

Joe Miceli
Creative non-fiction
about 1,000 words.

A Day in the Life of a Prisoner in New York

by

Joe Miceli

When my cell did not open that Friday morning in April, I did not think it unusual; the cops occasionally make mistakes, so I waited, patiently, for it to crack. After a moment a guy named Rob, a bald-headed, black, muscle-bound, bible-toting Protestant in his forties, appeared and nonchalantly said, "You're on the draft."

I paused for a second, and heard myself repeating what he had said. "I'm on the draft?" A certain degree of incomprehension and surprise thick in my half-asleep response.

He looked at me, gauged my reaction and said, "Yeah." Then added: "How many bags ya need; the Co's are coming to get your stuff."

And so after quickly packing a lifetime's worth of

possessions into four large garbage bags--discarding or giving away everything I did not want to carry with me--(books I planned to read again, clothes I hardly ever wore, canned food I didn't want to carry and typing paper I could replace; anything I believed I could do without for the time being) I hauled my bags downstairs, trekked over to draft processing, and discovered where I was going: Sing Sing!

The trip was far from routine; it was interesting: it was an adventure. Everything I did, everything I experienced, had a sense of newness and meaning to it. I did not expect to be transferred so suddenly, especially after spending the last eight years at Auburn, but welcomed the change nonetheless.

In the bull pen several white officers--with bored expressions--were busy tossing heavy chains and handcuffs and master locks on the long, beat-up formica tables in the center of the room. The room itself was a cacophony of sounds: talking, yelling, tv in the corner blaring, and chains, handcuffs and locks clashing, punctuated by one indisputable fact--I was on my way out of Auburn.

There were three wire-meshed enclosures in the room, and after sitting on the "Boss"--a metal detector used to determine if prisoners have weapons stashed in their anal cavities--I was directed to sit in the bull pen on the far left.

The pen I entered was packed tight with convicts who wore expressions from stupefied to indifferent, and, in some cases, clothes that stank, or at the very least, emphasized their woefully inadequate hygiene skills. Obviously if you planned

on traveling for a few hours, I thought, the least you could do was splash some after shave on, brush your teeth, and/or rub some deodorant under your arms and on your shirt.

Anyway, in the confusion I spotted a space on the only bench in the bull pen, and, after excusing myself, managed to squeeze into a seat to wait. From my vantage point I could see the hacks sorting out paperwork, the television in the corner, and the inmates being chained and shackled. This bull pen--unlike the other two next to it--contained all those prisoners heading to Downstate, and generally, facilities closer to the City--which was a thrill for me because I had not been closer to home (Queens) in eighteen years.

After an hour or so, we were called out by name, glanced at by a red-faced Sergeant holding our identification cards, then shackled and cuffed, for what I expected to be, a brutal trip. I say brutal because I know how grueling these long road trips can be; you would have to experience one for yourself to understand how it feels to be shackled and stuck in a bus full of lunatics yelling and screaming and ranting about their favorite rap artists... And meanwhile your stomach is cramped cause you have to urinate, but don't want to subject your siamese-cellmate to the indignity of watching you piss...and the motor's droning, the world outside is zipping by at sixty miles per hour, and all you can do is dream about stopping and getting out. All you can do is wonder what it would be like to set your feet on the ground, without the shackles, to smell the fresh air, the trees and flowers, to walk into a restaurant

and eat a thick, juicy steak--(a glass of red wine is optional).

The shackles and cuffs are curious instruments--practical, useful, and more than likely invented by a character with a sadistic nature. Of course they do serve their purpose, well: they prevent escapes. Although I must admit--as I indicated, it is thoroughly painful to have to wear them for prolonged periods of time. Imagine the visual: you are seated next to a stranger--(who may be anti-social, hostile, taciturn, and smells like rotten eggs)--and tethered to him with a twelve inch length of dog chain (attached with a cuff to each of your ankles). It's not all that hard to walk; all you have to do is time your steps with his so the cuff doesn't nip your ankle. After a couple of missteps you learn fast.

The belly chain and black box are another story: not quite as comfortable. A belly chain is nothing more than a thick chain that is wrapped around your stomach and used to secure the handcuffs on your wrists. A black box, (some have said an inmate invented this device) is then clamped over the two or three links of the handcuffs that afford you wiggle-room, anchored to the belly chain, and hence: prevents you from moving your hands up, down or sideways.

In any event, as I said, I am seated next to a Latin immigrant who, besides saying he is on his way to Rikers Island and on trial for assaulting his wife--(who he said he should have killed in a brief and singular telling declaration)--seems hostile, irritated and angry... and I'm not surprised; so killing time chatting with him is not an option. And to make matters

worse, when the cop walks up and down the isles and drops paper bags into our laps, mine flips into his and he looks at me and growls. Meanwhile, I am reminded how difficult--if almost impossible it is--to eat when your hog-tied.

Ahhhh, those great bologna and cheese sandwiches, the bruised apple and tiny juice containers loaded with sugar. The nutritionist must be related to the guy who invented the black box. The menu hasn't changed in twenty-one years! Same old stale bread and green-molded bologna. But it is a relief to have something to eat; we have been on the road now for a good few hours--en route to Elmira for a stopover--and I am hungry and the bologna tastes, now that I think about it, almost as good as steak. So I gently finagle the sandwiches out of my brown paper bag, dump the mustard and apple on my lap, and gently strain my neck to take bites of my food--chewing slowly to make it last.

At this point the handcuffs on my wrists have begun their dirty work; my wrists are swollen and the cold steel has already carved deep grooves into my flesh. Needless to say, after I eat I rub my hands to get the blood circulating again. But all in all: I manage--I endure--suffering is nothing new to me. In fact I consider my pain sort of redemptive--the journey to Sing Sing an adventure; like going on a vacation to an exotic island, or moving to a new home in a new neighborhood. Thoroughly enjoyable, thrilled by the new sights and sounds and possibilities... worth it all because I am on my way to a new facility, to Sing Sing, closer to the City, closer to home than

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I have been in eighteen years.

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Transcending Transitions

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I spent most of my time on the way to Downstate with my eyes closed. I couldn't sleep and the dizzying imagery of life whizzing past my window was far too much for me to absorb in a single day. The trees, homes, buildings, kids jogging in parks, people walking their dogs... were poignant reminders; they proved how precious life was: how much I had lost and taken for granted.

As for noise pollution: I did my best to block out the incessant droning of the bus's motor by daydreaming. I visualized what Sing Sing would be like, pondered whether all the horror stories I had heard about assaults on inmates--and staff--were true, and, most importantly wondered, if I'd be comfortable there.

My attempt to deny the existence of the world buzzing by my window was interrupted by a comment someone made.

"Yo," he said, "we're getting closer to New York. Check

out the cars. They're full of black people."

I opened my eyes and glanced over the Latino's shoulder sitting next to me. He was slumped in his seat like a drunk on a train. His head resting against the window. Sleeping peacefully. Oblivious. Perhaps, a good thing. I peered out the window at the cars flying by. The observation the man had made was right. The cars were full of black people. An undeniable--astute--consideration; particularly when you think about where I had just come from: Central New York, Klan country, where some people still whistled dixie and others still had confederate flags on their porches flapping in the wind.

Shortly after the inmate had tweaked my reflection about the curious, but obviously apparent cultural distinctions, we exited the thruway and made our way slowly down a road that led to Downstate. We suffered the usual preliminary delays before we entered the facility. We stopped in the parking lot and watched the officers on the bus--the Jamaican sergeant and officer Sanchez--take turns walking to their cars to toss their travel bags inside. I suspect they did not want to carry any extra bags with them when they set foot into the prison.

When they returned from their vehicles--Sanchez drove an SUV, we couldn't see the Sergeants--we immediately rolled into the facility; a huge gate slammed behind us defining a finality--a sense of hopelessness--only prisoners in similar circumstances could describe. I stared through the bus window, gazed at the incredible piles of white draft bags stacked several feet high; each bag had a neon colored tag attached designating

the prisoner's point of origin and destination. As I contemplated the mountain of bags piled high behind the ugly gray wire-mesh enclosures, I wondered when, if ever--as my professor from Cornell University had said--the prisons in New York would collapse under their own financial weight.

The bus door quickly opened with a whoosh and we shuffled off into the cold air. It was late and dark and because I had to urinate, it felt that much colder. As I waited for all the inmates to get off the bus, I glanced at the huge double glass doors that led into the facility; shifting my weight from leg to leg--shivering. We eventually lined up thick around the doors with Sanchez at the rear, beyond the line that snaked passed the cargo holds. We moved in through the doors slowly; only so many men could squeeze through at one time. Suddenly I heard someone scream in a deep voice.

"Listen up, men. All you guys in the front of the line take it over to the left and make some room. It's cold out here."

Sanchez had said precisely what I was thinking. The convicts in the front of the line had plenty of room inside; the thought had not occurred to them that we were also cold, and desperately wanted to share the space available inside the passageway leading into the building. They just needed to be coaxed--sort of the way sheep need to be when they're lead to slaughter...

When we shuffled into the building I glanced at the officer in the control booth, limped by her, then proceeded to the reception area. Several officers were ready--standing tall in their freshly pressed blue uniforms and shiny combat boots--to

remove our cuffs and shackles. A Sergeant made an announcement after we had all entered the room.

"When I call your name," he said, "step forward, give your name and number to the officer, and follow his instructions. The sooner we get done here, the sooner you can get a hot meal and a cell."

I liked the sweet sound of that song. A hot meal, at this point, was a beautiful thing. A cell and a warm bed: fantastic! Almost as good as dreaming about parole during the Pataki era.

When my name was called I announced my number loud and proud. I had been incarcerated since 1984. I had earned that right. I had survived. In my mind I considered that feat--at least among convicts--something to boast about. Afterall, I was surrounded by a majority of men who had 2005 numbers; that meant they were starting their bits; I was finishing mine.

After I carefully stepped into the bull pen I sat and waited--again until my name was called--to have my shackles and cuffs removed. At this point my wrists were swollen and numb and I had terrible cramps because I had to urinate. As soon as the officer called my name, I hurried forward, careful not to injure myself or the Latino tethered to me, and raised my leg so he could remove my ankle chain. As soon as he took the cuffs and shackles off, I rubbed my wrists and rushed to the bathroom in the corner of the room and took a good long whiz.

We waited in the pen for about a half hour or so, until we all had our restraints removed, and then were guided by

officers to a table piled high with plastic feed-up trays. Hot meals. We each snatched one of the worn out trays and followed the man in front of us down a staircase that led into the depths of the cool cement corridors and the cell blocks. In the halls, before we began to march to our destinations, we were ordered to pair it up--no talking.

As we wound our way through the huge, mazelike passageways buried beneath the building, I recalled, sadly, how I had felt when I first arrived here in 1984. Heartaching visions of my family and my past invaded my mind like cancer: I saw long lost loved ones seated around the dining room table on Christmas, eating, laughing, joking; my wife and I sharing a joint on the porch of our home; the sun setting in a blaze of hot pink beyond the world trade towers. My dog, a fiercely loyal Rottweiler named Tara, guarding her castle, barking at people in the boats drifting down the bay on water as flat and black as marble. And I remembered my grandfather, staring out the bow windows of our home, sitting at the table in the kitchen, humming an Italian song he had long ago forgotten the words to. And my grandmother--also deceased--clipping roses from a trellis in her garden.

Time had once been my nemesis, hopelessness an ally...things had certainly changed; my heart and surroundings had not. For now, it was the same old routine, same hallways, same decaying buildings: a chapter left out of "Dante's Inferno." Yet I looked forward to staying at Downstate overnight. I decided long ago to forget the past, to embrace the future, to expect little...

If nothing else I knew the cages here were the quietest in the state; unfortunately some of the prisoners living in them--unlike me, not who I was but who I had become--were far too inexperienced, far too numbed and infected by their jarring transitions, their journey into the underworld, to realize the futility of resistance or redemption.

We marched to various housing units in the prison, losing three or four inmates at each. We then stopped at the hotel I'd be staying in. Once inside we were told to hug the wall. We stood inside a few minutes, silent as the cell blocks, and cradled our warm feed-up trays. Then an officer appeared and we turned to face him as he addressed us.

"Ok, listen up men, when I call your names you will be given your cell locations. This is the special housing unit. I realize you aren't box inmates, so you will not be treated as such. However, you will have to be frisked before you enter your rooms."

And so we were each placed on the wall, had a metal detector waved over our aching bodies, and sent to our rooms like bad little boys. When I stepped in my cell I immediately noted how quiet it was. Quiet and peaceful. The room was empty, hollow; there was nothing inside it to read, nothing inside it to do, not even a hook to fasten a sheet on the wall to hang yourself with. I removed the towel from my pillowcase--which contained my linen, soap, toothbrush and toothpaste, and quickly rinsed my face with warm water; a luxury considering Downstate was one of the few prisons that had hot and cold running water in

its cells. I then took my boots off, sat on my bunk, and ate the bland rice and beans inside my tray.

After I finished eating I made my bed; I knew it would be a long cold night because my overnight bag contained a single flimsy blanket. I generally like to sleep with three or four. And to make matters worse, I did not wear my coat on the trip. I thought--and I was wrong and paid the price for this--that it would be stuffy in the bus; that, with no way to remove my jacket on the long ride to the City, I would sweat a lot.

After I settled in, made my bed, brushed my teeth with the tiny two-inch toothbrush Downstate provided me with, I strolled over to turn the light off. There was no light switch! Besides having a preference for extra blankets, I also detested light filling the room I slept in. I had spent a thousand dollars on shades and blinds to keep the sunlight from poking its nose into my bedroom at home. Needless to say, because I was in the box--and inmates in SHU were suicide prone--the lights remained on 24-7 as a necessary precaution.

I paced back and forth in my cell like a desperate animal; the smooth cement floor felt cool on my feet. I was bored, exhausted, unable to sleep; the mocking light shining from a four foot length of fluorescent bulb affixed to the wall--adjacent to my bed--tormented me: it made sleeping--and the possibility of escaping for a few hours--impossible. I tried to distract myself, stopped to peer out the window, watched a car slowly drive around the outside perimeter of a fence topped with snarling rows of razor wire. I considered my predicament,

checked the handle on the window to make sure the window was drawn good and tight. It was already far too cold in my room. As I stood there, staring out my window, feeling the cool cement floor numbing my feet, the light fixture taunting me, I noted someone had carved graffiti on the window with a razor blade. Scrawled there by an unknown author, illuminated by the light in my cage, were three words: Jesus loves you.

After pacing for a half hour or so, and wondering what I could do about that awful light tormenting me, I came up with a plan: I smeared toothpaste on the outer casing then wallpapered layers of toilet paper over it. I stepped back and admired my work. It did not darken the room as much as I would have liked, but it helped.

I finally decided to lay down to rest; the sooner I got through the long day, the sooner I would be on my way to Sing Sing. After I took off my clothes and slipped under my sheet and blanket, I heard the unmistakable sound of my neighbor's toilet roar like a lion. And it kept on roaring. Repeatedly. I felt like Daniel, surrounded in a pit of lions. At first I assumed he was flushing something down the toilet he didn't want the cops to find--hence an explanation for the prolonged pandemonium. But after a few moments of incessant rumbling I determined what the problem was: his button had stuck; his toilet would flush like that all night--or at least until the plumber came to fix it. So much, I thought, for the benevolent sentiments inscribed on my window by a faceless phantom.