

THREE

The Awakening

Waking up to the sounds of Marvin Gaye—it's been a good restless night. 6:00 am the sun is rising—you can smell the fresh taste of coffee in the air—for a moment you lose yourself and forget the reality—then it all comes back as soon as you hear—“Good morning ladies, this is your first wake-up call” —It's 0600 hours—why in the hell do they use military time? “Rise and Shine” thirty minutes till chow. Oh no, the dream is over. Damn—I'm really in Prison, The Penn, The Big house. Hell, who'd thought I'd be here.

It's been over 10 years and I can still remember faintly the time I came to the Penn in 1993. I can remember the wonderful dreams, nightmares, fears, loneliness, sadness and depression just wanting to be at home starting my life over again. I often wondered why I took the wrong road—didn't listen—why life dealt me this hand or did I just play the wrong cards? More than ten years and I remember it all as if it were the very first day I arrived. Yes, I remember the mornings of music and coffee as I awakened from another night of great dreaming, followed by tears. No more tears God, please. I just want to go home. Not a chance. It would be 2½ years and I've been told time really goes by slow in here for some of us. As I awake, almost daily reflections of coming here continuously go through my mind.

Arriving at CCWF in Chowchilla, California—Madera County wasn't easy. Being scared, nervous, not knowing what to

expect, you can only do one thing and that's pray. Pray that you get through this whole ordeal, that time will go by fast, that you'll have no problems and when you get a moment to yourself, which is virtually never, cry a river because the sooner you do it the better. Get it all out of your system quickly. Why? Because you have to be strong, you have to hold on so no one will punk you, so you can peep game, because you're in the system now—a place not to show you weakness, a place where before you leave you hope not to run into any problems or lose your identity—a place where you don't fall victim to this world of its own, but chances of that are very slim. Why? Because someone just won't like you. They don't need a reason. This is the Penn, a place where you wake up each day to thousands of women, more than what the prison was intended for.

Each day you see some of every kind of woman. Black, White, Latino, Asian, Indian and a few other ethnicities. There is no age discrimination, no separatism. You see our youth, fresh out of Youth Authority—YA, all the way to somebody's grandma here in prison at seventy-five years old. Damn, what the hell is wrong with this society, have we all gone mad? What the hell is somebody old enough to be my grandmother doing in a place like this? She told me it was because she kept stealing food from the supermarket because she never had enough money or food to last her. When she was caught the last time she had two packages of steaks and the judge said since she was arrested a few times, he would send her to prison—and that's what he did. Now yes she should have been reprimanded for her crimes; however could n't the system give her something lesser and find out her needs so she could stop stealing? I'm not talking about the system being bias to individuals in a certain class because if you do the crime, be prepared for some time but locking someone up is not always the answer. There are underlying condi-

tions that must be addressed or that individual will come out as the same person that went in.

When you're doing time on the inside, you aren't separated. Everyone is put together whether they're a newbie—fish, old-timer or lifer. That's right, your bunkie could be someone that shot, stabbed or killed someone. They don't care. Everyone is the same when you come through that gate except a dead man—in this case woman, walking, with the term "Make a hole" as this is a Death Row inmate and they're in a world of their own. You're considered a number, a criminal, an inmate who's worthless and you're treated like a piece of trash by some of the CO's from the moment you step off the bus.

You have some of every crime and you're exposed to many different types of women in the system. Some are beat down, worn out, angry, confrontational, tired, depressed, sick, timid, naive, scared and suicidal. There are also some that are extremely quiet—a time bomb waiting to explode, murderers, drug dealers, gang members, rapist, racist, prostitutes, thieves, white-collar criminals, lesbians, semi-lesbians which are wannabe's, and of course the curious ones figuring since they're in prison and have possibly wanted to indulge, what a perfect time and excuse to do so. Understand that there are many different personalities that you eat, sleep, shit, shower and work with daily. Women of different social and economic backgrounds of life from the lower to upper class, as society puts it but none of this matters because you're in a whole new world, a new zone—the Twilight Zone as some would call it, a world in itself; however through it all you have to try and survive, try and keep the peace, try to stay alive. But you have to be strong, unless you want people to run over you or kick your ass. So prepare to stand your own ground, don't back down to any situations that you know you're going to have to prove yourself and most likely they will occur,

and handle your business because I've always said, "I may get my ass kicked, but I'm not going down without a good fight." I'm not going to let anyone or tell myself I got a beat down without defending myself or die knowing that I didn't try to survive.

So stand tall, stand firm and hopefully you'll survive but damn, to alleviate all this, don't come here and you won't wind up dealing with all this bull-crap. For all of you who keep coming back into it, well you already know just what I mean.

Ladies, it's important for you to get wise, strong and seek help so you can stay out and not have to wonder when the nightmare of being institutionalized will begin and end as you ride to the Penn.