

One of the Lucky Ones: An Optimist in a System of Pessimism
By Noah Fischman

It's roughly 3:00PM on a Tuesday, November 3rd, 2020. The sky is blue, the sounds of traffic are close by, and overall the world is continuing on like nothing is amiss. I'm sat on the concrete steps leading up to the entrance of a large, bland, fortress of a building draped in dreadlocks of razorwire and clad in vibration-detecting chain-link fences. My mom and dad sit beside me as we make plans for the future and laugh at funny images on the internet, but our jovial tones are strained, forced, and my mother's voice is shaky and uneasy. We'd been told to wait while the staff changed shift, like a hotel receptionist putting a customer on hold, and a few of them even stopped as they arrived to ask what we were waiting on. We'd tell them and they'd nod with aloofness and continue on; no big deal. A terrible, gut-churning sense of inevitability looms over us like the building at our backs as the Lyft driver waits patiently in the parking lot; we know there will be one less person leaving in the car than it arrived with. Finally a staff member emerges from the entrance and tells me they're ready for me - not unlike a doctor calling for their next appointment from a waiting room - and in an instant, any semblance of joy vanishes from our faces, both my parents struggling not to break down entirely as we hug and say our goodbyes. "We'll see you soon," they say. I nod in agreement, but in that moment, the light at the end of the tunnel feels like nothing but some hopelessly abstract dream not even worth pondering - like I'll be gone forever. The guard is patient as I watch my parents walk to the lot and disappear from view and I struggle to maintain my composure, fear and uncertainty gripping me tighter and tighter by the second. Eventually I steel myself and step inside, drawing my final breaths as a free citizen. My name is Noah, and I self-surrendered for a 36-month prison sentence at age 20 for possession of child pornography. I'm one of the lucky ones.

I have a lot of reasons to consider myself a lucky or fortunate person. I'm young and in ideal health, I'm not destitute, I have a generally positive outlook on life, I derive satisfaction from my employment, and I have a healthy family and support system. Not to mention being allowed the opportunity to self-surrender for my (luckily short) federal prison term, circumventing the horror stories of federal detention centers or county jails, and even being allowed to show up to and depart from my sentencing hearing of my own volition. Between my initial arrest in March of 2019, in which I was detained for a total of maybe three hours for questioning, and my surrender to FCI Englewood's low-security compound, I've been handcuffed only twice. I may in fact be the only person on the whole complex to have taken a Lyft to prison. Although I never fact-checked it later, my attorney told me that fewer than 5% of all sentenced felons are allowed to self-surrender. I have plenty of reasons to hold my chin high.

Unfortunately, such blessings couldn't have been further from the front of my mind on that Tuesday afternoon; I had no reason not to be terrified coming into the system. For all the ugliness I would learn existed in the various pre-trial facilities throughout the country - ugliness I was fortunate to avoid - I'd also learn that they are something of an orientation for new blood; an unparalleled education in the truths and myths of the hidden society of the incarcerated that no movie or book could truly do justice. I lacked this education. I was flying blind as a bat, and as a sex-offender smart enough to recognize that sex-offenders sat low on any social hierarchy; my expectations were rather dreadful. How should I expect people to react to my charges, young age, or bisexuality? How should I handle such interactions? Would my pacifistic leaning lead to me being perceived as weak, forcing me to put on a belligerent personality that clashed starkly with my very being? Sometimes you have to adapt to survive, but who hasn't grappled with that fear that you'll betray yourself when that

test of character comes? For an optimist, I sure had a hard time seeing the possibility of an ideal outcome on any front.

As it would turn out, my first day of contact with the prison was something of an omen for many of the things I'd experience going forward, namely that the place is run with all the efficiency and grace of a Parkinson's patient learning to drive a stick-shift. I had shown up, started the process of being booked in (leading to the first round of goodbyes), then been told I'd actually have to wait for shift change, leading to my time spent outside laughing at pictures on the internet with my parents, unsupervised. Then, I was finally booked in completely (prompting the actual goodbyes) and taken into the facility's R&D (receiving and discharge) department to be processed, strip-searched, tested for COVID-19, and injected with a TB test. I was then left in a holding cell by myself for over three hours while I struggled to hold myself together. My whole life felt fruitless, like all my achievements had been rendered moot and I'd damned myself to live amidst society's dregs and wretches while its best would go on to change and thrive in the world without me. I was utterly forlorn. Later on, my first taste of prison food came through the slot in the dirty mesh door: sausage with a scoop of canned veggies, a potato, and some butter with two pieces of bread. It was colder than the bench, and the taste made me dry-heave. I knew I was at my wit's end right then, clad in stretch-fit transport clothing in shitty slip-on shoes (also called Jackie-Chans), eating food my dog would've grimaced at, and completely alone at the bottom of the world.

They say the only way to go, once you've hit rock bottom, is up. I knew my arrival at prison wouldn't be easy, but I had every intention upon coming in to make my stay as productive and meaningful as I possibly could. Once I knew there was no avoiding prison time, why not salvage what I could from it; make opportunity from misfortune? Such ambition was a core facet of my optimism, and I was eager to explore my opportunities. Turns out I'd yet to hit the real bottom though; there awaited one more exhibit of the utter dysfunction and inefficiency of the facility in my next stop after R&D: quarantine. Of course I'd had to wait two years for my sentence, only for my surrender date to land in the thick of one of the most chaotic health crises in modern history. Some staff told me it'd be a two-week quarantine, others three, one at R&D even warning that it'd be tough and to let them know if I couldn't do it. Still consciously focusing on keeping myself together, I was given a bed roll and hygiene pack consisting of chalk-like soap, shampoo, toothpaste, a toothbrush, and shaving razors that would've looked more appropriate as the toy in a McDonald's Happy Meal, and walked into the compound after dark to a gritty, dirty housing range. Looking like an old dog pound, lined with locked metal doors and narrow windows, it was quiet inside and on every door I noticed sheets of paper with different dates scrawled on them. It made sense they'd log one person or duo's starting date in quarantine so they can be cycled out after two weeks. Or three. None of the staff seemed to agree on that. I should've known it wouldn't be that simple when I noticed one door dated October 7th, with the occupant still inside. It was November 3rd then, remember? I was shuffled over to a door, stopped, turned around, shuffled to another door, stopped, and finally, after my handler consulted with another staff member, I was placed in cell #13, all the way at the end of the range, by myself with the light off. The light switch was on the outside of the cell. The cells were locked. "Holy shit," I remember thinking. "What have I gotten myself into?"

In less than six hours, I'd gone from a free man in free-man clothes breathing free-man air and eating free-man food, to a quarantined prisoner in a dark, concrete block that smelled like a men's locker room, so small I couldn't do jumping jacks, never more than five feet from the (uncovered) toilet. Welcome to the real bottom.

I'd later overhear from other inmates in quarantine that had come from the Special Housing Unit - the actual punitive unit meant to be a punishment sufficient to scare inmates into submission - that they **preferred** the SHU over quarantine. There was no recreation time; the commissary list (which came on Mondays, so I had to wait a full six days after arriving to acquire any property) was laughably small; the windows were double-meshed and so rusty that actually seeing outside, as well as getting fresh air, was a challenge; guards made rounds at unpredictable and sporadic intervals, sometimes disappearing entirely for hours at a time over the weekends and only returning to deliver chow, which was often cold and dry from sitting too long. Beyond that, inmates had to share a living space barely bigger than a pickup truck bed with another person they may not even get along with. We were let out of the cell onto the range for a maximum of maybe 45 minutes a **week** for a fifteen-minute shower, Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. Every day brought a new series of unknowns and inconsistencies and all of us were hopelessly at the mercy of every bump in the road. Sometimes it seems like much of life flies by in a blur, but in here, with so much nothingness and my mind set on overdrive, the passage of time flinched to a new kind of enormity. Every minute felt impossibly punctuated as it palpably inched by sixty times, hour after hour, and day after day.

Adding to the already unbearable anxiety, stress, and new claustrophobia, I had to change cells a whopping four times; three days in cell #13 led to a morning in suicide watch, after which I was put in cell #1 on the opposite side of the hallway with Mr. M (a pseudonym, other inmates mentioned will remain anonymous out of respect), an older gentleman. This terrified me and annoyed him - I was wondering if my prior concerns were about to be validated, and Mr. M just wanted to spend his quarantine stint by himself. Not to mention, I was a sex-offender, and he was not. The combination did not please him.

By the time a week had passed from me moving in, we regarded each other as better friends than I ever imagined we would (we still greet each other in general population), and at last I had begun to glimpse some of the brighter truths of what life in FCI Englewood may have in store. Turns out the phrase "honesty is the best policy" are literally words to live by; mutual transparency abated most of the tensions and established respect - another key facet of prison etiquette - while my young age turned out to be more of a pacifying factor than anything. (Additionally, an increasing number of non-sex offenders have begun distinguishing between "touchers," who typically warrant the most open hostilities, and "clickers" like me. Whilst still lumped in with the broader "SO" category and still prone to being singled out, clickers are often paid far less heed or ignored outright.) I also simply consider myself lucky to have been celled with some like Mr. M, and I began to realize that perhaps this whole ordeal, should I play my cards right, could even be a blessing in disguise. Too bad he tested positive for COVID-19 a week in. I didn't.

Cell #1 became cell #28 at the opposite end of the range in the sectioned off "isolation: cells, somehow even more removed than the rest of the already torturously secluded living conditions. Communication from staff became so vague we couldn't even tell with certainty if our quarantine date had been reset. I'd never know though because before less than two weeks of living with Mr. M elapsed, he got taken to a makeshift COVID-19 isolation area in the FCI's gym (which I heard was later shut down by the CDC, if that tells you anything) and I got moved into cell #18 with Texas. This time, our date got reset - a week and a half of quarantine time made moot. Obviously perturbed but also better armed with basic knowledge and feeling slightly less like an anxious train wreck, the two of us wound up getting along fancifully, and we soldiered through the mind-rending conditions of isolation. I began journaling and writing stories to send home later, letters to my family, and reading faster than I thought possible; I once

finished almost ten 300-500 page books in a week.

Three weeks from the new start date came. Communication from some staff sounded mixed, as the facility was on lockdown since infection rates had spiked, but we were feeling good, eager to get out there and quell our worries of life in prison and start on our paths. Then without a word, our release date to general population came and went - along with our optimism. We didn't want to believe it, but what had been a light at the end of the tunnel had just turned into a never-ending staircase. I felt nauseated with dread and anger; not only were we not getting out of quarantine when we thought, but nobody seemed to know when. Pleading questions to medical and pill-line staff yielded indifferent "we don't know" dismissals and empty promises to ask superiors for information. Sparks of hope would ebb and flow like an emotional tide pool, and three weeks turned to four. The lockdown had been lifted but nothing changed. We passed time by shooting rubber bands into gaps in the light fixture, or playing with the screws that had been placed as wall hooks and laughed at the banter and shouting of obnoxious neighbors down the hall. The epitome of boredom manifested when I traced every single imperfection in the paint on one of the walls with a ball-point pen. Four weeks became five. The CO was suddenly rounding up quarantine inmates in the hallway with all their property, and around midday we were told to pack - this was it! We packed and waited excitedly, bantering and dreaming aloud. Minutes turned to hours however, and once again that seed of dread began to sprout. Then shift change came, and everyone was put back. We'd been faked out. "We'll be out eventually..." was all I could callously mutter.

Finally, after a total of 44 days - six and a half weeks - in quarantine, 44 days of vagueness, ignorance, frustration, and unknowns, quarantine was cleared out and we had made it to general population with our sanities (barely) intact. We were finally on our way up from the bottom.

I've taken you on this trip through the tumultuous beginning of my prison sentence to help illustrate as vividly as possible the dichotomy embodied in my mentality in prison, that of trying to maintain a positive outlook in desolate circumstances in which one has the absolute minimum of control. Control is the fulcrum from which this turns, as I've discovered; that base power to effect change in the world around us that suits our desires, however altruistic or selfish they may be. I could be something as simple as busting your ass at a given task because it instills a sense of fulfillment, or just choosing what you want to eat for your next meal. To be so completely robbed of that ability to effect change and be present in the world around oneself is truly a torture like no other I've experienced, and it was for that reason that I sought not to be content with just getting by as a lowly inmate - to quietly duck through my three years in the system and get out so I could forget it all - but to make meaning of my predicament, a resolution only bolstered by my prolonged confinement in quarantine.

As Viktor E. Frankl, Holocaust survivor and author of Man's Search for Meaning, famously states in his explorations of how man can find purpose in suffering, "everything can be taken from a man but one thing; the last of the human freedoms - to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way." These have become words to live by. They've empowered me to leverage the limited control I've regained of my life in the system and work towards bettering myself and especially helping others. After all, what better way to find meaning than to make life easier for someone else? Of course, I haven't neglected myself either. I've put myself out there socially, falling in with cadres of friends, companions, and helpers from walks of life I'd never dreamed of intermingling with - gangsters, enforcers, killers, robbers, and drug hustlers, to name some. I made myself known to the hard workers of the compound, eventually working my way up from a commendable job cleaning the chow

hall to being offered a position in the facility's education department as a clerk. Here I do my part making readily available to the population as much information and learning material as we can stockpile and helping to run the Adult Continuing Education (ACE) programs. I've even joined the psychology department's voluntary team of inmate companions for the suicide watch program, coming full-circle in a way to where I first started. I've nurtured old hobbies like exercise, writing, art, and educational reading, and learned the ins and outs of comfortable, relatively trouble-free living in prison. The simple act of showing genuine respect has gotten me further socially within the system than I ever thought possible and helped me avoid any kind of violence for a sizable fraction of my sentence thus far, a feat I consider rather impressive.

I consider myself lucky to have these opportunities to thrive, to take full advantage of the control I've been granted, and I've given myself plenty of blessings to count. Mentally however, it's not always so simple, and surrounding me at every turn are the ugly, corporeal reminders that this is still prison, and I'm not supposed to like it here. All of my belongings fit within a locker space barely bigger than a large piece of luggage. Privacy is a myth and the preferred rooms (in my opinion), the 4-man cubes, don't have doors. The color palate of the entire facility and the clothes we wear are as disgustingly bland and monochrome as a hospital waiting room. Living in a microcosm of just about every behavioral extreme imaginable, I've been the recipient of the preying of nefarious and perverted people who should probably stay locked up for far longer than they will be - of which there's no shortage here given that this is a SOMP (sex offender) yard - and friends have had to threaten to break fingers to keep hands and eyes off me while I slept. There's the constant scrutiny of the guards, cooking meals using only hot water, the lockdowns, shakedown & pat-downs, rampant drug usage, racial tensions and segregation like it's the mid-1900's, politicking over nuances like the TV room seating and who lives with who. I've listened stone-faced to the wails of savage beat downs through dayroom walls and watched drug debt collections turn physical just next door to my own room. I've been threatened with stabbing and nearly provoked into fighting over my bed assignment, and watched fights erupt over things as mundane as whether the range fans should be on and who's in line for the showers. Friends from harder yards recall instances of people being killed over seating discrepancies in the chow hall or glancing in others rooms. We as a society like to say that violence is not the answer; in prison, it's often not just the answer, it's code. It's how disagreements are handled, scores are settled, debts are absolved, and respect is earned. In every sense of the phrase, might makes right, and it's on you alone to handle your own problems and enforce your boundaries. Running to the staff or telling someone who later tells staff (also called "dry" snitching) is often grounds for beatings or ostracism, or death at many other yards.

The real pain however comes from how living in prison for any amount of time separates you from the outside world while it continues on apathetically without you, like watching your ship depart from port without you onboard. Having numerous contacts on the outside, as I do, is thus something of a double-edged sword. We want to know about what's happening in the lives of those we care about and want to feel like we're still in the loop of things, to feel involved and in the present as we once were. At the same time, every update from friends or family is a new spike of heartache, a fresh reminder of the life and happiness I've been forced to forsake - that horrible depravation of control made manifest in yet another twist of the knife. Having access to the Corrlinks email system as a sex-offender is a rare blessing I'm lucky to have, but it's a cumbersome system in its own way, sometimes feeling less like a convenient alternative to the phone or snail mail and more like casting a line and hoping for a bite, with every moment spent waiting reminding me that I'm stuck in this hole in the ground and I'm only going to have contact with the outside world when someone goes out of their way to visit that

hole. For all the callousness I've developed to the spartan living conditions and barbaric communal norms, this is one wound that seems paradoxically aggravated by its own balm.

Don't get me wrong, I acknowledge entirely that I'm the one who put me in this predicament to begin with, and it's important to me that others know I've long since owned up to my mistakes. Although I was still a minor when I was first exposed to child pornography, I don't pretend to know whether or not I'd have still viewed it when I was arrested at 19 without this early exposure, and this has been a necessary intervention. Even before I was sentenced, the tangible awareness of authorities and looming threat of prison had been a necessary slap across the face for me to get my shit together and stay away from such things. If prison alone is meant to make me never want to reoffend, it's done its job and then some, and I look forward to the day I can recall all of this as simply a memorable experience. In the meantime though, I have two choices before me: feel bad for myself and mope my way through my sentence as the dreg I feared living among, or leverage what I've been presented with and, as Frankl says, choose my own way.

After all, I am one of the lucky ones.