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Animal Shelter

*She was the ugliest woman I've ever seen.
Calloused, insensitive, and downright mean.
With a swelled head and swollen cheeks that housed those beady
little eyes
And two tongues in her mouth telling twice the lies.
Her speech was harsh; similar to the braying of the ass
Crass, uneducated, and devoid of class.
Vehemently she defended her children's destructive behaviors
Sons desensitized and crude
Daughters with their mother's attitude.
Defeated and depleted because their souls were so mistreated
These ignorant bastards couldn't recognize the help they needed.
Cultivated in an infected womb and nurtured so savagely
Was born an immoral generation more hideous than she!*
—Yamini

I am going to begin my story with the Cook County Jail, one of the largest single-site jails in the United States. All civilized behavior ends at its barbed-wire walls. It is an animal shelter. It is as if it was created in the mind of a bestselling author of fiction. It is dangerous, volatile, and dehumanizing. I say “animal shelter” because a good number of the men here behaved like animals, county sheriffs included.

I arrived at the jail with a group of fifteen young men from all over the city, with many of us being charged with murder or attempted murder. We were mostly African Americans and Hispanics of high school and college age, and we had all just thrown our lives away. The truck pulled up to a human loading area at a back entrance of the jail and let us out. We were ushered through a large underground tunnel that connected the courthouse to the jail, stopped along a wall, and ordered to strip naked. This was the place where many infamous stories of beatings given by sheriffs took place, and on that day in September 1996, what I witnessed confirmed it.

I, along with the other men, had been in a police-station lockup for close to three days without washing and wearing the same clothing. The smell was unbearable. I remember wondering if the transatlantic slave ships smelled this bad. As I stood there naked, eight huge African American sheriffs paced up and down the line like attack dogs. Some wore face masks to cover the stench, others wore angry, disgusted frowns or contorted smirks, and all looked to steal whatever dignity any man on that wall had left.

In a loud, aggressive tone intended to intimidate, a big six-foot-two, 250-pound sheriff faced the line we were standing in and began barking orders. “Anybody with braids in their head take them out right now.” I and about five others had our hair in braids and began to take them down. A young guy about my age didn’t like the order and with an attitude, he slowly took his time. Seeing his dislike of the command, two huge sheriffs walked over to him, violently slapped his hands out of his hair, snatched the braids from his head,

called him a couple of names, and shoved him back against the wall with tremendous force.

“Let me see your hands; fingers wide,” the sheriff giving orders said. I stretched my long arms straight up and showed both sides of my hands. “Run your fingers through your hair.” Now that my hair was down I combed it with my fingers to show I wasn’t trying to smuggle anything into the jail. “Open your mouths wide,” the big officer said. With that last command the degrading vulgarities began.

“This pretty boy got a nice-size mouth,” one of the sheriffs wearing a mask said to a man standing a few feet away from me.

“She’s gonna need it,” another replied as they both inspected the mouth of the man they were dehumanizing. “Bend at the waist and spread them cheeks,” came another order. I cringed. I couldn’t stand losing my dignity, but I also knew that the cavity back there was how some people brought their drugs in with them.

When the order was given, a thin, sickly looking Hispanic man was moving too slowly. His inability to keep pace with the rest of us was obvious because of his physical condition. Just as wild predatory animals attack the lame ones among them, a sheriff outweighing this sickly, naked man by 150 pounds smashed his head against the wall with such force the crunch echoed in the tunnel. He would have collapsed had his face not been pinned between the wall and the hand of a 300-pound savage.

Completely naked and vulnerable, I angrily listened to the degrading insults. Although none of them were addressed to me, I

felt like they were. I felt the other man's pain, his grief, and I was ready to fight for strangers.

In this group of sheriffs, there was a particular officer who was more vicious than the others. He was light skinned, about five foot four, and 165 pounds, and he looked like a midget compared to the ape squad. He walked up and down the line taunting our naked group for a reason beyond my understanding. He stopped in front of a guy about his size who looked weak and who didn't open his mouth wide enough when the command was given and slapped him so hard he fell into the next man. I stood there grinding my teeth so hard my jaws almost locked up.

We were told to get dressed and get back on the wall and wait for our next instructions. Once we all had our shoes and boots back on and were no longer in that vulnerable naked position, the small sheriff who stirred up the most hatred in us all was nowhere to be seen.

No one likes a coward. He is despised and rejected. It was my pride and ego's greatest challenge to witness or be subjected to abuse from the kinds of men whose hearts tremble with fear at the first sign of danger; men who will abandon you, without warning, to face a threat alone. This is what I was preparing my mind for, at least for the next few years. My terrible choices landed me here. The stupid decisions I made led me here. I chose the street life, the gutter, over my family—over everything. I was raised a God-fearing freethinker and I chose a direction that had me bending over spreading my butt cheeks to be inspected by animals. Angry and humiliated, I entered my new life with my soul on fire.

The Cook County Jail is divided into units called divisions, and in 1996 divisions one, nine, ten, and eleven were where the men with violent cases pending were housed. In the jail there were always between forty-eight and seventy-five men on one wing. The majority of them were members of one of more than ten different gangs, with many under the influence of the drug of their choice and gallons of homemade alcohol. To see so many young guys being held and facing trial for violent or heinous crimes against people was distressing. They were impulsive, without reason, devoid of logic, and living in a closet-sized space. My sane mind had a need to make sense, a need to be rational, and I was going to have to find a way to exist in this environment. But this was something I could not comprehend. This was anarchy, chaos, and like everyone else I had to survive, and it began immediately.

I was sent to division ten after the demeaning experience in the tunnel—starving, exhausted, and funky as hell. I couldn't stomach my own smell. Anyone who has been through this process knows exactly what I'm speaking of and exactly how I felt. There was nothing to be proud of. I was thinking, "What if my mother saw me standing there looking and smelling like a diseased, stray animal?" For the men who had kids, I thought, "What if your children, who adore you because they see their father as this larger-than-life figure, saw you standing there, their hero, filthy, spirit deflated, depressed, and unrecognizable?" That image of you will be burned into their minds forever.

I have never—ever seen a man come through those county doors facing charges that could get him serious time and not have that look about him. It is the stripping of dignity and the realization that I'm either going to die in this hell or leave as an old man too old to work. We were all pretrial detainees surviving and awaiting our day in court with little or no faith in beating those cases, but hoping like a mutha. That's a different kind of hope. That's an extreme hope for extreme circumstances.

I stepped through the door dragging the kind of mattress that looked like it was found in an alley against a dumpster. Lumpy and stained from God knows what, I dropped the disgusting bed roll and looked around. I saw young males in my age range, seventeen to twenty-one. Boys: thin, frail, and war-torn. Everyone looked as if his spirit had been siphoned from his body. No laughter, no good-natured conversation, no concern about the well-being of others. Nothing. Just empty shells.

The majority of these young men were smoking cigarettes, and the air in the housing unit looked like it had been blanketed from the exhaust of a raggedy car whose engine had just been started for the first time in years. They weren't smoking the stuff with filters but that "roll your own" raw tobacco that alters your skin color, blackens your lips, and will just mess you all the way up period.

The young guys had a defeated look and when they walked, their shoulders were slumped and they dragged their feet. The scene depressed me instantly. This was a school wing, and the number of young guys charged with murder and other violent crimes was higher on this one wing of males ages seventeen through twenty-one than

on any other wing in division 10. The trend continued throughout all divisions in the county jail that housed men with violent offenses. The school wings were a majority of killers. This was it, my new home. Damn!

Checking out the scene that I was about to be a part of, my mind continued to race. Looking at all those young faces I thought, “Here we were, facing the aftermath of gang banging, drug dealing, and any other rebellious behavior that got us exiled from society. All pride gone, street dreams dead, relationships dead, reasoning dead, spiritually dead, and too stupid to know.” Even though I was now a part of this group, I was not what they were.

Still standing in the doorway, I gathered my bed roll and walked over to the nearest phone and stared at it. What I was about to do was the worst thing I’d ever had to do in my twenty years of living. I had to call home to my mother—the woman who raised me, educated me, cultivated me, nurtured me, and placed me in an environment where I was able to develop without any abuses or influences from drugs or alcohol—to tell her I was in jail and charged with first-degree murder. I hated myself for that. I hated having to put my family through that. It was a phone call each of us had to make. I can only imagine what she went through when that news penetrated her ears and worked itself through her nervous system. I saw a picture in my mind of thousands of mothers and grandmothers on their phones when that news came through to their own ears. Can you see it? That’s what we did to them. That’s how we repaid them for their

sacrifices. That's how we rewarded them for all their years of love and support. Then we started whining for money.

I don't remember much about that phone call because I was numb; however, I do remember it was my youngest brother, who was in middle school at the time, who answered the phone. I don't have many blank thoughts when it comes to memorable moments, but this is one. I don't even remember the conversation. I guess the traumatic stress of it all wiped it clean from my memory. I hung up the phone, and whatever emotional roller coaster I was riding, I got off and raised my head. All eyes are always on the new guy, and he will forever be reminded of how he arrived to the wing on that first day.

Peace has no place in the county jail. It is unwelcome. The men here worship their own impulses, which were influenced by the lifestyles that led them to imprisonment.

The next morning, at 5 a.m., before I had an opportunity to find out if anyone was from my neighborhood, the deck went up. This means a wing riot. All hell had broken loose, and it is the single most dangerous time in jail or prison life. Anything can and will happen, and it usually does. Early-morning riots were not uncommon in the county jail. People were cranky and still in a swoon from their night sleep. As most of them are, this riot was caused by a young man who was a slave to his impulses. Whatever destructive urge that this young fellow felt, he seemed to obey. I don't remember his name because I had just arrived, so I'll call him Angry.

Angry was upset because the breakfast tray he himself picked had less juice in the container than the other trays. Never mind that the juices were sealed and shipped from the manufacturer that way;

never mind that it was less than an ounce difference from the seventy-five other juices. No, to hell with logic and common sense. This was an opportunity to start some mess because he was the type who enjoyed chaos. Unfortunately, so did a handful of others. This was the school wing after all, and there were no men here to talk sensibly or demand order. The only people here were overgrown little boys who, before this, were still living at home under Mama's roof.

Angry took his hard, thick plastic tray and swung it in the face of a rival gang member across the bridge of his nose. Instantly the wing exploded into violence. Fifty young men scattered around the unit, chasing each other with anything they could get their hands on. It looked like drunk, crazed soccer fans from opposite teams who hated each other storming the field with shanks, mop ringers, and broom sticks. A guy came out of his cell still half sleep and wearing shower shoes only to have his teeth knocked out with a hard object by somebody running past. It went on so long that people got tired of fighting, and when the sheriffs' response team arrived, guys were already grouped with their gangs, taking head counts and assessing the damage.

Blood was everywhere and young men were hurting. All the killer, gorilla looks were gone for the moment, and I saw the true ages of seventeen-, eighteen-, nineteen-, and twenty-year-olds. Baby faces were in tears from the pain of stab wounds, and others limped around pitifully. It was the aftermath of a medieval battle with no

winners, guaranteed to happen again the moment somebody felt the impulse to kick something off.

After the wing was locked down, a lieutenant came around cell to cell to see who-all needed to go to the health care unit. Sadly, at least one-third of the people involved in the brawl had serious injuries. I already hated this place. A few days later it was business as usual on the wing, and I had a court date.

Depending on one's outlook, going to court could be an unpleasant day of dealing with riffraff and hated sheriffs or a chance to socialize and hope that you ran into people you knew who too had court dates. Every day thousands of men were ushered from their divisions to the courthouse by way of an underground tunnel. Although I traveled this tunnel a couple of nights before, the scene this morning was unexpected. I saw thousands of men, the majority African American and Hispanic, handcuffed, wearing beige uniforms, and being marshaled to judgment.

Because I wanted to get a better look at what was going on up ahead, I stood on top of an empty crate that was nearby. The scene from this vantage point sent a chill down my spine. I saw tired, depressed, defeated, handcuffed young men standing side by side as far as my eyes could see in both directions. Doom and despair were the only things present, and everyone seemed to already know his fate. We looked like slaves and the county sheriffs looked like overseers. I stepped down off of that crate and joined the rest of the prisoners, disturbed by what I just recognized. I saw slavery that day, and no one can ever convince me otherwise.

I was a new arrival to the county jail, so I had to go see the chief judge. I wasn't alone. There were a dozen others who had to do the same. I've always been observant, so when I was seated I looked around the courtroom. On one side of the room sat the accused, and on the other side of the room were ambulance-chasing, drooling lawyers. Many of them didn't have clients in the room and were there to hear who was charged with what to determine which of us needed an attorney the most. Their favorite cases involved drug dealers charged with possessing large amounts of drugs. Whenever a drug case was called, the lawyers stopped fiddling around with their notes and paid more attention to what was going on in the courtroom. That was easy money for them. However, when a serious violent crime was called, their interest was not even close. Just by looking over at the person charged with the murder or attempted murder, the attorneys quickly determined his worth and moved on. "Damn! So that's how they do it," I said to myself.

I turned my attention back to the bench where the judge was sitting when the door on the side of the courtroom opened. In walked ten lively young prosecutors conversing with one another as if they had just seen a good movie. Noticing how well dressed they were, I turned in my seat and looked at how we were dressed in comparison. They were dressed for business, while we were dressed for a soup-kitchen line. Some of us still needed showers, and our hair and beards were uncombed. Although they too were young, we were complete opposites all the way down to our skin complexions. All ten of them were white, and all fifteen or so of us were African

American. But that was to be expected and was not what bothered me. What bothered me was that these young people entered the room still in conversation with one another, lined up in front of the judge's bench, received their case assignments, and left as they came, never once turning to look at us. It was business as usual and we were the business. We were nothing but case files. For the second time that morning, a chill crept down my spine. I turned to the man sitting on my right, leaned in close, and said, "We don't stand a chance."

I am not giving you my opinion on judges, state attorneys, or lawyers, because my opinions do not matter. I know of judges, state attorneys, and lawyers who truly care and truly want to make a difference, for the better, in the lives of people headed in the wrong direction. I am sharing with you my experience and what my eyes saw and ears heard, and what I felt crawling down my spine that day. Although I may not have been wise enough at the age of twenty to fully comprehend what I was seeing, I certainly understand it now that I am married with two children, an author, a public speaker, and the executive director of a nonprofit organization.

There was a two-year stretch in the jail when it seemed that judges were handing down harsher sentences than was normal. It was during this time that many men became members of faith-based groups. Muslims, Christians, Jews, Buddhists, and a few other religious organizations began to form on the wings. These religious services were already provided by the jail on their scheduled days; however, congregations grew beyond these services. Unfortunately, most of the guys joining were insincere. I had an up-close experience on how men truly believe they can deceive the one who created them

by quoting scripture and appearing to be upright. Being a God-fearing man myself, I assure you this is not an attack on religion. I am just explaining to you what men did to cope with their fear because of what the judges had begun. They were gang members by day and a fellowship by evening. It was a strange mixture.

This visible insincerity made religion very unappealing to young men who didn't understand spirituality in the first place. Many of the members of these jail-wing congregations were charged with the most heinous crimes and received the harshest sentences. I recall a conversation with another prisoner on the subject, and he said, "Those stupid fools are over there playing with God and getting earthed." That's when somebody gets picked up off his feet and power-slammed to the ground face first. This sentiment was echoed throughout the jail. After seeing so many people get convicted and receive long prison sentences, I became numb to it. Life went on and I just waited for my turn.

Days, weeks, months, and years passed in this dangerous, dangerous place where nothing happened but excruciating pain. No one was ever safe and everybody knew it. That level of defenselessness had us all on edge, and we knew that the only way to survive was to be ready for anything at any time. Black Teeth, a young gang leader, had some issues in the streets with members of his own mob that spilled over into the jail. He was visiting with his family one afternoon when a couple of gangbangers from the same gang as he stormed into the visiting room and stabbed him in front of

his loved ones. His young son and girlfriend saw men try to kill him, and he could do nothing but scream.

Doing time in Cook County Jail while waiting on a trial is dangerous for other reasons too. The gang infestation, of course, is the main problem, but the county sheriffs presented another. Whenever they came to restore order because of a riot, because of an individual's behavior toward another sheriff, or even because of a wing shakedown, their methods were brutal. Very often when a wing is shaken down (checked for any contraband items), a strip search is held. Sometimes sheriffs slapped, punched, kicked, and choked naked men during these shakedowns. They used gestapo tactics of intimidation and force that if caught on camera could get them all prosecuted. It was these tactics that made us despise the sheriffs.

During a surprise shakedown, a tactical team of approximately thirty men as huge as NFL players dressed in all black and wearing leather gloves burst through the wing doors. Some of them carried big sticks and were screaming loud obscenities, but all of them were extremely aggressive in their behavior. Their Rottweilers and German shepherds were almost as big as they were. As they bullied through the wing, they pushed people down and slapped others against walls. A man named Donnie wasn't moving quickly enough and he was slapped so hard that he almost lost consciousness. He was a light-skinned man, so the entire side of his face bruised instantly. In moments his eye darkened to an ugly little raisin and all the tissue around it became a swollen rainbow of dark colors. This was the tactical team's behavior all the time. The commander of the team said that this was his gang and that his gang ran the jail.

Not all county sheriffs were bad people. Some of them sincerely wanted to help, and they showed it through their kind and encouraging words. It was easy to recognize these officers, and we appreciated them. But we didn't get too close. To do so would have been dangerous for us and job threatening for them. Anyone who got too close to a county sheriff was no longer to be trusted with any information and was often mistreated on the wing, which was a dangerous situation. And the opposite was also true: any Sheriff getting too close to an inmate was ostracized by his or her peers and often placed under investigation, which could jeopardize his or her job. All of these variables created the "us against them" mentality that helped shape the thinking in the inmates and sheriffs.

Anyone who had friends and family to come and visit was considered blessed. This was a luxury and a major ingredient to remaining sane. Some men used their visits in boastful ways to show their importance. Whenever people came to see them regularly, they made it appear that they had status in their neighborhoods. Fat Sean had this bad. He was a small-time neighborhood drug dealer who loved to flash every little bit of anything. Every time he got a visit he would go into an "I'm sick of feeding these cats from my cell" kind of spiel like he really had it like that. Another guy, Caddy, would put on cologne just to go out into the visiting room and talk to his visitor through a thick glass with a tightly wired mouthpiece to speak through. There were no contact visits in the county jail, so watching him prepare on a weekly basis was ridiculous. Those who didn't

receive many visits, if any, had a hard time surviving and were forced to make it off of the few rations provided by the jail.

Time in the county jail is torture. I must repeat myself over and over and over again, because the day-to-day threat was real. Life there was as unpredictable as a tornado's path, and it made men take plea deals from state's attorneys just to escape the madness. A riot once erupted because somebody changed the channel from a kids show to the news. Two young guys who were watching Power Rangers jumped up and cussed out the man who changed the channel, calling him all kinds of names. He slapped one of them and all hell broke loose.

What's absolutely insane about the majority of these explosions is that right before they ignite, men in rival gangs may be sitting with each other playing cards or board games. But because they are in rival gangs, the moment a situation escalates, they attack one another only to later apologize, saying, "You know how this thang go."

During the riot, a Hispanic man named Los was knocked unconscious and had to be taken to the healthcare unit. He had been in the county jail for close to a year, and up until that time he had not been involved in or victimized by the stupid, senseless, random violence. A few days after his recovery, Los called his attorney, had him get his court date moved up, went before his judge, and made a plea deal for five years. This was a recurring trend in this treacherous place, and no one was laughed at or made fun of when he went to court and took a plea deal to get the hell out of that animal shelter.

After the riot, the sheriffs rounded up everyone who was seen fighting. When these brawls go down, they are chaotic frenzies, and

it is very difficult to distinguish friend from foe. I was in the dayroom on the phone when it happened, so I dropped the receiver and put my back to a wall, swinging at whoever got too close, trying my best not to take out people I became friends with. After the brawl, the sheriffs rounded up people to take to segregation, but because the fight was so large it was impossible to take everyone involved. Only a handful were grabbed, and unfortunately for me I was one of them.

Segregation, or “seg” as we called it, is an isolated place in the county jail where people are sent who violate the rules and regulations established for maintaining order. It is twenty-four-hour lockdown and is usually filled with men who have been involved in brutal fights, stabbings, assaults on sheriffs, possession of drugs or hooch, and other acts detrimental to safety and security. It is intended to be a dark, lonely place, but because the jail has so much rebellious behavior, segregation was just another wing. Looking around, my first reaction was, “This ain’t as bad as the sheriffs made it out to be.” Guys were going to seg intentionally just to meet up with their buddies, and when I arrived I was familiar with a majority of the people there. It was a hang-out spot.

While I was in segregation, I sang, rapped, told yo-mama jokes, and clowned other people just like everybody else. One afternoon as the dinner trays were being collected it was determined by the shift commander that the wing was to be split up because people were having too good a time. Two-man cells were made into one-man cells, and anyone with only a few days left to complete his

segregation term was released back into the general population. The area where I was located was the noisiest, and the split-up began there.

As the rearranging began, I voiced my displeasure to the sheriffs about them breaking up our little corner and explained that all we were trying to do was kick it. At twenty-two years old, immature and under the influence of my environment, I got caught up in the moment and ran my mouth, telling the officers how bogus they were as they arrived to my cell. Yeah, I told 'em real good. I laid the G down and continued talking crazy as I was ordered to move into one of the cells nearest to the hub where the sheriffs surveyed the entire wing.

I grabbed my property and walked toward the front of the segregation unit. “This is your cell r-i-g-h-t h-e-r-e,” the officer said in a sinister, ominous tone. When I walked into the cell, I knew immediately I had crossed the threshold into a deeper, darker dimension of the criminally insane. Judging by the layout of this chamber, I could easily tell that the man inside of it was used to living alone.

Taking a few more steps into the cell and looking around in disbelief, I was shocked by what I saw. Cut-out photos of women from pornography magazines covered the walls like wallpaper. On the table was a small shrine of more naked books dedicated to his perversion, but leaning against the pile was a figure of a woman made from the magazine pages. I was getting creeped out.

I knew many men who had a naked book or two, or three or four, but this was without a doubt the most extreme case I've ever seen.

Resisting the urge to turn around and bang on the cell door for somebody to get me the hell out of there, I dragged my property over to the bunk and looked down in more disbelief. Lying on the mattress was yet still more sexually explicit material. “My bad, celly [cellmate], let me get that for you. I ain’t used to living with nobody,” said a short, thin person who looked to be suffering from malnutrition. Standing there slowly turning my body around the cell to take it all in, I said, “I see.”

In the corner, on the opposite side of the cell, were stacks of court papers and case documents that came up to the waist of my 6-foot-4 build. People who were very active in fighting their cases along side their attorneys often had a lot of paper work but nothing like this. Stacks like these had to take years and years to compile. Shrugging it off and unpacking the few items I had I tried to get settled in but I was too uneasy about this entire situation. Those mounds of documents in the corner were just as bizarre as the porn and for some reason it was bothering the hell out of me. Curious, but not wanting to talk much I pulled out a Tom Clancy book I was reading and knocked out a few chapters before I dozed off.

Later that evening I was awakened to what sounded like loud whispering. I sat up in my bunk and scanned the cell to see if an officer had come in and was having a conversation with my celly. Finding no one there, I slowly leaned forward and peeked over the side of the top bunk and saw Ol’ Boy having a full-blown argument with a naked centerfold he had torn from one of his magazines. “You all right down there, celly?” I asked, startling him.

He looked up at me and said, “My bad, celly, didn’t mean to wake you. Just checkin’ one of my hoes.”

“Yeah, a pimp got to do that sometimes,” I said, going along with the situation. In complete and utter disbelief, I rolled over and stared at the ceiling. “This is what I get for acting a damn fool,” I told myself. It was the last time I woofed at anyone.

I was so disturbed by my surroundings that I stayed up all night and didn’t nod off until around 4 a.m. A few hours later I woke to the sound of heavy movements in the cell. Ol’ Boy was packing up all his property and moving to another cell where he could be alone again.

The next morning eight huge tact team officers the size of defensive linemen came on the seg unit and waited by Ol’ Boy’s door as he got dressed for court. They were there to escort him through the jail and into the courtroom because of his high profile case. As it turned out, Ol’ Boy was facing charges for several rapes and murders of women on Chicago’s south side.

Because I chose to run my mouth to the sheriffs as if I had some authority to do anything, I was tossed in a cell with a person charged with being a serial killer. Nothing about his appearance was threatening, nor did I feel threatened. I was at least 6 inches taller and 50 pounds heavier, and I could handle myself well. I was, however, almost traumatized by what I experienced. I’m still weirded out by that one night in the realm of the psychotic.

A few weeks went by and more and more people left seg to return to the general population. The party was over, and the disciplinary unit became the dreary place it was designed to be. There were only

four of us left to finish our segregation time in a place that could house close to fifty men. The silence was so unnatural it felt like all of the sound that was recently there had been sucked out by the huge air vents that hung from the ceiling. It was so quiet I heard the office phone whenever it rang through thick, bulletproof glass and layers of reinforced steel doors and concrete walls.

The four of us who remained after everyone else had gone were Ol' Boy, a psychopathic rapist and murderer; a middle-aged Hispanic man who barely spoke a lick of English; a short, powerfully built, hell-raising deaf man; and me. I had no intention of ever saying a word to Ol' Boy or the deaf guy because they were lunatics, and communicating with the Hispanic man was impossible. So there I was, stuck in seg with all the books I took with me already read, no cellmate, no one to talk to, no food, and two weeks left to do. It was just me, my puzzle books, my deck of cards, and my imagination. I thought back to what a sheriff told me about seg when I first arrived. "You gon' feel it when the party's over," he said. He wasn't lying. I was dying of boredom and from the lack of human companionship. I couldn't take it. The hours felt like days. I never knew exactly what time it was, only that it was morning, afternoon, evening, or night. To keep from losing my mind, I read my books over again. By default, *The Hunt for Red October* became my favorite book.

After my segregation time ended I went back to population and found that some of the gangs were trying to get a handle on their members because the violence had gotten to be too much, even by their standards. To get order meant brutal violations for anyone

putting the rest of the mob in danger, but those violations were so ruthless that they did more harm than good. Some of the gang leaders were so drunk with power that they were the biggest threat to their group. It was a control issue. Because it was too dangerous to start trouble with opposing gangs, many started trouble among their own, and when it happened it was vicious. The members knew that their gang leaders would stomp their ears together if they caught them doing anything outside of the mob's rules, but some members were so rebellious that they did things anyway. For their own protection from the backlash, they would ask the sheriffs if they could be placed in protective custody forever, marking them as cowardly to the rest of the population.

Most gangs cooperated in an allied system that was designed by the gang leaders. When it comes time for war, gangs, like countries, come together to form a bigger group. The opposing group also has alliances with other gangs to become a unit just as big. This was why the riots were so huge. Although each gang is independent on its own, whenever violence erupts, an allied member is expected to assist his ally.

In the county jail, whenever prisoners moved from one place to another, such as from the cell house to the gym, the potential for chaos was real. To keep the chances of an explosion of violence as low as possible, the gangs were separated from each other by being placed on the opposite ends of the line. If someone from a rival gang would be standing in part of the line reserved for the rival mob, a serious fight could break out, and many times, it did.

In the middle of the line, serving as a barrier between the two groups, was the place for all the neutrons (non-gang-affiliated people). Neutrons had it bad, especially when they were white men. It was payback time, and white inmates in Cook County Jail were punching bags. They were bullied, beaten, and extorted. It was sad to see young African Americans and Latinos become abusive, mean-spirited, savage bullies just because there was an opportunity for some get-back. Many of these young gang members who treated white men so savagely weren't even racist. It was just some bully stuff. I was glad that most inmates didn't treat those men like that. But when it did happen, it was bad.

There were not a lot of white inmates in lockup. The majority of them bonded out. They weren't given the excessive bonds that African Americans and Latinos were getting from judges, nor were they as poor. There was no way their families were going to leave them in a place where they could be severely harmed on a day-to-day basis as long as there was a way to get them out of custody.

In division ten, where I was housed, there was no laundry service. I will say it again: there was no laundry service. I had to do my laundry in one of three ways: (1) get an empty mop bucket, (2) get a trash bag, or (3) use the sink in my cell. I used the mop bucket the most often. I put as much water in it as I needed, asked around for state soap (small motel like bars provided by the jail), and then washed my clothes. The trash-bag method works similar to the washing machine. Simply fill it up and shake like hell until your arms get tired. Repeat the process several times and it might work.

The sink was also a common method. The problem was that the sink bowl was so small, it was difficult to put much in it. Some people would even wash their clothes in the toilet. This was mostly done by newcomers who would do their laundry without asking how it's done.

Sometimes the mop bucket and trash bags were not available, sometimes the wing was out of bags, and sometimes we had to deal with officers who wouldn't unlock the utility closets where all the cleaning supplies were kept. What added to the frustration of doing laundry was that the jail made no effort to provide us with means to do so. Whenever people decided to wash their underclothes and Department of Corrections (DOC) uniforms on the same day, clothes would be hanging all over the wing; homemade clotheslines would be everywhere. That meant tearing a sheet into strips and then tying the ends once it was long enough to do what you needed. The problem was that it was against the rules.

Many times, when a sheriff came on the wing to take count during shift changes, he/she would cut the clotheslines down and throw them in the garbage, leaving our freshly cleaned laundry lying on a dirty jail floor. This is how some of the officers treated us. Many of them flat out didn't care that there were necessities that we didn't have, and when we tried to improvise they were callous and cold about it, saying rules are the rules. Having to deal with these people made life more frustrating than it already was. On one hand, the environment was treacherous and unpredictable, and on the other hand, a good many of the authorities were what we called "cranks."

The Cook County Jail is a dangerous, nonproductive, volatile, dehumanizing, and sanity-threatening place. There is no growth there. It is the gateway to the penitentiary, and there is no escaping its experience if you are ever charged with a felonious offense.

After three years and two months of waiting my trial began and ended with such speed it is still difficult remembering everything that happened. I faced my judgment during a period when judges were slamming people hard. The sentences being handed down were so excessive they may as well have been life. Anyone charged with murder or attempted murder and chose a jury and lost might never see the world again. For what seemed like three of the longest years in human history, I sat and watched young African American men my age facing similar and even less-severe charges get hit with so much time it scared people to death and made them take plea deals.

Right before my trial began, Li'l Rock, a twenty-two-year-old African American man I had known my entire county stay, had just returned from his sentencing hearing. Judging by the look on his face I asked him, "Do I wanna know?"

With the cracking voice of a dying boy he said, "By the time I come home the Bible gon' have a newer testament."

"Damn," I said and walked away.

I knew not to play with these judges. Although I had no intention of copping out, I did make the decision, without council, to take a bench trial. My attorney was an overworked public defender with a bunch of other cases. I had little faith in him. Like everyone I knew in the Cook County Jail with the same type of case, I was found

guilty of first-degree murder under the theory of accountability and sentenced to thirty years in the Illinois Department of Corrections, of which I was to serve half.