

The average adult human body contains approximately 8 - 14 pints of blood, dependent upon ideal body weight; the general consensus being blood makes up approximately 7% of an individual's weight and one pint of blood equals 1.1 pounds. At the very minimum, one would need to retain at least 5.6 - 9.8 pints, respectively (approximately 70%), of this blood to maintain bodily functions without grave distress. Anything lower than this level will result in organ failure and/or direct fatality unless one obtains an immediate blood transfusion. Max, standing here in the middle of the Common Room, is due to lose 7 of his pints in less than eight hours. I have to give this man credit, though. He still has the resolve to be rehearsing his Absolution Speech. I settle myself in further at my chair in the back of the Common Room, observing his efforts.

Because he's not exactly known for his stellar verbosity, Max has studied with Mrs. Litman, one of the ward's Petitionary Tutors, and has his oration prepared on a few 4"x6" index cards from which he reads aloud. I've heard it before, as have we all, multiple times each and every day, ever since Max found out his penalty date from The Absolution Committee; but the only way for Max himself to memorize it is, clearly, by repetition.

Lately, there's a mixture of humor and distress on Ward Three as we're all concerned that when our time comes we might only remember Max's address and not our own.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I am heartily sorry for offending thee and I thank The System Committee for the opportunity to purge myself of my unclean and unrighteous blood as a token gesture of my need for your forgiveness." (The System, an elite and domineering organizational faction rising up from within our much revised United States government in the tumultuous years following 2001, unrivaled in their governmental control as of 2009, *highly* approved confessions recognizing them as a Supreme Council by their own divine connotation; said self-bestowed divinity being included in each and every acceptance speech of each and every System Committee Appointee.)

"My crimes are as follows: In 1987, I was a degenerate, a brute, and a drug addict and alcohol abuser. In my deplorable state, I committed grave atrocities against my wife, beating her and forcing her to seek medical care. I was arrested for assault and battery and given a five-year prison term, which I served in its entirety. In 1994, I repeated this reprehensible behavior and was arrested again on the same charge, and - after completing my incredibly lenient, and totally unmerited, but by the overwhelming mercy of the judicial system, fifteen-year sentence successfully and enrolling in numerous programs -"

He pauses to take a deep breath before continuing, losing precious seconds, something he no doubt needs to work on further. Here, at The Center, timing is vital in regards to the upcoming situation.

"You need to list those programs, Maxie." This coming from Ward Supervisor Davis at the security station desk directly across as he removes his glasses to drop them onto the desk. "You need to show them you really *have* taken steps to make amends."

Flashing Max a smile he chides, "Besides, what about Mrs. Litman? She told me you were doing a *fine* job. Don't want to let her down, do you?"

Davis, a mirror of affability, is the only person on the ward who calls Max by that nickname, the only person who could get away with it. Sometimes I think he watched too many mobster movies; everybody's name always has to end in -'ie'. I have been awarded the moniker 'Janie'. Here, at The Center, we offenders are addressed by only our first names, Supervisors, only their last.

"But, Davis," Max whines, "I only have two minutes. What if I don't have enough time?"

Davis shoots him a look. It's the only answer Max will get. Really, it's the only answer needed. If Max runs out of time then Max dies. Foolish question.

I turn away. The bleak comprehension crossing Max's face is too much for me to bear. At 6'3" and a comfortable 250 pounds there, realistically, is not much hope any one person can give him. Simple calculation speaks to the fact that he carries roughly 17.5 pints of blood in his obese frame. Losing 7 pints will be the equivalent of approximately 44% of his blood. And a transfusion simply isn't an option here at The Center. I'm glad, though, that Davis lets his eyes say this instead of voicing it audibly.

I try not to let the depressing prospect of Max's imminent demise prevail over thoughts of my own uncertain future. I have one comfort, however: I could feasibly be judged a vein and not an artery. Like Max, I might have the same circulatory system selection - due to the fact that I'm a repeat offender - but, hopefully, I will be a 'femoral' and not a 'Femoral'; the difference between the bleed out of the femoral vein (femoral) and the femoral artery (Femoral) being most profound. Max is a Femoral.

The time allotted is another important factor. Max has only two minutes, thus further validating his arterial status, and also leading me to believe he will have a Slasher. I've been told, by Steig no less, that I will almost certainly have five to seven entire minutes, due to the different echelon of my crimes. Logically speaking, this translates into my classification in the venous grade with, presumably, a Knicker in store. Of course, depending on the judgment rendered, I might wind up with a Cutter. Either way, my chances are, well, distinctly far better than Max's.

Steig is the Captain of the Level Fours and something of a legend. Level Fours are the worst offenders in The System and not entitled to The Absolution Process. However, The System, in its infinite wisdom, has placed this level of offenders in useful positions as well. They are The Center's Ward Supervisors. They're also the individuals recruited to administer all penalty payments in The Absolution Chamber. They've had the practice.

Although Davis is a Level Four, too, he doesn't revel in his position and its *entitlements* in quite the same way Steig does. Steig, well, rumor on the ward has it that dispensing retributions is the only time Steig ever truly smiles. One day in the not so distant future I might find out for myself if there's any truth to that. Still and all, when I want a definitive answer to anything involving the program, I ask Steig. In accordance with his rank and personality, he doesn't dissemble.

Allowing my thoughts to diverge from Max, I have to admit that The System has encompassed all levels of people in what is probably the most forward-thinking agenda ever

to have been legislated in an attempt to deal with the overwhelming amount of released felony prisoners into the general population.

The System had finally realized that, due to more laws being introduced or redefined, a greater conviction rate was prevailing, further resulting in a greater prison population. And, given the established dominance of the World Wide Web - and Google - there was precious little one could do as a former lawbreaker to minimize exposure of criminal offenses no matter how far past they might have occurred.

Oh, some states did indeed establish a Pardons Board whereby the remorseful felony offender might *try* to clear their name, but not all states. And the likelihood of approval in those that did offer this service was diminished considerably by the ubiquitous probability of a denial based upon not enough offender time spent, post-incarceration, being deprived any particle of profitable life, or the interminable wait for even a hearing to discuss the matter due to the most basic reality of understaffing. (Although the initial hearing never even includes the offender's physical participation - only monetary - as in *fees*.)

Therefore, although many programs were undeniably available to repentant felony offenders for the purpose of preparing them for reentry into society, the actual playing out of this concept was a governmental miscalculation; an error of judgment which had already cost millions of dollars in counselors, job training, et cetera, for felony penitents to adjust to *civilized* life and vice versa.

Gone are the days of serving one's sentence and rejoining the general populace or even one's own municipality. Long gone. Society has become increasingly Nero-esque and more apt to reach for lyres than buckets of water; It chooses to look the other way, perhaps with the childlike hope that not seeing the scorched and blistered, barely breathing carcasses that are beginning to clutter more than just the corners of Its communities thereby nullifies them.¹ Society, by and large, neither wants nor welcomes convicted felony offenders, no matter how apologetic or how behaviorally modified.

To be fair, though, if you are famous, have money, or have become a copious spokesperson against the very offense(s) for which you were incarcerated, then you might stand a chance for a semi-normal life without governmental assistance.

The System had, with regret, conceded the majority of released prisoners were not falling into those three categories. A better and more comprehensive plan was needed. A more financially prudent plan. Hence, after much legislative revamping, The Centers and The Absolution Process were born.

Now our populace is segregated into four separate levels. Every person is now classified by means of a small stamp on their identification card or driver's license. To not have ready proof of this categorization is a Level Two infraction. Not to worry, though. The System, through a groundbreaking coordination of censuses, has catalogued you in their computer banks anyway, most likely. Many are the offenders who thought they were safe from exposure as they had no voluntary registration within The System only to be sadly disabused of this notion upon capture. With such advanced technology, nothing and no one is secret anymore. Nothing. No one.

Level One is comprised of all those who've never had even so much as a traffic ticket. Their lives have no publicly recorded transgressions. None, whatsoever.

Level Two encompasses all those who've had small infractions or misdemeanors; those who've made low-level errors of judgments and have paid the court penalty, moving on through the short term swamps and mires of public disapproval. Still and all, they retain a functional future in society. While Level One is the ideal, Level Two is more the norm.

Level Three consists of felons and repeat offenders. Here is where I reside. We are the outcasts. We are the twenty-first-century lepers and the new and upcoming slave labor force in the United States. And, as there are a growing number of us due to changes in law, additional laws, and more stringent laws, I believe P.I.N.T.S. was created largely with us in mind.

The last tier, Level Fours, are violent or perverse offenders; pedophiles, rapists, and depraved fiends bent on murder and/or torture. These creatures have no chance at release. Not anymore, not in this new System. Multiple and consecutive life sentences eradicate any such prospects for *evildoers*. And the prisons are teeming with them - right alongside us; which translates into more Level Threes being released on a more consistent basis. But released to what? Released to where?

No doubt from one of the highest 'think-tanks' of Level One scope and range, The Absolution Process is almost beatific in its simplicity. After serving one's prison sentence and fulfilling the sanctions the judicial courts had imposed, a convicted felon would be allowed to clear their name (electronically and pseudo-publicly), at The Center closest to their individual locale, if they entered into an ultimate penalty agreement whereby they would confess their crimes and pay blood retribution. If the offender survives then the offender is labeled such no more. *All* is restored. If the offender dies...well...that has some obvious and distinct advantages too.

The technical name for this process is Perpetrators Initiating Natural Tolerance Selection. We here at The Center simply call it P.I.N.T.S.

A highly appropriate acronym when one thinks about it. What you are in is exactly what you will pay