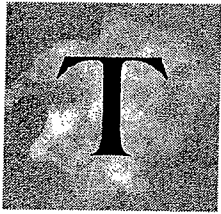


Quarantined Behind Concrete and Steel

BENJAMIN LAGUER



he first thing I see in the morning is the sunlight coming through the bars. The first thing I hear is a whistle signaling five minutes to count. Everybody has to be on his feet at 7:15 A.M. so the guards can check to make sure that nobody's dead.

My cell—number 309—is not much larger than a closet. The walls are regulation beige, and the ceiling is high and white and stained. Bolted to the floor is a steel desk. The bed is bolted to the floor. The toilet and sink are bolted. Opposite those is a cosmetics shelf, where I keep my books. Other than my clothes, my only possessions are a twelve-inch Zenith TV, an Optimus AM/FM radio, and a Smith Corona manual typewriter. In this place, with these things, I spend my days and nights seven days a week. It is where I face reality, the reality of my soul.

After resting for half of my life in prison, quarantined behind concrete and steel, encircled by silhouettes of faceless men in uniform and armed guard towers, I feel not only like I've been on a physical roller coaster but emotionally as if I am suspended in state. The pictures I keep on my wall are of my family from twenty years ago. It's as if they are frozen in time.

But I am not frozen. I am always pacing. When I am not physi-

cally pacing, my mind is pacing. At night, long after the voices have fallen silent and the imprisoned garrison is asleep in either its dreams or its nightmares, I lie in bed still awake, wondering what has become of me. It's that ultimate question one asks in search of self-truth: that question that arises in the night, when the human heart pounds its loudest. I ask myself in that way one demands answers from the gods, "How is it possible that 7,394 days could have been stolen from my life's calendar?" I remember when the judge in his black robe ordered my days forfeit. He had spoken with the ease of Pontius Pilate, upholding the letter of the law and the verdict of the crowd. It was not his function to deliver justice, he may have thought, only to carry out the letter of the law. Although I physically reside on this side of the stones, I have tried to convince myself, in a multitude of disguises, that in spirit I must be free.

But try as I might, I can't suppress those first sights and sounds from that day two decades ago—the instant I was arrested, the moment I stood accused, and later that evening when the steel door slammed behind me and I was left alone in a jail cell. Daily I remind myself of that time when my life darkened.

I first spent eight months in the house of correction where all you hear is that pretty little boys like me get raped at the Big House. So I pumped up my masculinity a hundredfold with the idea that the first motherfucker who looks at me with any smile, with any sense of winking at me, I'm taking him out. My masculinity was like Jimi Hendrix's guitar on acid. I dressed in green fatigues. In those years they gave inmates surplus Army fatigues if they wanted them instead of the prison blues they require now. And you could also get cigarettes and cigars at the canteen. So I used to always walk around in my Army fatigues with a big cigar. I wore dark sunglasses, not wanting the fear in my eyes to betray me, and I grew a beard. People called me Fidel.

My father's way of teaching me how to be a man had been to send

me off to the Army when I was seventeen. Army life gave me structure, which prepared me for prison life. My father himself had been in the Army. He'd also spent several months in a Puerto Rican prison as a young man. The police had rounded up a bunch of people they thought were subversive. And my father was subversive in his way. He did not like authority. His experience had been abuse at the hands of authority, especially when he got to this country.

Only after I was in prison did I really come to understand my father. He was not one to share his inner life with others. I don't believe there were ever more than a handful of people, including all seven of my sisters and brothers, who asked my father what he thought. My father and I never went to a baseball game. Except for the knowledge that he would leave for work before the streetlights turned off and never return home before the lights were lit again, I had no idea who my father was. Until the last seven years of his life, for me my father had been a thing that, by some cosmic order, just happened to inherit me.

Over many conversations, held at weekly intervals of two hours across a vast row of metal chairs in the prison's visiting room, my father and I became friends. I had never been with him one-on-one before; my little time with him growing up was always with the family around. Spending two and a half hours within two feet of each other provided a space of intimacy in which we were finally free to talk. We told each other our secrets. Curious about who I was, I began asking my father who he was.

The main thing I knew about him was that he'd spent thirty summers laying blacktop in New York City and Westchester County. During winter, the off-season, he went to sea with the merchant marine. But I always associated with my father the smell of black tar. Just seeing him would evoke for me the stench of a road crew. I still sometimes smell it in my sleep.

My father always dressed up when he went to church, when he changed out of the tar stench of his work clothes. And he was a sharp

dresser. He was an elder in the Seventh-Day Adventist church. I always saw in my father this aura of respectability. And though there were the things that pierced that aura—he had frailties, he had done things that caused pain—they did not take away from the man he wanted to be and the man he wanted me to be.

I once asked him about our ancestors and if they had been noble or scandalous.

My father replied, in words I will never forget, “All men have more scandal than nobility in their hearts. That’s what makes us human. Don’t trust a man who says he is noble.” My father had never spoken like that before; he spoke as if he had surprised even himself, perhaps having never thought of answering such a question. In the end, I realized I admired the old brown man. He was human like me. And I could tell he admired my spirit of protest, my thirst for justice, my endless attempts to exonerate myself, and my determination not to let this institution rob me of my manhood.

For twenty years I have seen men come in here proud and tall before being reduced to always asking for stuff. I’ve seen their families leave. Their daughters, their little girls, now have children. Their boys have grown to be men. These once proud men are reduced to having no role, of having to be taken care of by the state. Being at the mercy of the generosity of their families to come visit or to send a letter every now and then.

My sisters do not want to wake up in the morning and think, “Benjie’s in the penitentiary and God knows what his day is like.” It’s too much for them to handle. In the case of inmates, absence makes the heart grow cold, because people just want to forget. When I call my family I don’t want them to know all the details of what I’m doing. The most dignified thing I can say to them is, “It’s a beautiful day here at the penitentiary.”

Prison, if you let it, obliterates your sense of manhood, because you are no longer an individual, you are part of this machinery. They

have rules about everything, and if you break a rule, you get a ticket. I haven't had a ticket in well over a decade. Following the rules is my subversive act. It's almost Gandhian.

Three times a day, every day of the week, inmates can be seen walking, like an army of ants, toward the hospital building. The most common prescriptions dispensed in prison are not for physical ailments but are psychotropic pharmaceuticals to keep the inmates from facing reality. It is as if the prison psychiatrist has the power to single-handedly dispense more mercy than the prison chaplain. These inmates return to their cells like children coming home from the corner candy store. They lie in their beds and they do not wake again until it's time for more mercy and more pills.

The prison gave me these pills and they put me to sleep. I woke up one day and it was a week later. And I knew that I couldn't do this. I couldn't spend my days in the penitentiary sleeping. I have a meeting with destiny to attend.

. . .

It was a February day almost ten years ago that a uniformed man walked upstairs, stood in front of my cell, and said, "Your father died." The blue uniform then disappeared from sight. I arose from bed, removed a single piece of white paper from the desk's steel drawer, folded it, and covered the window, in need of even greater solitude than that found in a prison dungeon.

I had known for some months that my father's health was deteriorating, and earlier that week I had asked the prison's unit counselor if, upon my father's death, I could be favorably considered for an escorted furlough to attend the funeral. Within hours I was told I would be granted such permission. And so I waited for that moment when I, the son of a LaGuer, would no longer be connected to the LaGuers of the past, for that hour when I would stand alone, linked only to a future.

And what is my future? Someday I will leave here, but what will happen to me then? No matter how much I have tried to convince myself that twenty years in solitude has left me unaffected, I must confront the fact that I am a creature inextricably tied, in both failures and accomplishments, to what has happened to me in prison. It is here, in solitude, that a man attains what is nearest to his nature, where he battles to deliver himself either to his God or his devil. In whatever mold, a man emerges from his battles with scars of honor or wounds of disgrace.

When, nine years ago, I was to step outside the prison for that trip that would take me in front of my father in his final confined image, despite all my efforts to prove I should be worthy, I felt afraid. I no longer had concrete sights or sounds of what was beyond the stones. Why was I afraid?

I can only figure that whatever had paralyzed me in fright had something to do with how years in solitude can transform even the strongest of human beings. It is my understanding that our lower primate brothers and sisters in captivity are often so traumatized that they suffer extreme physical and cognitive impairment, sometimes to the point of not being able reproduce even when they have access to the opposite sex. And while I claim no unique insight into the natural science that explains such a phenomenon, I suspect that I am not so different in composite. If one were asked to remove one's space suit while standing on the moon, surely the impact would be immediate and profound. That probably is the nearest analogy to bringing a human outside, after spending year upon year in solitude.

Often in flashbacks I remember that summer morning when I was taken outside the prison for an appearance at the Worcester County Superior Court. Usually prisoners from across the state are brought in through an underground shaft under the courthouse building, then brought by elevator up to the courtrooms. For some

reason, however, that day was different. The men in uniform parked the transport almost two hundred yards from the granite edifice. I say all this to make a point: I have no recollection, except in flashbacks, of the sound of my shoes striking the pavement across those two hundred yards, or of the façade downtown, or of the many faces that I must have seen that morning. It is still a surreal experience. I remember the events, but only as if I were outside myself, as though I know what happened from watching it through an angelic distance.

My emotional paralysis doesn't seem so profound to me now. Yet I can't dispel the feeling that almost half of those who leave prison return. My question out of this feeling is simple: are these people returning to prison because they are actual deviants, or are they simply unable to adjust?

En route to my father's funeral, riding in the rear seat along the state's freeway system, I said to myself, "You mustn't be afraid." It wasn't that I was scared of having emerged from the abyss. I suddenly had awakened. Not only had I awakened in a metaphysical sense, stroked by systems of physical oppression and perceptive freedom, but a new reality had exploded within me, and there I stood, naked, transient, between two zones. Although I was overwhelmed by the sudden glitter of new images, sounds, and aromas, I was not afraid.

Perhaps that awakening was necessary. I came closest, nearer than ever before, to understanding how easily life can be negated. I had lived not only physically as a prisoner but also trapped in perception. But I have been able to crawl out of the box and to think for myself. Now I stand in front of the window faintly watching the world from afar. I am in exile, but I am in peace.

You attain peace by understanding that you have come as close as you are able to get to the truth of your life. There is a certain peace-

fulness that comes from not being confused over where it is that you are going.

As I knelt before my father's coffin, I said, as if in conversation with his spirit, "I have brought uniformed men who carry steel to this sacred place, Dad. I hope that I am forgiven. I hope to be a son and a father, like you, of Honor."

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The Bastard on the Couch

27 MEN TRY REALLY HARD
TO EXPLAIN THEIR FEELINGS
ABOUT LOVE, LOSS, FATHERHOOD,
AND FREEDOM

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