

**Hole Time**  
*Gregory J. McMaster*

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**T**ake a journey with me. A walk on the dark side. Traverse the dungeons that blacken men's hearts and wreaks havoc on their souls. Control Units, Segregation, Isolation, The Digger, Special Handling Units, Disassociation, and The Back End. Different States, different joints, different names. Call it what you will, fancy correctionalist titles or back home regional slang, the bottom line is you are going to *The Hole*.

It makes no difference what institutional infraction you allegedly violated. It does not matter if you are innocent or that everything is a simple misunderstanding. A floor officer has made the call, and the Goon Squad cometh. You are handcuffed behind the back, and a gorilla firmly clamps onto each arm. Investigative questions are not asked, explanations are not given, and your associates stare bewildered as you are crudely shuffled off to the hole. Incarcerated life as you have known it just changed dramatically; your first peak at the belly of the beast.

As you walk through the door of the segregation punishment unit your senses are assaulted. There is an odour that you recognize at once. It is the stench of human misery and despair. You instinctively know that shattered minds and unbathed bodies dwell here. A chill runs down your spine. Your eyes detect no movement. This is a waste land, bleak and empty. No bodies hustling about, no card games in progress. There are not any tables on the main flag. The wide open space is cold and unnerving. Your ears have not popped, nor have you lost your hearing. It takes a few seconds to comprehend that every single sound is different. There are no televisions blaring or radios competing for your attention. Gone are the loud boisterous conversations. Taunting challenges and slamming dominoes cease to exist. The constant buzz and din that took you so long to adjust to has suddenly disappeared. What you hear instead is every footstep of the escorting squad members. The rustling of their pants, the breath on their lips, the pounding of your own heart. You have entered the netherworld, the prison within a prison.

You are taken to the shakedown cell and strip searched. Goon squad and segregation guards surround you at close proximity. Orders are barked:

Show me your hands. Arms over your head. Run your fingers through your hair, then pull your ears forward. Open your mouth and move your tongue. Let's have a look under those lips. Lift your sac. Turn around, show me the bottom of your feet and wiggle your toes. Bend over and spread 'em.

All of this is done while the guards joke about how fat you are, what a small cock you have and how pink your asshole is. Dehumanization and degradation are the name of the game. Your blood boils. You want to lash out, but you are completely naked and it is eight to one. You stockpile this rage with all of the others and silently swear "someday, pig, someday ...".

Personal clothes are bagged and tagged and you put on the segregation issue. Your skin crawls at the indignity of wearing communal underwear and socks. You remember the stories about lice, crabs and scabies. The jumpsuit is torn, tattered and oversized. Nobody looks good in head to foot fire engine red. You fight the gag reflex as you slip on worn out three dollar deck shoes. The insides are blackened with crud and fungus. Your toes begin to itch immediately. Brief medical and personal information is taken down while paper-thin bedding and a lumpy pillow are handed out. You are given a sheet of rules and regulations and told "keep your mouth shut, nose clean and you might make it out of here".

Handcuffed, you are led out of the shakedown cell and walked down the main flag. Suddenly you are the centre of attention. Faces crammed to the cell bars, checking out the newcomer. Rows and rows of them. Too many to count. The enormity of the punishment unit hits you. Four tiers high, 32 cells long. The prison has bigger cell blocks, but you never imagined all of these men were in the hole. You are reminded of a scientific research laboratory with animals in cages stacked to the ceiling. The similarity ends when you realize that mankind is the subject of this experiment.

You walk past the rubber room with its hole in the floor and padded steel door opened to air it out. Then the two observation cells. High powered external security lights illuminate them 24 hours a day. The two cells are barren except for what remotely resembles human beings curled in fetal positions on cement block beds. They are naked, other than the fireproof suicide dresses; the infamous baby dolls. An ominous

reinforced solid steel door is next. The Quiet Box. You hear a soft whimpering emanating from within.

Too much is happening too fast. Your brain cannot process all of this foreign information. With mouth hanging open and eyes forgetting to blink, you stumble along. You tell yourself that none of this is real, that it cannot be true. These are the scenes of horror stories and demented fiction. A screaming prisoner snaps you back to reality. “What the fuck are you staring at, Punk!” There is a steel-meshed cage that encloses six cells and forms a narrow walkway. The cell bars are covered with the same steel mesh. The Assaultive Cage. Peering through the offset mesh and shadow from the overlapping second tier, you can barely make out the human forms within. You mumble some feeble apology as the guards chuckle and prod you along.

Finally you reach the stairs. This you can handle. You understand stairs. All too soon you are on the third tier, walking past cells again. Each cage contains a man, each man a set of eyes that burn right through you. These are the monsters of the midway and you are on their turf. Tattoos, muscles, scars, and personality disorders. Black, white, and brown, to you they all look the same; dangerous. These are the living legends that all prisoners hear about, but only a few get to meet. You are marched to the middle of the tier, cell 316. Your door is slammed, cuffs removed, and you inventory your new nine by six surroundings. Toilet, sink, steel bunk, and piss-stained mattress. The pitiful bedding you carried up completes the picture. Home sweet home.

When the guards’ footsteps are no longer heard you are bombarded with questions. “Who are you? What are you back here for? Did you bring any dope? Got any smokes? Did Crazy Bob make parole?” You ask yourself, “who the hell is Crazy Bob, and what am I doing in this nightmare?”

That covers the first-timer’s 30 minute introductory experience, leaving them dazed and confused. Now to the other end of the spectrum, and a look at the hardcore depravity of long term hole time.

Your tour guide is 39 years old and 18 years into a life sentence. In three years I will have spent half my life in prison. I started young. My history includes segregation punishment units in different states, different provinces, different countries. I knocked off five years in the hole, four flat during my younger days; most of that in some form of

isolation. The musical group, ZZ Top said it all, "I was bad and nationwide".

Been there, seen it, done it. Have many regrets. Would not want to wish it upon anyone. My attorney/fiancee warned me this would be an emotionally difficult story to write. The old wounds are being opened up in the hopes that some younger prisoners will look deep inside and determine that this is one path they should not follow.

Watches are contraband, and there are no wall clocks. You soon learn to tell time by meals, count, industry whistle, and lights out. No books other than the Bible and Chaplain Ray's "gangster to God" series. You are a little monster so you read the criminal exploits and trash the book at the first mention of salvation. No newspapers, no magazines, no novels; just you and "God's Prison Gang". T.V.s and radios are not happening either. You are beat for news on the outside world. I learnt that President Sadat of Egypt had been assassinated two years after the fact.

Visits are severely limited, by appointment only, and non-contact. The visiting phone/speaker is bugged. Visiting days and hours are separate from the general population. Your visitors miss out on car pooling, the community-based visitors' bus and are forced to visit during traditional working hours. Cancelled visits become the norm.

As always, the mailroom snoops your letters, both incoming and outgoing. The major difference being that the segregation guards receive perverse pleasure reading your mail too; possibly to see if their demented actions are having the desired effect. Phone calls, if available, are monitored. All private/confidential contact with the outside world is severed. Your communications become superficial and suppressed from Big Brother's paranoia. This has dire consequences on personal relationships, particularly impacting spouses and children. Having never been in your shoes, they cannot grasp the concept of being smothered through perpetual audio/visual surveillance.

A minimum of 23 hours per day is spent locked in the cell. Your exercise period consists of walking the length of the caged-in or plexi-glassed tier. It is crowded, with men stretching their legs and working out the kinks. Beefs are settled and the cock of the walk is established: pecking orders, even when there is nothing left to peck. The converted shower cell is a bustle of activity as everyone has to shower within the single hour. As usual the shower is filthy. Mould and fungus add an

interesting colour scheme. You make a note to bring it to the cleaner's attention - again. He does not live on your tier or use your shower, so he does not care. You decide to make him care.

Outside exercise is offered twice a week. You take it or forfeit exercise for that day. This is your only opportunity for fresh air, circling the large cage. Modern correctional philosophies have brought back the dog kennels, dividing the cage into individual runs. The surrounding buildings cast shadows, and direct sunlight is rare. I have been known to climb the cage and suspend myself, needing to feel the sun's life-giving properties on my face. Desperate men know no shame.

Banishment to *isolation* is like falling off the end of the earth. You become an inanimate object and are treated like garbage rotting at the dump. I spent five months on the fourth tier by myself, never seeing other prisoners. Guards strictly enforced the silent treatment. Just as well. I had nothing to say to them anyway. Another time I did 30 days in the quiet box with the cell light on the whole time. The food slot would be opened and a bag lunch thrown in. That is the extent of human contact. The doctor, dentist, and visits may all be cancelled while you are in isolation.

Some isolation cells have a small foyer added to their front. This allows the guard to step in, feed you through the cell bars, and then step out, closing the solid door behind him. The only light is in the foyer, and it is always off unless the guard is present. You lay there in the darkness, tucked away in a concrete cocoon. My longest stretch in one of these isolation cells was two months.

Many segregation punishment units wall off a small corner of the cellblock and turn that into isolation. The standard routine is one blanket, no sheets, no pillow, no exercise, no smokes, no shoes, and one shower per week. A mattress is given to you at 10:00 p.m. and removed at 6:00 a.m. Your mail is held until you are out of isolation, if they give it to you at all.

Generally speaking, segregation guards exhibit major attitude problems. Many of them are rejects from population cellblocks and form a core group in the *hole*. An asshole convention. I once asked a particularly nauseous Sergeant what was behind the bullshit headgames. He replied,

“the instant you walk through that door, you become an asshole. You wouldn’t be here unless you were an asshole. Everybody back here is an asshole, and they will be treated like assholes until they walk back through that door.”

I suggested that he hurry home and strip search his children, as I was sure they missed him. He failed to see the humour.

The few decent guards soon get with the program. With constant staff peer pressure and irrational prisoners screaming in their faces and throwing cups of urine, it does not take long. I have seen basically decent people psychologically scarred for life. You do not work in the hole and come out unscathed.

Long term segregation prisoners see themselves as prisoners of war. No other analogy comes close. Behaviour modification is the scheduled agenda. Everything becomes a test to break your spirit, to bend your will. The longer you resist, the harder the enemy tries. If you cannot be broken, prison administrators take it personally. It is their camp, they are in control, and you cannot be seen to have beaten them at anything. Your keepers interpret determination and unity as a virulent disease that must not spread. Instead of setting examples for other prisoners, you are made the example. Prisoncrats clearly understand rule number one of ultimate power: use it or lose it.

The months pile up and you begin to lose touch with reality. All you know is the hole. Guards become your mortal enemies and the warden the Director of the Evil Empire. Ironically, you have become totally dependent upon the very guards you despise. Food, clothes, shaving supplies and mail are all delivered to your bars. You cannot wipe your ass unless a guard brings you a roll of toilet paper. They get indignant when you do not say please and thank you. You feel neutered for having to ask at all. Neither side comprehends the other’s ill-will.

After a year or two, your world collapses in around you. No sunlight, total lack of stimuli, and the constant oppressive atmosphere leads to spiralling depressions. Sensory deprivation is a malignant cancer that slowly eats away at you. I crashed and burned for months at a time. I literally lived off of hate.

Death becomes your neighbour in the hole. Suicide, murder, drug overdoses, and heart failure. Attention seeking suicidal gestures become common occurrences. Men hanging themselves just as the guard walks

on to the tier. I have seen light bulbs eaten and balloons of Drano swallowed. Spraying blood from cut wrists becomes routine. Self-mutilation turns into an art form. One man wrapped his entire body in toilet paper and torched himself. The nylon jumpsuit melted into his flesh. He did not die; he just looks like he did.

During an emergency situation, a rookie guard got locked onto my tier. Within minutes he started trembling, crying and ripping his hair out. Like a pack of vultures tearing into carrion, prisoners tormented and cheered him on. Later that night, the rookie died of a brain aneurysm. A blood vessel in his head exploded from the stress. Not a single prisoner knew his name, but most rejoiced in his death. Hate was all encompassing.

Some of that hate is justifiable. If one accepts the reality that physical and psychological abuse takes place in prison, commonsense dictates that the hole is the hotbed of this activity. Beatings, being chained to the bars, four-point restraints, forced injections, chemical irritant abuse, and being denied medical attention are all on the menu.

You hate for what has been done to you. You hate for what you have seen done to others. Totally forgotten is the crime that brought you to prison and the infraction that landed you in the hole. Insanity rules the day. The very people charged with your rehabilitation are themselves committing acts of brutality on a daily basis. Nothing makes sense, and hate becomes your only constant. Hate is pure, focussed, and reliable. It will never let you down or leave you alone. As long as you hate, you have something to live for.

Screaming nut cases keep you awake all night. They belong in psychiatric hospitals, but the State closed them down. Instead they serve their entire sentence in the hole. You learn to appreciate it when sadistic guards apply physical therapy to silence the crazies. You never want it too quiet though, for the moans and muffled sobs of "normal" men will drive a stake into your icy heart. Your mind works the night shift and you sleep sporadically throughout the day.

You read, write and exercise. Masturbation becomes a favourite pastime. There is not much else to do locked in an empty cell all day. The toilet becomes a stair master and roman chair for situps. I honed my writing skills and wrote extensive poetry about - you guessed it - hate. My first pro se prisoners' rights suits were drafted in the hole.

Creativity surfaces in surprising forms. With only a pencil, artists turn cells into elaborate murals. Craftsmen resort to soap carvings with contraband paperclips. Spiders are kept for pets, traded and fought. One lost soul had a dead bug collection (22 different kinds) hanging from the bars with dental floss. Executioner's row for insects. I must have been really \*\*\*\*\* that month.

The hole houses many illiterates, and I often wondered how they maintained. Unable to read or write, their miniature world was half the size of mine. They became fantastic story tellers and the keepers of our oral history. I spent many nights gratefully lost in their renditions.

Meals can be a test of your character and resolve. The food is often undercooked, always cold, and the portions small. Your so-called brothers in the kitchen have forgotten all about you. Out of sight, out of mind. Prison food was never anything to write home about, but a trip to the chow hall is like a four star restaurant compared to this. You close your eyes and eat the slop. It is the only sustenance you are going to get. Once in a while untouched trays are fired from all the cells in protest. The show of unity does little to bolster your hunger pains, but it serves to bolster your pride.

Whether you call him the Mayor or the Boss of the Floods, when a charismatic leader gives the word, most of the segregation unit rocks. Plugged and overflowing toilets create massive amounts of water, which rolls off the upper tiers and thunders to the floor below. Niagara Falls never looked or sounded better. Toilets and sinks are ripped from the walls and broken water pipes spew like open fire hydrants. Fires are lit and everything is burned; sheets, mattresses, pillows. Burning sail boats made from milk cartons cruise by your cell. Hobby craft with a twist. Stainless steel toilets become battering rams, and you wear yourself out chipping away at your steel and concrete cage.

Eventually the goon squad shows up in full riot gear. They go from cell to cell dealing out their personal brand of retaliation. You pray they start at the other end so they are less energetic when it is your turn. Not much you can do to ten large men with body armour, helmets, shields, and clubs. The guards rotate, and ten fresh ones take over. You take your lumps and hunker down for the miserable months ahead.

For the first week the tier becomes your toilet. Shit and piss is everywhere. Remnants from the flood, piles of ashes and everything that used to be in your cell mixes with the excrements. Acidic ammonia



tortures your smoke scorched lungs. Bag lunches three times a day. The guards spit in your food, they spit in your face. Your friend is naked and chained in the padded cell. He had tied his cell door shut, greased up the floor, had shank, and threw a homemade bomb. First he was gassed into respiratory arrest and now he is getting the full treatment. War is hell.

You are locked in 24 hours per day and have not had a shower in weeks. There is no running water or a sink to wash up in. Teeth are scrubbed with your finger and warm milk. You rot in the same clothes you rioted in. Open sores and lesions cover your body and scalp. If you are lucky, the state health department forces the warden to pass out plastic potty buckets during the third week. You look on the bright side - life just got a whole lot better. Repairs are made, attitudes last about two months, and the Punishment Unit gradually returns to the shit hole it always was. The Mayor was put on the highway so you elect a new one. Life is hard at the top.

Once every year or so you skip the destruction and do the hunger strike. On my best effort I lost 47 pounds in 52 days and literally thought I was going to die. Me and Bobby Sands. Unlike the I.R.A. martyr and legend, I did not have what it takes. My co-hunger striker and chief of the Native Americans organized 400 citizens to march on our behalf. We did the perfunctory media interviews and actually won a few concessions. Oddly enough, I had a toilet for this excursion, but had no use for it. Nothing in, nothing out.

Violence and brutality come in all shapes and sizes. I listened helplessly while a close friend was severely beaten by guards in the cell directly below mine. My buddy suffered a fractured skull, broken nose, four broken ribs and a punctured/collapsed lung. They put the boots to the wrong man this time as he was a much loved radical leader. Three hours later a population cellblock rioted in response. Numerous guards were sent to area hospitals, some with particularly gruesome internal injuries.

I had a front row seat when the rioters were brought into the hole one by one; all 90 of them. Every man was naked and cuffed behind the back. Hanging from each man's mouth was a brown shopping bag with his last name printed boldly on it. The rioters were forced to walk their already bruised bodies through the gauntlet. Twenty guards, ten on each side, armed with ax handles and night sticks. The blows rained down freely on legs, abdomens and backs. In order to deny abuse, facial

bruising was deliberately avoided. If the paper bag was dropped, the individual was made to walk the gauntlet a second time. The leaders of the riot were set aside for special beatings in the shakedown cell. Zap gloves make a distinctive thud.

One man's riot is another man's sudden release from the hole. Other than 15 hardcore incorrigibles and psychotics, the entire segregation population turned over in a matter of hours. Those of us left behind suffered right along with the rioters. No distinction was made between who did and did not riot. Within a couple of days, I acquired yet another assault on staff charge. My "segregationalized" existence made sense again, there was a cause and effect that I could relate to and personalize. I was being dogged for a reason.

Christmas in the hole is a trip down misery lane. General population has tournaments, movies, church and illicit parties to offer as necessary distractions. Segregation offers the darkest blues and deepest depressions. Haunting memories from Christmas' past. Family, friends and children's glowing faces. Happiness, love, giving and sharing. It hurts deep. Tears silently roll down your face. You sit on the floor, back to the cold wall as you do not want to soil your bed with this guilt and self-pity.

I had been sentenced to life for taking a man's life. I found myself thinking of his family and their Christmas without him. I realized that I had done much more than kill a man. I had ripped the heart and soul out of two families; his and mine. Apparently I had to bottom out completely (prison, the hole, Christmas day) in order to understand the magnitude of my actions. Sometimes it takes sinking to the bottom before you can start climbing to the top.

Setting aside psychological defects, most of us experience the maturation process as the years tick by. Our thoughts and feelings change, sometimes completely. Men who had never been to the hole puzzled me. I assumed segregation was a rite of passage, that you could not be stand-up unless you had howled with the hounds from hell. Now that I am older and wiser, I realize it was me that was screwed up, not the men that managed to honourably avoid the insanity. There is nothing but despair, loneliness and hatred going on back there. Who needs it? Incarcerated life is hard enough without intentionally making it worse.

At the time I served those four straight years in the hole, prison psychiatrists had little experience or interest in the effects of long term

segregation/isolation. With the advent of maximum security S.H.U.s springing up all over the country, correctional watch dogs and the courts are finally taking notice. Now the shrinks ask me how I managed to survive and why my eggs are not scrambled. Unbeknownst to me, I had become an unofficial case study. I neglected to ask if I passed the audition.

All of the time I spent in isolation did have at least one extreme positive effect on me. It allowed me the freedom to conduct an intensive self-evaluation. Why did I think the way I did? What led me to prison? How did I end up in the quiet box again? Why were people afraid of me? Why was I always in physical confrontations? What could I do to change myself, my reputation and how others interacted with me? In short, how could I make myself a better person? Had I not done the extensive hole time and instead been caught up in the hustle of the mainline, I doubt very seriously if I would have taken time out for the painful, but much needed internal adjustments.

Too bad the madness cannot end on that positive note. The sad reality is that every State in the U.S.A. and most Canadian jurisdictions are faced with prison overcrowding. Cells are too scarce to leave empty. The hole stays full. When one body leaves another takes its place. This equates to a steady stream of petty rule violations, fabricated incidents and new arrivals waiting for a population bed. But that is no big deal because, like the Sargeant. said, "Everyone back here is an asshole".

*[Note: Hole Time was awarded First Prize for essay writing by the Prison Arts Foundation of Canada for 1997.]*