

QUICK TIPS THAT MIGHT SAVE YOUR ASS

Although prison life is not the cartoonishly bloody mosh pit depicted in the movies, it would be overstating things to say it's sterile and safe. To avoid trouble, there ARE a few rules you might like to observe:

MIND YOUR OWN FUCKING BUSINESS. No one really cares that much about you, and half the time they don't even notice you. If you aren't an obnoxious asswipe who's always in everybody's face, you'll probably blend in without trouble.

DON'T GET INTO DEBT with anyone, either through borrowing or gambling. Resources are very scarce in prison. People are extremely protective of what they have and are likely to become violent to get it back.

DON'T BE A SEX OFFENDER, and if you are, don't tell anyone you are. All groups need someone to scapegoat, and for convicts, the "rapo" (convicted rapist) and "chomo" (child molester) wear the goat horns. Sex offenders tend to be inadequate types who are physically weaker than your average convict. They are the bespectacled nerds in the violent all-male high school that is prison. Even so, they are much more likely to be shunned than outright attacked.

DON'T BE A RAT, because everyone knows you're guilty, too.

YOU'VE HEARD ALL THE RUMORS. You've seen all the TV movies. You own *The Shaughank Redemption* and *Oz* on DVD. You've read all the *You Are Going to be Raped in Prison* books.

You're scared shitless.

You know that when the gavel falls and they send you up the river, you'll be a "new fish" dumped into a pool of bloodthirsty piranhas. The first time you walk down the tier to your cell, praying for God to give your trembling knees the energy to keep pushing forward, you'll hear the hoots and whistles and see the grimy hands reaching out to grab your ass, leering toothless mastodons making kissy-face at you, the nauseatingly horrifying amorous advances of drooling tattooed sociopaths ready to split your rectum open like they're deboning a chicken. Your anus will pucker in terrified self-defense.

Your cellmate will be a seven-foot-tall tobacco farmer/smalltime burglar named "Bubba," a gentle soul except when it comes to matters of the flesh. He will murder your manhood. The things he'll force you to do are degrading, humiliating, and you'll probably never come close to recovering psychologically from them, but you can at least comfort yourself knowing that it'll never hurt as much as it did the first time. It'll still hurt, don't get me wrong—it'll hurt BAD—just not as much as the first time. And probably not nearly as bad as during the first few weeks when the virgin wounds are still fresh. But you'll get over it, and you'll learn to fold Daddy Bubba's sheets and do his laundry and sweep the floor and clean the toilet just the way he likes it, and if he isn't in too bad a mood, he might wait a few more days before he sells your ass for a cigarette to the Samoan twins down the block.

Every day will bring another punch to your jaw from another psychotic lifer, and you'll get used to picking up your teeth from the shower-room floor like so many bloody Chiclets. To make the predators leave you alone, you'll probably have to sharpen a pork-chop bone and stab someone under the armpit with it, and while the air's hissing out of his lung and he falls to the

ground gasping for mercy, you'll shout, "OK? Anybody ELSE want some? No? NO? Didn't THINK so."

You'll have to pull a stunt like that within the first few hours, or else they'll think you're a punk and bum-rush you, hanging a sheet in front of your cell bars and pulling a "train" on your swollen, infected ass, shooting AIDS-laden cum into every hole in your body, taking their dicks out of your mouth long enough to punch you again, calling you their bitch and smearing food coloring from Peanut M&Ms on your lips and eyelids and saying it's "makeup."

Fuck.

That sounds scary.

You have a vivid imagination, don't you, boy? I can tell you've never been to prison.

I RECENTLY SPENT ALMOST TWO-AND-A-HALF YEARS in the clink. My journey took me from crowded county jails to a minimum-security prison all the way to a maximum-security penitentiary with big grey walls and rifle towers and serial killers and even a member of the Manson Family.

And not once during all this time...not ONCE...did another inmate threaten me. The popular myth is that convicts will force you to either "fight or fuck." In reality, the most coercive thing another inmate did to me was to reach down from his bunk, wake me up, and politely ask me to roll over because I was snoring too loudly.

I spent a year straight in a 110-man prison dormitory, surrounded day and night by 109 loud, crude, smelly, near-retarded convicts, and maybe I witnessed three fist-fights total, all of them related to card games. I remember thinking that you could cram 110 men from any walk of life into that room...you could probably put the entire US Senate in there...and you'd have more than three fist-fights a DAY, much less yearly.

Sex was nearly as rare as violence. Despite the quaint fantasies of an uninformed public, there was almost no obvious homosexual activity in prison. There was a small contingent of flagrant queens, but they kept to themselves and no one hassled them. I'd reckon there's a lot more cocksucking and anal plowing, consensual and otherwise, happening at your average Catholic seminary than in prison.

And rape...bloody, violent, systemic, eternal rape...so ubiquitous in fictional accounts of prison life, seemed nonexistent. In all my time there, immersed as I was in a buzzing hive of inmates where the tiniest scrap of gossip spread through the chow hall before anyone took their first sip of soup, I didn't hear rumors of ONE rape occurring. Never saw it happen in the showers. Never saw it happen in the dorms. Never saw it happen out on the yard. I once...only ONCE...heard a guy groaning from a faraway cell late at night, but who's to say he wasn't having a nightmare?

I started believing that in prison, no one gets fucked in the ass who doesn't WANT to get fucked in the ass.

THE NIGHT OF MY ARREST, I was assigned a jail cell inhabited by a huge pony-tailed Eskimo, someone who could have easily snapped my neck between his thumb and forefingers. Instead of attacking me, he smiled, held out his

hand, and told me his name. He ran through his hard-luck story, and I ran through mine.

The next day, while I was out of the cell taking a shower, guards sent the Eskimo home due to overcrowding. When I got back to my cell, he had left a candy bar for me on my bunk, a friendly gesture to help my time go easier.

A few nights later I was moved to another county jail, a louder, filthier, rustier one than before, and sent into a cell with a tall, muscular black guy called "Mack." He was a Crip from South-Central LA and had done hard time in California penitentiaries...a chap who could have easily made me retarded with one punch to the nose. Instead of fighting for my life, I spent all night talking with him about everything from computer viruses to Islam to UFOs to the Federal Reserve. Within a few hours he had given me his mother's address and home phone number so when I got out I could see for myself whether she baked the meanest pies I'd ever tasted.

Wherever I went, the same scenario played itself out—convicted felons who'd scare you just to look at them were friendly and helpful in ways you'd never expect to see on the streets, much less in prison.

Convicts would befriend me. They'd share food, drugs, or legal advice. Or all three. And they'd expect nothing in return.

I saw this same cooperative spirit everywhere:

Black gangstas braiding each other's hair in the bleachers.

Bone-crushing peckerwoods massaging each other's impossibly muscular backs out on the weight pile, greeting each other with a throaty, Hulk Hogan-styled "Hell-ooo, bruh-thuurrrr!"

Crips playing cards with Nazis.

In prison, people get along better than they do on the streets. Rather than a gladiatorial bloodbath, prison is more like a giant support group for criminals.

Convicts display the sort of camaraderie that only emerges under siege. They are polite to one another because they know the consequences of being rude. It's as if everyone's carrying a gun, so no one gets shot. People are respectful in prison for the same reason that soldiers step carefully through a minefield.

Chaos is in nobody's best interest. It's fucking bad enough to be locked down. No need to make it worse. Nobody can afford the headaches. Everyone just wants to do their time and avoid trouble. The lifers, more than anyone, want a minimum of turbulence. They may be mama-clubbers and baby-fuckers, but they still like a clean cell and a good night's rest. Rape and assault would be, you know, too much *trouble*.

DURING THE ENTIRE INCARCERATION PROCESS, from arrest to detainment to prosecution to conviction to prison to parole, you realize that the ONLY people who are nice to you are other inmates. You'll meet a lot of cold-blooded prosecutors and sadistic guards, a lot of do-gooders on the "right" side of the law who are paid to harm you and who laugh at the very idea that you're human. But unless you go out of your way to be an asshole to other inmates, they'll help you a lot more than they'll hurt you.

Maybe these guys aren't so empathetic when it comes to, say, not robbing banks or not making speed in their bathtubs or not having sex with corpses, but when it comes to other convicts, they have boundless empathy. Why?

Because they know what it feels like to be locked up and treated like an animal.

Because they know that placing a human being in a cage is a crime in itself.

Because, despite whatever they've done in the past, they've learned one ethical lesson that no District Attorney or scared mindless taxpayer ever learned—it's immoral to lock people up.

Because they know that being locked in a box, day in and day out for years and years, is more destructive to the human soul than being assaulted or raped.

Because, despite the fact that you're a peckerwood and he's a brutha, you're all wearing the same blue uniform and you're all soldiers against a common enemy.

Because, in a weird way, you are brought together by compassion. The compassion of dudes helping dudes.

I WORRIED ABOUT THE GUARDS. I worried about returning to a society whose members would never understand what it feels like to be stuffed inside a sardine can for 876 straight nights. But I didn't worry about the inmates.

Prisoners form a common bond against a society so stupidly out-of-touch that it thinks all we do is punk out new fish and sell their asses for cigarettes.

The only time I saw inmates acting like animals...with "acting" being the operative word...was every week on Thursday morning when some local probation officer would parade a cluster of teenagers on some diversionary "Scared Straight" program past our cell bars while muttering the same tired speech about how, c'mon kids, ya don't want to end up like these guys. That's when we'd put on a show, a tongue-in-cheek "Welcome to the Jungle" guerrilla theater performance fulla hootin' and hollerin' and rattlin' cell bars. I'd flash the kids my best "hundred-yard stare" and *Clockwork Orange* grin. And none of them would ever look me in the eye. On those

mornings, we'd amuse ourselves by PRETENDING we were crazy, just like the straights expected of us...what an insult for us to be put on display like fucking zoo animals.

What does it say about SOCIETY that they need to see us as subhuman beasts? It says they couldn't justify caging us otherwise.

Believe me—prison is hell. Being salted away inside a steel box is worse than you could imagine. And it turns

your worldview upside-down when you see it's society...not the criminals...that is harming you. It fucks your head up to realize the system...not Bubba...is the predator.

THE NIGHT I GOT OUT OF PRISON, I went shopping at a local supermarket. While I was standing in the checkout line, someone bumped into me and kept walking without apologizing.

I was stunned. I didn't know what to do. I hadn't been treated like that in years.

People are *never* that rude in prison.

MORE INMATES, LONGER SENTENCES, STRONGER PILLS

Reasons Why Prisons Are Safer Than They Used to Be

There are some practical explanations for why prisons might be safer than a generation or two ago. One is that America is jailing a LOT more people these days—a staggering ten times as many as thirty years ago. People who would have been diverted into probation...or a mental institution...back in the 1970s are now doing hard time for their first offense. This has resulted in a dilution of the pure old-school hardcore convict population, and, perhaps by accident, it has made prisons safer.

Another reason is that many states are increasingly likely to pop you with new criminal charges for crimes you commit while behind bars. The idea of raping or assaulting someone loses a certain cachet when it means an additional seven to ten years in the Cement Shithole. Whereas the state used to ignore...or even encourage...mayhem and rape among inmates, it now makes financial sense to squash such shenanigans. The benefits are twofold: The state avoids spendy lawsuits from prisoners with broken noses or perforated rectums, and they also keep the prison beds filled for years to come, ensuring job security and satisfying the private contractors.

Finally, one mustn't underestimate the effect of STATE-SPONSORED MEDICATION on keeping the inmate population placid and nonviolent. One of the most ironic sights in prison is when the bell rings for "pill line," and all the guys who were busted on drug charges line up to receive little dixie cups containing legal zonk-out drugs to help quell whatever mental disorder the prison psychiatrist decided they were afflicted with after interviewing them for five minutes.

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