

## NEW PHASE

JONATHAN RODRIGUEZ

I arrived at Fishkill on a Monday morning, June 7, 2021. It was a hot, humid, and sunny day. Hector, Peter, and I were last to be transferred, so processing went smoothly. After having our shackles removed when we stepped out of the van, we listened to the draft officer's direction. He told us to grab our property bags and follow him to housing unit 3-2. He also said that we shouldn't get too comfortable because we weren't going to stay on this unit for long. This unit was used for processing offenders into Fishkill.

After grabbing two bags apiece, we followed the officer through a maze of narrow hallways and stairwells once belonging to criminally insane inmates. We quickly arrived to our destination. Before settling in, however, we had to make another trip through the maze to get the rest of our property bags. We were drenched in sweat with all the walking and heavy lifting, but finally being in a medium security correctional facility meant that Hector, Peter, and I had finally entered new phases in our incarceration, with the next one being us walking out of these prison walls.

The significance of going from a maximum-security prison to a medium one is profound. Years of being caged made me feel hopeful and excited, but displaced and uncomfortable. I was used to functioning in a closed environment. I had a prison cell to myself in maximum security, which afforded me personal space. I had fewer dealings with officers, and when I did, they were more inclined to address me by my last name. Now, I was forced to adapt to a more open environment. Everything's out in the open: bathrooms, sinks, slop sinks, TV rooms, and bed space. Compounding my new reality was the fact that, here, officers often ignored prisoners unless an apparent need was present, like being called for visits and mandatory appointments and callouts – and they addressed us by our bed numbers. An incarcerated person's prison experience was meant to be an impersonal one. After all, DOCCS is a business.

The combined prison experiences and future dreams of Hector, Peter, and me created a bittersweet moment for us as we retrieved the last of our property bags, and I took a moment to reflect on our respective situations. Hector has 26 years in prison and is looking forward to being released so that he can spend quality time with his family, especially his 22-year-old son who's an aspiring rapper from Connecticut. Peter has a little over 10 years in prison and is looking forward to getting to know his daughter in person, who just entered her preteen years. And I have thus far served 19 years out of a 25-year sentence. I am looking forward to working a 9-5 job, saving up for an apartment and car, and dating. I thought about all this during our return to the housing unit. It was then that our property bags were thoroughly searched and we were assigned rooms that resembled sweat boxes.

Upon entering my room, I looked around and took it all in. There was a brown, metal bedframe to my left, a lime green plastic mattress with no pillow laying on it. A metal toilet and sink combination stood between the bedframe and cell window. The window was opened all the way, and the window gate swung open half way. A high bookshelf was to my right. It was mounted on the wall across from my toilet/sink combination. On the same wall, but a little lower than the shelf, stood a prison-style table, a slab of wood nailed to the wall. Gray

paint dominated the whole room: the walls, ceiling, and floor. But the gray paint on the floor appeared as if the humid day was melting it. I put my four property bags on my bedframe, left the room so I could grab a broom and dustpan, and returned, determined to make this room feel habitable.

Tone, a guy I'd met when I first came upstate in 2005, peaked his head into my room, and said, "A guy tried to set himself on fire last night in this cell. That's why your floor looks the way it does. You should be able to clean it up with no problem."

"Thanks for the info," I replied, his news filling my heart with curiosity. The person who'd set this room on fire must have been desperate, or crazy. Or Tone could be giving me a fabricated version of what actually happened. I felt my guard go up as I reminded myself that I was in prison.

"No problem. Just thought you should know. Let me know if you need anything."

"Sure, I'm good for now, though. Thanks anyways."

Soon, the afternoon count was called. I looked around and watched other men stand in front of their room doors. The housing unit officer walked up and down the unit, counting every man as he passed him. Once he reached his post, which was by a stairwell, he announced in a loud and clear voice: "COUNT CLEAR! MAKE SURE YOU SIGN UP FOR YOUR DESTINATION AT THIS TIME."

Hector and Peter quickly came over to my room, wanting to know what we planned to get into during the afternoon. Attending the mess hall was on the agenda; going outside was also on the agenda. We all eagerly followed the other guys who were signing their destinations next to their names on a Plexiglas sheet mounted on a wall by the officers' post. After putting ourselves down for the mess hall and the north yard, we headed back to our respective rooms so we could finish cleaning them.

Organizing my property and thoroughly cleaning my room had me dripping in sweat. I took a break from my tasks to relax. I thought about the room. Why this room? It made me feel small and closed in. It looked like a small utility closet, its walls and furniture screaming lifelessly. I went over to the window and peered into a small courtyard. It had a children's jungle gym in an otherwise empty area. This object was probably meant to cultivate a feeling of hope, but it failed miserably. It darkened my mood by increasing my anxiety. *I can't wait to put this prison experience behind me*, I thought.

"ON TO CHOW!" a male officer's booming voice snapped me out of my thoughts.

I went over to my sink, washed my hands and face, and used toilet paper to dry them. When I turned around and faced my room door, Hector was standing there, waiting. "Let's go."

"Where's Don P?" I asked Hector, using Peter's nickname.

"His bum ass is coming. You know he's last for everything."

Hector and I shared a knowing smile. His characterization of Peter is true. Hector, Peter, and I have been with Bard Prison Initiative (BPI) for the past three years, and we have gotten to really know each other and our strengths. Peter's good for a laugh, but procrastination is his Achilles' heel. Hector's widely known for his artistic ability; he's also a good sounding board. And my patience and helpfulness make me dependable.

When Hector and I went to Peter's room, he asked, "Are you guys

waiting for me?"

"Yeah, we're waiting for your bum ass. Things will never change with you," Hector said.

"But bro, I'm still cleaning my room. I haven't even taken anything out of my bags yet," Peter replied.

"What! Are you kidding me?" I blurted. "What have you been doing while we were cleaning our rooms?" I questioned.

"Drinking coffee and smoking a cigarette," he shot back.

"You need to hurry up, P. We're about to miss the mess hall run because of you," Hector urged.

"Let me just grab my shirt."

Hector and I were already walking toward the stairwell next to the officers' post, albeit slowly. We didn't want to leave our friend behind, but we weren't going to miss the opportunity to put some food in our stomachs, not on account of him. Peter eventually caught up to us, and we all wandered through narrow hallways, following a line of men heading in a particular direction.

"They must be heading to chow. Let's follow them," I asserted.

"Are you sure?" Peter inquired.

"We can't wait in this hallway, that's for sure," Hector said, walking past us.

As we followed him, I looked out every window we passed. All the windows led out to a courtyard. This courtyard had me stuck. It didn't look right. It had a basketball court and wood benches under trees – trees! I couldn't believe it. I couldn't remember the last time I actually saw a tree this close up. With the sun out and barely any clouds in the sky, the trees cast long shadows that would entice anyone to sit and enjoy the reprieve from the sun that they offered.

A growing buzz diverted my attention. The mess hall's entrance was right in front of us, and I didn't want to appear lost in a daze. So I slowly followed Hector and Peter into the mess hall, taking everything in. The mess hall was relatively small, the serving counter to my immediate left. The men I was following, I noticed, made a right turn and walked along the walls. There were officers everywhere. Some stood by themselves, others were in small groups; all were watching inmates intently.

As I approached the serving counter, the smell of the afternoon meal became more pronounced. The sight of meatballs in a red sauce, beets, a hot dog roll, and vanilla pudding on the brown serving trays confirmed what I smelled. There was a time in my incarceration where I looked forward to eating this meal. I didn't share the same feeling now. I was the new guy at Fishkill; my senses were on alert, and, more than likely, I was about to consume a cold and tasteless meal.

The mess hall was small, inmate movement was slow, and officers standing around stared intently at all the new faces, creating an uncomfortable atmosphere. After grabbing our trays of food, Hector, Peter, and I had to walk through the middle of the mess hall in order to get to our assigned seats, which were spaced out thanks to new COVID protocols. Once we sat down, I thought, *Jesus, I don't know if I made the right choice asking to be transferred to this facility.* I placed the three meatballs given to me at the serving counter in the hot dog roll, dressed them up with cold tomato sauce, and slowly took the first bite of my meatball sub sandwich. My stomach churned as I ate my lunch.

There was a lot of chatter in the mess hall. Many were laughing while

they stuffed their faces with their food. Others quietly picked at their food options, eventually getting up to leave. And others just gave their whole trays away. My friends and I kept our conversation clipped while we ate. We had no choice in the matter but to eat. Of course we'd transferred with some food we could cook. But we couldn't get access to an electrical stove or pots and pans. We didn't have enough time in the facility to meet people who did. And we knew that we were not going to stay in housing unit 3-2 for long. The housing unit officer and inmate clerk told us so.

We had approximately 10-15 minutes to eat our lunch. This is the usual amount of time inmates are afforded. Not wanting to push our luck, we got up and made our way to the garbage can, located by the door we came in through. I dumped my tray after Peter and was stopped by an officer who looked like he had some time on the job.

"Come here!" he commanded.

"What's up?" I replied.

"Turn around," he instructed.

I did what I was told. I turned around slowly, knowing full well what he was stopping me about. It was my haircut. I had a fade, the hair on top of my head in short curls, with a part to make the hairstyle unique.

"Who cut your hair?" he questioned when I completed my turning.

"I did," I responded.

To my surprise, he bobbed his head up and down before saying, "You can't have that type of hairstyle in this facility. Get rid of it. I don't want to see you with it the next time I'm working."

"Okay," I said.

I walked away feeling annoyed. Anything that can possibly be made an issue in prisons usually is. I walked back to my housing unit thinking how I needed to not make a splash in my new environment. I made it too far in my sentence to end up lowering my chances of going home on time. I returned to my housing unit determined to borrow a mirror from someone so I could cut my hair down low enough to erase the part in my hair. But it turned out that I didn't need one. After speaking to Hector about what happened, he offered to cut my hair, warning, "I'm not a barber. But if you guide me, I can give you a decent haircut."

I accepted his offer. He cut my hair within an hour, and afterward, I showered. Once done, I got dressed, went up to Hector, and thanked him. He said that it wasn't a problem – he just wanted to help me.