

It was my first day in prison and a guard had just made it clear that I must get to unit 2, range 6, cube 47, upper bunk. He also made it very clear that he had no interest in directing me on how to get there. I looked around and saw other inmates milling about. I saw the prison barbershop and beyond that, some doors leading to the outside compound. I decided my best bet was to head through those doors and search for unit 2 somewhere out there.

With a pillow under my arm, one hand holding an overflowing laundry bag full of everything I needed for the next several years, and the other hand holding up my oversized pants, I began my awkward trek down the long hallway. I made a few stumbling steps before I noticed something disconcerting. Another inmate was staring me down. He was a few feet away from the barbershop and oblivious to everything going on around him; he was intently focused on me and only me. His eyes stared directly into mine with an eerie look. It was a look unlike any I've ever seen before. It was a look that rattled me to the core. It was a look that said, "Ah, you...What are you going to do now that it has finally come to this?"

I decided to do what I was told to do and somehow find my way to unit 2 somewhere on the compound. I took a few shuffling steps, doing my best to maintain my grasp on everything I was holding, including my pants which were eagerly waiting to fall off.

The other inmate would not remove his gaze from me. The closer I got to him, the more intense his stare became. His face tightened and I could sense he was about to make a move at any moment. I didn't have a good feeling about this situation.

Suddenly, I could not believe what was happening right before my eyes. There was no warning or explanation to help me comprehend the scene. I've never witnessed anything of this nature in the "free" world. The man had turned into a bumblebee! He had fallen to the floor, his body squirming, his arms bent and flapping like wings, while his mouth let out a loud buzzing sound.

In a moment of shock, I almost let go of my oversized pants. What a scene that would have been - me standing in the middle of a prison, pants down around my ankles while a man squirmed and buzzed like an injured bumble bee at my feet.

I had no idea what to do. I had just signed papers saying I was told "everything I needed to know" about life in prison. They must have skipped over the part that explains the procedure for when something like this happens though.

Just then, the barbershop door opened. Another inmate came out, grabbed the bumblebee man by his legs and while dragging him into the barbershop, he gave me a menacing look

that seemed to say, "Don't fuck with me."

I made a mental note to avoid all contact with that inmate moving forward.

With the bumblebee inmate now out of my way, I quickly headed for the outside doors. As I stepped through them about 50 ducks blocked my way. I took four steps forward, expecting them to clear a path. Instead, they swarmed around me from all sides, looking up as if waiting for me to offer them something to eat.

I took a quick survey around me and the first thing I noticed was a large rock to my right. It was too large to move by hand but the perfect size to sit on. It had fossils all over it; shells, plants, and tiny organisms. It reminded me of a fake rock you would find in front of a museum with a bunch of 5th graders on a field trip climbing all over it, freaking out their anxious teacher. I found it rather odd that someone would place a fake rock full of fake fossils in that spot. But there it was, sitting next to me, who was standing next to 50 hungry ducks in the middle of a prison yard.

By this point, I had acknowledged that my first day in prison was not turning out at all how I expected it to. The only thing I was certain of, was that the life I had once had was now done. When you go to prison, it's as if everything you ever knew comes to an end. Any hope of an enjoyable future fades away. When you go to prison, you know your life is over.

I did eventually find my way to unit 2, range 6, cube 47 and settle into my upper bunk. About a year went by when I began to seriously search for some meaning to my incarceration. Something to let me know my life may not be over. I looked into the past with hopes of finding an answer.

I discovered that USP Lewisburg opened in 1932. It was designed by architect Alford Hopkins. Hopkins was inspired by the architectural styles of the French Renaissance. The inside of the higher security prison has an eerie look and feel to it. It came to be known as "The Big House" - a term later adopted as slang for any prison. The institution housed some noteworthy people since its construction. Some examples are Whitey Bulger (FBI most wanted crime boss in Boston), John Gotti (Boss of the Gambino family in NYC), Jimmy Hoffa (American labor union leader who "disappeared"), Robert Hansen (American serial killer), and Willie Aikens (former MLB player).

In 1991, a documentary about the institution, "Doing Time: Life inside The Big House" was nominated for an Emmy award. In 1995, a prisoner-led riot earned national attention (and much of its current notoriety). In 2009, it was designated a Special Management Unit (SMU)

intended to house the most violent and disruptive inmates in the Federal system.

Now, in 2022 it is home to some of the most troublesome members of the vicious prison gang MS13. A recent string of murders carried out by MS13 members caused every Federal prison in the country to go on lockdown for several days. There are plenty more highlights, but honestly, none of this really interested me or offered much value to my time here in the minimum security part of the prison.

It wasn't until I dug deeper into the past that I discovered something life changing about the fake fossil rock that led me to reevaluate many of the thoughts I had on my first day.

For example, the guy who wouldn't shut up on the bench who I thought was the most annoying man I ever met; well he became my co-worker and friend. I actually looked forward to our conversations together. The inmate who I thought turned into a bumblebee actually didn't, he was just having a bad reaction to being high on deuce (synthetic K-2 that gained popularity amongst a segment of the inmate population because of its ability to go undetected on prison drug tests.) The inmate from the barber shop who grabbed the bumblebee man and gave me that menacing look ended up being my bunkie on that first day. He wasn't threatening and he was the head barber in the prison. He often gave me gifts and never once charged me for a haircut. These people were not at all as I thought on my first day of prison. I had been mistaken.

Finally, there was the discovery I made about the rock. I was completely wrong about the rock. It wasn't fake, the rock and its ancient fossils were as real as can be. This land was once submerged under a shallow sea, long before a prison ever sat on top of it. Some of the oldest fossil-bearing rock in the world has been unearthed in this area! The fossils I saw were remains of worms, shell animals, and algae masses (known as stromatolites), dating back to the Ordovician and Cambrian periods. That's 400-500 million years ago! If you're lucky, you can still find smaller rocks scattered around the compound that also have fossils in them. I spent many days of my sentence wondering what life was like back then. Back before this, or any prison existed.

Coming to understand that I was wrong about the people I saw on my first day and also wrong in thinking the fossil rock was fake, I had an even greater realization. I was also wrong to think my life was over on that first day of prison. Yeah, prison sucks and it really messes things up for you, no question about that. But, my sentence has an end date and on that day it will be my last day in this place. I will walk out of this prison, take a breath, and say to myself, "Your life is not over, you're just stepping into the next season of it."

Welcome To The Big House (Part 2)

On that day, the prison will be just like the fossils in the rock; something from the past. Something to look back on as life moves into its next era.