

## New Blood

I'm a large man from a small town. My father was a pilot in the US Air Force. He always wanted me to join up. Well, I'm in uniform now, but not the sort he had in mind. My name is George Robertson.

I don't know how I got here; the last few years are a bit of a blur. I guess I could put it down to bad decisions, bad morals and bad luck. I used to be a stockbroker. My spacious corner office had a window overlooking the Manhattan skyline. I had a private secretary, a company car, and a cappuccino machine in my office. I still have a corner office, if you could call it that. If I crane my neck far enough I can see a lone tree outside the barbed-wire fence.

I arrived some fourteen months ago. On the bus ride over here I was full of trepidation. I needn't have spent the energy worrying. It's much worse than I imagined it would be. It was a Monday. The bus stopped inside the gates and the guards put us through the normal security check. Just our luck, Warden Buck saw fit to meet us personally. There we were, a bunch of new recruits lined up for a sort of inspection. New blood, fresh pickings. Warden Buck paced up and down, examining us as if he had supreme power over our fates. He sort of did, and still does.

"Welcome to Park Hill Prison," he spat at each 'p' sound, "Consider yourselves the lucky ones. This facility is clean, organized and far, far away from civilization. No distractions, gentlemen, nowhere to go. This is your home now, at least for your allotted time. Oh, and there has never been a successful escape from these grounds. Let's keep it that way, shall we?" Warden Buck strutted off towards an outer-building, which I soon learned to house his office and those of his administrative staff.

We marched through the grounds towards a large metal door. Prisoners playing ball on the other side of the chain-link fence stopped mid-game to sneer at us. This was not going to be fun. I felt like turning around and taking the next bus out of this place, but I couldn't just run away. I had no choice, had to do my time, just like the others. And besides, where could I go?

I was the last to enter the building, the door clanged shut behind me. We passed through brightly lit corridors. The light bulbs, enclosed in wire frames, reminded me of muzzled animals. We entered the distribution room and received our uniforms. Then they showed us to our accommodation, which is a fancy word for the plainest room I've ever slept in. I was allocated the bottom bunk, but I only had a short time to settle in before a bell announced

lunch. I didn't realize it until then, but I was starving. Prison food isn't exactly something to look forward to. You would have thought that we deserved better, but the mashed potatoes, predictably, are served soggy and the meat is always tough. You get used to it because when you have no other option, there isn't much point in complaining. Prison life is all about routine, and I found myself salivating at midday and again at six. I was turning into Pavlov's dog. That's what places like this do to you.

The morning after our arrival, the Chief Guard distributed work assignments. The grunt work was demeaning, especially for someone who used to make million-dollar decisions every day. But what could I expect? At first, my jobs kept me away from the hardened prisoners. I suppose I was thankful for that. The basketball-playing, sneering inmates would pick me for a greenhorn as soon as they laid eyes on me.

About two months into my stint at Park Hill, they switched our jobs around. I assume that the idea was to keep us busy learning new things, or maybe to keep us interested so we wouldn't slack off. Whatever the reason, I found myself more and more among the general prison population. Mostly they left me alone, but I got into an altercation once or twice. I knew I was being tested. When I was a teenager Dad insisted on boxing lessons, so at least I could hold my own. But these fights could have gone either way. Both times, Warden Buck called me into his office. The first time resulted in a stern lecture, but the second incident earned me a week's duty in solitary confinement. Solitary wasn't as bad as it sounds. It got me away from everyone else for a while, which was sort of the point. It did get a bit lonely, but because it was so quiet I caught up on a lot of reading - a little bit of culture was very welcome in this colorless place. If nothing else, at least that.

Over time, I managed to earn some respect and now I supervise the laundry. The steam from the machines fills the room and I welcome any opportunity for some fresh air. But it isn't as bad as working at some of the other jobs around here, I suppose. There isn't much time to idle, which means less time for getting into trouble. If the sheets aren't moved quickly from one station to another they can jam up the whole system, so everyone has to be on their game. We work in shifts of two hours on, one hour off over a twelve-hour hour period. Finishing time doesn't come soon enough.

The Warden was right; there has never been a successful escape from Park Hill Prison. I heard stories of attempted break-outs. One time, a prisoner knocked a guard unconscious in the shower room, took his clothes and photo ID. He tried to use the disguise to walk right out of

the front gate. He didn't get far. The guard was a six-foot tall, ageing black man. The convict was young, short and white. How stupid can you get? This other time, so the story goes, a prisoner put a fork to a fellow inmate's neck. When the guards called his bluff and refused to open the gates, the prisoner said to his hostage, "Ah, forget it, Jimmy, I knew this wouldn't work." Apparently, they both got tasered for their trouble.

Aside from TV, there isn't much to do at night in the way of entertainment. What would you expect in a prison? Casinos? Occasionally they show a film, always romantic comedies, no violent action movies. Don't want to get the inmates all riled up. I hate film nights. It's like going to the cinema with a bunch of bored teenagers. Actually, that's what some of them are. I know a few guys in here who have spent more time behind bars than they have on the outside. Some of them are barely eighteen and their experience with relationships starts and ends with throwing things at the screen and jeering at the actresses.

My thundering descent to rock-bottom began when I lost my job at the stock broking firm. Well, perhaps that's putting it too softly. I was fired. Sacked. Given the boot. I was shunned and vilified, expelled from the industry in one brutal gut-wrenching belch. Just when I thought it couldn't get any worse, I found myself here. I don't think I could get much lower. Here I am, stuck in the middle of some god-forsaken desert, while my wife is probably living it up with her friends, and goodness knows who else. I miss her. She doesn't miss me. Never returns my calls. She's ashamed of what I've become, how far I've fallen. I expect my lawyer to show up any day with divorce papers.

Sometimes I think I deserve this life. I did it to myself. Greed tore me from my skyscraper office; this is my punishment. It's a rotten, stinking place - a hostile universe of strangers thrown together by circumstance. I never know if I will make it through the day without incident, or if I will be plunged into the chaos of testosterone-induced violence. I hate being a prison guard.