

The moments fly-a minute's gone;
The minutes fly-an hour is run;
The day is fled-the night is here;
Thus flies a week, a month, a year!
-Author unknown

One Man's Journey

My name is Sean Joseph Bates and, on a hot day in July, I lost my freedom. I was removed from the law-abiding society I once knew. Later, this day would be referred to as, "the day I fell." This is not a story about my innocence, or a tall tale about our justice system, or a chronicle of double-dealing court-appointed lawyers. This is not about the daisy chain of regrets that haunt me: "I should have..." or "I would have, if only..." or "I could have, if only my lawyer..." In the end, we all know who is responsible for Sean Joseph Bates. I made choices in life - right, wrong, and indifferent - and there were consequences for my decisions and actions. I fell. And then I had to learn to get back up. The following accounts are adapted from the daily journals I wrote on and after July 9, 2013.

July 9, 2013. A Tuesday. The temperature is hovering right about Crayola meltdown in the parking lot I am standing in. I have just finished my final day of a wonderful and exciting 20 year career as an In-Home Appliance Technician. The polite police officer is doing his job and taking me into custody. I am thinking about that crayon melting on the asphalt and how it will never do the job it was made to do again. I have been to jail a couple of times before - both times alcohol related - but nothing longer than a weekend. I am not worried. This has to be a mistake.

Anyone who has ever been to jail knows what an assault to the senses it is. The noise is a mixture of casino and asylum. The visuals are intensely contrasting. Bright lights and dull gray concrete everywhere. The smell is a real gut punch. It literally takes your breath away. A combination of disinfectants, fish, body odor, the concentrated confinement of hundreds of detoxing men, and whatever despair and shame smell like. I have never been able to get used to it. I still make the same scrunchy face my dog did when she sniffed something rotten.

I languish in county jail for 421 days - enduring horrific food, all the brackish water I could drink, and losing all memory of sitting in comfortable furniture. I learn how to cook my food in a sink, drink warm metallic water, interpret jailhouse politics, interact with the mentally ill and criminally insane, sleep with the lights on, and live in the kind of filth only a lit match could clean. I make a final attempt to plead my case, and a jury of my peers decides to introduce me to the next phase of my life. Prison.

The Sheriff's department proceeds to educate me on the definition of humility. Or maybe it's humiliation? I am told to strip naked alongside two dozen representatives of society's finest. A bear in a deputy uniform looks in my hair and mouth, under my tongue and sack, then tells me to turn around and spread so he can look where no sun has ever shone. Then, following our brief courtship, he gifts me a bright orange suit that I am sure is meant for someone a foot shorter and twice my weight. When I suggest there must be a mistake, and helpfully provide my measurements - six foot and a buck fifty - the bear assures me that he doesn't make mistakes. I am still standing

in my birthday suit, waiting for underwear and socks, but I am quickly apprised that the orange circus tent with holes in it and a pair of plastic sandals represents my complete ensemble. Until the bear brings out the accompanying jewelry - bracelets, anklets, and a biker-looking chain belt. While these are being applied, I check my new ID. There is no label to indicate I am hearing-impaired, but Yogi insists on treating me like I'm deaf. I think he is afraid I will lose my new jewelry because he makes sure everything is plenty tight.

After being in jail for over a year, I'm a little pale. A nine hour carnival ride in a prison bus adds some color - nice hues of purple, blue, and blood red. I wish I had used the restroom before I left.

September 3, 2014. Wednesday. Today is both physically and mentally mixed with pleasure and pain. I arrive at Shelton - home of the Washington Correction Center (WCC). Anxiety at an all-time high. My ankles and wrists numb and bleeding. And then, for the first time in 421 days, the sun shines on my face. It is like an angel blowing warm kisses on my cheeks. And then I enter the reception building. A correctional officer removes my restraints and I start to recover some feeling in my fingers and toes. I am herded down a tunnel along with the other cattle, under the prison grounds, and out into daylight again. I waddle across what looks like an abandoned parking lot. I am in no hurry, because the jukebox in my head is playing, "You are my sunshine, my only sunshine, you make me happy when skies are gray..."

Another building. At least this one has windows. A bulldog of a man bestows us with a sort of tutorial. There are rules at this establishment. When he is done barking, a couple of his pups empty a bag of soiled underwear,

t-shirts, and socks onto an equally soiled sheet. Some of my fellow travelers dive right in - like my son dives into the ball pit at a games center. I just stand in horror and befuddlement, trying to understand. Maybe I'm not too bright, or just slow to react. But, when the dust clears, I am wearing undergarments that were previously owned by someone who definitely liked to eat and apparently had hygiene issues.

Shelton is an intake center. It has a small long-term population, but it is primarily a temporary storage facility where they evaluate new arrivals via interviews and tests. Normally, inmates stay a few weeks at most. Most of WCC is comprised of two sets of R units - the 'Lower Rs' are numbered 1-3, and the 'Upper Rs' are numbered 4-6. I am sent to R-4. My cell has a narrow window that opens, and I can see birds outside, and an exercise yard and a gym. A loudspeaker in the cell plays music from a local radio station. There are Friday night movies, and fresh fruits and vegetables with the meals. The overhead lights shut off at 10pm. The distinctive prison smell never goes away, but I find myself on some level of happiness. Perception and perspective are two words that Merriam-Webster and I agree on.

I reside at Shelton for seven weeks. There are tests, of course. A physical, which reminds me of the one I had in order to play 7th grade tackle football. And mental evaluations, which confirm my suspicion that nobody in their right mind would work here.

I am learning patience. Nothing happens fast in the Department of Corrections. At least, nothing happens fast if you behave yourself and follow the rules. Those who misbehave and break the rules are treated to a remarkable show of speed from a bunch of unfit, overweight, state employees with very bad attitudes.

I 'pass' my tests and I am rewarded with an assignment to a "Mother Institution." So I graduate WCC and now it's time to visit mom.

October 23, 2014. Wednesday night. A guard slides my luggage under the door. A size-86 brown paper bag. If I place everything I own in the world in this bag, it would not only fit quite easily, but I might still be able to slide it back under the door. But my luggage is also my ticket. Written in black Sharpie on the bag: "CRCC BATES #375510." The name and number is me, of course. But what does the acronym stand for? A gentleman in the cell across from me - studying at WCC for his third semester - helpfully informs me that CRCC is Coyote Ridge Corrections Center. A prison located out East in some backwater, banjo-plucking town called Connell. He asks me if I ever heard of it, but I barely hear him because all the blood is draining from my head and my ears are ringing.

Connell, Washington. The same small Eastern Washington farming town where I grew up and spent the first 16 years of my currently 52-year old life... where I could see the prison from my childhood home... where my ex-girlfriend's dad sold the State the land that the prison is built on... where I personally knew countless correctional officers, staff, counselors, administrators, nurses, and teachers.

This has to be a mistake!

I try to tell someone, anyone in authority. But now it's them who seem to be hearing-impaired, because nothing seems to register. So I lie in bed, staring at the ceiling, barely able to contain my excitement for another 8-9 hour 'chain bus' ride. Followed by what I am 99.9% sure will be a return trip when DOC figures out their mistake.

I eventually doze off around 2am. At 2:30am my cell door opens and the most recent graduate from The Emma DuPont School of Etiquette instructs me to get dressed, roll up my bedding, pack my things, and be ready to leave in two minutes. The instructions do not allow me to brush my teeth, comb my hair, or - most notably - use the toilet. And, as usual, it's a case of hurry up to wait. Because, at 3:30am, I'm still at WCC, sitting in the 'departure lounge' on a cold concrete block, with no underwear or socks. I am handed a bag containing two peanut butter sandwiches, a brownie, and a pack of plain Sunchips. Breakfast. I try to eat the brownie but it resists, being colder than I am. I roll one of the peanut butter packs in my hands in an attempt to unthaw it, but only succeed in making my hands numb.

Another etiquette graduate arrives with more instructions, which he delivers loudly, repeats loudly, and then emphasizes by warning he will only say this stuff once. More importantly, I manage to use the restroom before I leave. I have not had anything to eat or drink since 4pm last night, so I figure I'll be okay for the trip. In the event I needed to go to the bathroom again, I would have to perform a Houdini-like operation to somehow get my jumpsuit down below my belly-chain while my wrists were still shackled to it. Fortunately, the need never arose and the trick remains a mystery.

October 24, 2014. Thursday. I arrive at Coyote Ridge Correctional Center around noon. I am tired and ragged and just want to sleep. Instead, I have to model my birthday suit again and convince my audience that I don't have any tattoos. I assure the corrections officer that, if I did have a tattoo, I would not have put it down there. He may be tired after a long night, or he may be simply devoid of humor, but his demeanor makes it clear no further comments from me are welcome.

I am issued a bag of clean cloths. Actual cloths. Pants. A T-shirt. And, for the first time in over 15 months, I put on socks and underwear that have not been previously worn or defiled by anyone else. "Perspective" kicks in again, and I climb to a rung on the ladder of happiness that borders on excitement.

I am sent to E-Unit, B-side, Cell 3, lower bunk. Sounds easy enough.

Coyote Ridge Corrections Center is what a community college on the moon would look like - plus razor wire, minus intelligent design. Everything is gray. Blocky gray concrete buildings in a vast ocean of gray gravel and gray walkways. Almost no plant life or color to be seen. It is a depressed giant's anti-Zen garden - lots of rocks and constantly-raked gravel, producing the exact opposite of peace, tranquility, and aesthetic beauty.

Someone in a control room buzzes the door open and I emerge into the moonscape. Getting to E unit involves working out that the buildings are labeled in a vaguely alphabetical order, but mostly just following the inmates who seem to have been here before and know where they're going. But, on the way through the gray, there's a surprise.

I see a couple of puppies. I am a huge dog lover, so my emotions ride a sudden rollercoaster. I miss my own puppy. These puppies are so cute. This place looks like hell, but how can it be hell if there are puppies? Wait, why are there puppies in prison? Have these puppies broken the law?

I have to get off the puppy rollercoaster, though, because I am almost out of walkway and, looming ahead of me, is a large concrete building with the letter E painted on it. One of my favorite childhood authors, Shel Silverstein, comes to mind. My heart is pounding as I walk through two sets

of doors, down a short hallway, and into what I will grudgingly call home for the next 13 months. The first things that greets me is the smell. But I built up my tolerance in county jail, so this gut-punch of an odor doesn't hurt as bad.

I am now officially at my "Mother Institution," housed in a Medium Security unit on one side of the fence that divides the facility's four Medium and four Minimum security units. There's an unnecessarily complicated 'points' system that determines an inmate's custody level. An average inmate arriving fresh from Shelton usually ends up with 55 points - one point short of Minimum level. Then they meet with a Facility Risk Management Team to determine what happens next.

I will see the FRMT in a week or so. But, first, I meet the Unit Sergeant and acquire a key to my new home. The sergeant also gives me a basic tutorial, a small verbal list of expectations, and what passes for a welcome to E-Unit. I step into the B-side and get hit with the smell. Of course. Trying to breathe through my mouth, I locate cell number 3 and walk over to the door. Everyone in the dayroom stares at me, simply because I am new. The cell is empty, although the lower bunk (which I have been assigned) has quite a few personal belongings spread all over it, and there's an assortment of food, hygiene, and magazines on the top bunk.

One of the most basic and fundamental rules for survival in prison is: if it's not yours, DO NOT TOUCH! So I set my luggage, aka the paper sack, and my bedroll on the floor. The two-man cell is somewhat standard: a toilet, a table-and-seat combo bolted to a concrete wall, a 12"x18" window, and bunk-beds. The entire space is approximately 8' wide and 13' long. So, I will essentially be living in a Texaco bathroom.

There's not much else to see or do in the cell for now, so I venture into the dayroom. It's noisy, with usually fifty-plus inmates scattered around, sitting at tables or loitering in different areas, all having conversations at various volume levels. There are plenty of card games, dominoes, and the occasional board game being played. The dayroom is split, ten tables on one side and ten on the other. There are two phone hubs, one for each side, each with five payphones. There are two tiers, and each tier has thirty two cells and eight shower stalls, plus some small offices and storage rooms. On one side of the dayroom is a kitchenette area with a hot water dispenser, an ice machine, and a microwave. One microwave... for 128 people.

Okay, so back at my cell, the door is open and my cellmate - or "celly" is back. He is, in fact, going through my meager possessions! I introduce myself, but all the vertically-challenged Vietnamese man says is "uh huh, uh huh, got any coffee?" I inquire about my bunk, and am informed bluntly that I can take the top one. Obviously, I'm not going to be allowed the lower bunk I was assigned. But a bed is a bed, so I start getting my mattress and blankets laid out and set up. My angry little celly asks for coffee. I have some, but I tell him I need to make it last until I can buy more, so I can't give him any. This is not what he wants to hear, and he responds angrily, "that is why you lose war, cause you afraid to die, I not afraid to die."

And that's my welcome to E-Unit - which, I will find out is what's known as a "gladiator" unit, with fights occurring almost every day.

A few days later, I am introduced to what is euphemistically known as the Facility Risk Management Team. It consists of a half dozen people" administrative staff, counselors, and a sergeant. I immediately inform them about my potentially problematic placement at a facility where I literally grew

up exactly where they are now sitting, and where I know so many people, such as this person, this person, that person, etc. I let them know I have not unpacked anything and I'm ready for them to ship me out again to a different prison. Their response is, "We'll let you know." Eight years later, guess where I still am?

But, 15 months after my first FRMT meeting in E-Unit, I am indeed packing my bags and moving. Not to a different prison, but to a different custody level. All the way to the other side of the compound, to one of the Minimum security units. The days of my brown paper bag luggage are gone, and now thanks to the love of my step-mom - I need a 120 gallon plastic-dumpster on-wheels to haul my possessions. (My birth mother, who lives in Connell, has yet to visit me. Maybe next week? But she's been saying that for roughly nine years now.)

January 15, 2016. Still at Coyote Ridge Corrections Center, I arrive in G-Unit. There's a feeling of *déjà vu*. My heart is doing its best Alex Van Halen imitation and that is the only thing I hear and feel walking down the hallway. I must be close, because I smell dead fish dying a few more deaths. Upon entering I am greeted by a surprisingly cheerful old chap of a correctional officer with a gravelly voice. He gives me the standard do's and don'ts list and informs me this is an honor pod (only those with a minimal infraction history allowed). After he is done with his Cliff Note version of expectations, I take a tour of G-Unit. The layout is very similar to the unit I just left - prisons are not known for their design flare, and generally focus on the major theme of confinement. There is a different vibe though, brighter and more laid back. Partly, this is due to the sunlight entering the unit through a window grid on one of the walls - on the other side of

which is a "fresh air pad," also known as a "unit yard," approximately 24'x24' with two prison-issue picnic tables and an exercise bar. Ah, the luxuries of Minimum security. The dayroom is also a little different than the one I just left. There is an additional microwave, making a grand total of two. Also, a mobile book cart with 100 or so books available, a ping-pong table, and two J-Pay kiosks (for inmate e-mail and entertainment downloads). There are 4 'public' bathroom/shower areas - two upstairs and two downstairs - because these Minimum security cells don't have toilets built-in. On one hand, this means I don't have to live in a bathroom anymore. Yay. On the other hand... that's 128 inmates sharing 8 toilets. Oh, boy.

At this point in my life, I have spent most of my 40s and soon to be half of my 50s in prison. This was obviously not in the plan I had for my life. However, after drinking hard spirits daily for twenty-plus years, I can honestly say prison probably saved my life. I have now been sober for 112 months. And half that time was spent clearing the cobwebs and learning to think clearly again. I was practicing self-denial for the first few years. It had to be somebody's fault I felt like this. I was lost "like tears in the rain" (as Rutger Hauer put it so eloquently in the movie Blade Runner). I was stuck. Time was moving in one direction and my memories in another. Something had to change. In prison, everything is cold, hard, gray - and I was slowly conforming to my environment. I decided to resist and found a "real job" in prison. There are not many available. But I found something to occupy my time and the space in my head. Working in Textiles, my "real job" occupied 6-7 hours of the day. The problem was the remaining 9-10 hours. And I realized there was a lot more real estate in my head than there used to be. So I enrolled in college - and with work, school, and homework, I fill my days up pretty well.

There was a time I could not have imagined spending a single month in jail. Now with 112 months in the rearview mirror and less than 16 to go, I can see light at the end of this journey. My time in prison has been far from pleasant. I've spent 9 years or so fighting the frustrating bureaucracy of the CRCC mailroom, but I have never been in a physical altercation or received a single infraction. I give all that glory to God.

I have kept a daily journal of my trials and tribulations. In the beginning, it was to help with my memory. Later, it became a reliever of stress. It is a way to express my thoughts and poems - and a way to remember when to get new underwear and socks. It's always the little things that matter. And perspective. And, today, I am okay.

This was one man's journey and I leave you with a poem from my journal.

THE RAVEN

My world, neither flat nor round, encompasses two windows.
One is a 17" babysitter for the mind and contains the faults of men.
The other is a 12" view to my soul where my dreams slip away on the violet
tips of a Raven wing and harbor the fault of only one man.

SJB