

Man Walking

He makes his way down the third level of the narrow tier. He walks slowly, his set of keys jangling noisily at his sides. He doesn't stare, but rather peers into each prison cell out of the corner of his eyes as he passes, quickly observing each prisoners behavior and taking note of anything suspicious: the scent of tobacco or marijuana, the sour, unmistakable smell of prison wine, raw skin indicative of fresh tattoos, pornography. Anything unauthorized. He even looks for frivolous items such as paperclips, pushpins, and writing pens with ink other than the color blue, though he rarely confiscates these items of lesser infraction. The tier walk is a routine he's completed four times in the last hour. Sixteen times on this shift alone.

"Hey officer!" one of the prisoners yells loudly from behind the cell bars. It's coming from one tier above him, about ten cells back. He's used to this. He ignores it and keeps walking.

He tries not to make much eye contact with the prisoners as he passes. To do so would be acknowledging that they were human, equal to him in every way but for circumstance. He *wants* to acknowledge them. He wants to ask them questions, and inquire about their lives. But he can't. He was warned about getting too close when he was trained. Each year he gets an additional four days of training, which mostly consists of his superiors reminding him that distance from prisoners is paramount to having a successful career. So he walks, and his keys jangle, and all the while he thinks about the question he always wrestles with; "what's the point of all this?"

It's something he thinks about a lot. Quietly of course.

He's a prison guard. His only real duty is to maintain order and suppress signs of mutiny. It's so much different than what he expected. When he applied he thought he'd be changing lives. He thought he'd be helping to equip wayward men with the confidence and skills needed to make it in the

real world. He was disappointed when he discovered that rather than being able to help these men, he was merely babysitting them...warehousing them.

"Hey officer!!" the prisoner yells again, now about twenty cells back. He ignores it still.

As he walks the tier, he notices many of the men playing cards. Probably pinochle as that seems to be the go to game when doing time. Most of them seem oblivious to his presence, yet a few eye him suspiciously. He takes note that some prisoners slam their playing cards down loudly while taunting their opponent. It's obnoxious, to both him as well as others living on the tiers, but he doesn't intervene. He appreciates that most of them lay their cards down softly as they play, and he wonders if this is done to show respect for the rest of the men on the tier. More likely, it's done fearing the lone prisoner yelling loudly from his cell front that whoever's slamming the cards down is nothing but a *"punk that needs to get his teeth folded back"*. The card slamming gets louder. As intimidating as these men can sometimes be, he appreciates even more that these threats are mostly empty. Mostly.

"HEY OFFICER!" He's startled by the sound of a cell door suddenly being kicked. It's a jarring sound. A sound he still hasn't gotten used to.

Dang it. It might be an emergency. If it is, he can be written up for not responding.

"Yeah, what do you need?" he yells out.

"Oh, not much. Just for you to go fuck yourself!"

The tier comes to life, dozens of men chuckle in rhythm at their fellow prisoner's sudden comedic outburst.

Nice. Comments like these are nothing new. The content contains nothing original. He hears stuff like this periodically, usually when medication line is called a bit late and next level boredom begins to set in. Some of the boys have issues. He tries to understand. Tries not to take it personal.

Usually, like this time, he knows exactly who's behind it and mediates the problem with progressive levels of discipline. It's an angle other guards frown at, most of them favoring a more heavy handed approach, including pepper spray, a bloody nose, handcuffs, and weeks spent in segregation. He realized early in his career that their method of problem solving only riles them up further. It only creates a deeper chasm of distrust and volatility. No need for that. He thinks about the prisoner that just yelled at him. Usually quiet, spends most of his time sitting on his bunk. Visits are rare for him, the last one informing him that his mother had recently passed.

"Congratulations E-439," he responds with more confidence than he actually feels. *"You just got yourself noticed for all the wrong reasons. Now you have to walk down here and talk to me."*

He continues walking. He notices men drawing portraits, and as he passes their cells he wonders how many homes in the outside communities pay homage to their loved one by displaying these works of art proudly? He notices a lone man praying...his hands are clasped together, eyes closed, the slight hint of a smile plays at the edge of his mouth, a remote look on his face, seemingly detached from the agonies of his prison existence. He sees other men hunched over the small desks mounted to their cell walls, pencil in hand, carefully crafting letters destined for the morning mailbox. Maybe they write to a wife, or to a child. Maybe to someone they've wronged. Maybe these letters are written with the hope of receiving a response that gives them purpose? Maybe they write simply for a reason to go on, to feel as though their voice hasn't been forgotten in a world they're no longer part of. He wonders how they do it.

When he does his tier checks, he always notices them noticing him. This two way game of who's watching who made him nervous at first, now it's just part of a routine that's somewhat understood. Somewhat expected. Sometimes he feels the urge to confide in the men. Not all of them mind you, but a few. Mostly the quiet ones. The ones that share a slight head nod with him when he

passes their cell. He thinks about telling them that it feels like *he's* doing time as well, and that they're not alone. He feels like telling them that it could have been him sitting behind those bars had it not been for sheer luck, or better circumstances, or any number of things that send people left and right down life's forks in the road. But he can't. Can't show vulnerability. Can't appear to have anything in common with them that they'd use against him. Potential manipulation tactics, that's what his training calls it. Not that these men would, but he has to keep it in mind. He was warned. Repeatedly in fact. Moreover, he knows that his colleagues don't look kindly upon fellow staff who treat prisoners with dignity and respect. It gets you 'the look'. He detests the fact that he's in a position where he has to choose sides, especially when he knows some on *his* side are more criminally minded than the men currently sitting behind these bars.

He's not happy, doesn't feel content, and he often questions his *own* sense of purpose in this career. Despite it all, he maintains focus remembering that his family depends on his paycheck. Depends on his ability to maintain order. But they have no idea. As he passes the last cell on the tier, he takes a deep breath and looks at his watch. He has fifteen minutes to talk with the disgruntled prisoner before he has to walk the tier again. He climbs the stairs to the fourth tier and opens the bar box that houses the cells' locking mechanism.

"Cell 439!" he yells loudly. "Come on down, let's have a chat."

The prisoner walks down the tier, head down, absorbing the taunts from other prisoners.

"Hey fool, you're lucky it's him," one of them says. "Any of the other correctional officers would be beatin' your ass right now."

When the prisoner arrives, he can tell that he's embarrassed already. No need to make it worse.

“You alright 439?” he asks him. “I know you’re waiting for medication line. It’s running a bit late tonight. How about a little more patience next time, sound fair?”

“Yes sir. I’m sorry.”

A few minutes later, he readies himself for another tier walk. His mind is preoccupied with the mainstream approach to criminal justice, which mostly entails punishment without rehabilitation in mind.

He wanted to be a *corrections* officer.

He sighs.

