

Prison Day Number 4735

By Jesse Friedman

From "Faith and Fear – A Memoir" by Jesse Friedman

"Send 2-27 upstairs for the ID room!" the announcement bellows. That's me. I hardly believe it is true. A part of me still does not believe it is happening. A part of me is reserved thinking something will happen in the next few days that will stop me from being released from prison.

The cell gate opens with a loud "crack!" I slide the gate open, step out onto the gallery, and slide the gate closed with a "clank!" to lock it. I walk along the gallery on the ground floor of the cell block with a little gaiety in my steps. Most of the other cells are empty; people are off at work or school. The block is pretty quiet, which is not the norm. Two hundred and sixty three inmates can make a lot of noise, and everything echoes off of the steel cages and the ceramic tile walls.

A pack of cigarettes comes flying down and lands about twelve feet in front of me as it bounces off the wall.

An unseen voice from upstairs yells out, "Hey, toss that in 15 for me!"

Picking up the pack I call back, "Yeah! Got it!"

"Thanks!"

"No problem!" I shout back, tossing the cigarettes onto the back of the bed in fifteen cell. Normally I could not do that without getting yelled at, but since there are no cops around it is okay. One of the 112 rules all inmates must abide by is rule §113.15 "Inmates shall not purchase, sell, loan, give, or exchange personally owned articles without authorization." Basically, we are not allowed to give anything to anyone else. How strictly this rule is enforced depends completely upon the Officer in charge, what you are "passing" and who happens to be doing the passing. If the cop likes you, then it is no big deal. If the cop is looking for something to fuck with you about, then handing someone a pack of cigarettes is just as much an infraction of the rules as punching someone in the face.

From "the flats" (which is what everyone calls the wide ground floor of the cell blocks) I can look up at the other tiers. Above Two Company is Four Company and above that is Six. One, Three, and Five are on the other side. Upstairs the galleries are narrow walkways, about three feet wide. People can throw things out of their cells, off the gallery, and down to the flats. While out of your cell you can climb on the gallery bars, reach up, and toss something onto the gallery above you.

The cells are back to back and a cat-walk behind the wall with all the plumbing and electrical. The back wall of the cell has the toilet bowl and sink, light switch and two headphone jacks. The headphone jacks are for the facility-wide radio system. These are holdovers from years ago before the days of FM radios and television sets. That used to be the only connection to the outside world. Nowadays the only people who use them are so poor that they can't buy a radio of their own.

When I first arrived in prison in 1989 inmates were only permitted to buy AM radios and tape players. Now inmates in New York State prisons are permitted FM radios also, and a great many of the maximum security prisons have a personal television program. By 1994 I had a T.V. of my own, in my cell, where I could *choose* what channel to watch. Television improved the quality of my life in immeasurable ways.

I remember how one of the wall plugs would be a rotation of different music stations. The other plug would be television – audio only. Often sports, but sometimes broadcast T.V.

I, like everyone else, used to *listen* to TV. shows. Being able to fill in the missing gaps of information about a show where the picture was required became a special skill.

The back walls of the cells also have a grilled air vent. These are mostly caked with dust and grime and their only use now is for communication to the other side of the block. People stand on their toilet bowls and yell through the catwalk to each other, passing along messages. Nothing private, but in an emergency it is the only way. In the old days right after the quiet bell would ring at 8:00 there would be a nightly plethora of “I love you!” back and forth between all the transsexuals and their jocks. There is not quite so much of that anymore.

I walk upstairs and then wait for my escort officer.

At the top of the stairs by the block’s main door is an officer’s station for the “A-Man” – the officer in charge of the block. Officer Grozo has been at that job for, well, forever. He had that job when I first got to Dannemora in 1989 and he still has that job in 2001. The mailbox is here as well as the block bulletin board. There are so many memos stapled up here, one on top of the other. Looking through them while I am waiting is like an archeological dig. There are memos which have been hanging here so many years that the paper is faded to a smoke-stained tint of yellow.

The whole bulletin board system is absurd anyway. Inmates rarely have an opportunity to stop and read these memos. Many years ago I had my cell searched and received a disciplinary report because I had two hot pots purchased from the commissary for making hot water and cooking.

The “Misbehavior Report” said that I was in violation of “the memo dated December 22, 1992” which said inmates were only allowed a maximum of one hot pot. Funny thing: The date of the infraction was January 8, 1992, and no such memo seemed to exist. I checked the bulletin boards in the block, at the school, at work, wrote letters to the Law Library asking for a copy of the memo and was told they had no such memo in the Memo Book.

I went into the hearing demanding the dismissal of the ticket and my hot-pot returned. I was found guilty. The hot pot was confiscated and I was punished with “loss of recreation for fourteen days.” Ah well.

The loud knock at the block door returns me to December 2001. It is an escort officer to take me, and one other inmate who is also being released on Friday, to the ID Room.

There are 2,900 inmates housed in Clinton Correctional Facility, in Dannemora New York. There are nine cell blocks, a giant mess hall, industrial shops, four yards, the Death House for condemned persons, visiting rooms, administrative offices, and of course, a fifty-foot wall (thirty feet high above ground, and folklore has it twenty feet below ground.) There is also a medium-security “Annex” prison outside the wall, but behind a fence instead.

Any walk through a prison this size is a long walk. The hallways are all unpainted red brick with poured concrete floors. The hallway is always cold, always damp and drafty. There are small windows spaced every twelve feet for light and some ventilation. Inmates always walk on the right; officers always on the left. There is a yellow line painted on the floor down the middle of the corridor.

I walk down the hallway (20 paces) and stop at the yellow line, turn left, through the gate, past the mess hall, turn right, down the stairs (24 steps) and stop at the bottom at the yellow line. I know the corridor so well I could almost make this walk with my eyes closed.

Turn right, through a gate, down the stair (8 steps) down the long corridor (38 paces) stop at the yellow line. Wait for the officer, “Empty your pockets. Face the wall,” arms against the wall, spread your legs, get pat-risked. Then proceed through the gate, turn left, wait, down the hallway (20 paces) turn right. Twenty-seven paces past the package room and four row-benches for inmates to sit and wait, to the next gate, stop at the yellow line. On the other side of this gate is the visiting room area, and since we are heading towards the front of the prison this gate is a manned locked gate.

“Two for ID” the escort officer announces. The gate is opened and we continue past the visiting rooms, turn left, then a quick right, then another manned locked gate.

“ID” is announced again, and the three of us are let through. “Second door on your right!” And so it is. The two officers inside have been expecting us. They are both in pleasant spirits as it is apparent they like their jobs. It is an easy eight hours, five days a week.

Various job positions, or “posts” in the prison are assigned based upon seniority status. When there is a job opening, officers “bid” on the spot and the officer with the most seniority gets the new permanent assignment. The jobs in the cellblocks are the least desirable. A lot of grunge work. A lot of inmate contact. The job in the ID room probably requires better than twenty years on the job to get (if there is ever an opening assignment to get.)

Rivera, the other inmate, and I are finger-printed (two sets) One set is for the facility records, one if for the FBI. We have mug shots taken, in triplicate, again one set for the prison, another for the FBI, and the third photo I learn is for our “Release ID Cards”. I think this is related to 9/11. They can’t send us out onto the street with no picture ID at all.

There are two feet marks on the floor in front of the height chart backdrop, the things you see related to dance-set routines, cut outs to show the inmates where to stand. *Flash!*

“Okay, turn to your left.” As I do I chuckle because there is a cartoonish painting hanging there which is right in the face of every inmate who ever comes to get their picture taken. It is a Tweetie Bird in his cage wearing old-time stripped prison garb, on which it says, “Jail Bird”. This was obviously painted by an inmate God only knows how many years ago. So stupid, but it is just another way in which the C.O.’s try every subtle means of humiliation.

The whole process takes less than ten minutes, and ten minutes later I am back in my cell feeling just a little bit closer to glee than I was before I left.

Holy Shit! It’s really going to happen!