

DEPRESSION
Monday
December 17, 2012

Almost 9 years later, I can still remember my first day in the California prison system. I was sleeping in my cell in the Humboldt County Jail when the officer woke me up, telling me to "roll it up," that it was that time. Still sleepy and trying to rub the eye boogers from the corners of my eyes, I scanned my cell, trying to determine what I was going to take, and what I'd be leaving behind. Having spent more than a year in pretrial detention as I represented myself in court, this was proving to be easier said than done, as I'd somehow managed to accumulate quite a bit. In the end, it was pretty much a no-brainer. I took all of my legal work, and most of my magazines and books, leaving behind all my canteen and hygiene products. Even then, it proved to be more than I could carry.

There were about 9 of us, all dressed alike in the bright orange monkey suits. Shackles were placed around our ankles, and our hands were secured to chains wrapped around our waists. By the time they were done with us, it was all we could do to slowly shuffle up to the waiting van, and even harder to climb up into our seats.

The van was parked in a secure garage, safe from any who might display an unhealthy interest in who might be coming and going. As we struggled to climb in, I couldn't help but notice the eerie way the light made everyone's faces look. Pimples and acne marks stood out in a brilliant contrast of blue and purple compared to the unnaturally white faces of those who'd not seen the light of the sun in months, or in my case, more than a year. I took one last look around, trying to permanently imprint every single detail to my memory, knowing that it would be a long time, if ever, before I'd see this place I'd come to call home. As the van started up and pulled out of the garage, I began to scan everything around me, alternating between recalling fond memories of places we'd passed, to searching for signs of people I knew. As the van gathered speed, I sat back in my seat and began to absorb the beauty around me, struggling to control the emotions that threatened to overwhelm me. The most difficult times were when we passed the house my fiance had moved to after our split, the house we'd briefly shared as a couple, and her place of business. Fond memories all, and even after her betrayal, I still loved her unconditionally, which was why I couldn't bring myself to totally destroy her when she took the stand to testify against me, exaggerating and lying to help the prosecution to gain their conviction.

The drive took several hours, during which time we stopped briefly at the Mendocino County Jail. The county of Mendocino was a place I'd lived in briefly, and again, there were many fond memories replaying themselves as we made the journey through the county. All throughout the journey, we were surrounded by some beautiful sights and scenes, along with some truly unusual ones as well. One of my favorites was a place called "Confusion Hill," where my, now ex, fiance and I had stopped once to visit. For the uninitiated, this place makes some pretty wild claims about how the water travels uphill. Sure enough, when we paid our entrance fee and went inside to check it out, the water did indeed travel uphill. I'm sure that it's got to be some kind of optical illusion, but I'll be damned if I can figure out how it was done. In fact, they even have several rooms built into the side of the mountain, and when you walk inside of them, your whole world literally turns on its side! It's so disorienting, it's all but impossible to stand up straight, or what was straight only a moment earlier. There are plumb bobs that hang out sideways instead of up and down, and balls that roll up the side of the wall. As I said a moment earlier, I'm sure it's some kind of illusion, but I'll be damned if I can figure it out!

The trip was over all too soon. Before too long, we were approaching one of the reception centers infamously known as San Quentin. From a distance, it appeared remarkably old, even quaint, and was located in a location that I can only describe as beautiful, the kind of place where the rich would spend a fortune to live. It was some kind of island with a roadway leading up to it, and as the rays from the rising sun hit the surrounding waters, the tops of the waves glittered like a bunch of glistening diamonds. It was a surreal experience, and for the life of me, I just couldn't believe that a prison would, or could, be located in such a setting. Pulling up to the gates however, the scenery began to change, and you realized that, beautiful scenery or not, this was indeed a prison, and don't forget it.

Pulling into the sally port, the drivers got out to secure their weapons, while the guards examined the outside of the vehicle for anything potentially dangerous or which could be used in an escape. Once they completed that, they opened the door and did what I can only describe as an "attitude check," where they look in, sneering at you and talking to you like you're a worthless piece of trash. For those who're stupid enough to respond, the punishment only gets worse, as they call down to the officers who take you off the van, telling them to go extra hard on you. Wisely, I kept my mouth shut, doing my best to avoid making direct eye contact. I've made a lot of mistakes in my life, but I'm not a complete idiot!

Once we were cleared, we pulled into the prison, and I began to see what a dismal place this truly was. I'd heard all sorts of stories about San Quentin, seen it featured in movies and television shows, but none of this did the place any justice whatsoever.

It's kind of difficult to describe, but it's like they took a monastery, a warehouse, a castle and a dung heap and combined them to come up with a prison. Once you entered the prison, the waters surrounding the prison changed from a beautiful and welcoming bay to a moat surrounding a castle. The walls were massive, manufactured from stone and concrete with huge windows in them, some with stained glass. Everywhere you looked, you could see dirt and decay, covered with layers of filth. IN some of the places, it wasn't just years of dirt that covered the walls, it was years of human feces that had been flung at the walls, feces that no one had even attempted to clean.

Prisons are full of things like filth and disease, violence and strife, misery and depravities that are so horrible, they've never been described in writing. It's easy to lose hope in a place like this, and once that hope's been lost, you find yourself sinking further and further into despair, eventually giving up on life. During the time I spent in San Quentin, I found myself edging closer and closer to those cliffs, preparing for the jump, but writing helped lead me back to sanity. Following this is a poem I wrote about some of the suicidal thoughts and feelings I'd been considering, along with some of the reasons why I had them. While this poem doesn't even begin to come close to describing how I felt that way, or why I felt that way, it nevertheless provides a glimpse into how quickly time in prison can break you down.

Since writing that poem, I've worked hard to get that hope back into my life, and as each day passes, I can see more and more light at the end of the tunnel. Of course, even the dimmest light looks like a shining beacon when your world is darker than the darkest pits of space, but some light is better than no light!

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Monday
December 17, 2012
Page 3