

Irreparable Good Man

By

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I weighed just 155 pounds. I stood 5'5". I sat there on the floor, my chin resting on my knees and my back against the graffiti-sprawled concrete wall. A wall that separated a rusty toilet from the rest of the men. The recycled air, stale and polluted with cigarette smoke and the monotone voices of dozens of men, each struggling to hide their nervousness by laughing and lying to each other. Trying to kill time—while waiting to hear their names for their day in court. Some spoke Spanish, some Vietnamese, but everyone cussed in English. I was surrounded by predators and giants. Intimidated I sat watching quietly, waiting. The holding cell was cold; the loud, senseless talk was maddening the overcrowding suffocating. It was a room made for twenty people; but today there were bodies packed everywhere and it stunk. There was a pungent smell, a mix of stress, funk, and ass—with a hint of disinfectant.

I spent three hours in that once white room, reading and re-reading old, peeling graffiti, counting cracks in the walls and floor, studying the worried faces of the men before my state appointed lawyer, Mr. Goran appeared at the holding cell bars. His slender six-foot-four framed topped by grayish curly hair, and his ashy white skin sharply draped in a light blue suit. He wore expensive shiny black shoes. I watched him search the holding cell for me as I navigated the crowd of bodies, making my way to the opposite side of the bars directly in front of him. As if on cue, the room went quiet. There was no privacy there. This was our second meeting during the month that I had been in jail. I examined his face for a hint of good news, but it was without emotion void. Mr. Goran was stoic. He started to whisper as I leaned in closer. He did not say hello, or ask how

I was holding up. In a matter-of-fact tone he muttered, “*The District Attorney has decided to seek the death penalty.*” There was no break in his voice, no sympathy, no humanity. “*I will try to come by the jail tonight to discuss our options.*” He continued. “Our Options” I repeated his words in my mind. I was trying to process his last statement, “death penalty?” when he looked down at his watch and just as quickly as he had come—he was gone.

I watched him walk away. I watched as long as I could before he was out of my sight and I could only hear his shoes click around the corner and down the corridor. I was afraid to turn around and face the stares of those strangers in the holding cell. I gripped the bars to steady my feet. My heart pounded hard in my chest and loud in my ears. This was not real, I kept telling myself, “*This isn’t real*”. Somehow, I found my place back on the floor, placed my back against the wall and tucked my knees as close as I could in to my chest. This time, I buried my head into my folded arms and did exactly what any eighteen year old would do facing the death penalty.

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For two excruciating years, I waited for trial, making many more trips to that crowded holding cell. I thought of suicide more times than I could remember, but like everything else in my life I couldn’t even get that right. The two years I spent in jail were a precursor to prison, a breeding ground for ignorance and racism. Jail introduced me to being called the word “nigger”! Not once or twice, but constantly. I had the word hurled at me so many times that I used to joke it was my middle name. Jails are backward places where everything is segregated the dorms, yard time, showers and the collect call phones. Prison politics encourages it, and the prisoners enforce it. On those rare, “oops” moments when the deputy would open the wrong door during another

times all hell would break loose. Since the first day I stepped foot in jail it has been hunting season on Blacks. I was warned never get caught alone.

Nothing about jail was easy. Three months into my 19th birthday I was involved in my first race riot-- coming back from Church, I was suddenly caught in the dorms vestibule, while another dorm was coming in from the roof. Outnumbered I swung at everything and everybody with my Bible. Thank God for hardback books. Because of my size and age, I was bullied and embarrassed. I lived in constant fear and stress. I walked on eggshells in the dorms, careful not to get in anybody's way. One morning an older man talked to me so bad just for sitting on his bed, that from a distance you would have thought that I came out of his testicles. Once going to visit Mr. Goran a deputy yanked me out of line and off my feet by my neck. I learned a valuable lesson through that experience; if a deputy ask you " *where are you going?*" Never ever, respond with "*where do you think I'm going?*" It just is not a good idea.

While in the county jail, I had a little bit of everything imaginable thrown at me or on me: hard plastic cups, a bar of Ivory soap, hot water, hot liquid detergent, a bag of piss and a couple things I will keep between God and myself. Confused and depressed, I was an emotional wreck when I finally made it to trial. Not only could I not focus on the trial, but I had not even begun to focus on why I was in jail in the first place. Trial lasted a month. It was a blur of testimony. There were multiple theories of guilt Natural and Probable Consequences, Special Circumstances allegations, felony murder rules, and "*every man for himself.*" Wrapped in an ill-prepared defense. The jury deliberated for two days, two long days that resulted in guilty verdict on every single count.

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I was ushered into the courtroom from that same holding cell that I had become so familiar with in the two years I had been in jail. My jumpsuit was bright orange and three sizes too big. I wouldn't be wearing my personal clothes on sentencing day. Shackled at the ankles with my wrist cuffed in the front, I walked slowly into the courtroom. The shackles were tight. They cut into my skin leaving red welts around my ankles, and clinking with every step.

I was seated in a wooden chair, and pushed up to the defense table next to Mr. Goran. He ignored me silently perusing over his notes. After a minute he simply said, "How are you holding up?" I managed a "fine". "Good man" he responded. Mr. Goran leaned in close to me. He had a secret. "I'm going to ask the court one more time for a new trial or a lesser sentence." I stiffened in my seat. Just the mention of a new trial gave me a slither of hope. I let my mind drift.

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I could not sleep the night before trial. I sat at the desk in my dimly lit cell imagining how great it would be if they would let me go home. In my mind, I saw myself at the park playing basketball with my friends. My last good memory before being arrested. I thought about school the summer before and my guidance counselor telling me that if I applied myself I could be a good student. I imagined myself sitting in class, listening to the professor, taking notes, periodically peeking at the clock. It was almost over. I thought to myself *I'm going home*.

I heard voices around me murmuring I stopped listening, tuned them out. I didn't want to be there. I concentrated on the clock, watching the hands tick by. My concentration was broken when I felt Mr. Goran squeeze my shoulder and explain to the court why I should have a new trial. As if for the first time, I looked up. The courtroom was crowded. I scanned the faces. Everyone was tense, tight jawed, somber. No one would meet my gaze except my mom. She was

sitting two rows behind me. Our eyes locked for a moment and she gave me a reassuring look that everything would be okay then motioned with her head to face forward. Mr. Goran continued to plead for a new trial while the judge listened. From the bench, he looked large and un-interested in the whole routine. He was older, in his late 60's with white hair and wore wired rimmed glasses that indented the bridge of his nose. He remained silent while Mr. Goran spoke, contemplating before looking directly towards me.

“Life without Parole” Those three words cut deep into my chest. They reverberated up my spine, crawled like spiders over my head, into my eyes and face and into my mouth. I promised my mom I would be strong, I remembered, fighting back my tears. Life without Parole. In that instant, it all became clear to me I had no value, I was diseased, hopeless and being sent away to die.

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Hidden under the menacing nighttime shadows of the December clouds, the prison resembled a medieval castle with iron bars, huge granite stone blocks, and an enormous King Kong Door that kept the peering eyes out and kept the monster in. Shackled, waist chains, hands cuffed in front. I shivered at the prison gate from a mix of fear and cold air. *Its giants here*, I thought nervously. To this day people shake their heads sympathetically whenever I mentioned that I started my sentence at New Folsom. I use to describe the experience as a long drawn out *nightmare*; while at other times, I would brag, referring to Folsom as *my alma mater*. Sometimes I would rationalize suggesting, *everyone should start there, and learn how to do time*. The truth is it was a traumatic experience; Folsom was the most violent and predatory place you could dump a 20-year-old first termer.

In Folsom everything and everyone seemed big to me; the yard, the cells, the weight pile was so huge it looked like a full-scale construction site, with all the iron bars and plates laying around. The men would lift, pull, grunt, and cuss at the weights day in and day out, and the weights would clink, clank, and clunk—cussing the men right back. Both the guards and prisoners looked like they were made for the place, they were Giants. In my young mind, I wanted to be a giant too.

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I was one of three new arrivals that year: Derwan, Kiki, and myself. They called us Fish. I didn't understand why until someone told me it was because we looked out of place; like a fish out of water. Neither one of us were over the age of 22. Each of us had Life without Parole. We were strangers, brought together were our age and sentence. On Saturday mornings, we would meet up on the hill next to the weight pile, with the rest of the fish our age and hang out. The topics of conversation were always the same: jokes, X men, rappers, girls and prison politics. Derwan had long dreads. He was dark skinned and chubby with pearly white teeth. By early April, Derwan was beaten and raped repeatedly by his cellmate, a giant who called himself Baltimore. When he finally got the courage to report what was happen to a nurse, his bravery was rewarded with a slice from mouth to ear for snitching.

Kiki was bi-racial, Black and Hawaiian and a little slow. The older men would say he had the word sucker written across his forehead. Kiki was always trying to fit in, trying to prove he was *down, smart*, and more Black than not. Determined to fit in he volunteered himself into the safe keep of a dozen prison knives. He swore he had the best hiding place ever, but two weeks later,

he threw them all away during a major prison search to avoid being caught. This common sense decision resulted in Kiki getting stabbed in his lung and almost dying on the way to the medical.

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I felt sorry for Derwan and Kiki, but there was nothing I could do. Having Life Without Parole meant that, outwardly, I had to accept the violence or become a victim to it. I felt trapped, imprisoned inside a prison. I carried my sentence around with me with shame like a scarlet letter. I hated the way people would look at me when they found out how young I was and the sentence I had. Their expression reminded me my diagnosis was terminal. I was dead. I just didn't know it yet.

There was no therapeutic groups in jail or Folsom. There was nothing to help me transition from my friends and my mom and little sister to life inside a maximum-security prison. There was nothing to set me on the right path. There was no right path. I had no incentive to program in a positive way. I lost all hope. My depression turned to anger. Stress was a bad cold I could never shake, and to make matters worse, during my first orientation committee—*welcoming me to prison*, I was handed a copy of a letter the District Attorney wrote that was place in my personal file, which stated that I was irreparable. The driving motivating force behind my crime and it would be fitting that I never get out of prison. That letter was the final peg that drove me to defeat.

Those first years in prison were the hardest for me. I was surrounded by violence, and drug abuse. It was common to see men snorting heroin on the yard through a visine bottle, or smoking weed. Drugs created problems that were resolved with a slashing or stabbing. Per prison, politics violence was always the answer and Alcoholism was the norm. Drugs and Alcohol helped people

cope and when stress and feelings of abandonment was finally too much to bear suicide was the final option.

One Saturday a man hung himself. They said he was having problems with his marriage. He hadn't heard from his wife in months and then one day a letter came, a Dear John. Apprehensive, he tore open the envelope. Before he even sat down to read it, he knew it was bad news. She was leaving him for another man and wanted a divorce. She was running off to Atlanta with her lover, and believed he was a "good man" and deserved to know the truth about her affair. His cellmate found him hanging from the end of the top bunk.

We sat at on the side of the weight pile, and watched them rush his lifeless body on a gurney to the medical. A nurse ran along the side of the gurney, pounding away at his chest. The sheet knotted around his neck. The silence was broken when someone said, "*this is going to have us on lockdown*". It was then that I understood what hardened meant. No one was moved by the suicide. Loss of life had become expected, normal.

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With a heavy sigh of relief, I left New Folsom in 1997. As if jail was not enough, I survived two prison wars and a major race riot a year earlier, all by the Grace of God. The thing about prison wars and riots are that everyone becomes a target. Age, doesn't matter, surrendered hands, wheel chair or crutches, stabbed and bleeding, it doesn't matter, and to the guards, anything in blue; victim or victimizer you can be shot. Despite the fact that I walked away from these experiences physically unscathed, they left me emotionally scared and traumatized. I became more and more detached as the years passed. I never learned how to take responsibility for my crime, I just blamed everyone else. I had become worse, a grown child with awful coping skills, and muscles'

I had become a giant, yet mentally and emotionally, I was the same dysfunctional kid at the time I was arrested, just angrier. I protected myself to whatever degree necessary, including manufacturing weapons. It wasn't until I ended up in California's notorious Pelican Bay State Prison that I decided that I needed to change my life.

Four years later, I found myself in administrative segregation on Bed Rock fighting a weapons case. Bed Rock is a cell made completely of concrete with two bunks side by side, and two cubbyholes at the base of the bunks to keep your personal belongings. The bunks are an arms distance apart. My cellmate was an older guy I'd met years before at Folsom. Owl was in his forties, tall, balding and built light a full back—a giant. He didn't talk much initially, but when he did, his speech was deliberate and focused. He commanded your un-divided attention when he spoke. Over the next four months, I absorbed what he had to share. I learned that he had been in since he was eighteen, like myself. He was also sentenced to Life without Parole. He started his time in the historic San Quentin in the "bloody 80's". He told me many war stories, but the ones that affected me the most were the stories of the family members and friends he lost over the years. He lost his mother and his father the very next year. He explained to me the feeling of hopelessness he felt not being able to attend his parent's funerals he was alone and bitter. To deal with his grief and loss he immersed himself in the prison sub-culture and accepted his sentence as his fate etched in stone. He would die in prison.

Owl's stories became warnings to me. They made me reflect on the path I had chosen for myself. I began to fear the future. I didn't want to die in prison and more so, I didn't want to lose my family while serving Life without Parole. I didn't want to be alone. I realized I was only feeding the hopelessness, by choosing violence over change, was creating a hole I would never climb out.

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I was twenty-seven years old when I left Pelican Bay. I wanted to change but I wasn't entirely sure on what change required. It became a gradual progression. I stopped associating with individuals with racist ideologies. I avoided those conversations all together, especially ones regarding prison politics; which group is pinning for control of the yard, who owed who money, who got stabbed; those things became pointless to me. I wanted something better for myself. I wanted to be a better person. I enrolled in vocational classes, searching for different ways to educate myself. I began occupying my time with constructive activities and gained a sense of accomplishment. It felt good. I managed to remain disciplinary free long enough to earn a custody reduction because of my change.

My guidance counselor told me of a program in Los Angeles County that I might fit into. Mr. Mayor was a Vietnam vet who always had a story to share. He would sit in his office, his long legs stretched across the floor with his pale hand doodling in the air as he talked, looking over his brown, framed glasses. He spoke of his friendships in Vietnam, he learned what, real friends are and what loyalty is. He talked to me as if I were a real person with value, not just an inmate. Sometimes I would stop by his office just to experience an unbiased "real conversation." He always ended our conversations with "*you're a good man*" I liked that. It made me feel good that he saw quality in me. No one had ever told me I was a good man before. I believed him.

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For the next two years, he tried to get me to Los Angeles County, but it was always "closed to intake." I just kept on programming, staying out of trouble and doing my time as constructively

as possible. Then, in 2010, I was finally accepted to Los Angeles County. My mistake was sharing the news with my co-workers, who responded with nothing but negativity. They called the Progressive Programming facility a protective custody facility. A place where they housed snitches and pedophiles. I bit right into the peer pressure, doing everything I could to get out of the transfer. I refused to go to a facility with a bad reputation. Even on a positive path. A Life Without sentence forced me to do everything in my power to hold onto a respectable prison reputation. It was all I had left. Whether or not the rumors were true about the Progressive Programming Facility. It didn't matter. Life Without Parole is a trap that dictated every decision I made for the rest of my life. In prison, it only takes one time for someone to say you are "no good" and the probability for you to get stabbed shoots to 10. I couldn't take that chance.

When Mr. Mayor found out about my change of attitude, he called me in for one of those "talks". When I entered his office, he gave me a look of disappointment, removed his glasses, pinched the nose-bridge, and leaned back in his chair in a long exaggerated motion. It was hard for me to meet his gaze; I focused instead on his thinning hair.

I was embarrassed. I saw the inconsistency. The truth was I was afraid. I'd claimed to want to change, to turn my life around, but my recent activities showed otherwise. I'd been cuffed up twice since my transfer approval, and each time, sent back to my cell with a warning. I was given the benefit of the doubt. Because I'd been programming for so long and so well in contrast to my past. Everyone was trying to help me and I didn't understand. I was so afraid of what other people would think that I almost squandered a life-changing opportunity. I tried to explain my concerns, feeling trapped because of my sentence. He listened patiently, even nodding emphatically. When I was done, he gave me a reassuring nod and reminded me I was a good man

and everything will be okay. He silently handed me my transfer papers and began reading off all the programs that Los Angeles County had to offer.

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I have practically grown up in prison; spent the latter half of my adult life raised between six different maximum—security institutions: New Folsom, Kern Valley, Tehachapi, Corcoran, Pelican Bay and Lancaster. It didn't take me long to adjust to the new facility. I immediately enrolled in the college program. College gave me a new perspective about life, I had an “aha” moment once I finished my first semester. I loved the feeling I had when I was done. I finally did something right. College showed me options that I never thought existed. I also began participating in the Men for Honor cognitive behavioral therapy programs and learned about childhood trauma, causative factors and the ripple effect of my decisions. These programs taught me the importance of taking responsibility for my actions. I began adopting new coping skills and love for myself, and others. Church has become the foundation of transformation, my love for God. Twenty-five years ago, I would have never imagined being the person I have become; I am so far removed from that eighteen-year-old kid crying in the holding tank. I often wonder if that person ever really existed. It only took one person to see value in me, to encourage me, and help me see the value in myself, which helped me see the value in others. Today I am working towards my BA degree and I have dedicated my life to helping others. I was never irreparable. I have always been a *Good Man*.