

You're In Prison

By John Purugganan

It's not like in the movies. That stuff really happens, but it doesn't all happen in an hour and a half, in three acts that build to a dramatic conclusion, like it does on the big screen. You think it's going to be exactly like that, especially after you've been convicted and sentenced, and you're still being housed at the county jail, and some guy asks if you've ever been to the "pen." When you tell him no, his face expresses grave sympathy, and a grimace of pain. This is meant to communicate that unimaginable horrors await you. Movie scenes of brutal rape and blood-dripping shanks flash through your mind. All the other repeat offenders make a point to extend their heartfelt condolences about your impending arrival in certain hell. But you also overhear these same former convicts, these prison ambassadors of goodwill, talking among themselves about how they can't wait to get back to the pen. The contradiction first confuses you, then gives you hope. Maybe they just get off on putting a good scare into people. You tell yourself there's really nothing to worry about. Whatever happens, you'll deal with it. You have no other choice.

Then you talk to your brother Brian on the phone. "Are you OK?" he asks. "Are you nervous? Are you scared?" (He's seen those same movies.) You tell him you're OK. You're not nervous. You're not scared. Brian is silent for a moment before he says, "What if someone tries to rape you?" You assure him someone — the rapist or you — will have to die. You'll fight to the death before you'll ever let something like that happen. Brian doesn't miss a beat: "But what if fifteen guys hold you down, and you can't fight?" You ask him is he trying to cheer you up, or is it just coming out that way? "Sorry," he says. "But you've seen what happens in the movies." Yes, you tell him, you've seen what happens in the movies. God! Let the nightmare begin already.

You arrive. Old Folsom State Prison. It looks old — spooky, too: forty-foot walls made of giant blocks of granite; black iron gates interlaced with barbed wire; towers capped with Gothic, conical roofs. Your first thought is of Count Dracula's castle. The place was erected in the days when prisoners were executed by hanging. They buried the bodies right there, on the infamous China Hill. You hear ghosts calling from the graves as your bus descends into the ancient compound.

But you soon discover the real nightmare is more mundane. Simple freedoms you once took for granted are stripped away, such as taking a shower when you need one (never mind *want* one). The real horror about prison showers is not the threat of some bald-headed, three-hundred-pound degenerate sneaking up behind you. No, the real horror is the sight of an empty shower, a shower that is not being utilized, a shower that is within spitting distance of your cell, where you sit stinking and sweating and not knowing if anyone will be permitted to enter that shower today.

There are numerous similar predicaments in prison, but you won't see them in the movies; a producer would be shot in the head for producing such monotonous rot. The endless continuum of boredom is enough to make you lose your mind. You can't dwell on it, or you'll

spiral somewhere you do not want to go. So you don't think about it; you don't talk about it; you'll write no more about it now.

Your sister Teresa asks how the guards are treating you. No complaints, you tell her. Don't mess with them, and they won't mess with you. Many of them have been here longer than the men they are guarding.

Sandy, your younger sister, asks about the other inmates. She wants to hear about the monsters. You tell her quite honestly that this is the most polite society you've ever known. In 1990 Old Folsom is still in the long, generally peaceful aftermath of the seventies riots, and, for the most part, everyone seems content. If someone inadvertently bumps shoulders with you, it's not an occasion for posturing or for picking a fight; he will look you in the eye and respectfully excuse himself, and etiquette dictates you should do likewise.

"Aren't there any tough guys in there?" she wants to know. They're all tough, you tell her. But they're smart also, smart enough not to incite unnecessary conflict.

"Oh," she says, almost disappointed. You realize that on some level, not so far beneath the surface, she *is* disappointed. She wants a traditional prison horror story. She doesn't understand that this is not a Hollywood movie; it's not even an independent film.

"Well," she goes on, "what about the guys who lift weights all day? Do *they* give you any trouble?" It's been your observation that the bigger the inmate, the more mellow he seems to be. Pumping iron all day works off his aggression, and he gets a good night's sleep. He's not interested in you or what you're doing, so long as you're not out of line. Big muscles command respect in prison. The bigger your muscles, the less likely it is you'll be required to use them.

Sandy asks if you work out. Only on the typewriter, you confess. You do play basketball, a little cardio to help prolong this charming life.

Your brother wants to know if there is a lot of homosexual activity. You're happy to report there is very little — not that you have anything against homosexuals, but the old-timers have told you that, "back in the day, if you didn't get yourself a punk, then you were going to be one." It was "do unto others before they do you." Now, thanks perhaps to homophobia or fear of AIDS, the horrid practice of making someone a "punk" has been abandoned. That's not to say that two men cohabiting in a cell as man and punk is entirely unknown. The "man" will claim *he* is not gay; his cellmate is. He's living in the closet with the door wide open.

This was not the type of movie your siblings were counting on. Had you known that they would one day abandon you to your fate, you might have juiced up the script to keep them in the theater. You'd like to think you have a little more integrity than that, but, at the moment, you feel so . . . Well, let's just say you were unprepared for the avalanche of returned letters, for the automated voice on the phone informing you that the party did not accept your collect call. Again, you can't say you were surprised, exactly, but you didn't entirely see it coming. You can't

help but think things might have been different if you'd livened up the narrative, given them the grim penitentiary tales they so desired. There are some: Child molesters invariably make horizontal exits strapped to gurneys, their destination either the county morgue or an intensive-care unit. Gamblers and junkies with outstanding debts are typically dealt the ignoble shank, precisely inserted into the neck. Loudmouthed drunks occasionally murder each other for no sober reason. These deaths are accompanied by little or no fanfare, but maybe you should have shared the stories anyhow, strictly for entertainment value. Your brother and sisters might still be talking and writing to you.

In your head you have the absurd image of Brian, Teresa, and Sandy assembling in a Howard Johnson's restaurant for an impromptu sibling meeting — with you absent, naturally. The meeting comes to order with no preliminaries. Sandy daintily dabs the corner of her mouth with a paper napkin and makes the motion: "Let's just drop his ass." The motion is seconded, with some reservation, by Brian. Teresa says, "Whatever," distancing herself from any potential guilt, should it arise. The meeting is adjourned. Let the record reflect that the sibling condemned to prison is hereby excommunicated.

Just like that? How dare they! What happened to the guilt complexes your beloved mother and the Church so diligently heaped upon all of you? There was guilt for every occasion — in your case enough to fill an entire book. It's not possible that your sibs emerged from the experience unscathed. At any rate, you object! You'd like a chance to defend yourself before you are convicted. You were under the impression that a newfound sense of family unity had been discovered during your arrest and trial. They even hung in there with you through the first few years of your incarceration. So why have they abandoned you now?

Fine. You never asked for them to be your siblings anyway. Bad luck and random genetics forced them upon you. Of course, you're only kidding yourself; you'd welcome them back into your life with open arms. No words will ever adequately describe the long, dark nights in prison. Your sarcasm, your cinematic allegories, your weak attempts at wit, your bitching and moaning are all a front. You're projecting onto them your own guilt, your own sense of shame, which time will never erase.

Seventeen years ago you moved from Hawaii to California with your wife and your six children. For the previous twelve years you had worked in the food-and-beverage industry, and now you'd decided to start your own catering company. But first you'd treat yourself to a little break from work. You'd held down two jobs most of your adult life; you owed it to yourself to relax a little.

That first hit of crack cocaine had you hooked: heavenly bliss. As your daily consumption increased, your savings account diminished. But you'd quit soon enough. Just one more hit, one more blast.

Your "little break" from work lasted for more than three months. It ended with you strung out on crack cocaine, another man's blood on your hands. You'd never met him before that terrible

night, the fourth straight sleepless night of a crack binge. You were looking to score another bag of rock. Paranoia soaring, you became convinced he was setting you up. You believed, wrongly, that it was kill or be killed. His name was Carl T.

Carl T. never saw his thirty-fifth year. He did not marry his lovely fiancée. He never fathered the children he'd hoped to have one day. His dreams were never realized because you went over the edge. You took Carl T. with you. You did not bring him back.

You can say you're not the same person anymore; you're not that cocaine-addled, paranoid schizo who killed Carl T. But it doesn't change the fact that he is gone forever. And that his father's eyes still haunt you.

You remember your brother and sisters were offended by the way the T. family was eyeballing you in court. "You should see how they're looking at you, man," Brian said. But you had seen. More than you could bear. One glimpse of Mr. T.'s eyes was all it took. You averted your gaze. You couldn't handle what you saw there. Beyond Mr. T.'s anger, beyond his hate, beyond all the reasonable responses to your crime, you saw the fathomless void of another man's sorrow. It was a taste of what you might feel if someone killed one of your children. Anger? Sure. Hate? Without question. But all the hate in the world could not begin to fill the void you saw in those eyes. The void you had put there.

You did not dare raise your eyes to Carl T.'s mother.

You were unable to articulate any of this to your family. You told them only that if they said one word to any member of the T. family, you would never speak to them again. Your brother was incredulous: "Why don't you fight?" You were fighting, of course, but not with the T.'s. Your fight was with the state, which had charged you with first-degree murder. You never denied killing Carl T., but it was not premeditated.

Over the years you've written several letters of apology to Mr. and Mrs. T., letters you could never bring yourself to send. You didn't seek their forgiveness; you know you don't deserve it, and it would be selfish to ask. If they did grant forgiveness, it would only serve to make you feel better, and at their expense: the final insult.

Of course there's more. There always is. . . .

Every father in prison is guilty of a greater crime than the one he was convicted of. He has forsaken the most sacred of trusts: he is a deserter of children.

You were going to be the best father there ever was. You'd earn the right to wear one of those silly T-shirts that boast, #1 DAD. You'd have worn it with pride. When you were a kid, and home life was a perpetual celebration of dysfunction, you'd thought, *It doesn't have to be like this!* You'd vowed, in spite of anecdotal evidence that we are destined to repeat our parents' mistakes, that you would have a good relationship with your children. You'd never scream at

them or talk down to them. You'd take time to explain things to them, even when you didn't feel like it. Never would you say, "Because I said so!" — that horrible euphemism for "I don't respect you enough to explain why." If one of your children brought an unfair situation to your attention, you'd take the necessary steps to correct it. Together you'd figure out what was fair, and it would become a rule. This would be your family policy.

By the time you had a three-year-old, a two-year-old, and a two-*month*-old, you considered that there might be more to it than that, and perhaps you should educate yourself on being a parent. You went to the public library and began checking out all the parenting how-to books. Some were filled with philosophical fluff, and most others had a central theme of controlling your children through manipulation or intimidation. Of course, they didn't call it that. They used tidy phrases like "reverse psychology," "strong encouragement," and the all-too-readily accepted "tough love."

Unrelenting, authoritarian drivell.

Ah, but you're getting carried away again, aren't you? You're blasting these authors and their well-intended efforts so that you can avoid looking at your own misdeeds as a parent.

You eventually found a gem of a book that said children are people just like adults, only smaller, and they're at our mercy, so we should treat them fairly. With help from this book, your children were developing into more than responsible individuals: they were reasonable, caring, and remarkably kind human beings. They weren't perfect, but they were a pleasure to be around. You once overheard one of your daughters telling her older sister about a girl at school who had hurt her feelings. "I thought she was my friend," your little girl tearfully confided. "Now I never want to see her again."

Big sister, all of seven years old at the time, responded, "Sometimes kids are mean because they don't have anyone to be nice to them at home. That's what Daddy says."

Memory is sweet, even as your heart breaks. You taught your kids that there are reasons people act the way they do — not excuses, but reasons that sometimes deserve our understanding. Besides, being bitter and judgmental is no fun. It could have been your subconscious, planting seeds of forgiveness that you hoped could later be harvested on your behalf. You never came close to being the BEST DAD EVER. Even before you completely deserted your children, you'd spent more time at work than at home. Your children's mothers (you've been married and divorced twice) are the ones who fostered gracious manners in your offspring. They are the ones who clocked the long hours of perseverance and patience.

Your children remain your greatest joy. You hope they are doing well. You were completely cut off from them a year after your arrest. You continued to write to them, not knowing if they ever saw a word, because there was still so much you wanted to share, to teach them. Instead of litanies of do's and don'ts, you wrote them stories and songs. You told them how much you loved and missed them. You asked their friends' names, and their teachers', and what they'd

learned in school — anything to show them you were interested, that you cared. Your letters went unanswered. For eight years you clung to the hope that they were at least receiving the mail you sent. That hope dissolved when the last parcel was returned to you with no forwarding address.

You rarely talk about your kids. They own your heart and soul, yet you hardly ever mention them. You're a mess when it comes to your kids. Hell, children in general. You choke up at the sight of a jolly, diapered baby crawling across the kitchen linoleum in a TV commercial. In the corniest of movies, the quivering chin of a child about to cry makes your eyes pool. Yeah, you're a mess.

When you visit your children in your dreams, they are the age they were when you last saw them. Each time you awake from such a dream, you want to go back to sleep, to return to that time in the past. There are moments when you'd like to go to sleep and never wake up. But you must go on. You must live with the pain you have caused others, knowing you can never make amends. You cannot give Carl T. back his life. You can never return Mr. and Mrs. T.'s son to them. You will never be able to make up for all the times your children needed you and you weren't there. And these only top the list of your many transgressions.

You will die alone in prison. Still, all is not lost, not yet. This is not a movie, but you can still hope for a relatively happy ending. If you can achieve even a small amount of success with your turns on the typewriter, maybe you can leave something for your children besides the memory of a crackhead father who abandoned them.

Hope, despair: these are facts of life. Sometimes they seem to go hand in hand, when you're in prison.

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