

The NEW Middle Passage (Leaving... on a Southern train)

~The Chino Chronicles, Pt. 2~

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Oi. Mom & Dad would be
so proud.... ☹

Imagine: Ten hours on a prison bus, bound at the wrists, waist, and ankles, dressed in a disposable paper suit and open-toed sandals, sitting on a narrow, rock-hard seat and squished into a sort of human meatloaf made from dozens of nervous, sweaty men enduring the same degradation, chains and shackles digging deeply into soft flesh and lodging painfully against hard bone while this whole sorry circus barrels down 450 miles of interstate freeway from pre-dawn to mid-afternoon.

That's a typical prison transfer in California, and I loathe it so much I've ~~resorted~~ ^{actually} resorted to violence just to avoid that special hell. And the physical misery of it is just the tip of the iceberg... it's also an emotionally jarring and psychologically draining experience, being hauled through the world you once belonged to, just ~~inches~~ ^{inches} away from normal humans in cars one lane over, sometimes just feet away from places you frequented before the state stole your life. A thin layer of sheet metal and glass, a few scrawny bars... so little material separating you from the world you knew, loved, and desperately want back — but it's enough. In fact, it's too much. You can't physically overcome it, slim as the barrier may be, and that... well, that's that. You remain a captive creature, paraded through the land of the living, forced to watch your world hurtle by through ~~thickly~~ ^{thickly} clouded ~~with~~ the accumulated oils of 1,000 other men's foreheads pressed against them before you, knowing you won't see even that much of it again for months, years, or decades. Maybe not ever. It can be a devastating experience, and that's what I want to share with you now.

On April 23rd, 2026, I was transferred from Mule Creek prison, near Sacramento, to the California Institution for Men in Chino, just outside of Los Angeles. The move began about 4:30am and in the early darkness I mostly just dozed, but as the sun rose my attention focussed sharply outside the barred windows and onto the world of cars and people and roadside sights like housing tracts, gas stations, and for much of the journey, cows. Whatever was to be seen, to be smelled, it didn't matter... I was overwhelmed by the presence of reality again, even if it seemed superficially boring and largely bovine.

My transfer was unusual. Thankfully (shockingly) I was the only person aboard that big, nasty bus (literally the only person — the only other mammals were the three pigs enforcing my captivity, and any rodents that managed to stow away). Being alone, I could freely look out both sides of the modern slave ship as I was conveyed like cargo to another set of cages 450 miles away. Since I was spared the usual additional torment of travelling with 30 other hostages, I had some physical and psychic space to think, to reminisce, and when the landscape became familiar again, to indulge the emotional hurricane that ensued. I lived in southern California my entire life, so this trip was returning me to familiar ground after 15 years

of what felt like Siberian exile to a So Cal kid locked away in the northern wilds, but it was a long time on the road before I saw anything with a strong emotional pull or nostalgic value. Fresno is as far north as I ever travelled on my own — one time, with Darrell, to the national speedskating championships on his first trip back to Cali after he and his mom moved to New York. He was supposed to compete there but he broke his wrist a couple days before. That was also the last time he saw me when I wasn't facing life in a cage. Anyway, in those hours north of Fresno, I mostly just stared down into the cars of morning commuters, and I realize how boring that sounds, but I was enthralled. After not seeing the inside of a normal car for over a decade (not to mention not having seen a driver who didn't wear a stormtrooper costume), watching regular people drink coffee or sing aloud or argue with their passengers was a curious pleasure that did not exhaust itself over the hundred miles or so before the first familiar sights began popping up.

At some point I saw a huge billboard that proclaimed, in urgent capital letters: "When you **DIE**, you **WILL** meet **GOD**." As I sat chained up tight like a vicious animal, staring at the increasingly aged skin on my hands after half a life spent in utterly pointless captivity, I thought to myself (with no small measure of contempt) — "Good. Actually, great. Maybe there really is someone responsible after all. I doubt it, but I hope it's true, because I definitely have some stuff to hash out with this 'God'. She owes at least an explanation, and probably a refund." Less than a mile down the road, this thought still fresh in my mind, I saw a bedraggled man walking down the freeway with a big, asymmetrical backpack jutting out at odd angles from his bent back; then immediately after that, another person pushing a dilapidated old cart that seemed to contain all his worldly possessions (his, or her possessions... it was hard to tell from outside the tumorous mass of clothing protecting him/her from the cold). It was 6:30 in the morning. I angrily reiterated my hope for the truth of that billboard, for my chance to meet this cruel, culpable deity who's plainly made such a mess of things. I'm sure I can never rest until I've given her a piece of my mind for all this suffering, if she's real.

Eventually, we reached Fresno, and from then on it was all memories. I think I'll tell some of those stories separately so as not to draw this post out too long, but I choked up a bit seeing the last place I ever said goodbye to Darrell when I was still a normal human being. After that, cresting the Grapevine near Frazier Park, where my sister had her cabin that I only got to visit one time; Hungry Valley / Gorman, where I got my first dirt bike at 10 years old, then rode the racetrack years later in my second life; through Lake Hughes (wait, is that the name? I think I got that wrong...), past Pyramid Lake, and then... the interchange of the I-5 and 126, a road I've travelled hundreds of times from my earliest memories of returning home to Ventura. When I was younger, it had always seemed so far, ~~a~~ a distant outpost on the interminable journey back to my world. Now it just seemed part of that world, ~~as I~~ flew by it, and so achingly close to my childhood home that I could've easily walked from there. On my hands. Through glass. No problem.

After that point, things became exponentially more excruciating, familiar to the point of nausea, roads I'd travelled every single day for many years. Roads I'd travelled when I'd believed I was free forever. Past Six Flags Magic Mountain, the amusement park with the skyscraping red tower that in all my trips there I somehow managed never to go to the top of (how not?). That whole area just flooded me with powerful memories of childhood visits, then adolescence when my brother-in-law would drive us by it on our way to LA County Raceway, the motocross track where I had my first race and where I continued to compete all through my second life, making an army of new and now sorely missed friends (yeah you, Saydge, Lee, Derrick... so many people). Then came intense memories directly from that second life, when Daniel and I took our summer train & bike adventures down from Palmdale to Magic Mountain and the Hurricane Harbor water park next door. Again, these are stories from real life I should probably tell, but separately. They deserve their own space.

All that time, I'm sure I appeared to my captors like a gopher on meth, my head swivelling wildly as I tried to consume every inch of visible memory on both sides of the bus. If they were watching me, and I'm sure at least the rear gunman was, they probably realized we were close to my home.

The interchange of the 5 and 14 freeways was my breaking point. I already had a severe lump in my throat, but seeing the turnoff to Palmdale, the last place I truly called home, and where a huge number of my old friends still live, all of whom probably drove that same stretch of road many times per week over the past eighteen years, some of whom ~~may~~ have even been on that ~~very road~~ with me right then... I just broke down. I watched through tears as my turnoff went by, twisting my neck to the aching extreme to watch the exit disappearing behind us for as long as I could, then immediately noticing the train tracks that carried me to school in Northridge twice a week for two years, next to the aqueduct that had mesmerized me since I was a little kid driving by it with my dad decades before. I broke down into heaving sobs, hot tears pouring down my face with no easy way to wipe them off with all the chains on my body, but no real desire to try very hard either. I simply succumbed. I needed to. The pain was almost unbearable. From there, the emotional pressure continued, quickly passing the spot where my uncle had come to my rescue on the side of the freeway where my car had broken down just a few months into my second life, and then shortly beyond that we entered the stretch of the 210 freeway where I'd loved to wring out my first car, a little Porsche 914, catapulting well past 100 mph before the exit for that same savior uncle's house, the avuncular retreat where I'd spent countless weeks and months of my youthful summers with my two closest cousins. The tears just kept falling.

Beyond my uncle's exit in Sunland, the territory got much less familiar, though I scoured the hills to find the place where my cousin Eric took me mountain biking early in my second life. Soon I calmed down and my vision cleared a bit. The views from the 210 freeway above Burbank and Eagle Rock

are really spectacular, those old hillside neighborhoods like little mazes full of almost Dr. Seussian architecture, the iconic L.A. skyline silhouetted in the distance. Soon we were in Pasadena, and I could see the City Hall that my friend had just sent me a picture of from his first ever visit there a week earlier. It felt surreal, knowing how close I was at that moment to where my friend was just days before. How close we were again, for a brief moment, to each other. Then it was on to Chino, somewhere I'd only ever passed through on trips to Las Vegas with my dad.

After 10 hours on the road, it was all over, and here I am: Cockroach Heaven. Yay. But actually, yes, sort of. Yay. It's nice to (sort of) be back in the Southland again. Everything about it feels better to me. I always insist I can NOT be caged in my own backyard, and Chino is almost too close to home. But not quite; it's still foreign enough to be tolerable, unlike Lancaster, where the prison is literally right next door to my old doctor's office and just a couple miles from Adam's house. HELL. NO. I could never. But out here... it's ok. The T.V. stations and weather are familiar again. Even the allergens are ones I know, so no more viciously itchy eyes and snort attacks out of nowhere whenever the wind blows just wrong in March and April, which was a really big problem up north.

That's the ride, then. The Middle Passage, 21st Century style, right through the heart of California. Maybe I'll write a few more zoomed-in portraits of some of the more salient aspects of the trip. I dunno. Maybe it's too much, for me AND for you (but in different ways, lol.) But then again, if I don't write it, don't record it somehow... did it even happen? Does the unrecorded past just... *Poof*? Maybe me too, just... *Poof*? ☹️

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