her visits or her laughing voice on the phone. Those are the moments that keep me going. I see that smile and in that moment I know it's going to be alright.

INABILITY TO HELP

It's hard being unable to help those I love in their hour of need and when I get a letter from someone needing my help, my heart races. After settling down, I offer any positive advice I can in hopes that my words will bring them some comfort. I never mind helping people talk things through. Some people think that because I'm an inmate they shouldn't complain to me about their problems in the free world, but I welcome it. I feel good listening to those I care about talk about life. Still it's very hard being in no position to help those you love, especially if circumstances offer little chance of solace.

LOST POSSIBILITIES

Lying in bed at night is the hardest time for me. I lie there thinking of all the lost possibilities. On any given day I'll see something that sparks my curiosity. If I watch a movie about jets, I'll think, "Why didn't I become a pilot or a fire fighter, a prison guard, a priest, an archeologist, an artist?" Whether or not I could or would have been any of those things, I lie there thinking about them. Once I signed up for the Army and I think how much better it would have been to die fighting than to live and have fought for the wrong cause.

I just want to be anything other than a man who is trapped, a man who no matter what he accomplishes will always be just a prisoner.

MONEY ISSUES

I get to go to store once a month, if, that is, I have money on my account. In California the State takes 55% of all incoming money for restitution, until each individual's restitution is paid in full. Then he receives 100% of his money. So for \$100 I receive \$45. I can buy hygiene items, writing and drawing supplies, food, candy and an assortment of other things.

The food in prison is not very good and sometimes I can't eat it, so I'm grateful for store. On days that the food is too nasty to eat, I can make something out of my store food. I also love chocolate, which always brings me joy. Making a meal in my cell breaks up the monotony of prison life and I know if I'm hungry I can eat something.

Being hungry and being trapped is a bad feeling. If I don't have store and I only have one soup left, I'll save it because once it's gone and I have nothing left, my mind starts to play tricks on me and I feel like I'm starving. In prison the rations are poor and the solitude is long. Many suffer from hunger.

When I have to ask for money from my family, it hurts me. Having put myself in prison, I shouldn't expect them to have to pay to make my life easier. Also I know my family cannot afford to send me \$100 a month. So asking for things makes me feel like I'm being a burden to them. Same goes with my friends. I don't want to ask them for money, even when I really need it, because I don't want them to feel that's why I consider them my friend. I'd rather be hungry than think I'd lost someone for asking them for something. No one wants to feel like they are a burden to those they love. By being a prisoner, I no longer have the ability to take care of myself and I have to depend on others, even when it hurts to ask.

DEALING WITH ATTITUDES

Every day I deal with a hundred different attitudes from loved ones, prisoners and guards, all dealing with the issues of life. If some guard is having a bad day and brings it to work there is little I can do about it. When a prisoner is struggling with something, I try to remember that I feel like that at times, too. Once I realize words are just words, I'm able to ignore lots of things. Someone has a bad day and says something hurtful, of course it upsets me especially if I'm being belittled, but I think to myself, "I wonder what hurt this person?" Everyone in life is going through some issue on any given day and people in prison are no different than those in society in that regard. But no one likes to be belittled or made to feel helpless. No one likes to be seen as less than human.

LOSING SOMEONE YOU LOVE

Losing someone you love while in prison is very hard. You go through the normal sadness of not being able to say goodbye. You feel that if you had somehow been there, things would have been different. You wonder if you added to the cause by going to prison. You blame yourself, knowing you disappointed them. You hope they didn't think you cared more about your pride, your gang or your lifestyle than you did about them. In your mind no matter how much you tell yourself it wasn't your fault you still think it was. You never forgive yourself for not being there for them. You never even get to say goodbye.

PRISON DANGER

Prison is a dangerous place. In here I have to maintain a certain pose, even if I don't want to. I have to stand my ground and deal sternly with other prisoners. I've learned that words can resolve conflict. When I was younger I thought violence was the only resolution. I try to talk things out now because I don't want to hurt anyone else. If I'm put into a dangerous situation I will defend myself, but it scares me to think my family and friends will think I haven't changed. Would I disappoint them or lose them? That's what really scares me.

In prison every possible crime can be committed. I'm surrounded by gang members, killers, sex offenders, thieves and everything in between. Respect in

prison is a major issue. Anything viewed as disrespect is seen as an unforgivable act. It's the first thing you learn. It's the main ideological belief of prison. Some prisoners are predators, stalking people like prey, moving from one victim to the next until someone puts a knife in them or they are isolated. No one is safe no matter how tough he is. No matter how much I work out, no matter how bad I could become if I had to, I can still be a victim on any given day. Inside you never stop looking over your shoulder. You never stop being careful with your words. You never stop thinking of how alone you are.

MY SENTENCE

Prison is what I was sentenced to for my crimes. I don't complain about my life or my sentence. In fact, I admit to my wrongdoings. I got the sentence that fit the crimes for what I allowed myself to become.

I live with my own sense of morality. That is the hardest part of my life. My conscience taps me on the shoulder and never lets me forget. Never lets me forgive myself. Self-recrimination, remorse, regret and guilt are the constants in my life. I judge myself stiffer than anyone else ever could. When those on the outside distrust or hate my efforts to change, it really destroys my hope at becoming a better person.

Yes, what I did was very wrong and I live with that realization every day of my life. Other inmates have tried to better themselves but eventually came to believe that society doesn't think that they are any better than animals, that they are hated, and that no employer will hire them. Many return to crime when they are released. If that burden of assumed oppression could be lifted, maybe recidivism wouldn't be nearly as high.

I am trying to become a better person and will continue to educate myself. I have no prospect of material rewards for trying to do well. I do so because I want to. Because I know I made terrible mistakes, but despite those mistakes, I'm still a human being.