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ERNIE DRAIN

The Meaning of Imprisonment

I'd like to thank my son for his encouragement as well as my mother for laying the foundation for my intellectual curiosity and training.
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Being incarcerated in prison means tucking your life into your back pocket for a while. It means taking your slumber on a bunk bed for the first time since childhood. If your incarceration is the end result of a mistake you made rather than a criminal lifestyle you were leading, then it means becoming acquainted with an unfamiliar and wicked subculture. It means showing your pride the door as the staff begins to emasculate you. It's the choice between answering to a pejorative or going to the hole for disobeying a direct order. It's being appalled at the number of grown men who enjoy watching Jerry Springer and Maury Povich. It's anger management classes, group psychotherapy, undercooked rice, indirect pepper-spray shots and petty politicking. It's sleeping the day away in an effort to push time forward. It's accepting responsibility for the acts that brought you here and learning to purge yourself of anger and resentment. It's questioning the morals of inmates who befriend child predators. It means standing in line for the privilege of performing a bowel movement. It's being made to stand in ninety-seven-degree weather in order to receive your medication. It means locking everything you own in a small steel box and hoping that no one smashes the lock when you go to dinner. It's understanding too late, the difference between the priorities of a man serving three years and a man serving a life sentence.

It means physically fighting for your reputation—which means that you care what other inmates think of you while professing that you don't. It's listening to the details of another inmate's deteriorating family life when you couldn't care less. It's suddenly realizing that you have a deep affinity for Mark Twain's political commentary, Norman Mailer, and the *New Yorker* magazine. It's forgetting what real ground beef tastes like. It's spending your whole life running away from an African-American stereotype only to smack face first into it. It's letting down your ancestors. It's the process of mental self-devaluation. It's earning sixty cents a day and enduring a lecture on work ethic from a twenty-dollar-an-hour C.O. whose most strenuous task of the day is reheating his coffee. It's watching the C.O.'s own low self-esteem ooze from every demeaning word he speaks to you. It means watching the staff eat food that was meant for inmates while the state deals with budgetary problems by

shrinking the portion sizes of the food delivered to those inmates. It's holding out hope that your life can mean something, that a talent can somehow be discovered, nurtured, and appreciated, even as your gut is telling you that your life is unredeemable. It's looking forward to an early release while walking into a fierce headwind of potential obstacles that threaten to derail that goal. It's knowing that at any moment, a philosophical debate can turn into a fist fight. It's wearing the anxiety that comes with that realization like a winter coat.

It's trying to make peace with the world while going to war with yourself. It's thanking God for the small things like seventy-five-degree days, pizza bagels, quiet and mail, hash browns on Sundays, a soft pillow, Dove soap, the few staff members who treat you like a human being, and the ability to write a cohesive sentence. It means trying to walk up the down escalator. It's the extreme rationing of hygiene and food products. It means constantly reminding yourself that this is not a place to make friends. It's picking and choosing very carefully which of your rights to fight for to avoid becoming a target of C.O.'s, staff, or administrative personnel. It means adopting the new first name of "inmate" or "offender." It means hiding your own emotional desperation and only exuding power and confidence. For some, it's grouping up and planning the next caper or sharing imagined war stories from the streets. For others, it's making sure their names ring bells on the yard, going too far in an effort to gain favor with dim-witted thugs, getting their security level raised and getting shipped out to a more restrictive joint. It's the total absence of pure joy. It's having your exuberance replaced by momentary relief from anguish and paranoia. It's the intoxication of denial. It's searching for familiarity and finding none. It's mandated nudity before an anonymous person. It's imagined authority and real tyranny, unnerving ethos and unavoidable conflict. It's a lesson learned, never to be forgotten.