

It was a morning like every other. Things don't change much here. Prison is routine followed by routine, followed by routine, followed by more routine. I'm up by 5:30 AM every single morning. I've prepared my cup the night before with powdered creamer and stale instant coffee from a packet indicating it is over 4 years old. The coffee is not a powder, it's solid little chunks because of moisture seeping in over the years. I wonder if it's possibly moldy as I add the hot water. I stir, take a sip and ignore the thought of ingesting a toxic mold.

I make breakfast - mackerel, 5 olives, mixed peppers, garlic powder, and olive oil. It's the same breakfast I've had every morning for about a year now. By 6:45 I am ready to stand in uniform with my ID displayed and nothing on the top of my neatly made bunk as two men walk by to inspect my (and ever other man's) appearance.

For the next three and a half hours I will work on addressing my "criminal thinking errors" in the cognitive behavioral therapy program I am in. I mention that the job I had held for over 15 years decided to cut my pay \$3 an hour, I could no longer support my family adequately and how this also played a role in my criminal activity (selling marijuana). The staff is quick reprimand me.

"You suffer from blaming and are unwilling to take responsibility. That is why you are a bad father..." The staff rambles on for a while and I pretend to be listening but I am instead recalling walks in the woods with my daughter, teaching her how to identify birds by sight and by their calls. I think of lines from the letter my other daughter sent me and how she thanked me for being such a caring father who took the time to help her, provide for her, and love her the best I could. I recall family gatherings I would arrange and the laughter and sense of togetherness that grew from them. Sure, I had some "thinking errors" like any human who walks around on this planet, but I am quick to accept them and learn and grow from them.

At this point, the staff is finishing their tirade and closing with how I'm a bad partner and son. All the men in the room remain silent (myself included) because we understand that if we complete this program we will get a year off our sentence. I wonder how many of these men start to believe and internalize the staff's criticisms. At least I have a strong and healthy support group on the outside. They aid me as a mental buffer when I have to listen to such nonsense as I just did.

How many of these men will return home more broken and depressed because they've come to embrace the regular put downs by the staff here. It's stressful and sickening to witness all this. I usually find the strength to get through these 3 and half hours, but today is one of

those days when you wake up and just don't want to acknowledge you are still in prison. I can use a moment to escape from the routine of my surroundings. I plan to meditate in a few hours when the bays will be at least half empty and the constant sound of men burping and farting will be at its lowest point of the day.

For now, I just head back to my bunk. Down in the corner of the bay, several men are gathered around a window laughing and yelling with anticipation. I approach and peer out the window and see Joey Marks outside by the cat house that shelters the stray cats that live here year round. The cat house has two floors with separate entrances. On the higher floor are 3 kittens that are just fine. On the lower area of the cat house, a possum has taken up residence. It has been there for almost a week now.

Joey Marks has gone out there to "rescue the kittens" the inmates gathered by the window inform me.

Two things came to mind, first: the kittens are just fine, the possum has no interest in them. Second: we are on lockdown (because of the pandemic) and I hope no guard catches Joey Marks out there.

Joey is an okay guy. He's like a 12 year old boy stuck in an overweight man's body. As one inmate said quite accurately, "We all pitch in and take our turn babysitting Joey Marks."

Another inmate also made the very true connection that, "Joey Marks is like the dog that keeps shitting on the rug but you have to learn to put up with it."

I add, "That's true but it's getting worse. Now he's shitting on the rug and he's also coming back to eat it. At some point you have to stop this behavior."

We all laugh but realize Joey Marks is pushing it with this kitten rescue mission. He has a large broom handle that he is shoving into the cat house as he tries to pry the possum out. But the possum is determined to remain in the house and avoid coming out at all costs. Joey Marks pushes and pokes at the possum with his broom handle and the best result he gets is the possum turns around and sticks its nose out the cat house.

The inmates gathered at the window yell out to Joey Marks, "Grab that bitch!" and "Use your hands Joey Marks!"

I don't like where this is heading but part of me is rejoicing in the absurdity of it all. An inmate sneaking outside during a lockdown so he can battle a possum to "rescue" kittens that are in no danger and a group of 8 or more inmates gathered around a window, yelling

words of encouragement.

By this point the mother cat has come out of the top part of the cat house to see what Joey Marks is up to. He tells her, "Don't worry, I got this" and he gestures for her to back off with several hand movements. She abides and sits about 5 feet away to watch the situation play out. One of the kittens peeks its head out and after a moment loses interest and goes back to sleep in the upper part of the cat house.

Joey Marks returns to his locker and grabs a pair of cheap prison issued winter gloves and marches back out to confront the possum with a look of determination plastered on his face. He pokes the broom handle in the cat house until the possum turns around and sticks its face out the hole. Joey Marks reaches forward with his gloved hand and lays a gentle slap on the possum's face. This goes on for a few minutes and after the 3rd mellow slap across the face, the possum turns back around and exposes its tail. The mother cat gives a hiss in support of Joey Marks. Joey Marks bends down and grabs the possum's tail.

The men gathered around the window with me yell out in astonishment, "Oh my God!" and "That man is sick!"

Joey Marks begins to pull the possum out of the cat house. The men gathered at the prison window are going wild. Their excitement with the situation only attracts more inmates to come witness the kitten "rescue".

As the possum is pulled most of the way out, it quickly grabs onto the front of of the cat house with its front legs. It grasps tight with determination and does not have any interest in letting Joey Marks evict it from its new home.

Joey Marks pulls and the possum latches on even tighter. The undertone of concern is overpowered by the laughter that is pouring out of the prison window from all the gathered inmates. As Joey Marks continues to pull, the possum shows signs of tiring. Just as someone shouts out the window, "Get em' Joey Marks!" the possum lets go of the cat house.

In a display of triumph, Joey Marks lifts the possum over his head and swings it by the tail. It circles above him like the propellers of a helicopter blade. After 3 full rotations, Joey Marks unleashes the possum and it spirals through the air, directly towards the open window. The onlookers quickly close the window and jump back with fear. The possum lands a few feet in front of the window and scurries off, admitting defeat.

The men cheer and yell as Joey Marks makes his way back into the prison.

Toughest Man in Prison

I do feel bad for the possum, but laughter comes over me as I see Joey Marks walking down the bay. He approaches me with a big smile on his face and I announce in front of everyone that, "Joey Marks is the toughest man in prison." He repeats this proudly about 3 times a week now.

Most days in prison are not like this. There is no excitement, just routine followed by routine. But every once in a while, we can count on Joey Marks to offer an escape from the monotony of prison life. Though we don't talk much, I will miss having Joey Marks bunked across from me when he goes home in 7 months. At least the kittens he "rescued" will remain as proof that Joey Marks was indeed the toughest man in prison.