



Hector Ortiz

The Endless Middle

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From the outside, the transport bus that carried me from one solitary unit to another at a different facility resembled a Greyhound, but the seats were hard plastic. In the back, in the place of where a seat would be, there was an open toilet that sloshed on every bump, filling the air with the pungent scent of urinal cake and pounds of ripe excrement. I was one of 40 prisoners wearing an orange jumpsuit, belly chains, wrists cuffed to the waist, and leg irons. None of us had seat belts. When I arrived at my new destination, it looked exactly like the Segregation Unit I had just left: another prison within a prison. *Did they just drive in a big circle?* I wondered.

As I settled into my new cell, lunch arrived, according to the typical solitary mealtime process: The guard screams "mainline!" and if you're not standing on a yellow line near the door as the meal cart goes by, it keeps going. Food portions were small, and I remained hungry from one tray to the next, waiting for my next meal like a starved dog in a kennel. One bright spot was that my window was not completely blacked out. A thick, long scratch in the exterior latex coating offered a glimpse of a different reality. Standing on tiptoes on my bunk, I could make out people walking to and from their cars in a distant parking lot. I imagined what their lives were like, and if they even knew I existed. Hours would pass, and my toes went numb.

Human contact was sparse. Each week offered five one-hour sessions of recreation, and three ten-minute opportunities to shower. I was placed on a leash by the guards and walked like a dog to my destination. Before the leash could be attached, I had to squat awkwardly, extending my arms straight back through the food port in the center of the door so they could handcuff me from the outside. Before escorting me to or from my cell, the two-man team would perform a dehumanizing strip search. "Show me the nasty," they'd say, laughing.

Recreation involved being taken to another concrete box called "the yard," which, despite its name, had no grass. The '80s style payphone housed in a crude steel cage by the door was our only means of contacting the outside world. I spent

most of my hour on the phone, or sometimes doing a few pull ups on a bar in the yard. All year round, an old dirty jacket lay on the ground, for use by all in case it got cold. A small mesh grate in the top corner of the room provided a peek at the sky, where I hoped to see a plane or bird. I never did. Occasionally, instead of recreation time, I might have a one-hour visit with my mom and little sister, separated by glass.

The screams and rants of other prisoners echoed into the night, accompanied by the pounding on their steel doors. Walkie-talkies crackled, keys jingled, a fluorescent light that never went dark hummed incessantly, and more and more often, I thought of killing myself. Maybe I was already dead and this was hell, I thought. At some point, I don't remember when, I realized I needed a routine to stay alive and sane. So I created one. I woke up to guards slamming steel trap doors and yelling several pods away, giving me a 10-to 15-minute head start on a workout: pushups and sit-ups one day, and squats and calf raises the next. Afterwards, I would read the Bible, one of only two books allowed in my cell. I spent the next several hours writing, recording my dreams, ambitions, and thoughts, and periodically stretching. After lunch I would read the second book, a novel, which I got to switch out once a week: I usually picked a western, sometimes sci-fi if I felt like taking a risk. As I read, some men played chess from cell to cell, yelling the piece and space number back-and-forth. After recreation time, I spent my evenings with a disappointing dinner and my book. Then, I tried to sleep under the fluorescent lights.

My family doesn't understand when I explain that my memories of that time are blurred. They have months or years of distinct memories. In solitary, I only had one. Each day was the same, and began with the worst part: waking up. "Nothing" happens each moment of every day. Yet in those moments of nothingness, the absence of life, happiness, and experience gives birth to misery and despair—the torture of knowing that your life is worth nothing, that it holds nothing: no casual conversations with a neighbor or coworker, no hugs from friends and family, no kisses from a spouse. There is nothing left but bare

survival.

