

D.L. Hemphill *Another Day in Prison*

A buzzing sound wakes me. I open my eyes to find it's the blinding fluorescent light beaming down on me. Another day in prison begins. I drape my legs off the side of the top bunk, careful not to kick my cellmate sleeping three feet below me.

Like a gymnast, I dismount from the top bunk onto a rickety plastic stool. My feet just miss dead center and the stool shoots out from beneath me. I crash to the floor but my thud vanishes in the bang of the stool bouncing off the steel door.

My cellmate rolls over and sneers at me.

"Sorry about that, bunkie," I say as I lurch to my feet.

He just shakes his head, hisses out a breath, and rolls back over.

I rub my elbow. The sharp pain distracts me from my kinked neck and sore back. Damn that two-inch thick green thing that the state has nerve to call a mattress! I could really use some aspirin. If I put them on my store list today, I'll have them in just two weeks.

My cellmate is already beginning to snore again. I hate to make more noise but I really have to pee. With my back facing him, I squeeze myself between his bunk and the toilet. The sound of urine hitting water sounds like Niagara Falls in our broom closet-sized room. But I feel relieved and I relax a bit. MISTAKE! A pent up fart escapes, clouding my cellmate's head. The smell wakes him, and he roughly pulls his blanket over his head. I'm sure later on the yard he will be complaining about me to anyone who will listen.

I look at my plastic Casio watch. It's already 6:10. That leaves me about enough time before they call breakfast for a bitter cup of instant coffee and a teeth brushing. Unfortunately, this requires the use of our unusually loud sink. I turn it on and wince as the pipes sputter and shake.

Quickly I notice that the water spewing out is almost as dark as the coffee I'm trying to make. This happens whenever the wind blows hard enough to shake the rust-filled tower. I wish I had a few spoons of sugar to mask the chemical taste but the administration recently restricted it, supposedly to stop prisoners from making wine. Thinking back these past 10 years I can rarely recall ever even seeing wine. But everybody knows administration uses any excuse to take things from us. I pull to memory all the other things they have taken away, counting off each one on my fingers: cigarettes, razors, typewriters, soda, toasters, duffel bags, hot plates and visiting outfits, to just name a few.

I'm barely finished brushing my teeth in rust colored water when I hear people walking past my door. I lean out and give my neighbor a

questioning look.

“Breakfast,” he informs me.

I tense up. The officers purposely whisper the mealtime calls. But stop for two seconds at someone’s cell and the walls rumble with their screams.

I slide out into the hall, locking the door behind me. Some people leave theirs open, but I trust no one. The walk to the chow hall is quiet. Most of the inmates are still in their own medicated zombie-like states from the boatload of Seroquel that medical shoves down their throats. I’m not worried though, they’ll stop giving it out when the pharmaceutical kickbacks to the medical department dry up.

The line for breakfast stretches out the chow hall doors. The guy behind me is standing so close that I can feel his rancid breath warm the back of my neck. I turn around to yell at him but I stop when I see he’s an old man. What would be the point? If the guy hasn’t learned manners by now then nothing I say will change him. I turn back around and see the line hasn’t moved an inch. How is this even possible? Then I see. Like VIPs at a nightclub, people that think they’re special cut straight to the front of the line.

A half hour later, I’m handed a tray of runny oatmeal.

“Where’s the waffles?” I ask.

“We’re out,” the food steward curtly replies.

I go to the next empty seat but skip it when I notice someone had spilled orange juice all over it.

“Inmate!” a voice shouts.

I turn to an officer glaring at me.

“Fill in that seat,” he instructs me, pointing to the juice covered chair.

“There’s juice on it,” I argue.

“Use your napkin.”

I know this is not an argument I can win with logic so I comply and use my only napkin to smear around the mess. At this point, I lost my appetite. When I get up to leave, I can feel my damp pants sticking to the seat.

I get back to my cell and notice the trash bin is out in front of my door. This is the universal prison code for I’m using the bathroom. I look at my watch. It’s only 6:50, and the unit won’t open for movement until 7 o’clock. I scratch my chin and wonder if my cellmate is really using the bathroom, or if this is payback for waking him up this morning. Either way if I get caught standing here and officer will write me a ticket. I slide into the water closet and hide for the next 10 minutes.

The dayroom opens and I sit in there for the next hour while I wait on staff to call big yard. The television is blaring, but I’m still unable to hear it over everyone’s shouts and screams. Finally I hear an officer over

the intercom.

“Big yard,” he shouts into the mic.

I get up to leave, but I’m stopped in my tracks when he adds, “Is cancelled.”

My shoulders sink and I let out a groan. That’s the third time this week. There’s a hundred officers working, and if one decides to leave early, they claim there isn’t enough officers to open the yard. I shuffle my feet out of the building and go to the tiny dirty lot they call our small yard. The dirt track is turned to mud from last night’s rain. I’m the only one out there so maybe I can get a little exercise in. After some minor stretching, I start to slowly jog. If I go any faster around the small hundred-foot track I might get dizzy, but I never get the chance.

“Hey you!” a passing officer yells. “There’s no running on the small yard.”

I look at him like he’s crazy, “Why?”

“Because of the risk of you crashing into someone and hurting them.”

I look around the empty yard. “I’m the only one out here.”

His lips pinch together and his cheeks redden. “I’m not going to argue with you, run again and you’ll be in the hole.”

I throw my hands up in surrender then stomp off, back to my cell. I guess I’ll knock out my shaving, then shower. I pull out my electric razor and get half of my head shaved when the batteries die. I go to my footlocker for some more only to find that the dead ones were my last two. I appraise the damage in the mirror. If I stand to one side, I have hair, and if I turn to the other side, I’m bald. “Damn them for taking the razors,” I mutter under my breath.

Soap and towel in hand I head for the shower. “Yes!” I say pumping my fist into the air. For once, there’s no line. I have the entire shower to myself. After getting undressed, I hang my clothes on the hooks and turn the corner into the shower. “You gotta be kidding me!” my scream echoes. There, in the center of the shower floor, is a steaming pile of human crap. I can hear giggles coming from the hallway, but I don’t see the humor in this.

Naked already I decide to shower anyways. Like a game of twister, I manage to carefully sidestep the human feces that’s liquefying past my feet on its way to the drain.

Dried and dressed I go downstairs to pick up my clean clothing from the unit laundry man. He hands me my bag of whites back, and the pit of my stomach falls. Everything’s stained a deep copper like orange. I slap my hand against my forehead. The rusty water got me again.

I go back to my cell and fold them. They confiscated my duffle bag so I have to cram them into my locker.

I check my watch and see that it's almost count time. I climb onto my bunk and settle in for the next hour and a half. The mailroom has denied the last three books I ordered, so I'm forced to grab one of the books that I have already read. Threat to the security of the institution, they say. How they can find Harry Potter a threat I'll never know.

It's noon now, and I'm glad to be able to leave my cell. The dayroom is shoulder-to-shoulder standing room only because everyone wants to be first out the doors for lunch. We get the call, and like a herd of sheep, we walk to the chow hall.

The line is even longer and slower since everyone is awake by lunch. The menu reads spaghetti and meat sauce, but they give me over cooked noodles with a dollop of ketchup. I'm starving, so I scarf it down before I can even taste it.

Leaving the chow hall, I notice the officers haven't even called the next unit. I let out a bitter laugh and shake my head. These officers purposely hold the lines up until 1:45, shift change. That way they don't have to run big yard until 2:30, effectively robbing us of an hour of yard.

At 2:30, the yard reopens. I want to go outside, but I know this will be the only hour today that my cellmate will be gone. Sitting down at the desk, I begin to write to the girl that I thought I would spend the rest of my life with. She hasn't answered any of my recent phone calls. I think that she has found someone else.

I'm disrupted by a rapping on my door. I look up and see an officer. I open the door knowing this can't be good.

"Step out so I can shake your cell down," he says in an emotionless tone.

He doesn't even let me slip on my shoes. Walking down to the end of the hall the smacking of my flip-flops against the grimy concrete alerts my neighbors to the possibility that they may be next.

A half hour later, the officer exits my cell. He's carrying two pieces of cardboard that doubled as makeshift shelves inside my locker.

"Fire hazard," he says, obviously reading the look of confusion painted across my face.

I give him the palms up gesture. "Fire hazard? So you are telling me that the locker that I'm assigned to keep all of my highly flammable prison clothes in can't have a piece of cardboard in it because it's flammable?"

The officer aggressively leans towards me and raises his voice. "If you want to argue about it, then I'll just write you a ticket right now."

I can tell he's trying to get a rise out of me, so I decide to keep my mouth shut. He takes it as a victory and struts off.

I go back to my cell to check the damage. I'm at a loss for words. I

have to take a step back and collect myself. It looks like the cell was hit by a hurricane, during a robbery. Mattresses flipped, food stomped on, clothes in the toilet, coffee spilled, and everything of mine is mixed with my cellmate's.

I spend the remainder of my alone time separating our things. When my cellmate comes back, he's even madder than I am. Great, I think to myself. Now I've got to listen to him complain for the next hour and a half.

I hop onto my bunk and attempt to sleep away the time. Unfortunately, the scorching afternoon sun has made it to our side of the building. The rays heat up the bricks and shoot through the windows, turning the room into an oven. I'm having trouble breathing. I continuously sip on the rusty water to replenish the sweat that is soaking through my clothes. The next 90 minutes feel like an eternity.

Five o'clock finally arrives, and I peel myself from the mat and race down to the dayroom, hoping to get a spot in front of the big fan. I don't even come close. I find a spot on a corner table in the back. I really want to rest my head on the cool stainless steel, but the risk of catching the flesh-eating disease that's been going around makes me think better of it.

A while later, they call for dinner. Meatballs, they say. A starving dog would turn up his nose at this meal. I'll go just to get the milk and the fruit.

At the end of the line, I see the food steward. She could possibly pass for cute if she would stop giving such dirty looks to all the inmates. I scratch my head. Her attitude seems weird in contrast to the affection she shows towards the male officers.

I shrug it off and go to my table. I can feel the chill of the milk through the thin cardboard box. I take a huge gulp and already have it swallowed before the sourness hits my taste buds. "Yuck, the milk's spoiled." I announce to no one in particular. Everyone begins sniffing their milk like glasses of fine wine.

Me, I had enough. Pocketing my apple for later, I dump my tray and leave the chow hall.

Halfway down the sidewalk an officer stops me.

"What's in your pocket?" he asks pointing at the round bulge protruding from my thigh.

I shrug and pull out the apple.

He smiles, takes the apple, and pitches it in the garbage with the rest of the food that he had confiscated.

I glare at him until he tells me to "push on."

Back in the unit I sit on the desk in my cell and stare at the cinderblock wall. This gets real boring real fast, so I walk down to the

dayroom. The second I get down there, I feel out of place. How can I be surrounded by so many people and still feel alone? I spend the next two hours walking meaninglessly between my cell and dayroom, occasionally making small talk with people whose names I can't remember.

Eight o'clock rolls by. I dress down into a pair of shorts and climb back up on my bunk. I lie back on my thin mat and prop my head up on a folded pillow so I can see the television at the end of my bunk. There's no remote so I stretch my left out and use my big toe to flick through the stations. I've been changing stations like this for so long that my right calf is now noticeably bigger than my left one.

After a couple more hours of this, I turn the television off and get ready for bed.

Crawling between my rust-stained sheets, I close my eyes and try to fall asleep before the officer shines his light in my face on his next round.

Lying there in the darkness, I replay the day's events in my head. I've made it through another day in prison. Just 7000 more to go and then I'll be home. I just hope that they all can be as good as today was.