

A Blessing in Disguise

by Josh Little

On January 6th, 2011, I was sentenced to 364 days in the Santa Rosa County Jail in Milton, Florida. To many, this probably seems like a punishment, but to me, jail saved my life. I spent most of my teenage years getting in and out of trouble. I was always involved with the court system. I wasn't a horrible kid. I was just raised in the rough part of the city growing up with parents who could hardly afford to pay bills. We moved from home to home. I think the longest my family ever occupied a home was between seven months and a year before getting behind on bills and being forced to move. I don't blame my parents or even their lack of parenting skills for my bad behavior. They did their best. The juvenile court system gave me many chances to turn my act around, but it never seemed to work. If anything, they should have gone harder on me at a younger age. Finally, in Florida, the judge put the hammer down and gave me my first, and definitely last, piece of real time.

After getting off the paddy wagon at the correctional institute, I was brought inside to be examined by a medical technician. I was cleared and approved to be moved to the general population. The first three days all I did was sleep. I didn't get up to eat, shower or socialize with the other inmates. I was in a state of depression not knowing what the next eleven months and twenty nine days were going to bring. After a few weeks I began getting into a routine of playing poker, working out, and sleeping. Too much free time would have led me to get into trouble with the other inmates. "Idle hands are the Devil's playground," my mother used to tell me. I just hung out with one person. They called him Tech. Tech always looked out for me. When I didn't have food, he would offer me some of his; if my laundry didn't come back on time, he'd lend me

a pair of socks. Eventually, the everyday living in jail became somewhat normal to me, and it was just like any other life, with some restrictions.

I began playing cards for money and winning a lot. Gambling is not the best choice for anyone, I must say. Sure, I won some money here and there, but when I lost, gambling would cost me all of my food for a whole week. Yes, a whole week without breakfast, lunch, or dinner trays. Luckily, I had Tech to support me through it. The guy who won all of my food was a real jerk whose name was Big Mike. After three days of giving him my trays at “chowtime,” when I went to hand him the tray, he smacked it to the floor and said: “You can eat it, Bitch Boy.” I don’t know what happened inside me, but my adrenaline peaked and I punched him as hard as I could in the jaw. Big Mike fell off of his stool and hit the ground. The entire pod went silent, because Big Mike was considered somebody you don’t mess with. He had many “jitterbugs” (younger inmates who are paid off to fight for someone who doesn’t want to get his hands dirty or get into trouble), some of whom wanted to fight me anyway. I got hit from behind by Little Mike, Big Mike’s sidekick, and then from the side by Jordan, Little Mike’s bunkie. Tech started on Jordan and I turned around to defend myself from Little Mike, who actually wasn’t so little. At this point ten to fifteen correctional officers came rushing in. They were known as the “Turtle Squad,” because their armor resembles that of a turtle shell. Once the Turtle Squad rushed in, everybody but Little Mike and I had fled to their bunks. Sergeant Wheeler doused us with a highly concentrated type of mace. We both began to gasp for air and scream from the pain. The mace was burning our sinuses and eyes. After the officers had us under control, they escorted us to the medical dorm to be examined in pre-confinement. The nurse checked my vitals and I was sent to solitary.

The “Hole” is a dorm with eight one-man cells. Here you are locked down twenty-three

hours a day, seven days a week. This was the first and not the last time I went to the hole while I was in jail, but it was certainly the longest amount of time I served there. They sentenced me to sixty days in solitary confinement for provoking a riot. Most inmates dreaded the Hole, but not me. I found peace in the solitude of my cell. I discovered something there that I would have never found in a regular old pod. I discovered escape—not to complete freedom, but a temporary escape from the hell I was in. The Hole is the place where I discovered reading. For the sixty days I spent in solitary confinement, that's all I did: ten hours a day, every day. I finished one to two novels a day. I loved it. Books were like the movies, and then almost reality for me. I read horror stories, love stories, mysteries, action, and when I had nothing else to read, I even read non-fiction.

I said that jail time saved my life. It saved me through books. If I had never picked up a book, I would have probably gotten into more trouble upon my release from solitary, seeing as how all I did from that point on in my new dorm was read, eat and work out. By the time my incarceration was over, I had read over 150 novels. Most importantly, books influenced my decision to go to school when I was released. Many people who hear my story of being in jail think: “Ugh! What a piece of shit! He went to jail?” Or: “Stay away from him. He's nothing but trouble.” None of this bothers me, because I know what I have accomplished and the way that it's helped me become a better person. Looking back on my incarceration now, I think about not what the correctional system did to me, but rather what they did for me. I smile, take a deep breath, and keep moving forward. My incarceration was a blessing in disguise.