Getting Out

Just as every prisoner has a getting-caught story, every prisoner but the lifers and the executed eventually has a getting-out story. Most of the stories are pretty routine. A man does his time, keeps his nose clean, doesn't get into trouble, and is released when either his sentence runs out or the parole board gives him a date. But some of the getting-out stories are escape stories — mostly attempted-escape stories. When I was at West Street I saw an escape-attempt straight out of a Bugs Bunny cartoon. Three guys had ripped bed sheets into strips and then braided them into a rope. There was an exercise period on the roof and because it was cold we wore big army jackets. When it came time for the escape one guy wound the rope around and around himself and put on the biggest coat he could find. There was a guard tower on the roof and a fence. Two other accomplices faked a fight and drew the guards' attention while the escapee unwound the rope and threw it up over the fence and down. He tied the end to the fence pole and climbed up and over. The second escapee climbed up and over. Then the third. But the bed sheets couldn't hold all their weight and snapped. All three of them fell about four stories. None of them died, but they all ended up in the hospital.

I met a young guy named Quentin, who was an okay kid. He always came off tougher than he was. He was being transferred from a minimum-security prison for a court appearance. Some new charges had been filed against him and he was worried. Too worried to go before a judge again. Since he had minimum-security status, he wasn't hand-cuffed, and as the guard drove past a cornfield Quentin flipped open his door and bailed out. He hit the road, rolled a few times, then hopped up and ran into the field. The guard stopped the car and hollered for him to come back — he promised he wouldn't tell anyone that he had tried to

escape. Just come back and all would be forgiven. But Quentin knew the future charges against him were true and he was crashing through the corn and looking for a way out. He came to a farmhouse, forced open a basement window, and hid in the coal bin for two days. On Sunday the farmer and his wife went to church and Quentin went upstairs, found a set of car keys, and took off in a pickup truck. A few days later, as he stepped out of a grocery store, he was picked up. The truck had been spotted and traced. He never changed the plates.

A group of guys started an "astral projection" circle, where they would sit around a card table and concentrate on breaking down all their molecules into subatomic material and drifting through the fences. That was a waste of time. They went nowhere. Other guys would get furloughs and not return — but were eventually caught. Some guys were on work-release and would walk off the job. But they were always caught. It was always something dumb — like they saw a car with the keys in the ignition, or they went into a bar and got loaded and just decided not to return. Nothing remarkable. There were no daring helicopter rescues, no tunnels, no ingenious plans to dress up as a guard and stroll out through the front door. Most often the escape attempts were straightforward and totally ineffective — they tried to climb the fence. We all knew it was impossible, but desperate cons like the X-ray tech before me tried anyway. The fence was twelve feet high with triple rows of razor wire on the top, and if you made it over that fence there was a second, identical fence to get over, and there were guard towers with snipers, and bloodhounds in their kennels just waiting to sniff you out. But in the dozen or so attempts I saw or heard about, not one man made it over the first fence.

Still, after the parole board set me off, my mind wandered toward escape plans. I imagined the usual plots — a helicopter rescue, a tunnel, a paperwork snafu and mistaken release. Escape became a mental parlor game. And then I stumbled across a plan that would work. I knew a lot

of draft dodgers who had spent time hiding out in Canada. I figured I could, too. After I had received my minimum-security custody rating from my caseworker, Mr. Bow offered to take me out on an evening furlough to a "special motel where you can get your rocks off." All I had to do was have fun and be back by midnight. Cinderella rules. Only I wouldn't come back. Before going I would raise cash inside by selling medical supplies. I could check flight schedules and make a reservation by using Mr. Bow's office phone when I mopped his floors on the weekend. And once he dropped me off at the motel, I could cab it to the airport, catch a flight to Canada, and be over the border before I was missed. I knew it would work. It was simple. And it was tempting, but being a fugitive for life was too much of a risk. Yet, it was delicious to imagine.

My real getting-out story was nothing like the one I had imagined. First and foremost, I got a new caseworker. Mr. Wilcox retired, and I was assigned to Mr. Casey. He was young, and not yet beaten down by the brutal atmosphere and the frustration of trying to help people in pretty hopeless situations. So I tried one more long shot. I went to him and told him that I wanted to go to college and that if I got accepted to one while still in prison did he think I could persuade the parole board into giving me an early release to go to school.

"I never heard of an escape plan like that before," he said. "If you get accepted to a school, I'll write a Special Progress Report and we'll give it a try."

That was all the hope I needed to get me fired up. Iwent down to the library and asked the librarian if they had a Barron's guide to colleges. They didn't. So I went to Mr. Bow's office and asked him to buy me one. I told him I'd pay him back somehow, but for now I just needed the book. The next day he brought one in. We pored over it.

“Okay,” I said, “I want to go to a school with a writing program but I don’t have any writing. So let’s find a school, any school that has low standards, and I’ll offer them cash.”

We flipped through the pages and found a small school in New York. Graham Junior College. It was a two-year school with a focus on communication arts. Their motto was “Learn by Doing.” That sounded fine to me. I sent away for an application. I had Mr. Casey mail my request from his house so the envelope would not be stamped with U.S. Dept. of Corrections, like all outbound prison mail. I used his address for the return.

Soon, they responded. I filled out the application, and in my cover letter I made it extremely clear to them that I was not applying for financial aid — that I was a one-hundred-percent cash-paying student. I figured that would speak louder than my mediocre transcripts from Sunrise High School. I also told them that I would like to enroll as soon as possible — in the mid-year January semester. I spent days crafting my answers to a few short essay questions. My caseworker and I decided since the application didn’t ask about arrests or anything like that there was no point in bringing up the subject myself, as it would probably spoil my chances. Mr. Casey typed up the application, wrote a check for the application fee, and sent it back to them.

A few very slow weeks passed and Mr. Casey called me into his office. He had the reply from the college. I ripped the envelope open. I was accepted!

I gave it to Mr. Casey. He read it. “Impressive,” he said. And he was true to his word. He wrote out a Special Progress Report on my achievements in the prison, he attached a copy of the college acceptance letter, and he sent it to the parole board for consideration. This was the real college application.

I waited. It was nerve-wracking. My face broke out again. Welts. Boils. Acne. Reservoirs of pus and blood. But I left my face alone this time. I did hundreds of sit-ups. I did push-ups. I sweated it out.

Finally Mr. Casey received a report from the parole board. He ran up to the X-ray room to give me the news. I had a date. December 18th.

I was stunned. Nearly fifteen months after my first night at West Street, I would be released. I read the letter over and over. There were conditions. I had to have a stable place to live in New York City, and a job. I had neither, and right away I was nervous. Mr. Casey let me call my father. I explained what I needed.

A week later he called Mr. Casey. He knew a guy in St. Croix whose mother had an extra room in an apartment in Little Italy. I could live there and pay her rent. And the same guy had a brother who would give me a job selling Christmas trees until I could find a steady job after the holiday. Casey called in the information to the parole board. My release was approved. And I was given walking papers.

On the morning I left, I said good-bye to Mr. Bow and Mr. Casey. They had been so helpful. Without them, my stay would have been much longer, and my life much different. I went down to the discharge closet and picked out some clothes. I chose a clean-cut look. No Superfly outfits. No cowboy duds. No black-leather rebel-without-a-cause rags. No fake orange fur. Just a plain pair of dark slacks, a white shirt with a button-down collar, and a jacket with patches on the elbows. I looked like a librarian, and that was fine with me. In my yellow cell I filled a brown cardboard suitcase with my belongings and carried it down to the discharge officer's station for my final inspection.

The guard put my suitcase on a table and flipped it open. He was good at searching things. He had strip-searched me many times. He set aside my two pairs of prison underwear, two pairs of socks, two round-neck white T-shirts, a pair of sneakers, a pair of work boots, gloves, and

a wool cap. I also had a drawing pad and colored pencils, a manila envelope with important prison and parole papers, and my copy of The Brothers Karamazov. The guard picked the book up by the spine and tapped it on the table as if he were shaking sand from a shoe. Nothing came out. He flipped open the jacket and saw the prison library seal. "This is a prison copy," he said. "It belongs here." He set it to one side.

I couldn't say anything. The prison seal was stamped in blue ink for both of us to see. My heart was beating wildly. I had to keep that book. My entire identity as a writer was in that book. Everything I had written was squeezed between Dostoyevsky's great lines, as if my words were his discards. But they were all I had. "It's my favorite book," I said to the guard. "I'll pay for it." I had been given forty dollars in travel money, along with my bus ticket.

"I'd like to sell it to you," he said. "But I can't. It's prison property."

I looked down at my feet and kept my mouth shut. I wondered if he would give it to me if I said it was my journal. Or if, like the ship's log, it would only be used against me, and I'd be marched right back up to my cell and locked in until my sentence expired. I was just so nervous to be this close to the door that I zippered my lip. I looked up and smiled, and turned away when he threw it in a return bin. I heard it hit with a thud. That journal was the one and only thing I loved about prison. I knew I'd always have my memory, but my heart was in that book.

I was driven to the bus station by a minimum-security con called Pittsburgh. We checked the schedule and my bus was going to be two hours late. "Can't leave you here," Pittsburgh said. "Town law don't want no cons loitering. Gotta take you back."

It made me sick to my stomach to have to go back. I offered Pittsburgh ten dollars of my forty-dollar travel allowance. He snapped up the ten.

"You're on your own," he said, and sped away.

I sat on a bench and waited, wondering if the discharge guard would discover my journal and read enough of it to send a search team to come and get me. Once I boarded the bus and we got underway I just looked out the window and watched the country roll by. It was a joy to have a window that moved. It was a joy to have new thoughts. And then I had a funny realization that I really didn't lose my journal entirely. That between the lines of new, free thoughts were compressed the secret memories of my days in prison. That made me feel better.

When I arrived in New York, I took a cab from 42nd Street to Mulberry Street, where Gabe Virgilio's mother lived. She was expecting me. She had food waiting. She showed me to my room, which was small but had a street view. I loved the room, with its old flowered wallpaper and lace doilies on every surface. I put my cheap suitcase on the bed.

"Do you have more luggage?" she asked sweetly.

"No, this is it," I replied.

"Well, with so few things," she said, "you'll need to wash your laundry often. You just give your clothes to me and I'll take care of them for you."

I wanted to kiss her, she was so kind. After I ate too much dinner, and moved some furniture around for her, and took down the trash, I went to meet her other son, who had a job waiting for me. He was just as kind. And suddenly — in two days — I went from X-raying convicts with broken bodies to selling X-mas trees in Little Italy. And everyone seemed happy. People were nice to me. On the Christmas tree lot, we had hot coffee with Sambuca in it, and cookies, and calzones and pizza

and pasta and every wonderful food I could want. The good cheer of the holiday season was in everyone. I was in heaven. And I laughed about it. I kept looking around thinking, I've made it. I'm out. I'm out. I'm out. I'm out. And I'd eat some more, and talk to people who came to buy trees, and play with their kids, and I found myself going up to complete strangers and saying, "Can I help you?" instead of imagining that every stranger was a danger.

Part of my job was to deliver the trees to people's apartments. The last job I'd had in New York was pushing a shopping cart full of drugs down the streets to people's apartments. Now I was pushing a shopping cart with a Christmas tree on it. I laughed like a loon at the nutty irony. And when I carried and tugged the trees up three or four or five flights of stairs, I laughed. Nothing could get me down. It was all so comical, and so joyful.

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When the January semester began, I got my money from Newman and went to school. After his fee and the thousand I gave my father, I had just enough to cover the first semester. I paid cash, but I needed spending money, so I got a work-study job at the school. They made me a security guard. At night, I'd walk through the deserted school buildings, checking doors and windows. I had a time clock to punch at various checkpoints on my rounds. Each time I punched my card I shouted, "COUNT!"

In my writing classes, I first wrote brutal stories about prison, about New York street life, about the men I knew who had hard lives and hard hearts. And then one day I got tired of all the blood and guts and hard lives and hard hearts and began to write more stories about my childhood, like the ones I had started writing down in prison — stories which at one time I did not think were important, but suddenly had

become to me the most important stories of all. They contained the hidden days of my innocence and happiness. And once I began retrieving the lost pleasures of my childhood, I began to write stories for children. And I laughed about that, too. Prison certainly wasn't funny, but with each new day it was receding into my past. The mistakes I made, the pain I endured, the time I wasted were now the smallest part of me.

But no matter how small, it wouldn't entirely go away. One night I was lying in my bed in Mrs. Virgilio's house, reading, when I glanced up from the book to the ceiling. The naked lightbulb suddenly reminded me of the man with the bulb busted up his ass and I got a surge of anxiety. I hopped up and looked out the window as if the anxiety was tailing me like the Feds had. But no one was down there. I turned and saw my razor on the dresser. I grabbed my shoes and darted out of the room and took a walk.

Every now and again an anxious moment like that comes back, but not often enough to prepare for so I get caught up in it until I shake it off.

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I never returned to dig up the hash. I was broke, and exhausted with the heavy schedule between my work and college. I needed money. I could have recovered the hash, cut it into grams and sold it piecemeal, and it would have been worth about five thousand dollars. Once, to be honest, I got as far as the drinking fountain. "Thirty-nine steps, twenty steps, fifteen steps," I said to myself. But my feet wouldn't move. My heart wasn't in it. I would not let myself make that kind of mistake again. No matter how desperate for money I was, I knew giving in would reveal that I was desperate on the inside in an even worse way — and I wasn't, not anymore.

Now, every time I pass the Plaza Hotel and General Sherman, I smile. And once, by chance, I walked by Lucas's old apartment. I didn't stop. Not only would it have been a parole violation to see him, or Hamilton, again, but I didn't want to dig them up either.

I did get the ship's log back. Years later I had Newman request my court records, and the log and files were sent to me. But the Karamazov journal is gone. It was the biggest loss of writing I've ever suffered. Since then I've never lost a journal. Now I wonder if that volume is still on the prison library shelf. I hope so. That thought sustains me. I imagine some prisoner checking it out and reading my book within that book. And maybe he will add his thoughts to it, and maybe others will, too. Maybe the library will become filled with books with the trapped world of prisoners' thoughts concealed between the lines.

What remains of the rotted hash is hidden in the hole I dug for it. And I'm out in the open doing what I have always wanted to do. Write.