

Welcome to Corcoran, Asswipe

By

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“Sometimes if you stand on the bottom rail of a bridge and lean over to watch the river slipping slowly away beneath you, you will suddenly know everything there is to be known!” -- Winnie-the-Pooh

How’s this for the best advice a man ever got: if you don’t deal with the shit in your life chances are you’re gonna eat it, the shit, I mean. This told me by my Corcoran State Prison bunkie whose name was Country and who once shot a man in the face while sitting in a black leather recliner drinking a Budweiser and getting a blow job from a woman named Sunshine. Which is as illuminating as first light by way of introducing you to the incubus-fraught universe better known as Corcoran State Prison, where for the past year I’ve been trying to make sense of all I’ve seen and heard and lost as a result of being sentenced to serve three years here for a crime I definitely committed.

I’ve seen a man dropped in his tracks for eating a cheese omelet. I have stepped between two men going eyeball to unblinking eyeball over a piece of chocolate cake that wasn’t all that good to begin with. I have heard stories to make Q. Tarantino’s skin crawl told with such enticing ease it could have been a Spaulding Gray monologue. I’ve woken some mornings so chastened from dreams about the people I’ve betrayed I wanted to, I promise, tear my heart out. I have seen sunsets that were so beautiful I came to resent

the hell out of them, tantalizing me as they did with the world's tenacious transcendence no matter how desolate and ugly I irrevocably felt, and a moon so full and ripe that the perennial yellow prison yard lights were laughingly redundant.

I have, more than once, been shackled like a slave.

And I've got to say, I've spent more time than imaginable feeling worthless, ashamed, incompetent, useless, and irrevocably failed, something tossed away with the garbage. There is, I want you to understand, something about all this that is beyond me to do much more than say that there have been days when all I've been able to do is lay on my bunk yearning for death because I couldn't shake the crushing sense of my own smallness and spiritual incompetence. I can only tell you it's pretty much like waking some mornings wanting to die if only to escape the freakish fact that you're alive.

In a letter from an acquaintance, I have been advised to write about all I "observe, hear and experience with a searing and unvarnished judgment." That same letter writer also warned me against slipping into self-pitying darkness, but I have felt dark and self-pitying nonetheless.

I have seen a lot of really bad tattoos. I have seen stark lightning bolts and intricate swastikas punctiliously inked on leathery skin. I have eaten with toothless teenagers who have the words "Bad Ass" carved into the back of their shaved skulls. I have laid face down on molten asphalt choking on tear gas. I have been stripped searched and probed. I've observed cruelty, raw rage, and unfathomable fury. I have met men who can't pee without colostomy bags because they've been shot in prison riots

and are still looking for a lawyer to take their case. I know men named Country and Rabbit and Gargoyle and Lurch and Badger and Pineapple and Lord No Love and Psycho and Sicko. One insisted he be called Evil. “I am what I am,” he declared. No one argued.

I have seen men larger than the largest NFL linemen weep in impotence, a dwarf who’d as soon stick a shiv into your neck as say hello, and levels of human insanity that ought to leave anyone observing it unspeakably lonely and numb, only it doesn’t. You acclimatize. I’ve heard prison troubadours bleating out tragic rhymes into the night and was more reminded of wolves howling at the moon than of a sodden genius shaking his Welsh fist at the ungentle darkness. I think I almost died and know I would have been okay with it.

I have observed—and in my dark despairing moments can almost appreciate—behavior that is pretty much absurd and appalling: as being, get this, grateful for prison, for a roof and three squares a day.

I have eaten chicken adobo with no chicken in it. Learned to like to the point of actually anticipating a cup of instant coffee in the morning, and I have consumed nearly 300 gastro-quaking bologna sandwiches on stale wheat bread while watching *COPS* on TV. I have learned to eat anything served me with a plastic prison utensil called a spork.

I swear I will never wear a denim blue shirt again despite having been told blue’s my color.

I have been pulled, by my boots, out of a burning building because I was, without

exaggeration or literary hyperbole, absolutely too tired to move. I have been caged with a lot of people I would have preferred never to have been caged with. I have felt as low as a man can go, and have filled six canary yellow legal pads trying to figure out whether it was everything or just me. I have acquired an almost reverent respect for a dead theologian named Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and a lingering resentment toward a J. Edgar Hoover doppelganger who happens to be Corcoran's fire chief, who has one of those fixed scowls on his square hard face, who struts around in a creaseless clean uniform with arms bowed from his sides like a bitter Popeye, who smells of either cheap cologne or even cheaper bourbon, and who rides me mercilessly within a cm of my breaking point because, someone told me, he hates me for being too smart to be where I am, though here I am, apparently not all that smart.