

~~GREY GOOSE\*~~

The Wheels On The Bus

I've been at Kern Valley State Prison's maximum security facility going on seven years now, prior to COVID. Even after my annual opportunity to be transferred to a lower-level facility due to good behavior presented itself, I elected to remain here due to the unique educational programs available that would increase my employment options and my chances of a successful re-entry back into the community once paroled - or at least that's what I told myself. The reasoning behind my decision to stay was valid, yet after examining feelings of regret, I discovered my reasonings were, in part, an excuse I clung to as a means to avoid a deeper issue: The California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation's transportation experience. After speaking to a few people, I learned I wasn't the only one who wrestled with feelings of apprehension when it came to transferring out to another prison. Even if that transfer was to a better place, we thought twice. So I questioned, is this really a thing? The answer, for me, required an evaluation of past experiences. 51

CDCR transportation trips are exhilarating, exhaustive, anxiety-filled experiences all wrapped into one. Every ride triggers internal conflict, as the entire song and dance of it all requires a level of mental preparation needed for what felt like an assault on the senses. This can be huge for someone living in an environment of confinement, a place so structured that monotony becomes a literal way of life. It seeps into daily routines that can resemble obsessive-compulsive behaviors.

At specific times, day after day, 365 days a year, unless locked down, a rigid program is adhered to, courtesy of the prison. Within this tight program, I've developed a habit of waking up at the same time in the early morning, ensuring items within my small space are removed and cleaned, along with the area, and then placed back into their designated places. Coffee gets made and drunk at the same time, and bedding gets washed once a week, every Saturday, at the same time. I've grown so accustomed to performing these habits, if/when imposed upon or forced to deviate due to an outside influence, I'm uncomfortable, because not being in control of my life causes me to hyperfocus on the little things I can control, namely what I do with my time. 135

I've been a CDCR prisoner for over 20 years for a gang-related homicide I committed as a teenager. I've had my fair share of high-powered bus rides from one prison to the other. However, my experience with transportation prior to CDCR in no way prepared me for what was to be expected. It began back in the Los Angeles County Jail, while going through the slow process of dealing with my criminal case. Bus rides to court then were a welcome escape from the medieval conditions of the county jail environment, where guards conducted themselves like Gestapo and where men devolved into animals, where they went without sunlight or fresh air, were forced to consume rancid water, and commonly had to fight off rats or staph bacterial skin infections. Living in those unsanitary six to four-man cell-dungeons 24 hours a day took heavy psychological tolls.

We looked forward to those monthly/bimonthly court trips for multiple reasons, but my favorite were the brief one to two minute window of being escorted from the county jail through the parking lot onto the awaiting bus. We're already handcuffed and secured, and in that moment, nothing else matters because for those one or two minutes, you're exposed to fresh morning air. If you're lucky, there aren't any clouds in the sky blocking the sun's rays from reaching your skin. 81

Then there's the co-ed aspect. The county jail also housed women prisoners in a different section, and sometimes we shared bus rides to court. Women were always placed at the back of the bus and separated by a locked metal gate with holes big enough to see one another. This was a treat for both sides, and someone from the outside 67

looking in might label these encounters as rowdy and explicit, but I saw them as special occasions lonely humans living under unnatural circumstances used to express what came naturally when deprived opposite sexes met. Confinement, I learned, had this way of activating our most primal instincts, specifically a "so close yet so far away" type of thing, which for us only enhanced the attraction. The LA County Jail bus drivers didn't seem to mind the excitement either. 77

CDCR's approach to prisoner transfers are militant, anti-coed, and are strategically grounded in degradation and instilling fear of receiving great bodily injury. Before being placed on a prison bus, you're strip searched, made to squat and cough, then instructed to bend over and spread your buttocks so they can look at you with a flashlight to ensure you aren't hiding contraband or weapons. From there, you're shackled from your ankles up to your wrist by strangers with hostile demeanors who wear harsh gazes to match. Next, they lead you onto the bus before delivering their spiel about the rules of the bus ride. This includes, "We don't give warning shots; we shoot you, and that's it" and "Shut the fuck up while the bus is moving. If you can't do that, we'll pull the bus over, take you off, fuck you up on the side of the road, and then put you back on," intense language used to ensure compliance. They create a tense atmosphere that makes you feel small and powerless. In these situations, I detach myself mentally by focusing either on the future or on past conversations with a loved one. 114

In total, there are three armed guards. Two sit at the front and one rides at the very back, perched in this gated cubicle area with his shotgun at the ready. You wonder, if the guy next to you starts fighting and the guard decides to shoot, will I also be hit by the powerful buckshots? When traveling, I'm in this perpetual state of mental and physical discomfort because buses are fitted with one-size-fits-all metal seats. Combined with being shackled, it drastically reduces blood circulation. As a result, your hands, buttocks and feet are constantly going numb, so you adjust - left buttock, right buttock, rotate wrist, rotate ankles, then repeat for hours. Skin breaks. Sometimes you bleed; sometimes you don't. 115

Despite the negatives, there's an upside to these trips that for some can outweigh the bad. The number one upside is you get to see the outside world. There is an absolute beauty in seeing people go about their lives one doesn't appreciate until the gift of doing the same is removed. Little things like a person pumping gas at a gas station; a couple holding hands; kids playing at the park; or someone simply sitting at a bus stop triggers envy or nostalgia. Once I transferred during the holiday season. We drove through a town dripping with Christmas decorations. There were wreaths, faux snow sprayed on business windows with depictions of St. Nick, reindeer, and Xmas trees everywhere. At that time, this was something I hadn't seen up close in almost a decade, and even longer now, but for someone raised in a home with a parent who went all out every holiday season, this was an awesome sight. That trip back in 2009 is etched into my memory as one of the top three best experiences ever. It provided an escape during a time of year that coincides with many of my favorite childhood memories. 116

I am a creature of habit who values the small comforts afforded me in a place like this. I am also institutionalized. Sudden change or an onslaught of multiple stimuli that come with being relocated from one prison to another activates anxieties, especially when those outside influences are designed to degrade. However, I've slowly come to terms with the underlying causes of those ill feelings, and I've concluded that almost 20 years of living on these high security Level 4 yards has gotten old. The few hours of discomfort via a CDCR bus ride is worth taking it on the chin to reach my upcoming Level 3 destination, where the next leg of this lifer's journey towards freedom will absolutely increase my chances of success when paroled. 117

By Emmanuel G. Vaughn

\* An old-school slang description once used by prisoners to refer to state prison transportation buses. 118