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(Short Story)
Words Uncaged

THE NEW ARRIVAL

The year was 1983, I was only 19 years old at the time; the exact time, shortly after high noon. The place, Old Folsom prison, the crime for which being there became necessary, murder in the second degree. All my life I've been prescient of things to come, but nothing in my childhood prescience could have possibly prepared me for that unique moment when my feet slid off the shallow steps of that faded green, over a dingy grey, CDC bus and onto the black, hot asphalt of this classic California prison; a prison which, by-the-way, has been recorded for all time in the Johnny Cash song and movie "I Walk The Line." My first brush with something so boldly undeniable as this ancient state institution had brought the deadliness of prison-style reality closer to a conscious awareness perhaps than every before, which seemed to have occurred, from the approaching distance, right out of the golden, rolling hills of the Represa landscape, like the Castle Dracula. It was such a massive structure with an equally huge, winding, granite wall which seemed to coil around the inner-structural aspects of this ancient monstrosity from California's earliest roots like the scaly, slippery tail of an enormous boa.

My experience, while there, certainly taught me a healthy appreciation for the dangers inherent in my own past sins, in a brand new way; never mind what my first impressions may have been of this place upon my arrival. If ever hell existed anywhere on this Earth, I quickly found myself living in it only short moments after disembarking from that rickety old prison bus, at what was its discreet R&R terminal. There was nothing fashionable nor beautiful about this prison, the whole atmosphere smelled and reeked of the stench of danger and death, as the noise within the building I entered was. This is where my instinct for self-preservation formed most formidably, because I learned very fast the sobering lessons of Darwin's laws of adaptation, as very terrible things were transpiring everyday.

There was no time for second-guessing, every thought involved an almost split second decision to move with diligent speed, turn this corner, walk up these stairs, and avoid pausing, in any area, for too long for fear that someone might get shanked in the vicinity, leaving me vulnerable if not wide open to the possibility of being blamed for the gruesome act. Oh, this happened a lot. I've seen stabbing occur where the blood of the victim splattered onto some unsuspecting inmate's shoe by chance occurrence, which then resulted in that person being accused of involvement, if not being the assailant himself, and hastily carted off to lock-up.

Prison in those days was very no-nonsense, and gravely different from the neatly boxed in, diametrically proportionate designs that you commonly see on TV or in the movies nowadays. Actually, this happens to be one of the more popular, structured concepts of most modern prison architects. But the Old Folsom, San Quentin style prisons were, in plain terms, slaughter-houses, gaping spaces wherein tragedy and misery patronized a common intersection, where these two contemporary sensations seem to clash often. Cause and effect intertwining at this unassuming crossroads, delivering a deadly blow to all who would dare attempt to dart through its traffic.

This, I suppose, was my baptism by fire during my entry into the California prison establishment. I thought my crimes against society's innocent (and its other more vicious urban elements) had prepared me for whatever the future had in store for me. This experience would prove me dead wrong. That was then; today, California prisons have morphed somewhat into a prodigious administrative complex, almost entirely different from what it was in those days. The violence levels of the past have been shaved down somewhat to something far less than what they once were; this is partly owed to the fact that new laws, which give inmates new hope for freedom, have changed the pervasive hopelessness mind-set that many lifer prisoners in California harbored as a matter of course, and the violence perpetuation for its own sake has been all but totally disavowed by many of its most ardent proponents. Where misery had dominance over the mind-sets of the run-of-the-mill prison inmate, the triggers which once allowed for this to persevere are gradually being subdued by a realistic expectation of finally securing liberty after so many dreadful years of incarceration. The new prison situation, at least the one which exists now, inspires a renewed outlook that hasn't been witnessed since the late 1970's when Governor Jerry Brown did then what he's been doing a lot of lately, which is changing the administrative parole laws to relieve the prison system of the burden of overcrowding and the State of the financial hardship that an overcrowded prison system places upon its tax payers.

And with renewed hope, many inmates see light at the end of the tunnel, even those with life without the possibility of parole, as many of these have been the stellar actors within the system and have reduced their custody levels far below the average determinately sentenced populations, but for obvious reasons of safety and security, they were prevented from physically going any lower than the usual Level-III model prison setting. But all that appears to have changed, and a great deal more. Though it is safe to admit that violence in California's prisons at certain levels of security will always be an inextricable fact of life, the mode from which the modern concept of lowering that level of violence in other prisons is being duplicated in rapid fashion. This will undoubtedly become the new norm, and to the extent that it does, prisons in California will probably eventually surrender to that new norm and perhaps learn to comply with the instinctive human mandate to seek what comes natural to each enlightened and incarcerated human being – FREEDOM!

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