

Letter 39

3-12-26 to 5-11-26

The Day

Now that I've been here for two months, I feel like my routine is pretty solid. Here is a day in the life.

7:00 a.m. The lights come on. It's bright, sudden, and harsh, but at least it's silent and not an alarm.

7:02 a.m. The cell doors pop open. This provides an auditory cue if you need that to wake up. My cellmate pops up now. I continue to doze while he gets dressed and ready for the day.

7:15 a.m. I get up. I get dressed and brew a warm cup of tea. While the tea steeps, I prepare the laundry that I will turn in today. Next I brush my teeth. Part of me wants to wait until after breakfast to brush, but most of me wants to brush before joining other people. Then I transfer my three tea bags to a second cup and let that set for later.

7:30 a.m. Breakfast is announced. I head downstairs where most everyone else is already gathered. I prefer to be the last to arrive so I can avoid as much morning small talk as possible.

7:35 a.m. Breakfast actually arrives. The last five minutes took forever.

7:50 a.m. I'm done eating and back in bed. A card game has started in the day room. I tried this early game before, but found it drains my social battery much too early in the day. I use this time for me. Maybe I am organizing my thoughts, writing something in my head, or getting a short nap.

8:15 a.m. Most days something happens now. Maybe it's time to turn in laundry, or razors and nail clippers have arrived for use. Then immediately back to bed.

8:30 a.m. The tablet network becomes active. This means I can check my messages to ensure nothing happened overnight.

Depending on what's going on, I may send a message about work so it arrives before the day begins. Whatever messaging is happening, I am still horizontal.

9:00 a.m. Medication time is announced over the intercom. I don't take morning meds, but it's my signal to actually start the day. I made a cup of terrible coffee, cut with half a pack of cappuccino mix. I gather some things and head downstairs.

A card game is still happening. I sit near it, but do not engage. Everyone already knows to let me be until 10.

I sip my coffee, take a revolting multivitamin, and reward myself with a cookie from a previous day's lunch.

I read, write, watch MTV, and plan. Most of my writing happens now, along with a lot of work planning.

- 10:00 a.m. People are allowed to engage with me now. Sometimes it's a card game, sometimes it's a call to Sara.
- 10:30 a.m. Cards or writing time.
- 11:00 a.m. If I want to be near people, I will play cards. Otherwise, it's time to read. I have finished 15 books so far during my time here.
- 11:30 a.m. A few messages will have arrived by now. It's time to catch up on those.
- 12:00 p.m. Lunch is called and arrives pretty immediately. I'm sure to save any cookies for future coffee.
- 12:20 p.m. Catch-up time. Maybe I'm replying to messages, reading, writing, or placing a commissary order.
- 1:00 p.m. This is pretty reliably time for cards.
- 2:30 p.m. Tea time. Also, lockdown. We get a forced siesta every day from 2:30 to 3:30. I start by having tea and purposefully thinking about Sara, who is simultaneously having tea in Pittsburgh. Then there is some combination of reading and napping. I may allow a nap if I slept poorly the night before. I can use this time to catch up on sleep, but I don't want to get ahead.
- 3:30 p.m. This is also a predictable time to play cards. Sometimes, though, everybody needs a break from everybody else. If things have been a lot lately, somehow we can all feel it, and lockdown extends to a longer quiet period where people read, watch movies on their tablet, or just continue being alone.
- 5:00 p.m. Chow is called. By this point we are usually pretty hungry. Maybe lunch was light, maybe breakfast was a disappointing pile of slop. On a rough day, both happen. Dinner usually sets things right.
- 6:00 p.m. Dinner is wrapping up and news is coming on. This tends to be a mellow hour because old guys like to watch the news and aren't afraid to tell the kids to be quiet. This tends to be a good time for a call.

7:00 p.m. Headcount. This is usually the first check-in with the night shift. Somebody drops in to say hi, check that things are normal, and ensure the correct number of us still exist.

7:10 p.m. A movie usually comes on, cards are dealt and calls are made. It's a social time where everyone seems glad another day in jail can be crossed off.

I can never watch movies in the day room. There is always too much noise or distraction. I will play cards if my social battery still has charge. Otherwise, I will use the time to read or write.

9:00 p.m. More often than not, this is time to sit and bullshit with John. We have solved zero of the world's problems, but have identified a number of them. Mostly, we sit in the balcony and judge the rest of this muppet show.

10:00 p.m. Lockdown. Back in your cell. If I still need to complete my daily exercise, now is the time. Otherwise, time to read.

11:00 p.m. Lights turn off.

11:01 p.m. I'm asleep.

Weekly

Some activities are so special we can only do them once a week. Well, not really, but it feels good to phrase it that way.

Mondays - Razors and nail clippers are available for fifteen minutes in the morning. You can sign up for a razor the night before. After you use the razor, you must show the blade to the CO to turn it in. I have heard that upstate a piece of silver cardboard is put into a razor for inspection, but I can't confirm this.

Wednesday was our fear factor night. It was one of the rare times that the group decided on a show and everybody shut up so we could watch it. Of course, the season ended.

Thursday - Commissary arrives.

Friday - Razors and nail clippers again.

Sunday - The cellblock either watches Marshalls or shuts up while everyone else does.

There is also weekly Bible study and AA, but I have no idea when these happen.

Letter 40

5-13-26

Coping

The walls in here contain an abundance of pain and suffering. To make it worse, we are locked in a cell where we must figure out a way to deal with it alone. Even though the cellblock always feels like it contains too many people, none of them are the people that are there for you when you are hurting.

The luckiest folks have people on the outside that they can rely on for emotional support. Sometimes that support will even last their entire time here. Sometimes though, despite the best of intentions and promises sworn through tearful goodbyes on the way into court, that support fades.

For the families on the outside, life can move on. For those in here, we exist in a form of stasis where it's hard to wrap our heads around seasons changing, let alone relationships. But our families continue to live on, and sometimes it's hard for them to feel the same way once someone is labeled the way that we, here, are all labeled.

Some folks, though, don't even have the luxury of losing relationships while they are here because they didn't have any to start with. They come in alone and they will leave alone.

No matter what our situation is, though, we all experience bad news, rough days, and some form of personal chaos. We must face those challenges without our usual coping mechanisms. Healthy or not, we at least had coping mechanisms on the outside. For some people those same coping mechanisms are why they are here, but that's a different story.

Without access to our addictions, or exercise, or friends, we are left alone in a cell with just our problems.

Some people find themselves waking up and choosing violence. Nobody chooses depression, but sometimes depression chooses them. Some people just go numb.

Not every inmate has a hard time processing emotion, but a lot of folks who have a hard time processing emotion become inmates. Then these people suddenly find themselves locked up on what is probably one of the worst days of their life.

I wish I had a humorous take on this or a clever twist, but I don't.

Sometimes jail just sucks.