

ISOLATION WHILE AT FISHKILL

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I fell ill on Wednesday, December 15, 2021. Headaches and chills raked through my body, making me feel completely out of it. I took Tylenol and Ibuprofen every six hours for three days straight, hoping they would ease my discomfort. Even though nothing worked, I wrote my sickness off as a common cold since I was vaccinated against Covid-19 and had not had the flu in a while. But when my sinuses began draining into my nasal passage, the nasty puss taste lingering in my mouth led me to believe something was terribly wrong.

I was called to the visiting area on Friday, December 17 to take a random Covid test. I immediately reflected on how, two days prior, I used the kiosk and coughed – I wondered if the officer who was working C-Center that day put me in for this “random” Covid test. I, of course, was a bit skeptical about the timing but decided to just dismiss my skepticism. Getting tested and finding out the results were the most important things that mattered at the moment.

The nurse administering the Covid test was friendly, joking about how it could cause a little discomfort. I assured her that I would be fine; this made her smile. After administering the test, I scrunched up my face, which drew an “I’m so sorry” from the nurse. I told her not to worry about it; I just wasn’t used to putting anything up my nose. Then I posed a question: “Would I test positive if I just have a common cold?”

She assured me, “The Covid test is pretty accurate. I wouldn’t worry.”

I left the visiting area feeling hopeful. I went about my business by attending my college classes, giving presentations, and outlining final papers. I even continued my weight training and ate cooked meals with my roomies. I had no idea that my world would come to a standstill on Thursday, December 23 – two days before Christmas.

Sometime before 9 p.m., I was hanging out in housing unit C-Center’s dayroom when my roomie Lou came to me and said, “Ms. G wants to talk to all of us in our room.”

“Why? What’s wrong?” I asked, alarmed.

“I don’t know,” he replied while walking away from me.

I sensed Lou’s annoyance but reserved commenting. As I walked into the room, the C.O. Ms. G had her back to me, talking to my other roomie Chris.

“We’re all here,” Lou announced.

Ms. G turned around, took a deep breath, and looked at everyone. “You all have to pack up.” Then her eyes settled on me, a painful look in them. Pointing a finger directly at me, she declared, “You tested positive for Covid. I’m sorry.”

Her words hit me like a ton of bricks. As she walked out of our room, I leaned against my bedframe, confused, thinking, *How? When? Who?*

The energy in the room crashed as Lou, Chris, G, and I wrestled with this revelation. I turned to my roomies, who had become my friends. “Guys, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to expose you.”

“Don’t worry about it. You have to remember that someone gave it to you first. And there isn’t anything we can do about it right now,” Chris assured me. “You’ve been to the box before, so you know how to occupy your time. Baby boy, I still love you.”

“Yeah, don’t worry. This is a situation that’s beyond your control. We

just have to deal with it," G added.

"Well, I'm not happy. I hate having to move!" Lou interjected, his annoyance readily apparent. "But I love you too, kid."

Dazed, I started packing my bags but was repeatedly interrupted by men in my housing unit who expressed their sympathies. I received get well wishes from them and was even told by one guy to hurry up and get back to the unit because he needed his barber. I told him I would and went back to packing essential clothing, cosmetics, and books to take with me into isolation. I ended up taking two bags, and the rest of my belongings remained in C-Center. While Chris, G, and Lou were escorted to the hospital for observation, I was escorted to the main building, housing unit 17-19.

It was well after 9 p.m. when I entered my new housing unit. The officer on the unit had the post. He told me who he was, giving me a run down on how he ran his unit, eventually asking me if I needed anything such as toilet paper, bed sheets, or a blanket. I told him I was good, and he informed me that I'd be moving into room 5. He led the way as I carried my bags. When he unlocked the door to my room, I entered, flicked the light switch on, and took a deep breath. The sounds of the door closing and the lock clicking behind me sealed my fate. I expected and prepared to be in isolation for at least 2 weeks.

My time in isolation felt like being in Special Housing Unit (SHU). I was alone in my room for 23 hours and 15 minutes per day, with 45 minutes to shower, use the kiosk, and get on the phone. Using this time wisely for at least the first three days of being there, I took 10-minute showers, quickly synced my tablet to the kiosk so I could send out and retrieve emails, and got on the phone for 30 minutes. The rest of my day was spent in my room reading articles related to my academic papers, typing these papers into my tablet, and writing emails to family and friends. As for recreation, I listened to music and read books and magazines. I got some fresh air by opening my window every day for an hour or two. My window opened to a sort of yard that had bare trees and a small burgundy warehouse, with food containers and garbage laying everywhere. But even though this sounds depressing, the yard was teeming with life. I watched geese fight over white bread I had fed them and domestic cats relax on or near a leafless tree. One or two times, I witnessed a cat stalk a sparrow, only to give up on the chase when the sparrow sensed the cat and took off flying.

Then, my isolation took an interesting twist. On the fourth day into it, Fishkill went into lockdown. The CERT team, manned by officers from neighboring facilities, made its round to different housing units, searching cubes and rooms for contraband and sending incarcerated persons to SHU. I waited for the CERT team's arrival for three days straight. I was a nervous wreck because I knew that officer-on-inmate violence increased during institutional searches. Every morning and evening, I'd open my window and hear the CERT team's rollcalls. These officers' words were indiscernible, but it was clear to me that their stomping and chanting were meant to build unity among them and intimidate those waiting and listening for their arrival.

On the third day of the prison lockdown, my sixth day in isolation, I opened my window to get some fresh air and saw men and women in S.W.A.T. gear searching the building's perimeter. I slowly lowered my window and waited for their arrival. They didn't fail to make their presence known in my housing unit. They yelled and screamed, ordering incarcerated persons to strip down to their boxers and slippers, and to have their backs to the door and hands interlaced

behind their heads. I complied and waited for an officer to open my room door and direct me to clear a portable metal detector.

I paused on my way to the metal detector and asked the escorting officer if I could fix myself.

"Yeah, we don't want to see any swinging dicks around here," he replied.

I fixed myself, interlaced my hands behind my head again, and continued my walk toward the metal detector. Once there, another officer had me remove my Casio watch and clear the metal detector that reminded me of a pole. I walked through it, turned in a circle, and was directed to walk back through.

Once I cleared the metal detector, the escorting officer ordered me to stand facing the wall in front of my room with my hands interlaced behind my head. He informed me that I was not to move until told otherwise. I acknowledged his directions by saying, "Okay, I understand," and waited for the other officer who was searching my room to finish his job. I remained in this position for about 20 minutes before another incarcerated person got fed up and defied this universal procedure. I heard shouts from a nearby officer to my right telling this person to turn around and get back on the wall. I held my breath and tried to stop my mind from accelerating. The incarcerated person, who I gauged was a few people away from me, said that he was refusing the officer's direct order because his arms were hurting from standing in an uncomfortable position for such a long time. This confrontation must've lasted for 2-3 minutes until a supervising sergeant came onto the unit to intervene.

I had dealt with this sergeant when I was in Green Haven, and he wasn't with the bullshit. He gave the incarcerated guy a final warning. And when he refused to comply with his direct order, the sergeant directed his undercharges to restrain "the individual." I continued facing the wall but listened to the tussling and yelling. There came a point when I embraced the possibility of being jumped on and not going out without a fight. I knew that my emotions and imaginations were getting the best of me because I wasn't thinking straight. But being so close to going home and finding yourself in a situation like that can spark anyone's imagination and build his anxiety.

The incarcerated individual was quickly handcuffed, given a long speech about being lucky he wasn't going to the box, and escorted back inside his room with no further commotion. Once this situation was given the all clear by the area sergeant, the officer standing directly behind me gave me an order to return to my room. What I saw was typical: all my belongings were dumped on my flipped mattress. And I wasn't surprised to discover, after folding my clothes and reorganizing my room, that my personal blanket was taken.

"You gotta be kidding me!" I whispered. For an officer to look like he's doing his job, something must be taken.

I eventually had a porter on the unit locate and retrieve my blanket from the garbage bin. Not being given a contraband receipt after this ordeal didn't surprise me.

This institutional search lasted for another two days. This meant I was not allowed to come out of my room for anything. The door to my room was only opened when an officer had to serve me food, which was three times a day, the actual time varying, with the food consistently being served cold: white rice, carrots, and chicken curry; pizza with a three bean salad; baked potatoes, cabbage, and meatloaf. For evening meals, we were served a baloney and cheese

sandwich, 2 sugar cookies, an apple, and a juice.

The lack of cleaning supplies and access to cold water (the water was somehow switched to hot only) further complicated my experience in isolation. Being forced to improvise, I used a t-shirt and liquid laundry detergent to clean the floor, toilet, and sink, and I poured hot water from my sink into milk containers and stored them on my window ledge so I could have cold water to drink.

I was transferred from housing unit 17-19 (the isolation unit) to 9-1 (general population) in the afternoon of January 1, 2022. I remained there with no access to the rest of my belongings, and I became increasingly annoyed at the fact that I only had a few shirts and no food. When I asked officers for help finally getting me back to C-Center, they would make a few phone calls and come back to me saying they couldn't do anything because the facility was running on a modified system. I was basically stuck on the other side of the prison with very little to my name. And to make matters worse, I had to continue living out of my two bags.

My typewriter, which I had left with a friend back in C-Center, somehow made its way to me, but being called to housing unit 13-1 to pick it up didn't sit well with me. Leaving it with someone else probably wasn't the brightest idea, as I could have been subjected to disciplinary action for unlawful exchange of personal property. Luckily, this didn't happen to me. When I met up with the officer who called for me, he basically asked me why someone else had my property, and why multiple incarcerated people asked for it, each one presenting their own reason for wanting it back. His inquiry was funny to hear. I told him that these men were my friends and they were just trying to protect what was mine. Then I apologized for breaking the institutional rule about lending other people personal belongings.

I must've struck a chord within this man because he returned my typewriter, saying I shouldn't get into the habit of lending things to people in this type of environment. I acknowledged his advice and returned to housing unit 9-1, examining my typewriter along the way. I immediately noticed that its condition wasn't as I had left it. The keypad cover, slot rest (where the paper sits), and handle were missing.

"Damn, my typewriter was a Mercedes Benz when I left it in C-Center. Now it's a hooptie," I whispered to myself as a way of dispelling my disappointment.

I plugged it in when I got back to my cube in housing unit 9-1, wanting to see if it was still operable. It was, but it wasn't. It printed what I had written in the memory, but only the bottom half of the letters were printed. Either someone had gotten a hold of my typewriter, or it was banged up pretty badly before it was returned to me. I was conflicted on whether to buy a new one, even though my best friend Brittany had advised me not to invest in something so ancient.

I remained in housing unit 9-1 until January 16. In the evening hours, I was told by an officer to pack my belongings because I was moving up the hill, back to C-Center, as soon as the walkway opened at 6 p.m. A sense of relief filled me. I had been away from my regular housing unit for more than three weeks, and this had me extremely annoyed. Being away from my stuff and moving around so much was stressful. I had the opportunity to go to commissary, but with my limited funds at the time, I could only buy enough food for 3-4

meals. The thought of gaining access to the food I had left in my regular housing unit became even more pressing. Now that I was finally moving, I wasted no time bagging the little bit of property I had in my possession.

So I said farewell to a few guys, grabbed my stuff, and braved the cold weather outside, relieved that I'd be reunited with my belongings, my roomies, and my sense of normalcy after so many weeks.