

The First Day of Forever

-By-

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Blinking awake, searching for clarity, my vision adjusted and I found myself staring into the eyes of a rapist and killer. My stomach knotted and chicken skin erupted from my thin arms. Reality rushed into my consciousness and yesterday seemed like a nightmare...

On December 26, 1996, Christmas seemed like a distant memory. Santa left me with a bus ticket to the "Big House". A deputy doing his security check woke me at two o'clock in the morning. "Gibson! You're transferring! Be ready in ten minutes."

My heart accelerated and I was instantly awake. Fears of the un-known descended on my psyche and I began shivering. I mindlessly grabbed the meager belongings that were allowed in prison; shower shoes, soap, tooth brush and paste, ten stamped envelopes, pencil and paper, and put them all into a zip lock bag.

I splashed water on my face, took a pee, and tried to steady my heart rate. I flinched as the door automatically opened with a loud gush of air.

I made my way to the front of the pod and the awaiting deputy. Patted down the cold cuffs snapped around my wrist and I took one last look at the surrounding cells. Most people were sleeping, but a few wistful faces stood at their doors. Head nods, hand waves, and air pounding fist bumps silently sent me on my way.

I was escorted to a line of six other guys from my unit that were catching the same chain as I; my buddy Mike was one of them, and selfishly, I was comforted by his un-fortunate luck of being sent to prison. Misery does love company after all. Shackled and secured, we shimmied silently down the long hallways to the processing area.

The process for transfer and intake are much the same; strip searches, identifying questions and herded like sheep from one holding cell to the next until I reached the busses staging area. I waited for my name to be called. The nerves in the holding pen were taut as a lasso fighting a raging bull. "Gibson!" I jostled and clamored my way to the chutes entrance. Spotting the officer that was angrily waiting for me; I drug my seemingly cement-laden feet and stampeding heart to stand in front of him. Two other hapless souls stood to my right. From experience of other bus rides, I knew that they were to be my traveling companions for the duration of the ride. The guy next to me tried to pull a fast one by extending his stomach as the waist chain were applied; the transportation officer gave him a look that would freeze ice. With slumped shoulders, a burst of hot breath, that had not tasted toothpaste, filled the distance and the chain was tightened an extra notch or two for the failed deception. It may not seem like much but a five or six hour trip with a dog chain gnawing at your gut will make anyone whimper and growl. Outfitted in my own chains, it felt as if I was chained to two rabid dogs that did not appreciate the cat with them. Cuffed and shackled to the other two inmates in a chain like fashion, we awkwardly wobbled, shuffled and baby stepped our way to the next room. It dawned on me at that moment why the older convicts call it "catching the chain". I felt like a fishing bobber on a stormy sea. The cuffs and shackles bit into my skin as our walking rhythm was more zombie than human. The stink of breath and sticky skin had me wishing that I had another tethered to me. I couldn't move unless they moved and I could not escape the feeling of being engulfed in my drunk uncles' arms in the back of our family car. It felt disgusting and stomach turning.

Thirty of us were loaded on to a prison-type tour bus. Horizontal bars marred every window and diamond shaped wire fences created individual cells throughout the front half of the bus. I seemingly had entered a metal coffin built for men that behaved like boys. It was cold. The chill gave excuse to my shivering, but truthfully, fear was at the root of it.

A black clad militant looking transportation officer directed me to a window seat. He was gruff, business-like, and intimidating.

He advised us of the rules by bellowing, "Shut the fuck up, no talking unless we say so or you will regret it!"

A silent pall settled over the bus. A shotgun-armed guard settled in the back behind another diamond-holed partition, next to the stinky built in port-a-potty.

The trip to Tehachapi State Prison was a few hours long and not without incident. One of the guys toward the front could not keep his mouth shut. Without braking or slowing down, one of the guards silently stood up and approached the run-a-way mouth.

The guard unhooked the inmate from the other two, yanked him up like a rag doll. His hands grasped for a hold to combat the sensation of no control. Fingers flexed but with the confinement of the cuffs, he only came up with air. His head flopped around on his shoulders and his feet kicked about, the six inches permitted by the restraints. Whimpers, gasp, and protestations ignored, he was dragged to one of the phone booth sized cages, roughly turned upside down, squished inside, and locked away as if he was the guards toy that lost favor.

The inmate was cussing and moaning the whole time, until he finally managed to right himself. With his lesson learned, he rode in silence the rest of the way.

The only noise from that time on was from the radio that played ancient country music. "Burning ring of fire" by Johnny Cash singed my eardrums and lollled me into a dream state as I sat there and watched the world pass me by. Businesses, cars, and houses sped through my vision and thoughts of their occupants stretched my imagination and left me with a feeling of longing. I was only twenty years old and sentenced to life without parole. My eyes began to water as I realized I was never going to be part of that society or taste freedom again. Locked up, it was the simple things I missed, the smell of my mom's cooking or carpet on my bare feet. A swimming pool flashed by and I realized I would never feel water completely covering my bare skin. To submerge myself in the underwater world, instead, now I would be placed into the underworld of prison. Car after car flew by and it dawned on me that I did not even know how to drive. I would never learn. I would never have a hot girl riding beside me or spill my coffee on the way to work.

As the blurry world passed by in that bus, I thought about how my bad choices caught up to me three years ago. At the age of seventeen, I tragically, senselessly, and selfishly shot and killed Armen. My hand ended an innocent man's life. The shame I felt from the pain I inflicted had stained my soul and left me feeling sad and soiled. A heavy sigh of resignation fled my lips as I thought about all the harm I delivered. Murder is irrevocable. Thoughts of him not being able to enjoy all the basic or complicated pleasures in life was disheartening. I was doomed to die in prison because of my awful choices. I forfeited all of life's joys, trading them for violence, isolation, loneliness, and countless hours of worry, and anxiety. I felt as if I would always be looking over my shoulder, fearing the knife, seemingly, destined to be planted there. I was already a ball of tension and now it was growing into a bolder boulder.

The stopping of the bus interrupted my melancholy. We had arrived. Entering Tehachapi prisons perimeter reignited my worries. An electric fence surrounding the property dispelled any childish fantasy I may have had of escaping justice. My heart sank as I realized this would be my final resting place. A concrete sarcophagus awaited me. As the bus lurched forward so did my heart.

Processed through, the bus crested a hill, and the prison came into view as if it was rising from the depths of hell. A gloomy pall, as thick as the thieves I was surrounded by settled into my psyche. Fog twisted, spun, and rose, fleeing the busses wheels and engulfing any retreat. I felt forlorn. Tiny windows with curious faces permeated the sides of the concrete coffin that awaited me. This was my destiny. To spend my eternity as one of those lost souls that peered out. How did I go from a kid playing dodge ball to one that would soon be dodging knives and rapist? A fleeting thought of death, brought on sooner by my hand, flitted across my mind. Like a hummingbird, it lingered for a second and darted away. I have never been one to quit experiencing and at that moment, I felt guilty for even staring at that do-do bird of a thought. The prison kept growing the closer we got. The expansiveness' astounded me. There were three different compounds: upper, lower, and minimum. We drove right up to building five on the lower yard and prepared to disembark.

One by one, we were unhooked from our traveling partners; names called out, and herded to our destination. As I shuffled down the bus isle my palms became sweaty, my knees felt weak, and my heart rate accelerated to a million miles an hour. Just before stepping onto the prison grounds, I took one last deep breath of the busses recycled oxygen, puffed up my chest and tried to hide my fear.

The cold mountain air attacked my semblance of toughness; a violent shiver ran from my toes to my shoulders. I followed the other "Sheep-le" into the reception building. The shackles and belly chains were removed, clothes discarded we were instructed where to stand. There were fifty spots, images of feet painted on

the cold concrete.

There I stood, on top of two faded yellow silhouettes' of feet that bore the weight of countless other condemned souls. I was shivering from the cold but shaking from the fear. I felt as if my pale, unblemished body stuck out like a chicken's neck ready for slaughter. The yellow, forever feet, filled up with my traveling companions. Most of them were heavily tattooed, pinch faced and battle scared.

We all stood there, naked and listening intently to the prison guard barking out orders that had life or death consequences. No sooner had the reception officer informed us that for fights or assaults, no warning shots would be fired, did two heavily armed guards appear. They were standing behind a protective bubble, twelve feet in the air. Iron bars covered windows that were filled with the muzzles of mini 14 assault rifles. I felt like the cowardly lion, lip quivering, eyes bugging out, knees shaking and realized I was not in county any more.

To remind us of the seriousness of the situation the sobering sound of bullets chambering, "clack-clack!" punctured the atmosphere welcomed us to Tehachapi State Prison.

After gruffly informed that our lives were now property of the California Department of Corrections, we were then subjected to a humiliating security check routine, with our butts and mouths thoroughly checked by a probing flashlight beam.

Inspection completed, we were piled into a small holding cell, designed to hold half our number. There I waited naked and half-afraid, for the next forty-five minutes, shivering like a wet cat, while the lively aroma of onion armpits and sweaty ass assaulted my nostrils.

Waiting for my name to be called so I could proceed with processing, I eaves dropped on the O.G.'s and watched for fabled predators. My ears and head filled with stories of how much time they had, who was who, who they knew, who was recently whacked, who needed to be whacked, and countless other tales of violence.

My sinking despair and shivering was shattered with the yelling of my name. I slithered and slunk my way to the front of the holding pen and handed a pair of dingy boxers, three sizes too big, a sweat stained tee shirt and a pair of brand new socks. To me it felt like opening a present, which was lost behind the tree, the day after Christmas; after the previous days excitement has begun to fade, and there peeking behind the tired, dry, sagging tree is a small gift. The eye's bulge out, the adrenalin is reignited and you tentatively reach, hoping it has your name on it. It is like discovering that present you wanted bad but thought was lost in the hubbub of the time. That laundry clothing my nakedness, felt as if I was gaining some of my stolen humanity back. I was then directed to another cage, with similar clad guys, only to sit and listen to more war stories and wait the assignment of a number and cell.

There were inmate workers with brooms, boxes, and tables bustling about in front of our cages. They were methodical and trained well preparing for our processing. In an entrepreneurial fashion, the workers quickly bartered for wedding rings, watches, and necklaces for minute amounts of tobacco.

As I grew bored with the haggling of wares, I took a better look around and saw over ninety cells with faces filling the windows. My ears attuned to the jovial, sarcastic remarks about who gets whom for a celly and what their night would entail. Whistling, catcalls and threats of rape were common and encouraged by fits and burst of laughter. Rape seemed to be a joke that hid actual fears from the mouths of many.

I had heard it all before. As quickly as I tuned in, I tuned out and waited for my turn to enter a cell, fall on the pee stained cushion, and get some much-needed rest.

I was assigned the CDC#K-32676; my new identifying name for the duration of my prison stay, I was given a small bedroll consisting of a blanket, sheet, boxers, shirt, and socks, I was then told I was assigned to cell three. Arraigned in a horseshoe like fashion, there were fifty cells on the bottom tier, fifty on the top. I wearily made my way to mine.

My feet were heavy, my breaths short. I steadied my nerves, prepared for battle, and approached my new cage. Even though this routine, followed many times before, this time prison just felt different. When the door to #3 opened a big, hairy, tattooed guy named Steve greeted me.

Sizing each other up, we made our standard prisoner greetings; handshake, names, where we were from, how much time we had and what we were convicted of. Steve left out the part about him being a rapist, but proudly announced the murder he was doing time for as if taking someone's life was a badge of honor.

With the superficial compatibility test behind us, I was granted admittance. The cell was dark as I entered,

but I only had eyes for the bed. Small talk ensued while I covered the soiled cushion with my bedding. I learned that Steve liked the cell dark. He drank coffee, cup after cup, pacing the cell, intermittingly staring out the doors tiny window, as if expecting an attack at any moment. The vibe he gave me caused my skin to crawl, as if hundreds of spiders had formed a circular death march from my back to my neck. Casual conversation initiated, met with grunts and monosyllabic answers, led to the beastly image that I was forming about him. Never in my life had I wished that I were able to sleep with one eye open as I did right then. I soon crawled into my covers, and fell into an exhausted sleep.

Blinking awake, searching for clarity, my vision adjusted and I found myself staring into the eyes of a rapist and killer. So began my second day of prison...