

The Longest Ride

By Justin S. Hong

I awoke startled by the slight jerk of the prison bus. It felt like a freezer as I breathed in the cold, dry, and recycled air. In a futile attempt, I tensed my body to keep from shivering. I was in one of those frozen meat trucks that I have only ever seen in movies. Swaying carcasses on meat hooks off to the butcher shop.

Next to me, a tattoo-riddled “ese”, seemed to have taken up more space since we first sat down. Sighing in discomfort, I watched his baldhead bob in and out of consciousness.

I was embarking on an 18-hour drive, with a life sentence, to one of California’s most violent prisons—Pelican Bay. The stories told about my destination could be the sequels to Stephen King novels. Wearily, I scanned my surroundings for any sign of the bogeyman. Most of the passengers had fallen asleep to the low hum of the bus’s engine, while a few watchful eyes seemed to share my sentiment.

A stone-faced officer watched from a steel mesh cage behind us, his ivory shotgun daring any unruly behavior. Warned by him earlier, to “Shut up”, or face consequences, none of us was so audacious to find out what they were; we rode in silence to the soothing sounds of jazz radio.

The bus lugged a consignment of society’s castaways, murderers, rapists, thieves, all indistinguishable in our red paper jumpsuits. We had been traveling for 3 days, making the occasional stops and layovers at Tehachapi, Folsom, and San Quentin, industrial warehouses where the defected are tagged, tossed, and forgotten.

My neck and shoulders ached from the long hours in restraints, hands cuffed and force folded in a state of perpetual prayer. Chains on my feet dug into my ankles as I tried to stretch my legs. The handcuffs connected to another chain around my waist that prohibited no more than a couple inches of movement. Torturous if one was to have an itchy nose.

I heard the clanking and scraping of chains dragging across the floor, as I watched a prisoner waddle to the bus’s outhouse. He stopped every few steps to regain his balance on the swerving bus. Using a combination of his feet, knees, and fingers, he jerked and flipped open the toilet seat. What followed was the assailing stench of festering excrement that had been accumulating for days. Holding my breath so as not to gag, I silently prayed that my bladder could withstand the duration of the ride.

At 18 years old, I punched my own ticket to this prison bound convoy. Living my life in the revolving doors of bars and nightclubs, I basked in the glow of strobe lights and glory of street fights. Gang affiliated mixed with alcohol and drugs topped with an umbrella of low self-esteem made for quite the nasty cocktail. Impulsive with a propensity of always trying to prove myself, my goals usually consisted of looking up from the bottom of a tilted bottle and selling enough drugs to support my criminal lifestyle. While celebrating my 18th birthday, my gang and I got into a bar fight with another group of guys. Following them to the parking lot, we viciously

attacked and murdered Brian Chin. It was senseless, without reason, and secured my window seat to prison. Moving forward, I have spent many nights, wallowing in regret and remorse, wishing I could turn back the hands of time. However, the hands of time do not tick that way, Brian will never be able to spend time with his family, his newborn child, meanwhile, the world ticks on without his contributions.

I stared out a bar-bolted window to see a familiar world passing me by. The sky was dark, but on the cusp of an impending sunrise. Purples and blues colored the atmosphere with streaks of pinks and oranges intensifying the horizon. Its vast beauty reminding me of all the things I took for granted.

A few curious on-lookers drove by as they made their early morning commutes. Stories began to formulate as I pensively watched my on-lookers go about their lives. A man on a cell phone became a businessperson working out the final details on a business deal. An excited truck driver was on his way home after weeks on the road to see his wife and kids. An affectionate couple held hands as they sped off towards a romantic getaway. I contrived in contrition as I realized that I might never experience these things, that I had forfeited my place in that world.

I gazed in reverence as we approached the majestic Redwoods of northern California. Their sheer size seemed to defy the industrialization of us mere mortals. For centuries, they stood unaffected by the changing world around them. If I could only stand as strong and rooted as they were, maybe I too could survive.

Navigating through a labyrinth of trees and twisted roads, we finally arrived at our destination. My fellow passengers were awake now and shifted in their seats for a better view of the concrete fortress. There were whispers amongst the prisoners about the “SHU” (Security Housing Unit) and “Big homeys” that seemed to heighten the anticipation.

Barbed wire and electric fences surrounded the sterile, gray, concrete walls. Ominous signs depicting electrocution, gunfire, and certain death warned against any attempts of escape. A fantasy crushed by the impossibility of the notion.

As we entered the compound, we went through several gates and checkpoints. I found it odd that the undercarriage was checked with large mirrors, who in their right mind would want to sneak INTO prison? Once we came to a halt, a burly correctional officer came onto the bus with a roster of our names and pictures. With a booming voice, he bellowed, “When you hear your name, call out your CDC number, and make your way to the front of the bus!”

One by one, our names and CDC numbers shouted and one by one, we emptied the iron icebox. When it was my turn, I two-stepped and hobbled my way to the front. Hopping off the bus, another officer replaced my handcuffs with another pair with a practiced efficiency. Shuffled off towards the prison’s R&R (receiving and releasing), I found my place in the assembly line of shambling zombies. Slippers’ dragging across the gravelly ground, I felt a sense of relief that the bus ride was finally over. A relief that was short lived as I entered the looming doors of Pelican Bay.