

I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings

Like a shot from an Abrams Tank, the voice boomed, “All rise!” I stood from my rickety, worn, wooden chair and faced the balding, octogenarian judge, but avoided his gaze and looked down at the desk. The traces of sweat left by my hands disappeared slowly like hot breath on a cold window pane. I took a deep breath to suppress my anxiety and was assaulted by the rank smell in the air. It was the same proprietary blend of fear, grief and body odor prevalent in every courtroom sentencing hearing; an almost palpable pheromone proliferated by the human body under extreme duress. The likely source of this smell was the courtroom audience, specifically the men and women in orange jumpsuits lined up against the wall.

“Please be seated, the Honorable Thomas Wilson presiding.” I took a seat back in my chair, feeling my heart rate spike to double its normal rate. I forced myself to look up and saw eyes as powerful and as striking as I have ever seen staring back at me. The mouth below started moving, and somewhere off in the distance I heard “Will the defendant please rise.” With the cold serenity of a man about to answer for his actions, I rose steadily to my feet.

“Due to your plea of guilty, I sentence you, the defendant Andrew John Todero of 20 years of age, to 23 years in a state penitentiary, with 21 years suspended, and three years of supervised parole after your release.” Judge Wilson kept speaking after that, but I did not hear a word he said. The room blurred. I could no longer process the stimuli received by my sensory organs. A middle-aged police woman tugged my coat sleeve, and I held out my hands. As the metal handcuffs clicked over my wrists, I glanced back at my dad in the third row of pews. He had folded up today’s Wall Street Journal and was already walking briskly towards the door. I did not want to make eye contact with him; to see his somber face, would have drained me of the hardened resolve I built around my heart in anticipation of this event. I was about to enter the true concrete jungle, where the strong survive, the weak become prey. Led by the police woman,

I left my sorrow in the courtroom and walked across the street to Rockingham-Harrisonburg Regional Jail.

After being stripped of all my personal belongings, and everything that made me feel human, I was handed a plastic bin of bare necessities: toilet paper, toothpaste, a toothbrush, a comb, a bar of soap, five stamped envelopes, a pencil, bed linens, and a spare jumpsuit. After I mentally inventoried my new possessions, I rode an elevator to the third floor. I stepped out of the elevator in my striped jumpsuit with wrist and ankle shackles, dangling like fresh meat above a lion's den.

The institution was comprised of two separate floors, each consisting of a north and south wing for housing units. The living space in each wing was divided into quarters by thick concrete walls. These quarters were the individual subsections of the housing units and colloquially known as either "pods" or "blocks". The pods were arranged to resemble a semi-circle so the guards keeping watch in the center had unobstructed views for every section. Each pod had roughly twelve to thirteen cells with two men sharing every cell. Usually, three of the four pods were minimum or medium security, with each wing having one maximum security pod. I classified as a minimum-security offender.

Including myself, there were approximately eight of us that had been booked and rode the elevator together. Once we arrived, everyone in the third level's north wing stopped what they were doing and examined us through the windows. As the inmates swarmed to the glass, some were overwhelmed by happiness to see a friend and others immediately started yelling threats at enemies they recognized. Since I was unknown, nobody reacted either of those ways to me. They studied me intensely, as if they were trying to categorize me. I kept my back to the wall and returned eye contact at the people staring at me. I knew this was an animalistic encounter, one predator analyzing another animal to determine if this creature would fight or flee.

As the door opened to my assigned pod, I was overwhelmed by the terrible stench. The pod was the source of odor in the courtroom, only magnified ten-fold. It was as if it seeped from the walls. The room was large, and utilitarian to the smallest aspect. There was a small TV, several metal picnic and round tables, and two showers in the corner of the room. "Welcome, Jailbird!" an inmate yelled. I ignored him. I ignored all of them. I held my head high and entered my assigned cell. The cell was exactly how I had envisioned it: an outward locking door with iron bars, a toilet made of steel with a small sink above it, and a small bed area with an army green, nylon mattress no thicker than a college textbook. I set up my belongings in a way that felt organized, put sheets on my bed, then stepped outside my cell to quietly gather intelligence on the situation surrounding me.

I stood outside of my cell door and unsuccessfully attempted to block out the noise. The air was filled with obscenities. Nothing but people bragging about themselves to anybody willing to listen. The way they ostentatiously talked about the women they mistreated, the material possessions they owned, the crimes they committed; it boiled my blood. But the worst thing, more so than the smell and noise, was the clock: you see, there was not one. I looked high and low but there was no clock, and I was soon to learn that the lights never shut off. Later, I would come to see this as the cruelest of ironies: a man indebted to the State in time is forbidden to keep it. Overwhelmed by my new surroundings, I retreated to the privacy of my cell.

Back in my cell, I sat around pensively until dinner was served; a hearty combination of four slices of white bread, two slices of cheese, and a snack pudding. I threw myself down on my bed in desperate search for comfort, disappointed to find it did not exist. I repositioned my body several times, then closed my eyes and tried to fall asleep. That is when I began to sing softly, just low enough so anyone standing outside my cell could not hear it. I sang for the wonderful life I had squandered, and the enormous regret that consumed my heart. I sang for the courage to

face my fear of being completely alone. I sang for my father, mother, sister, and brother, in hopes that the damage I caused could be forgiven. I sang to transcend my horrific reality and transport my mind far away. I knew, then, why the caged bird sings. Like me, it sings to be free.