

## DOING TIME; THE CELL BLOCK; LIFE IN A BARREN 5-BY-8 SPACE; SECOND OF A FIVE-PART SERIES.

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### Document Text

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Through the barred door that separated me from the cell block, I could see inmates casually wandering the walkways of the three-cell tiers.

Many were dressed as I was - in a mixture of olive drab and khaki. Others were wearing shorts. Some were shirtless, displaying a profusion of tattoos on chests and limbs.

Most appeared young and lean, and, I mused anxiously, tough and mean.

Would they resent an obvious middle-class, middle-aged man? Would they steal my cigarettes and underwear as the guard had warned? Would they threaten me or worse?

How would they react if they found out I was a newspaper reporter in jail on a phony drunken driving charge? Would they assume I was put in jail to spy on them?

And there was the vexing question as to how much I could endure. Reardon and Grace had told me I would probably hate them when this was over. How bad would it be?

All these questions went spinning through my mind as the guard turned the big key in the wall and then labored to pull open the heavy door. In two steps I was inside the cell block at the middle level.

I stood motionless as inmates passed by me, eyeing the newest arrival clutching in his arms a bulky, torn paper bag.

I didn't know what to do, where to go.

"Leader, you're in the Flats." I reacted at once to the name I had chosen as my pseudonym for my jail stay. My deceased mother might have disapproved. It was her maiden name.

Through the maze of wire mesh, I finally located the voice. It belonged to a guard standing at the top of the stairs about 20 feet in front of me. "Down here," he yelled, pointing to the ground level.

Obediently, I followed him down the stairs to the "Flats," a row of about 14 cells facing onto a corridor about 50 yards long and 8 feet wide. The floor was constructed of huge granite blocks cemented together when the Salem Jail was built. That was 1813. Abraham Lincoln was only 4 years old.

The cells were smaller than I had expected.

If I extended both arms I could almost put both hands flat against the side walls. In four normal steps I could walk from front to back. I estimated the size at 5 by 8 feet.

Finding an acceptable cell was a problem. Several had no light fixtures. For some reason they had been torn out. Other cells in the Flats served as storage area for the dilapidated beds, many of them with the springs hanging off.

The beds were no more than 3 feet wide. I wondered if I turned over in the night if I would fall out.

The decision was finally made. No. 6 in the middle of the Flats would be my cell.

"Grab a bed," the guard ordered. I went from cell to cell trying to find one with decent springs. I carried it into the barren cell. Another inmate, under orders from the guard, brought me a mattress, a bulging plastic-covered thing. The guard produced a light bulb.

I was supplied with a yellow plastic wash basin, a new white sheet (It was still in its wrapper) and two gray-black,

woolen blankets.

A youthful inmate noted that I had two blankets. "Hide one of those," he said. "I'll pick it up later." I obeyed, tucking it out of sight in a corner under the wash basin. He knew something I didn't know: It gets cold in the Flats at night.

As I began making my bed, the guard gave me a tip: "Don't let the bed clothes hang down to the floor. The cockroaches will climb up 'em." The springs of the bed were less than a foot from the floor.

There were no toilets or sinks in any of the cells. On each of the three tiers there were two toilets and a sink in a common bathroom. There were no doors on the toilets.

Inmates use buckets and plastic jugs when they are locked up, which is most of the time.

"I don't have a bucket," I told the guard.

"Let's look around," he replied.

We walked to the far end of the corridor. We passed another young inmate who was jumping up and kicking the brick wall. At first I thought he was exercising. Then I realized he was smashing cockroaches.

He noticed me watching. "We used to have rats," he volunteered, "They got rid of most of them. There's only one around here now."

The inmates call him Willard. I never saw Willard.

I found a bucket in an alcove at the end of the cell block. It was green plastic with a cover. I reached down with one hand to pick it up. I couldn't lift it. I swallowed hard. It was full.

In the opposite corner was a huge, funnel-shaped receptacle attached to the sewer pipes. It was here that inmates emptied their daily waste.

I lugged the heavy bucket to the corner and removed the cover. The fumes hit me full in the face. I gagged. Inside was a dirty, white pail with a handle.

Lifting out the pail, I dumped it over the side and into the drain. The fumes got worse. They stuck in my throat. I tried not to breathe, turning my head away, stifling the urge to vomit.

I turned the handle on the water spigot at the top of the funnel and rinsed the pail - over and over again.

Nearby was an oil drum lying on its side on a platform. "Use some of that disinfectant," an inmate said, pointing to the drum. "It'll keep the odor down."

Returning to my cell, I heard a guard give a command over his walkie-talkie.

"Close No. 6 in the Flats," he said.

Somewhere, my unseen jailer pushed a switch and I heard for the first time the muffled sound of an electric motor that would become so familiar in the next few days.

The cell door slid slowly along its runner, clanging to a stop against the metal cell frame.

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