

He lay in the chains, rapidly blinking. The badges and uniforms were multiplying between the flickering black screen inside his eyelids. They began stripping down Del and his homeboys and anyone else inside the chow hall during the assault. Brian had never seen anything like it. Even the man he'd hit was naked on the wall, his T-shirt balled up into a bloody red plug in his mouth. While young Brian did not quite finish his first meal in prison, he felt, fully clothed, that he'd clearly gotten the better end of things.

III. The First Year

He was escorted off to the hole and would emerge from it a year later. Only one of the three hundred sixty-five days was of true significance. Unbeknownst to young Brian, he had been thrust into the middle of a secret gambling circuit. The shift of weekend officers called themselves Saturday Night Special and placed wagers on fights between inmates. The operation's nickname came from an old Lynyrd Skynyrd song, but both black and white officers showed a measure of esprit de corps by not racializing it.

The key to the operation was twofold. The officers of Saturday Night Special needed, firstly, willingly combative participants while ensuring, secondly, that no one perished. Without men who would fight of their own volition, there was of course no gambling, and without homage to the idea that the combatants should be at least by the end of the fight alive, if not standing, an official investigation would undoubtedly ensue, from which members of Saturday Night Special could conceivably find themselves on the other end of this very same gambling operation, duking it out with each other in chains. The solution to this problem was surprisingly sim-

ple: put two known enemies on the yard together and, before they went through the gates, conduct a thorough search of every bodily orifice in which a weapon could be hidden.

It was young Brian's fourth day of his seven-to-life sentence at the California Men's Colony, and third day in the hole. Unlike the last, this cell was weathered and filthy. Young Brian had not been in the original long enough to appreciate the difference, and became accustomed to the filth by the end of the first day. His arrival in the hole was significant, and he could hear the cryptic catcalls being issued down the line. He knew he was being discussed by the other inmates, but for some reason did not spend even a moment breaking down the codes. He fell asleep on his side, the bruises of his escort from the chow hall coming up on his pale white skin.

The officers of Saturday Night Special were especially excited with their new arrival in the Segregated Housing Unit of the California Men's Colony. He was young, naive, and had struck a fellow officer in the chow hall of the East Yard. Their motto was *Nothing breaks down Billy Badass better than Billy More Badass*. They did not hesitate to pit him against Johnson for the show, a black inmate whose nickname, Ringer, came from his volunteering to fight for extra food.

Young Brian Flintcraft awoke. An officer was walking the line. Young Brian came to the door of his cell and pushed his cheek against it. He could see through the crack that the officer was stopping before each cell and asking something. To young Brian, it seemed like the officer assumed the answer to his question, because he did not stop long. Young Brian couldn't hear what was being asked until the officer was two cells down. He said, "Yard, Fitzgerald?"

Fitzgerald said, "No."

Three steps and then, "Yard, McCarthy?"

"Nah."

Three steps to Young Brian's cell. The officer's tag read "Enos" and his face was not friendly. He was an abnormally large man and when he said, "Yard," this time it was not a question.

Young Brian Flintcraft said, "All right."

The officer singled out a key and popped the mail slot. Young Brian pressed his back to the door and put his hands through the slot. Enos immediately cuffed him and then pushed his hands right back through it. Young Brian faced Enos when the door opened and Enos said, "Nah." His index finger made little loops in the air.

Brian turned back around and came out the cell backwards, step by step. Enos grabbed his wrist and pushed him down the hallway from behind. Young Brian Flintcraft looked straight ahead as the cells on either side were passing him. In his peripheral vision, the smudges of gray-white and brown-black faces were pressed to the door watching his progress down the hall. He had to concentrate to kill his curiosity. With discipline, he made it to the end of the hallway without turning his head, most proud because he had done it appearing respectably casual.

The cop told him to get on the wall and he did. His head was down, and when he looked up a white face was staring through the little squared window of his cell door. The wires embedded in the glass did not prevent young Brian from seeing a very curious thing. The man's eyes were empty and the face itself seemed dead, but for the contradiction of movement: the man emphatically shook his head no, as the unfocusing, unmoving eyes remained empty. It seemed like the very same warning in two dramatically different ways. Was there cause and effect between the two extremes, as in, don't go to the yard or you'll end up empty like me? Brian was too young to appreciate the gesture and young enough

to think it would have mattered if he had. Enos keyed the door and they went through, as a slew of strange possibilities opened up in young Brian's head.

In the secured hall to the five-by-five-yard yard it was dark, and a lone ray of light crept in through the shatterless glass. Brian saw figures along the wall: officers. One stepped authoritatively from the shadows. He spun Brian around, keying the 'cuffs, while the other, stumpy legs spread and tattooed arms akimbo, said, "Strip down."

Young Brian Flintcraft did as he was told, and it was easy. In the hole, you had a pair of boxers, a T-shirt, and, if you were lucky, slippers. Brian was not lucky, and little time passed before he was naked. One officer checked his ears, his mouth, his ass, and between his fingers and the cracks of the toes. Enos stepped forward and repeated the procedure. He told Brian, "Get dressed."

When the door opened, the first thing Brian saw was a cumbersome shadow on the opposite wall, deep black against the stark sunlight. Within its perimeter, a just-as-black man paced five echoing steps each way, with a head-down revolution. His hairless head glistened from the beads of perspiration coming up on the skin. There were sharpei-like folds along the back of his neck and on one arm a brand of bubbled scar intersecting with the curves of another identical brand. The two J's of keloid ran from the tip of his shoulder and halfway down the arm, and the arm was big, thick. The black threat of three days' back was manifesting itself in the man-animal before young Brian Flintcraft.

He swallowed and said nothing. It was his fourth day in prison, the ninety-first day of his seventeenth year. He felt something climbing the walls of his throat that must have been a kind of survival instinct. He did not know. This was very different, and he did not know. Unexplainable things

were happening inside him that could not be checked by the adolescent awareness of his thought. Still, he could not help thinking, *Everything happens so fast in this place.*

Though unaware of the specifics of the setup, he now knew why the man with empty eyes had shaken his head no. The hard part about it was that he couldn't trace the problem back to a flawed decision on his part, unless the flaw had been getting arrested for armed robbery in the first place. Maybe. But after that, young Brian Flintcraft couldn't locate the mistake and attach it to his four-day life thus far in prison.

It was too late, anyway. Ringer Jay Johnson stopped pacing and said, "Fuck you want, man?"

Young Brian said nothing. The instinct was crawling his throat, leashed only by the infinitesimal hope that the encounter need not lead to violence. In the chow hall, the violence there was reaction, his muscles responding reflexively to what the brain interpreted as imminent danger. Perhaps, in a way, he had initiated the incident, instead of letting it play itself out.

But his hands were twitching now and not closing into a fist as they should have been. It was this damned thinking that complicated things. Ringer Jay Johnson pushed his chest out and took a step toward the white boy.

The step was hostile enough to release the instinct in young Brian Flintcraft. He struck first and, without thinking, continued to strike, stepping back with each forward step Ringer Jay Johnson took. Young Brian's arms were much longer, but his young, unaltered vision was the true advantage. Young Brian's aim was the bridge of the nose, and his fists struck the target two out of three times, and then three out of four. Ringer Jay Johnson's head went back and forth, too caught up in its own speed-bag oscillation to stop. He dropped to his knees before five out of six came, and young Brian did

not think. He felt the wild instinct pulling him further down the path of the unknown. He grabbed a fold of the black, sharpei-like neck and ripped, opening up a hole with surprising ease, and when he heard the predictable jingling again, this time his arms did not stop. Enos and four other officers of Saturday Night Special got in more than a few extra jabs at the angry, now-soaked-in-blood young Brian Flintcraft, knowing the weekend gambling circuit was coming to permanent closure.

The word got around fast. In that single incident, young Brian Flintcraft had put an end to Saturday Night Special. The whites in the hole passed sycophantic notes of introduction via the white cop who walked the line Tuesday and Thursday nights. A few sent apples and oranges, and another sent a different copy of the same Hemingway book in his last cell. Young Brian met a dozen different white men that first week in the hole, but always through the same face.

Brian was learning the most important law espoused at the California Men's Colony: you stick with your own. Not only that. Those who aren't your own are your enemies. A thousand souls submerged in the law give stage to singular survival. Young Brian Flintcraft was an exceptional seventeen-year-old first-termer, sullen, strong, and silent, big and fast-fisted, indisputably violent, and because the little pocket of fear was always there inside him, fearless. But encapsulated in the law of life was also young Brian Flintcraft, at seventeen, three months and a week, perhaps especially young Brian Flintcraft, the perfectly impressionable age at which to create a prisoner's prisoner.

It was Tuesday. The bruises were now healing, as was young Brian's broken wrist, and now he could write. The white cop was making the rounds, and young Brian felt that now was the time to speak. A week and a half had passed

since Saturday Night Special had been disbanded, and he had effectually said nothing thus far to anyone. His motive for speech was simply an inquiry: How much time would he pick up for the fight? And should he write up an inmate request for the time?

Though a part of him felt faultless about the ordeal, he had, after all, struck first and continued to strike long after the notion of self-defense had been eclipsed by pure rage. That was undoubtedly the way the authorities would see it. But when he questioned the white cop, he was succinctly told to forget about it. As near as he could identify, young Brian did, and even a bit thankfully.

Still, the anger in young Brian was sprouting and growing its horns any time he stopped to think about things. There was no sidestepping these issues, for they surrounded his adolescence in ubiquitous iron bars, Pavlovian routine, and shatterless glass. Something was pressurized into birth inside him, a festering kind of hatred that latched itself to the opposing forces of everything he represented, which, at seventeen, three months, and a week, was not much. The opposing forces, as he saw them, were as follows: guards, as he was a convict, and black men, as he was white. It made visible sense enough and had now a physical degree of painful precedence to make the time pass without any mental ambiguity. Prison is many things, after all, but mostly it is the gross simplification of life's complexities.

IV. The First Brother

So he emerged from the hole a year later. Somehow the three bag lunches a day had translated into an even thicker Brian Flintcraft, who was eighteen, very angry, and no longer young.