

Letter 27

3-31-26

New Guy

Dear "New Guy,"

Welcome to your first day in jail. Odds are this is the worst day of your life. I'm sure you're scared and confused. Don't worry, it gets better.

First, realize it's normal and okay to be some combination of scared and confused. Everybody around you knows how you probably feel. There is no need to confirm or discuss this with your fellow inmates.

We recently had a new inmate on the block that, while moving into his cell, looked at his cellmate and, with tears in his eyes, asked, "You're not going to hurt me, are you?" That cellmate is a decent enough guy who was not going to hurt him. However, the new guy basically made his own "Kick me" sign and hung it around his own neck. He has been kicked every day since.

Despite what the television says, you don't need to punch the biggest guy here. You just need to shut the hell up and watch how things are done.

A couple of people will approach you the next day or so. They will want to be your friend. No offense, but I'm guessing you aren't that cool or interesting. There is probably a reason they want to be your friend, and it's not a good one. Maybe you look like an easy mark for the guy that rips everyone off. Maybe you are fresh ears for the crazy guy that everyone else already knows to ignore. Whatever their reasons, the first people that want to be your friend are the last ones you actually want.

I'm guessing there is an old guy there that is secretly keeping an eye on you. He will let you know to line up for chow, or will discreetly advise you to avoid doing something dumb. Listen to him. He doesn't want you as a new friend, he just doesn't want you to mess things up for everyone else. This means he will keep you generally doing the right thing because that makes his day smoother.

Do listen to your cellmate. You will spend far too much time with this person, try not to fuck it up on day one.

Realize that they probably don't hate you, but they do resent the fact that you just invaded their space. They, until a few minutes ago, were enjoying life without you; you are only adding complications to how they prefer to do things, interruptions to their routine. Be respectful of how things were set up and working before you arrived.

Be aware that this does not mean to be a pushover. Your cellmate may decide to test you to see how things will be. You have a meager amount of possessions right now, your

cellmate doesn't need any of them. If you were issued something particularly useful to them, it will likely also be useful to you in a few days, so don't give it up as soon as you walk in.

Make sure you get your fair share of space. They probably had their stuff everywhere before you arrived, but if there are four hooks on the wall, two are yours. Of course, they weren't expecting you to walk through their door today, so give them until tomorrow to move all of their stuff and find a new place for everything. Be warned though, if you don't say something tomorrow, you had better get used to having one hook next to their three.

When I was eighteen years old I had a paycheck, zero debt, and no blemishes on my credit. This made me a prime target for every predatory lender out there. I didn't fall for all of it, but I did get trapped enough that it haunted me for years.

Right now you have zero debt with these other inmates. Don't be in a hurry to change that. Very few people are in jail because of their kind heart and generous nature. Don't owe anyone.

You may think that a story about how crazy, tough, or hard you are will help you earn respect among your new peers. Remember, just shut the hell up! However great your story is, there is most likely someone crazier, tougher, or harder than you that will not be impressed. As the saying goes, it's better to be thought of as an idiot than to open your mouth and confirm it.

While we are on the topic of keeping your mouth shut, keep yourself to yourself. Nobody needs the details of your charges. Nobody needs the details of your personal life, family, or situation on the outside. There is a zero percent chance that your interviewer in an orange jumpsuit wants to write your biography, solve your problems, or leave you their fortune when they die. Please, just shut the hell up!

If you just keep your head down and observe for the first few days, you will do fine.

Letter 28

4-1-26

Lockdown

I am writing this from lockdown. There are two types of lockdown, but the duration is the only real difference between "Punishment lockdown" and "Oh Shit lockdown."

Punishment lockdown is pretty self-explanatory. Oh Shit lockdown is something that affects the whole block or sometimes the whole jail due to, hopefully, unforeseen circumstances. This is an Oh Shit.

Currently, one of the regular COs is out on maternity leave. This has led to an assortment of part-time and otherwise retired COs to be around as they cover a shift. They have been using their entire inventory of patches to cover the hole created by her absence. It's quite possible there was no one available today.

Another possibility is that an inmate needed to go to the hospital. That trip would need to be chaperoned by a CO and would leave the jail short for that time.

Those scenarios would put the entire jail on lockdown. Other options would affect just one block. For example, if a repair is happening on our block, they will lock us down while the maintenance crew is here. Also, if someone is about to be pepper sprayed, they will lock the rest of us down.

Speaking of pepper spray, the staff only calls it mace. I think they get a better reaction from that.

While we are locked down, we are stuck in our cell with only what's in there. For this reason, I always have two extra books ready in my cell. Also, I will never turn in all of my bedding on the same day, because that seems to guarantee an extended lockdown.

We are never told the estimated end time. I assume this prevents us from being disgruntled if, for some reason, lockdown extends past the expected end time.

The worst part of a surprise lockdown is when someone needs to shit. Under normal circumstances you wait until your cellmate is in the day room. If for some reason they are hanging out in the cell, it's fine to ask them to leave for a few minutes, they know what you are asking. However, during lockdown they don't have far they can go if nature calls. This is where the "Shit Sheet" comes in.

The Shit Sheet is a curtain that hangs through the middle of the cell, from a towel hook on the wall to the top bunk. This curtain hides the graphic visuals you would otherwise never be able to unsee. Well-timed courtesy flushes hide the rest.

During lockdown, meals are served through the hatch in the door. While room service is normally a luxury, here it somehow only happens on the days with the messiest food. For

instance, today's lockdown came with spaghetti. While spaghetti isn't always messy on the outside, eating it with a spork in a jail cell guarantees a mess.

Punishment lockdown is the same as Oh Shit lockdown, except for two things. The first is duration; punishment lockdown is for days or weeks at a time. The second difference is that you are isolated by yourself.

I often have an internal debate as to how bad that would really be. I feel like a few days to myself would be okay. They let you out for an hour a day, that's when I would rotate reading material and make my phone calls. The rest of the time you get the cell to yourself.

This seems like a sweet deal, but I sure would hate to find out I was wrong, and still have days to go!