

ATASCADERO SOJOURN

an interview with a survivor of
the state hospital system



Mongoose Distro
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by Ronin Grey

told me, 'you're totally free, you can go anywhere, France, Mexico, anywhere in the world, Daniel.'"

"So, where did you go?"

"Some friends of mine picked me up. We got some beer and I moved into their house and the first thing we did was smoke a big ol' joint." Danny laughs. "But really, the MDO thing messed me up so bad I ended up going to school and becoming a paralegal especially for MDOs after I got out. So, you have my permission to write this. I want people to know my story."

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"When I got back I was jumping in the hallways. I kept yelling, 'I'm going home! I'm going home!' And people I knew were saying, 'awesome!' But then Officer Penny stepped into the hall.

'Why are you yelling, Daniel?'

'I'm going home! Thank you!'

'You're not going home.'

'Yes I am, and thank you so much!'

"Nobody on the unit knew what happened yet because all the staff who went to court took the rest of the day off, except I saw the psychiatrist who smuttet me up, so I went up to him and I went like this." Danny slumps, staring at the floor looking dejected.

"And he says, 'oh, I'm so sorry, Daniel. Maybe if you take more groups and some more classes, maybe next year...'

Then I smiled. 'Oh! I guess you haven't heard. I'm going home!'

"And I saw him going through my chart, frowning and conferring with the other staff, so I went to the chow hall and I said, 'cake and ice cream for everyone!' See, I always bought this five gallon drum of ice cream and a cake for my unit on my birthday, so they're like, 'is it your birthday?' 'Nope! I'm going home!'

"It took three days to get discharged, but when I did I was off parole and everything. John B- showed up, and said goodbye. He

At nine A.M. in the Correctional Training Facility's Rainier building the buzzer blares for the hourly unlock. I meet a fit middle-aged man in the day room who isn't shy about showing off his personal flair. Today Danny sports tailored blue jeans embellished with colorful beadwork that matches his hat. He smiles, then leads me to the oversized blue plastic security couches in the middle of the room. We sit, surrounded by the clamor of California prison inmates watching television, working out, showering, and playing dominoes. He looks at me.

"So, where do you want to start?"

I tell him, *"From what I understand, you had a parole violation for smoking weed and somehow that turned into you being locked up in a state hospital."*

"Yeah! So, OK, this was after my second term. That was..." he thinks for a moment. "2003. 2002. Around then. I was on parole. I had this really cool parole officer. John B- He never tested me for drugs or alcohol, and he always used to drive me to my job interviews. Really nice guy."

"So, one day I came home and my roommate said, 'hey, your P. O. came by looking for you.' And I said, 'that's weird. What did he want?' And she said, 'no, it was a female. She left a business card.' And I saw this card said 'Victoria W-' So I called her and she wanted me to come in right away, but the buses don't run that late,

so she said, 'fine, first thing in the morning,' and I told her the buses start at ten so I'll be there at eleven."

"Why were you supposed to see her and not John B-?"

"I had no idea. I didn't know what was going on but I got there at eleven and she takes me into her office and she says, 'OK, I'm your new P. O. and I need you to piss test for me right now-' And I said, 'no, I don't do that.' 'So, you're refusing?' 'Yeah, I'm refusing, because it's not a condition of my parole. That means I don't have to do it.' And she says, 'well, I was in your place and I saw these.' And she goes to her desk and pulls out some photos and she says, 'can you explain this?'"

"What were the photos?"

"She had a picture of my roommates, from Christmas. My one roommate is quadriplegic, it was her and her boyfriend. I'm not even in the photo."

"So what did she want you to explain?"

Danny chuckles. "Well I asked her. And she says, 'this looks like a joint,' and I'm staring at the photo where she's pointing, where my roommate's boyfriend is holding a cigarette for her and lighting it. So I told her, 'she can't use her arms or her legs. He's helping her.'

'But where did you go?'

'My wife and son were killed in a car wreck and I just couldn't deal with work, so I took some time off. But if there's anything you need...'

'Can you be my character witness?'

'Sure, of course!'

"So, we went back to the hearing. Joe L- called him to the stand, and a psychologist, and an officer and a psych tech who were on my side. They all basically said I'm a model patient and a good guy, all that stuff. Joe L- wanted to call another psych tech but the judge stopped him. He said, 'I've heard enough. From what I've heard from both sides, Daniel doesn't meet the criteria for MDO. So I'll release him from Atascadero. You're free to go.' Then he banged the gavel and walked out."

"I turned to Joe L- 'What did he just say?'

'Daniel. You're going home.'

'What?'

'I said you're going home.'

'What?'

'Didn't you hear me?'

'Yes, I heard you twice, but I just want to hear it one more time because it sounds so awesome!'

"That must have been the best feeling in the world."

'No, but he argues with the other patients.'

'Argues about what?'

'Let me look at my notes. OK, he said the other patient hit him.'

'So, Daniel was the victim?'

'Um... he could have been.'

'Well, the staff report that you're referring to says Daniel was the victim of an assault. So?'

But that psychiatrist testified for two and a half hours, and the whole time he just smuttet me up. He made me look horrible. We took a break and I went back to my room and I'm just thinking, I'm done, I'm fucked. They're not going to let me out. I need a miracle. Then there's a knock on my door ... It was John B-!"

"Your first parole officer?"

"Yeah, the one from before that bitch set me up."

"Out of nowhere?"

"Totally out of nowhere. He said, 'I hope you remember me.'

'Remember you? I miss you so much I want to give you a hug! But what are you doing here?'

'I saw your name on some paperwork and I wanted to see you ASAP. I wanted to telk you I'm sorry. I read what Victoria W- did and I couldn't believe it.'

'Look. You can see the filter on the butt.'

"And she squints at it, then she says 'OK fine, but what about this one?' And she's got another photo and I'm still not in it. So, we started arguing. It escalated. I'm getting loud, she's shouting at me, and people are walking by and staring. Then she just stops. She takes a breath, then she smiles. 'I just want to be honest with you, Daniel. Like I am with all my parolees. And I would like you to test as a new condition of your parole because I suspect you were smoking marijuana.'

"Shouldn't we have your supervisor here for that or something?" Because I'm not sure but I don't think she can do that," he tells me. "But she just shakes her head. 'We don't need the supervisor. Just be honest with me and tell me if you smoke weed.'

" and I'm thinking, OK, we got off on the wrong foot. She's just doing her job, maybe she'll be alright. I'll give her the benefit of the doubt. So I told her, 'OK, I did smoke weed once, on Christmas.'

"Did you take psych meds at the time?"

"No. OK, let me back up. That was after my second term. I got out in 2002. But during my first term, in '96, when I was in reception I had a cellie who slept all day long. Seriously he only got up for breakfast and dinner. And I thought, wow, that's a great way to do time. So I asked him what's the deal, how come you sleep all the

time? He told me the psych put him on pills because he told them he hears voices and sees things that aren't there. And he said, 'you can do it too, and they'll put you on this shit and your time will go by so much faster.' That's what I wanted, so I put in to see the psych."

"How did that go?"

"The psych asked me, 'are you hearing voices? Seeing things?' But I didn't really want to lie so I said, 'no, but I'm really depressed.'

'Hmm. OK. Well, what do you like to do for hobbies?'

'I'm an artist. I work with stained glass on the street. I see designs, patterns in things.'

'What do you mean?'

'Look, see that wall behind you?' And it's a cement wall full of cracks and blemishes. 'I see a skull, right there. Don't you?'

'I don't see anything, Daniel.'

So, I took a pen and I drew the skull the cracks in the wall formed. And he said, 'oh, wow, that's incredible!' Then he put me on Zoloft."

Danny has been quite animated as he tells me his story and his candor is refreshing. I chuckle, imagining the scene. *"So what happens when you get to jail?"*

"They held me on a violation. For the weed, for spitting on my P.

sounds like it could be. Let's get your records and see what we can find.'

"When I got back from court I was going to the yard and I saw this cop I'd never gotten along with, Officer Penny. And she's just smirking at me, and she says, 'Oh, hi, Daniel. Gee, you'll never guess who I had dinner with last night.'

'Who, Satan?'

'No, my brother in law.. J- Hammer.'

And I just stared at her, because there was only one way she could know that was my judge. Then I gave her a big smile and I said, 'thank you! You just did me a huge favor!' And I didn't even go to the yard, I ran back to my building and called Joe L- to tell him what she said."

"So, we went back to court and right away Joe L- got me a new judge due to many, many conflicts of interest. Instead of Judge Hammer I got a judge who was about to retire, which my lawyer said was good. 'He doesn't give a shit anymore.'"

"That's a good start. What happened at the hearing?"

"First the state put my psychiatrist on the stand, and Joe L- just shredded him. Like, 'oh, Daniel is bipolar and he has a history of violence.'

'Has Daniel been violent while he has been at Atascadero?'

"So I'm sitting there all by myself and they had to go get Joe L- from some other courtroom where he was in a hearing. But they brought him in and the judge asks, 'do you know this guy?'

Joe says, 'no.'

But I tell him 'Your Honor, THAT'S my lawyer! There he is, Joe L-!'

The judge says, 'I'll give you a few minutes to talk.'

So Joe asks me, 'do you know me?'

'Yes, sir. You're the one who is gonna get me out of here. I've heard nothing but great things about you.'

'Well... I'm very expensive.'

I told him, 'I got no money, I only get sixty dollars a month from my job, but I have so much faith in you to get me home.'

And he thought about it, then he tells the judge he'll represent me. And he asks me, 'how did you hear about me anyways?'

'All the MDOs who go home had you as their lawyer. I asked them.'

"After that I gave him the whole run down of my situation. I told him I've never been in trouble, I do all my groups, I have staff to speak on my behalf, people on the street who support me, and I don't take meds, not even a toe cream. And I told him about the public defender and the judge both being from my first term and how they threw me under the bus, and isn't that a conflict of interest? Because they fucked me over before, and he said 'it

O., that's an assault. And one of the officers who tied me up said I kicked him. Which I didn't. But, you know- So I had to wait to see the parole commissioner. And when I did she told me they weren't going to charge me for the assault but they were going to violate me and send me back to prison for smoking weed. For nine months!"

"Whoa, that sounds excessive."

"You think? I said, 'nine months?! I didn't even test positive! Why so long?'

'Oh, it's based on your conduct.'

'My conduct? Fuck you, you skinny old bitch, and fuck your 'conduct!' And this was when you really had to kiss the commissioner's ass but I cussed her out just like I did my P. O.

'This is exactly what we're talking about.' And they came and grabbed me up, put the spit mask on me again, and threw me in a cell."

"So, back to prison?"

"Yep. Three days later I was in Wasco [State Penitentiary]. I stayed there for six months, then they transferred me to Soledad [State Penitentiary]. And right before I was about to get out all of a sudden they want me to talk to these psychiatrists."

"Did you take psych meds at the time?"

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and the guy says, 'here,' and the judge says, 'Mr. Royal is going to represent you.' And after the lawyer left I told that guy, 'you gotta fire that lawyer. He's awful. He totally threw me under the bus and sent me to prison.'"

"Then Royal comes back in, and he calls my name. And I said, 'what, are you going to tell me my lawyer is in the back?'

'No, I'm your lawyer.'

'No, you're not. I want nothing to do with you.'

And he's all confused. 'You look familiar. Have we met?'

Then the judge, the same judge from my first term too, Judge Hammer, says 'All rise.' And they called me right away. 'This is Mr. Royal. He's going to be your public defender.'

'No, sir. This man is the devil.'

'Excuse me?'

'He's the devil and I don't want him to be my lawyer.'

'Well, he's going to be.'

'No, he's not, he's the devil and you're the devil too, and my lawyer is Joe L-' I told him that, that I'm represented by Joe L- Every time the judge said anything I interrupted him. 'JOE L- JOE L- IS MY LAWYER. JOE L- I WANT JOE L- I WANT MY LAWYER!'

'Calm down!'

I started freaking out, I'm yelling it over and over, until finally Judge Hammer says, 'court is in recess! I want Joe L- in here right now!'"

Danny grins, giving me a look like 'what did you expect?'

Zoloft."

"How many people got out while you were there?"

"Of MDOs, maybe six per year. One every two months or so."

"How many people were in Atascadero then?"

"About three thousand. But some of those were SVPs [Sexually Violent Predators]. Those guys never get out."

"So after the year, what happened?"

"They didn't let me out. So I decided, OK, I'm going to just kick ass here. I am going to do ALL their groups and everything else possible. Except take meds. I never took meds. So, I went to the groups. I saw the psychologists and talked to them. I did really good. I even helped staff when they were being attacked by other patients and got the staff to give me commendations."

"So, after year two?"

Danny sighs. "After year THREE, finally I got to go to court for a hearing. I still hadn't taken any meds, not even an aspirin, nothing. So, we were all sitting in court, me and a bunch of guys from the jail. And who walks in but my first public defender, from my first term. Total truck. Piece of shit lawyer. He calls some guy's name,

"How long did you take that?"

"While I was in reception. Six months. Then I went to prison and got off it. I was there for three more years. Then I got out, and I caught my second case for GBI [Great Bodily Injury] with a deadly weapon. I did that term and got out too, so I had been off of psych meds for over six years by the time the psychiatrists wanted to see me at Soledad."

"So why were they talking to you?"

"That's what I asked them, too. They told me, 'you're under MDO [Mentally Disordered Offender] criteria because of your past violent behavior and your psychiatric history.'

'But I have no write ups. And I didn't get any during my other terms either. I'm a programmer.'

'You still fit the criteria, so we have to evaluate you to see if you're an MDO.'

Two of them interviewed me, separately. One said yes, I am. The other said no. So they brought in a third psychiatrist and he said yes, too."

"So what did that mean?"

"Nobody told me anything. A few days before I paroled they called me into the captain's office. Him and a bunch of other bigwigs were there. They told me I was an MDO and I had to go in for a formal evaluation at the state hospital. I got really upset, because I thought I was getting out after this nine month bullshit violation for my parole officer tricking me. But on my parole date they transferred me to Atascadero [State Hospital]."

"What happened when you got there?"

"My first day there I saw a psychologist. He told me, 'don't worry. This is just for one year.'

'A YEAR?! They told me it was only for ninety days!'

'Whoever told you that, they lied.'

And I got really upset, and he said, 'Hmm, Daniel, do you need some medication to help you relax?'

But meds got me into this mess, and I knew I had to get myself out, so I said no."

"How did you set about getting yourself out?"

Danny sighed. "Well, I spent a year at Atascadero. And it sucked. My mom died during that year, and I got really depressed because I was stuck in that place and I couldn't go see her. Still, I didn't take any medication. I worked, and I did well, and I even became the representative for my building so I could help the other patients."

"Help them how?"

"That place was bad. They abused the patients all the time. Physically, mentally... spiritually. I hated that. Half the staff was abusive. The other half were compassionate, but they didn't say anything or stop the abuse. So, I said something. I told them, 'you better cut that out right now or I'll report you. Not to your supervisor, not to their supervisor, but to outside agencies. Think I won't? Try me."

"Did it work?"

"Sometimes. The staff didn't like me there but they didn't mess with me. I got treated with kid gloves."

"So, what was your supposed diagnosis?"

"I think they said I was bipolar, but there was something else too."

"Like borderline or antisocial personality disorder or something?"

Danny laughs. "Everybody gets that one. We're all 'antisocial.' And they said I was 'high functioning' too. That's important. All the guys who got out were high functioning."