

There is a prison for violent criminals where the prisoners do not remember their lives prior to incarceration. They cannot remember their crimes. They cannot remember their names. They hunt for animals that come over the wall at night. They will murder for food. They fall victim to the vicious dogs that roam the decayed prison-city. A new prisoner named Dogboy has befriended the dogs or, rather, they have befriended him. This is his story.

Dogboy

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Dogboy

by Timothy Schwab



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I couldn't remember why I was in prison. I couldn't remember my life before. I couldn't remember my name. I couldn't remember anything.

My first memory was the sunlight that woke me. It pierced my fluttering eyelids and the pain went straight through my head. I was lying on my back in the dust. There was an overturned truck trailer to my left and the prison wall to my right. The wall was 10 feet high and topped with razor wire. There was old white paint chipping at the mortar and the bottom third of the wall was encrusted with dirt and mold. As my head began to clear, I felt panic surge within me. I backed into the trailer, panting, disoriented and mortified. I tried to concentrate but couldn't. I could hear the faint sounds of two men arguing in the distance beyond the trailer, from my left. The sun hurt my eyes. I was thirsty. There was a prevalent awareness of the prison wall and my desire to be distanced from it. In my head I could hear my own voice as it repeated three sentences over and over again: *I am a prisoner. I am being punished. I cannot live there.*

I rolled to my right as silently as possible and crept around the corner of the trailer to peek at the surroundings. The mid-morning sun spread itself upon a landscape of industrial decay. There were filthy buildings ranging in size from one story brick buildings to massive, towering structures in the distance that looked more like strange equipment than buildings.

I could see men arguing between two buildings that were beyond a road that ran parallel to the prison wall.

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The wall went straight out in each direction to places out of sight. The trailer I was behind lay between the wall and the road. Moving to my left, I tried to keep the trailer between the men and me, as not to be seen. I wasn't sure why I wished to avoid them, but I knew nothing. I trusted nothing.

When I crept far enough away, I crossed the road and hunkered low by the corner of a small cinderblock building and looked up a street heading away from the prison wall. Nothing moved. I could hear the wind, a clanging sound of banging metal and the distant bark of a dog. I used every inset doorway for cover as I worked my way up the street. Moving as quickly as I could without making any sound, I started feeling distinctly calmer the further from the prison wall I progressed. I also began to think more clearly, though I could still remember nothing. I took a right turn and as I approached the next intersection, the voices of the men became louder. I could see them when I peered around the corner, but could not make out what they were saying. I grew curious.

There was a fire escape on the building halfway between me and the two men, but I knew I could not get up it unnoticed, so I quickly crossed the street to make my way up another block. I took a right turn into an alleyway that cut the block in half. The garbage and dust were piled higher in the alleyway and the repugnant stench made the muscles in my stomach tense and stung my eyes. Crisscrossing their way up the sides of the two and three-story buildings were several rusted ladders and fire escapes. I was working my way up the alley, still making an effort to be as quiet as I could, when I spotted a ladder that went to the roof of the building to my right. Nearly at the top of an almost silent climb, the ladder creaked as the curved top portion of the

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right handle twisted slightly in its loose mooring. I froze momentarily before slowly stepping over the lip and onto the roof.

Suddenly I couldn't move.

I could see over the prison wall. I was struck with an array of feelings: deep sadness, stinging fear, bewilderment and a deep-seated understanding that I could not live out there. I was a prisoner. I was being punished.

Everything between the prison wall and the horizon appeared to be clearer. It was certainly cleaner. The sunlight hit the tops of houses and trees and glass buildings with a gentler touch. It seemed more colorful. I felt aware enough of the stark contrast, so I did not wish to turn around and look back at prison. I had never seen a world like it before. Realizing that I had never seen *any* world before is what eventually made me look away. Also, for some reason, I was terrified of it all. Something out there frightened me.

There were a few rotating vents on the roof, as well as several jutting pipes, a chimney and six or seven small, black birds. I continued toward the street where the two men were. The gravel made soft, crushing sounds under my boots. I was wearing denim pants and a gray short-sleeved shirt. I felt my head to find my hair cropped short. As I approached the edge, I went slower and more softly. Peering over the side, I could see and hear both men clearly.

"...can stay here and suffer or you can leave and have none," said one of the men. He was wearing clothes that were filthy beyond discernible color with holes in the knees of his pants. A head of long, dark hair, a full beard and mustache obscured his face. He was either slightly taller than the other man or just larger in stature. From above, it was hard to say.

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“I’m so tired of telling you this. No one will come here,” the bearded man replied, pausing between each word to stress them. “No one will see us. No one will *take* it from us. No one will *eat* it for us. Shit! I hate being here too. Don’t you think I just want to go home? Visionary said someone would be here between earlylight and halfday.”

“He said ‘just after earlylight’.”

“No. He didn’t. You don’t listen to Visionary, why do I think you’ll listen to me? I will stay here until *earlydark* if I have to, no matter HOW I feel about the wall. Two scampers, One-jug! This is real big of Visionary. I will NOT piss him off by not bein’ here. You go, like it would even surprise him, and you can bet I can eat both.”

“Fuck you, I ain’t goin’ nowhere.”

“Then, please shut the fuck up. The wall is bad enough. I do NOT need your bitchin’.” The bearded man was turning away from the prison wall and the balding One-jug, as he was saying this. One-jug was tapping his heel with a shaking leg as he glanced at the wall, then up at the sky. I leaned back and froze. The pause seemed endless. I could hear nothing but the thump of my heart in my ears at first, then the shuffle of feet. I heard a quick groan and sigh, then, “Look, fuck it. Lets just hang out. We can do the cage tomorrow and with full stomachs. I was thinking that if we took the wire we used for that old trap, we could hang it.” It was the bearded man speaking. I looked down at them again to find him sitting against the building across from the one I was on. His elbows rested on his knees and he nervously toyed with a rusty piece of metal in his hands. I pulled myself back away from the ledge to be safe when I suddenly heard a third voice.

“Wallclimber, One-jug. You waited.”

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I could hear that the two men were startled. Nearly in unison the two said, "Visionary!"

"What are *you* doing here?" asked One-jug. I looked down to see the two men facing a third man, who was coming toward them from the direction of the prison wall.

"Why are you here instead of sending someone?" asked the bearded man, apparently Wallclimber, with a quick and corrective glance at One-jug. "Is something wrong?"

The man they called Visionary was shorter than they were, but cleaner. His hair was graying blonde and was jaggedly cut just short of shoulder-length, some of which was tied away from his face with a length of blue string. He wore a yellowed, but seemingly clean cotton shirt tucked into blue jeans that were faded, but intact. In his left hand he was holding a pair of dead jackrabbits by the ears.

"In a manner of speaking, yes. I have bad news and a favor to ask." He dropped the two dead animals on the ground between the two men. They looked down at them and started shifting and shaking more anxiously. "Longfingers is dead. The Grey killed him last earlydark. I know he befriended both of you and that you have done work for him. I could do nothing."

"Why?" asked One-jug in a pinched, wounded tone. "Longfingers was like a healer! Sort of... Why would the Grey want to kill him?"

"They got nothin' to gain by killin' him," said Wallclimber. "Unless they wanna make *you* mad, but that don't make no sense."

"They don't want to anger me, Wallclimber. They want me to acquiesce. They want me to turn a blind eye to the taking of lands wind-way of the growers. They want many things. They wanted Longfingers to join them

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and to teach them. They don't want anyone to have what they cannot. It saddens me. I am sorry you have both lost a good friend. I believe you have things in his building, Wallclimber. You should get them, before word gets out and they are stolen."

"I will." He was nodding gravely.

"When you do," Visionary continued, "I need a favor. I gave Longfingers a gift once, a personal item. When you came to ask for a loan of food, I was concerned about some threats and decided to convince him to trust the two of you to take possession of the item, in case he was abducted. I apologize for asking you to suffer the wall, but I was going to have Longfingers bring the item with the scampers. I assure you he was not killed for this item. Will you help me?" The two men eagerly gave simultaneous acceptances. "Good. You can open the ceiling vent in Longfingers' back room. Reach into the vent past where it curves. You will find a small wooden chest. Take it, hide it, guard it and never open it. It is mine now. You are only holding it. You are safer to not know what it is." He paused, looking at each of them. "These scampers are not on loan. Enjoy them. Mourn your friend. I will see you both soon."

Visionary looked into each of their eyes before turning and walking straight toward the prison wall. When he reached it, he turned right and began to walk along it.

"You ever wonder how he can walk the wall like that? 'Specially since he's been here for so long?" asked Wallclimber.

"Who cares? Just get me away from it," responded One-jug, scooping up the rabbits and turning away. "Let's get these home so we can go to Longfingers' place."

"I want to get there right away before the place gets stripped out. You take the food home. Start cookin' one.

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Clean, dry and hide the other. We can still get the cage done and if hunting is a bust tomorrow, we'll still have the other..." Their voices trailed off as they walked away from my position. I stood up and looked out along the wall and spotted Visionary moving away from the wall toward the other buildings.

Gauging the distance across the narrow street, I felt sure that I could jump it with a running head start. I backed up half-way across the roof and ran toward the ledge. A fleeting doubt went through my mind just as I jumped. The roof across the way was considerably shorter, which was favorable, but the hesitation cost me. I tried to reach down for the edge with my hands, but I caught the rooftop in the right shin and tumbled onto the hot tar, banging my elbow as I rolled onto all fours. The pain in my shin was brief but intense. I was rubbing it with my hand as I limped across the rooftop toward the next street.

I could tell that the space to the next building was too far. This was the road I first walked up from the overturned trailer. I climbed down a fire escape, and started working my way toward the direction Visionary was heading when I last saw him. The streets made me feel very unsafe. There was more to hide behind, but I couldn't see as well as I could from the roofs. It was painstaking to run from hiding spot to hiding spot.

Two streets up and an alleyway over to my left, I spotted him again. He was going into an alleyway about a block away. The building beside the alley was two stories tall and had a downspout that I found I could climb. When I pulled myself onto the roof, I went over to the alley side ledge and looked down into the alley. Visionary was using his shoulder to force open a door into a building further up the alley on my side. It was a taller building by at least another two floors, but there

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was an access ladder leading up from the near wall. I had to jump a three foot gap between the buildings to get to the ladder, but when I climbed up to the top I could see six pyramid-like structures of metal framing. Each stood over a square opening in the roof.

I stuck my head down into the nearest opening for a look. The several floors of the building surrounded an empty, rectangular center and I could see all the way to the ground floor. There were pipes, I-beams and other hand holds covering the ceiling. I reached in, grabbed a pipe and pulled myself in through the opening in the roof. The pipe creaked as my body initially swung from it. Once steadied, I worked my way along the pipe to the floor along the nearest wall. The drop was ten or twelve feet, and I tried to land as softly as I could. The large emptiness of the building caused a soft echo from my footfall.

The floors were tiled. There was a guardrail around each floor to hold onto as I looked over the waist-high wall out into the building. Light filtered in through the roof in an eerie way. Tall pillars of dust were projected from them, glistening and swirling. On the floor in the center of the structure was an empty, circular pool. Inside the pool were rectangular protrusions of painted concrete, with dripping stains of rust on them.

The floors of the building, which ran along the walls, were slanted and formed a squared spiral toward the ground. As I began to make my way down, I was frozen by the sound of a clearing throat. The echo made it impossible to determine from where the small cough was originating. I crouched low and my heart started to beat heavy in my chest as my mind raced for the best thing to do next.

“Newcomer!” echoed a voice. It was Visionary. “You *are* a newcomer, aren’t you? The short hair on your head

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makes me guess that you are. I hoped you would follow me here. I saw you on the roof when I left the rabbits with my friends. As you can tell, you are free to speak in this building. Its emptiness will scatter your voice so that you may remain hidden. You are wise to hide." Visionary paused. I had nothing to say, and in the silence my heart beat in my ears like a drum. Then, louder than before, Visionary shouted, "I am a prisoner!" He paused again. "I am being punished!" As he again paused, I stood up.

"I cannot live there," I responded. In the pause that followed, two birds took flight from their perch in the building and loudly fluttered up and out through the roof. As their flapping echoes died out, Visionary continued.

"This is all you have now, newcomer. You own only the clothes you come over the wall with and these three statements. We call them the Prisoners' Statements and everyone here knows them. In here you will acquire things as you need them. You will get a building, food, allies, a name. My name is Visionary. I am able to see things that have yet to come and I give advice to those who will listen."

"Go on," I said, as he paused again.

"There is something more you will acquire in prison with time: fear of the wall. The more time you spend here, the greater the discomfort you will feel in its proximity. Some say the fear comes from the land over the wall and that we 'can not live there' because of this fear. The wall simply marks where the Outerworld begins. No one knows for certain, but all prisoners fear the wall and the land beyond it. You would be wise to avoid it."

"Yet you walked along the wall. You don't fear it?" I asked.

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“Yes, I fear it. I am a prisoner. I am being punished. I cannot live there, either. But I understand fear and have disciplined myself to not fear fear. It has taken me many years. I do not expect you to understand. You are a newcomer. You know so little and remember nothing. It will take you time to adapt to the prison and forge yourself an identity here. So many things come with time, but time comes only with survival. Very few men ever simply die in prison. Nearly everyone is killed eventually. A great many starve to death, but most prisoners only last a short while, and get thrown namelessly back over the wall as a corpse.

“If you are to survive, though, you will have to defend yourself from the rage of the other prisoners and the dogs that share the prison with us. Find shelter. Any building that has been stripped out is yours to claim. Beware furnished buildings until you know who occupies them. Prison is a very large land. There are many empty buildings to choose from. The further you get from the wall, the more desirable the real estate. This means you will have a better chance of finding shelter out here, at least until your wall fear gets a good foothold in your heart and mind and stomach, and you have gained the trust of some other prisoners.

“Food is not as easily acquired as shelter. There is a large river called the Schism and a smaller stream called the waterarm that run through the lands toward the mountains. They can be fished if you have cages. Other food can be hunted, like the rabbits I provided those two men. Rabbits are called scampers. Other small animals and fowl get thrown into prison from over the wall in the night. Should you successfully hunt food, it will have to be defended from others who would hunt you for it.

“The dogs rarely hunt these animals, for they have a taste for live prisoner. They travel in packs and are not

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affected by the wall as we are. I have no further advice for you regarding the dogs. Avoid them. They are prisoners, too.”

“Will I ever know why I am here?” I asked. I hoped it might be easier if I knew what I had done, what crime has brought me to such a harsh land.

“You are being punished. That is all you will ever know of why you are here. You are a prisoner. That is all you know of yourself, for now. Abilities and talents that you possessed are still intact, waiting to be discovered. You can speak. You can walk. You may be able to sing, or build things, or wrestle. Who knows? Some have had the ability to catch glimpses of their life before, and though I occasionally can glimpse what may come, never have I had the good fortune to remember my life in the outer land.”

“I’m afraid,” I said, and I was. I was trapped in a world that wanted me dead. I didn’t know where I could go or what I was capable of doing. I was beginning to feel hungry and was not sure I could survive.

“I know, newcomer. Fear punishes. Also, you have good reasons to be afraid. You are no large man and you have no skills yet. But I am happy to arm you with what I have said.”

“Will you help me find shelter and something to eat?” I asked, hoping to have made a friend in this place.

“I will not. If I help you find a building and food, I do not help you survive. Your survival is your own, and though there are those who would take it from you, there is no one who can give it to you. If you live, you will live to thank me.”

“What can you tell me about this building?” I could sense that Visionary had said what he would and that he wished to leave. I didn’t want to be alone and it was a comfort to hear his voice.

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“It is empty and interesting. That is all I know”, he said, and I could hear him walking toward the alley door.

“I’ll stay here, in this building, for now. I can hear movement very well in here. Will I see you again? Will you return? I may need more advice, and I *will* listen”, I said, jogging down the balcony-like floors toward him at the bottom.

“Perhaps”, he said, turning away from the door, looking at me as he reached it. “Good luck to you, newcomer. Learning who you are might be the only good thing in prison. I hope you live to know it and to know yourself.” The bright sun came in through the alley door as he stepped out of the building.

As the echo of the closing door climbed up through the vacant building, I began to feel a deep, dragging loneliness. It seemed so still and quiet. I turned and looked all around me. I felt hungry, but unprepared to venture out. There were a few doors on the bottom floor, concealing small rooms of varying shapes. There was a pair of similar rooms with white toilets and some sinks. After some experimentation, I got cold water to pour into one. The water was dirty, but did not smell foul and was relieving to drink. I washed my face and arms and decided to start wandering around the building. There was very little to discover. I kept thinking back to what Visionary said about buildings being ‘stripped out’. In some of the rooms, even the carpet was torn out. After surveying the entire building and taking note of what could be seen from all of the windows, I went into a dark corner about half way up the winding floors and lay down. I felt weak and sleepy and dozed off.

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