

## Transport

By: Patrick Rathsack

I stood in the doorway admiring the sky. Dawn was moments away. My reverie was disturbed by the loud voice of a guard beckoning me.

"Next!"

I stepped forward and quietly waited before him.

"Hands by your side" he instructed me.

I tried to ease my nervousness by taking a few calming breaths. My body relaxed as the sound of birds chirping rang out in the courtyard. Concentrating on their cheerful discourse I hardly noticed the heavy chains being wrapped around my waist. My thoughts were on the light that began to shine in the heavens. I looked forward to the ride ahead of us. It was a clear day. Nothing would detract from the view during our transfer. My mind snapped back into focus as the handcuffs encircled my wrists. I could feel the restraints pinch my skin. They were attached to those belted around my middle. I turned to face the vehicle.

"Step up" said another guard.

I cautiously mounted the stairs of the bus. I was met at the top of them by the driver.

"Have you been on a bus before?" he asked.

"No sir" I replied.

"Kneel down on the seat next to you."

I awkwardly complied. He gave me a short speech on the behavior expected of me as he fastened shackles to my ankles. My knees hurt from the hard plastic of the bench. I was relieved when he told me to stand. Getting to my feet was a challenge with the limitations placed on my mobility.

I noticed there were several cages behind the driver's seat. Besides those, the vehicle was filled by hard looking benches. They had straight back supports. The bus was divided into three sections. They were partitioned off with grating. Each area had a secureable door. The driver told me to take a window seat towards the back of the bus. I was to refrain from talking to anyone. I maneuvered my way down the aisle.

My steps were short. The chain connecting my ankles was a hindrance. My friend Lefty nodded his head to me as I inched forward. He was located in the last row on the driver's side of the bus. He beckoned me with his eyes. He obviously wanted me to sit next to him. I shook my head. The guard was specific. His instructions were to take an empty place next to a window. I took no liberties even though he was distracted from processing someone else.

I made my way to the back of the vehicle and sat down. I was in the last row opposite of Lefty. The cage surrounding the toilet was behind me. I glanced between the bars on the window at my side. I was happy to see my view would be unobstructed on our trip.

The people from my yard were loaded quickly. We all had window seats. The driver addressed us in a stern voice. He said that we were forbidden to talk to anyone. Furthermore, we were to be a good example to the next group. If we acted out he would deal harshly with us. He also informed us the bus would be filled to capacity. Some of our property had to be left behind. The boxes were unable to fit in the cargo space. They would follow us later in the week.

I thought the guys that boarded the bus after my group looked strange. Some projected a hard image. Others appeared lost and intimidated. A couple seemed comical to me. I wondered what offenses landed them in this predicament. I tried to guess which were "new fish". The old-timers stood out because of their air of confidence. I was amused to realize they were probably trying to gauge me.

No one would discern that I was a veteran. My hair was styled neatly. My glasses, full set of teeth, and lack of tattoos all added to my bookish appearance. They hid the fact that over a decade passed since I last walked free.

The driver made another speech. He explained that all of us were headed to the same prison. His expectation was for us to maintain silence. The bus roared to life and we rolled out of the courtyard.

I was dismayed by a pungent odor. It emanated from the guy sitting next to me. His hair was disheveled and he had several days worth of stubble on his face. I wondered when he last bathed. We had on paper coveralls. This limitation prevented me from learning more about him. Even though I was unable to examine his wardrobe, I noticed his shower shoes. This detail indicated that he was either very poor or new to the system. The only personal item we were allowed during transport was our tennis shoes. The absence of them spoke volumes. The only other things we were permitted were eyeglasses and hearing aids. He had none.

There was a delay at the gate. The vehicle needed to be thoroughly inspected before we left the premises. Then, we waited as the gunner boarded the bus. He was positioned in a cage behind Lefty's seat, next to the toilet area. He climbed into his spot through a separate door. It led directly to the enclosure. This precaution prevented us from having access to him. The man literally "road shotgun" over us.

I could see my old yard as we pulled away. Inmates were walking to breakfast. They were from my building. The distance between us was too great for me to identify any of them. I left many good friends and acquaintances behind. Would I ever see them again? A brief sense of sadness enveloped me as we moved onward. The moment passed. I began to enjoy the scenery as we lost sight of the prison.

The first images I pondered were the trees. Seeing them was a treat. I lived behind the same prison walls for eleven years. The only chance to venture out was for a few medical appointments. I planned to savor every moment of this trip.

I leaned back trying to find a comfortable position. I noticed that there was plenty of room on my bench. My partner kept his distance. There was a space of at least four inches between us. I thanked God for the buffer zone. The chains around my waist hurt and needed to be readjusted. With that taken care of, the trees recaptured my attention.

It amazed me to see plants so close and personal. I noticed that most of the tree trunks we passed were knarly. I wondered what types of trees they could be. I became distracted by little yellow flowers growing along side the road. I thought they were pretty. Then, with a start, realized they were just weeds. This understanding caused me to chuckle. My last field trip was awhile ago.

At that moment someone stood up in the middle of the bus. They began to shuffle down the aisle. They stumbled and almost fell. The restraints and the rocking of the vehicle made movement difficult. Their intentions became clear as they passed me. I heard the toilet seat bang. The sharp odor of antiseptic chemicals filled the air. After a brief pause, the man went by again heading for his bench.

The guard waited until the inmate reached his place and then spoke up. "You need to put the toilet seat down."

"What?" asked the startled passenger.

"You have to put down the toilet seat or we'll all suffer. The smell of the chemicals gets really strong....I'm just say-in."

The prisoner muttered an expletive and began to work his way, once again, to the back of the bus. He struggled to remain upright. Teetering, he lost his balance. He bumped against someone seated along the aisle. Both parties tried to prevent him from tumbling. It was futile. The restraints got in the way. He landed in another person's lap. Cursing and apologizing in equal measure, he asked for help. He regained his footing with the assistance of the one who broke his fall. Continuing the arduous journey, he eventually reached his objective. The toilet seat slammed shut with finality. Mission accomplished!

I sighed with relief as the air began to clear. It became easier to breathe. I wanted to thank the man but remained silent. He quietly made the trip back to his seat. The rest of his slow trek was uneventful.

My attention refocussed on the world through which we traveled. Gently rolling hills filled the horizon. They were covered in lush green grass. Houses and barns interrupted the view as we sped by them. I was delighted when a small herd of horses appeared. A colt frolicked in the sun. I smiled as he pranced and kicked his hind legs. Then they were gone.

More horses and some herds of cattle fascinated me for the better part of an hour. I devoured their images as they came into focus. Watering holes dotted the landscape. Corrals were often near them. These sights gave way to new ones as vineyards began to dominate the countryside.

We merged onto the freeway. Cars and trucks surrounded us. I imagined the drivers were curious about our bus. I wondered if they were commuting to their jobs. The sunlight reflected off of the vehicles near me. It pierced my vision. I saw many people sipping coffee as they sped past us. I wanted some too.

I was getting sleepy. My wake up call was at four a.m. That was many hours ago. The long day wore on me. The steady humming that came from our tires lulled my senses. I resisted the urge to close my eyes.

I glanced at my fellow passengers. Many of them were napping. Others looked to be on the verge of joining them. A few, like me, struggled to remain alert.

The bus continued to travel along the interstate. We seemed to be surrounded by suburbs. I was struck by the many colors. They assaulted my senses. The sterile environment, from which I came, was more comfortable. I was no longer accustomed to such harsh conditions. The bright hues meant to capture the public's eye caused me discomfort.

There were billboards and buildings brightly painted. Yellows, oranges and reds covered their surfaces. Even the shades of the blues and greens used were loud. They screamed for my attention. I saw a gas station here; a storage place there. Rental and commercial spaces were dispersed throughout the area. People bustled around them. The activity seemed intense. I marveled at how unaffected they seemed by it. How would I adjust to such chaos if I was released?

I lost track of time. My mind drifted. I wondered what the future held for me. Would I ever be released? Did it even matter? My thoughts changed direction.

I began to contemplate the days ahead of me. A new prison could mean more opportunities. I heard many rumors over the weeks leading up to my move. I was only armed with a few confirmed facts. My expectations were low. It was best to avoid hoping for too much change. I knew that whatever happened would be okay. I could survive.

The bus slowed. We exited the interstate turning left from the off ramp to cross over the highway. We rolled on down a two lane road. I saw orchards around us. The almond trees were in bloom. They were covered with pink flowers.

Our course led straight for the prison. The air in the bus became charged. I could feel the curiosity and excitement rise around me. We could see the light poles ahead. Inmates began to whisper to each other as we turned left onto the prison grounds.

We pulled up to the gate. The bus stopped to be inspected. I was startled to see inmates working near the fence. People on the bus made comments about it. They were unable to prevent themselves from expressing the wonder we all felt. In hushed tones they exchanged further observations.

The bus pulled forward and parked next to a building. A door opened and a couple of familiar faces appeared. They were people from our old prison who arrived months earlier. These two workers began to unload boxes of property stored in the baggage compartments.

The driver addressed us. He told us to step forward when he called. He would remove our shackles at that time. We were to retake our seats while he did the same for everyone else. I heard my name called and stumbled forward as quickly as the chains would allow.

"Kneel down on the seat" he said when I reached him.

I complied clumsily. My knees complained about the hard surface beneath them. I started to shake and my legs began to cramp. The hours of sitting in one position were catching up to me. I tried to shift my legs around during the trip. My efforts were unsuccessful because of the restraints I wore. Finally, he told

me to get up and return to my bench. I gratefully followed his instruction. Waiting there, I felt the anticipation grow. The trip was over and a new beginning loomed before me. My future looked bright with possibilities. No one could foretell the events that were to follow....

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