

JAILHOUSE DOG

"Freedom's just another word for nothing left to lose."

Kris Kristofferson

When Kris Kristofferson uttered this famous line from the legendary song, "Me and Bobby McGee," many a listener might have rightly been expected to relate to that state of mind.

But I can't say that I do.

Freedom is more than just a state of mind. In a world that is becoming more and more intrusive, it may very well be our more precious commodity.

The loss of freedom is, quite literally, the loss of movement. To a human being this loss can be devastating, for we Homo Sapiens are by nature nomadic creatures.

Nothing can bring this notion home more than that of being incarcerated.

Travel west along the Queen Elizabeth Way from Toronto and in about a half hour you will come across the town of Oakville, Ontario. Take the northbound cut off at Trafalgar Road, motor for another mile or so, and on the right hand

side, is the scene of my adventure in a house of detention — squat, sinister and severe: The Oakville Police Department.

The patrol car enters the underground garage through a set of

electric doors, and you are then hauled from the rear of the vehicle and led up a flight of stairs to a holding area where the nylon handcuffs (tightened just enough to cut into your wrists) are removed and you are then photographed and fingerprinted.

Your captor then leads you down what seems like an endless row of cells, though there are only eight of them, bunched in fours and facing one another. Think James Cagney walking the 'last mile' in

one of his famous gangster epics — the title of which escapes you at that particular moment as you have other more pressing moments on your mind.

A sickening feeling in the gut accompanies the clanging of a steel door slamming shut behind you. An added queasiness prevails with the preternatural click of the key when your jailer locks you in your cell; the sound of it ricochets off the walls and ceiling like echoes emanating from a deep, dark well.

You feel certain that your fate is sealed.

Jail is not only a frightening place; it is a humiliating place.

A paunchy guard, smelling of beef jerky, fingers your crotch, probing for the proverbial escape file. He orders you to remove your shoelaces lest you try to avail yourself of the suicide route to freedom (as if you couldn't hang yourself with your underwear, or your pants, or your T-shirt for that matter). Maybe it is that your jailer fears that you may attempt to flee — though where you're going to go in a locked cell block eludes you. Such are the vagaries of lockup that you are far better off to just hand the laces over without the paltriest of peeps, and so you do.

That your accusers have little or no interior design sensibilities should come as no surprise to you. The churning in your stomach is aided and abetted by the sickly mustard yellow walls; the paint peels from them like blisters on a bloated, lifeless body. The cellblock lighting is bright, very bright, and you form the impression that you could get a nasty sunburn if you were to be exposed to it for any length of time. The heat is stuffy and oppressive like when you are broiling on a beach in the midday sun, a beach on skid row, but a beach nonetheless. Perhaps the stifling environment is intended to keep the prisoners intimidated and docile.

Thirst becomes a problem under such conditions, and though your custodians have left you with the four-ounce paper cup from an initial welcoming glass of water, the only source of H₂O is the obvious one — the toilet.

Incarceration is a dehumanizing experience. It is distressing and disturbing and

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as your sense of foreboding increases as the time passes, the realization that yours is the only occupied cell settles in.

As you scan your cramped new digs, you note that there is barely room to swing a baby. The cell is maybe six by nine feet; a hot white light bulb bares itself to the world and is never turned off; your cot, which hangs from the ceiling, is constructed of cold steel, is bedding free and

has row upon row of tightly coiled springs that serve as a mattress. The bars are blistered too, as if the very air itself harbored a battery-acid-like corrosive that, given a century or two, might eat through them. Stale urine and disinfectant

create a caustic cocktail that is pungent and more palpable to the tongue than it is any assault on your olfactory organ. At that moment you can't help but wonder what the atmosphere may be doing to your lungs.

It is a depressing place, jail. And like in the movies, time does drag, each second yanking the next along with it like a ball and chain. To temper the tedium, you might watch the walls. There are little faces there, you know, in the various stains of food and blood and Lord knows what else. They develop before your eyes like a photographic negative awash in its solution.

For a change of pace you might favor a Sunday stroll, but you could walk until doomsday — and still not go anywhere.

Jail is like being condemned to the purgatorial equivalent of an inner city crack house. Like an addict, you despair of becoming dependent on your keepers, and it is similarly debilitating. Your newfound despondency reduces you to a kind of infancy or that of a grade school pupil who must raise his or her hand to go to the bathroom. Did you raise yours to tinkle? Or did you display your intention to do you-know-what? You must ask for everything. You must wait for everything. You “yes, sir,” and you “no, sir,” if you know what's good for you. You eat what

your captors give you to eat. You are grist for the mill.

You are, in short, the jailhouse dog.

The lockup is a forbidding place, where not only your freedom is curtailed, but it is also a hellhole where your precious freedom of movement is forsaken. Jail's “comforts” are to dignity what the Flea Bag Motel is to The Four Seasons.

Cancel your reservation.



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