

Dispatch 1: Welcome to Hell

ON DECEMBER 6, 2006, I WAS TRANSFERRED FROM THE MEDIUM-SECURITY PRISON IN MEMPHIS, TENNESSEE, TO THE MEDICAL CENTER FOR FEDERAL PRISONERS IN SPRINGFIELD, MISSOURI.

The first thing I noticed upon arrival was the drastic change in temperature. In Memphis, it was so warm, I could've worn shorts on Christmas <sup>D</sup>ay, whereas here, I was greeted by an arctic blast of air as soon as I stepped off the plane. It was a good thing the transport van was waiting, otherwise I would've frozen to death, since all I had on were the khaki pants and paper-thin T-shirt I was issued back in Memphis.

Fear and uncertainty racked my body as we approached the building. The medical center is a hulking structure that reminded me of an insane asylum in an old black-and-white movie. My feelings of doom intensified as the van lurched past the gun tower, where scowling guards trained their semi-automatic rifles on us.

We drove down a steep ramp, which was surrounded by tall, thick concrete barricades, right up to the building. Then I was hustled inside, where I was processed and placed in a holding cell.

About a half-hour later, a prim and proper matron, dressed in an old-fashioned business suit that reminded

me of something Morticia Addams would wear, glided into Receiving and Discharge (R&D).

The temperature dropped forty degrees as she strode toward the holding cell.

"I'm Ms. Frost, your case manager," she said.

How appropriate, I thought.

"Grab <sup>^</sup>a bedroll and follow me," she instructed.

Out in the corridor, my brain buzzed along with the overhead fluorescent lights as a visible cloud of bleach vapors and piss and stale body odor assaulted my senses.

We made a left and headed into the endless underground tunnel that loops the buildings together, <sup>seemingly?</sup> ten in all.

Hoping to warm the frigid air between us, I asked Ms. Frost, "So what's the unit like? What should I expect?"

She cackled then said, "What did Dr. Weiner tell you? It's the AXIS II unit, **everybody** on it is unstable."

The program director, Dr. Elizabeth Weiner, <sup>d</sup>has told me to prepare to enter a chaotic, intense, and often violent environment. But I thought she was just trying to see if I were really serious about participating and not wasting her time. Thinking Ms. Frost was doing the same thing, I ignored her and walked the rest of the way in silence.

We made another sharp left when we came to an elevator. We got on and took it up one floor.

Two-One West gets its name because it's on the second floor of the first building, which ~~is~~ shares with the Special Housing Unit (SHU), and a medical chronic care unit.

Heavily tattooed and scarred convicts glared at me from behind the barred gate that separated the housing unit from the lobby. It took everything in me not to run screaming back to R&D and begging to be sent back to Memphis.

Before I could, Ms. Frost steered me into the office area to meet the treatment team: Mr. Allen, the unit manager, Ms. Knox, a DBT specialist, and Mr. Elliott, the unit counselor.

Mr. Allen was a chubby guy with a salt-and-pepper goatee and a port-wine stain birthmark covering most of the right side of his face. He smelled of cigarette smoke and spoke with a gruff tone. "I'm not here to babysit you, so don't come crying to me every time something happens to you. This is jail, not Yale." I was taken aback by his seemingly callous introduction. But as I would learn, this was all part of the tough-love approach to Dialectical Behavior Therapy treatment. By being so tough, Allen was helping the AXIS II inmates learn how to cope on their own by using DBT skills and not relying on staff. As he constantly reminded the group: An understanding ear wouldn't always be there when we left the AXIS II program, so why should he coddle us now?

Ms. Knox was the complete opposite of Allen. A pretty, petite blonde, she had a bubbly personality and was always willing to listen to participants and help in any way she could. She had a whole shelf of stress balls and other

gadgets and toys that she'd lend out as aids for the "self-soothing" skill set, which involved stimulating the five senses. She also printed out song lyrics and other info from the Internet. This made her the most popular member of the treatment team.

Mr. Elliott was a laidback dude who looked like a country version of the talk show host, Dr. Phil, wearing snakeskin cowboy boots, cowboy shirts, <sup>how rancid?</sup> and a bushy mustache. He always had a smile on his face and corny joke or a story from his own life. He also had <sup>the</sup> remarkable ability to remain calm when total chaos broke out on the unit.

Ms. Frost next led me back out of the office ~~re~~ and over to the officers' station. After I was assigned a bunk. Ms. Frost unlocked the gate and escorted me onto the unit while my new neighbors watched my every move.

Two-One West is a small unit that houses fifty inmates. It is shaped like a lowercase "t" with a twelve-man dorm to the immediate left and three two-man rooms along the right side of the hallway. The left arm branches off to a narrow hallway, which is lined with more two-man rooms and a bathroom/shower area. At the top of the "t" is a TV/conference room, where <sup>a</sup> group was help<sup>d</sup> Monday through Friday mornings. <sup>therapy?</sup>

I followed Ms. Frost into the big dorm, which contained four bunk beds located in each corner and about fifteen hospital beds arranged in a horseshoe pattern. I was assigned

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a bottom bunk on one of the bunk beds.

It was lunch time when I finished making my bed.

Although I was scared shitless, I tried to appear confident as I strolled out into the hallway to wait for the unit to be called to chow.

I ground my teeth and clenched my fists as a cold sweat poured down my back, and I tried to avoid eye contact with the natives. They stalked me as I found a place against the barred gate.

After several tense moments, a little black man wearing thick glasses and a baseball cap pulled low over his eyes broke away from the group and headed over toward me.

"I'm Radio," he said. "Welcome to Hell."