

I walked in the front door. The yellow walls were covered with art. Pictures of thick legs with pink and white flowers entangled by long green vines tattooed on them and silly cartoons inked behind ears. I handed the hot blond-hair tattooed man my image, a pink and black star, anarcho-communist style but with my queer addition.

"Is this it?" he asked.

"Actually, I want it to say 'queer' across it in typewriter font, all lowercase."

As his face changed and his friendly tone disappeared I remembered one of the reasons for this tattoo; I will never have the choice to closet myself again.

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The questionnaire sat on my lap. My ass sat on the cold concrete floor surrounded by thirty plus other men with the same questionnaire. Everyone was going through it; one guy to my left was having his translated from English to Spanish. We were all in our bright orange uniforms, everyone else had boots but I still only had socks. Everyone was zipping through the questions, seemingly without thought. I was stuck, not because of any language barrier but rather an inner difficulty of crawling in to a closet.

One of the questions read, "Have you ever used illegal drugs?"

I checked the no box without hesitation. It was a complete lie. The day before my trial I stood outside in a circle with a number of my co-defendants passing around an apple carved in to a homemade pipe for some excellent upstate New York marijuana.

Another question read, "Have you ever been diagnosed with mental illness?"

My pencil marked an x perfectly in the no box, but according to my teen years psychiatrist I have a chronic Panic Disorder that I was prescribed 150mg of Zoloft to control.

The only question left unmarked read, "Have you ever engaged in any homosexual experiences?"

I read the question more than a dozen times but the pencil refused to make any mark. I clearly had no problem lying on the other questions, why was this one so different?

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"Lydon's not just a hippie terrorist. He thinks fags deserve rights too. That right Bin Lydon?"

"People should be able to fuck who they want to. It's none of any of our business," is all I say and we all return to work. It's not enough for that guard to be able to control my life; he needed to dig inside of me.

Around the yard there were whispers about me. Rumors passed from person to person, curious about Darnell and me. He was a fag, clearly. I was a fag, clearer than I wished it to be. We hung out together. We ate together. We talked about politics together. I had a huge crush on him. He had a crush on me. We never fucked. For those six months I couldn't even put my hand on my own cock never mind some one else's. As my release date came closer he pulled away as my friend. On the day I left he wouldn't even give me one last hhd. He had to stay with the talk; I was going home to my

friends, family and freedom to fuck safely.

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As the cute tattoo artist starts outlining the star on the inside of my arm I think back to that x on the No box. I didn't gain anything useful with that choice. That closet I jumped in to was not about survival, but about privilege. Like closeted actors, teachers, parents, and politicians I was afraid to lose something. We betray those who need us. Me, the fags, gay boys, trans folks, and bi guys in Muscogee County Jail. Them, all those queer kids in need of role models and alternatives to the heteronormative lifestyle dominating television, movies, and everywhere else. What does the lack in solidarity mean? Who suffers when we choose privilege over the experiences we have? The tattoo gun keeps buzzing dripping drops of blood down my arm and I know that I have a permanent mark in the yes box.

Have you had any homosexual experiences? How do I define that anyway? What about that one time during that one strip search?

The tall, angry, built, scowling guard took me in to the back room. He was one of the new guys, so he was forced to do the dirty work. He shut the door behind us; no other guard had done that in the past. He seemed to sneer at the latex gloves on the table. He was supposed to cover his hands before touching me, he didn't.

"Remove all of your clothes, including socks and underwear", he growled at me.

He stared me down as I peeled my sweaty, smelly, shirts, socks, pants and underwear off my long unwashed body. I had decided after the second strip search I suffered through that the only way to resist the anguish was to let go of myself

completely. Each strip search was an invasion of my body I could not stop, but this time was worse. I stripped as quickly as I could. Standing with my head up and eyes halfway closed, I imagined myself kicking this man in the face the next time we crossed paths.

Then I got the standard, "Open your mouth, lift your tongue, cough, cough deeper, lift your nuts, turn around, bend over, spread your cheeks, squat, cough."

But then he kept going. "Turn around. Pull your foreskin back, push it back, pull it back again, push it back again, pull it back again, push it back again..."

He was half smiling at me. My half closed eyes began to water. Rather than imagining kicking his face in I couldn't get the last image of unwanted touching out of my head. He put his naked hand under my balls and lifted them himself. I rose up on my toes and made a tiny squeak that felt like a scream. He let go of me and stared. He threw a bar of soap at me and barked, "You fucking smell, take a shower".

He grabbed a new uniform, threw it at me and said, "Put these on after."

He walked out the door and locked it behind him. I fell in to the shower unable to really cry. I hadn't even had a chance to name my sexuality for him or anyone else around and already a man couldn't keep his hands to himself.

I continued to stare at the question. I knew which box I was going to check the whole time. My brain needed justification. My heart sought resolution to betraying the last eight years of being out as the bullies slammed my head against lockers, as I stood before the Board of Education against the silencing of queer students, as I had my first kiss. The room filled with guys yelling, talking, and pissing in the open trough toilet felt almost silent as I put an x in the no box. I hoped deep down that it wasn't about trying to grab on to privilege. In that holding cell I sat as one of the only white people, with the shortest sentence, with access to huge support outside of the prison, with no major mental health issues, and I check that box to grab the only privilege I was missing. I was sure with all those cards stacked for me that I would go serve the last four months of my sentence at the prison camp, where I could go outside, have access to books, run the track, eat with other people, read in the prison library, not be locked down in the hole for another however many more days. The betrayal and pain I felt checking that box would be worth it.

One by one people were called out of the cramped holding cell. Each person was being designated – hospital, SHU, Camp, Level 2 – and my name was called. I shuffled out to the guard intake table. He pushed my fingers into some ink and rubbed them on yet another finger print chart. He took my picture, which I smiled Cheshire cat style for.

He smirked at me, "What do you have to be so happy about?"

"The airplane y'all put us on didn't crash. Sounds like a good day to me." He wasn't amused. I handed him my form, likely damp from the sweat accumulated in my hands. As his eyes glanced over it and his pen marked SHU I wished I had been braver.

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In Muscogee County Jail I didn't even get the opportunity to fill out any questionnaires. Standing before the judge in my black shirt with a pink triangle I outed myself to him, the people in the courtroom, and the U.S. Marshals who dragged me off to Georgia's notorious Muscogee County Jail. After the first night sleeping on concrete with no pillow or

blanket I was cuffed, shackled, and ushered out of the tiny one-person cell. As the guard tugged me along by the elbow I asked if I was going to be put with any of my co-defendants.

"No kid, there's a special Homo bin for people like you."

I nearly tripped over my shackles as my jaw hit the floor. He took me down the cold, spotless white corridors and in to a steel elevator. He turned it on with a giant metal key that had its teeth hidden by a silver sheath. We stopped on the fifth floor of the newly renovated county jail and he hustled me over to the cellblock all the way in the back corner. The door opened after the guard raised his right hand and gave a thumbs up. I walked through and the door closed with a thunderous bang behind me. I slid my cuffed hands through the open slot and the cuffs were removed. Turning around I looked towards my new family.

I was immediately greeted with hugs, hands smoothing my hair, and soap to take a shower. Skibo opened the bunk in his cell for me and informed me that he'd have my back. I didn't know at the time that really he just wanted to fuck me. Miss Knockout told me she was the head queen on the block and if I wanted to know anything about the 23 other folks around me, she was the one to ask. My new family cared about me and took me in. We talked about love, sex, AIDS, politics, American Idol, makeup, and gossiped about who was fucking who. They came together for survival, and let me in to survive with them.

The guards used our Homo bin as the outlet for their ignorance. On Tuesdays when we got clothing changes we were forced to give our clothes up in the day room without getting any new ones until afterwards, leaving Miss Michelle blushing and uncomfortably covering her genitals. While Clay Aiken sang his heart out on American Idol, the television would magically flicker on and off, outraging Santos. This segregated cell was created, supposedly, for our protection. I wonder if the preacher who raged on Sunday mornings in our block about the abomination of homosexuality got that notice. I was out there, without even having to check any boxes.

My stay in the SHU (lovingly called the hole) lasted fifteen days. I found ways to make the time pass in that cell lit up twenty-four hours a day by a florescent light. Only a shitter, bunk, small table, and open shower surrounded me. I sat on my bunk, lied down on it, did handstand pushups (since there wasn't enough room for regular ones), jogged in place till my calves burned, desperately searching for anything to keep my mind and body distracted. Though I was often sure I would never make it one day the guards shackled me up again and released me to the prison camp where I could keep myself imprisoned for the rest of my bid.

Of course I had to be in prison the summer the Supreme Court was overturning the fucked up sodomy laws. Almost everyday for a couple of weeks as we sat in the television room some newscaster would interview this pro-Homo or that anti-Homo white guy about the case. One morning, after reporting to kitchen duty a couple of minutes late the usually hung over, hardly older than me, arrogant guard pulled me aside.

"Lydon," he says, maybe a little slurred, "sometimes when inmates irritate me or I'm curious about them I google their names. Last night I got on my computer and dropped your name in. Do you know all the shit that comes up? There's quite a number of pages. Not all of it is about why you're in here. You're probably paying close attention to the big court case now, huh? You don't want to end up back in here."

He glared at me as he made it clear he knew my secret. I walked away from him and in to the kitchen. He flicked on the cafeteria television and put on the news. Of course it's about the sodomy case. One of the other guys looked over. The guard called out, loud enough for everyone to hear.

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