

## **You Can**

**written by: Ronald Brook**

Looking out the window of the bus as it passed through the gates leading to San Quentin, I examined the front structure of what looked like a castle. From the portcullis with the iron grill work to the faded yellow brick work across the top, the impression was foreboding and draconian. It screamed, "Stay out!" Little did I know at the time that life inside would be every bit as medieval as the portentous first view.

My knowledge of prison life up to that point was less than zero, colored and shaped by television and the movies. And as I stepped from the bus and looked around, I knew that I was in a new, completely different kind of world. Still being in shock from my crime, the arrest, trial and conviction, the first few months of moving into my new home were a blur of pictures and emotions. I lived in East Block, third tier-based side. The building was so high inside that I could hardly see the top tier. Looking out on the San Francisco Bay from the end of my bed, I could watch the ferry carrying people to work every day. Out there, in the other world.

My home was small. I could sit on my bunk with my back against the wall and put my feet up on the wall across from me. Air circulated through the bars that ran from floor to ceiling at one end of the cell. This open end also allowed noise, fog, bugs and other creatures into my house. And a neighbor had warned me not to leave anything inside that could be pulled through the bars. At night the sounds of the other inmates talking, yelling, crying and fighting could be heard as clearly as if they were right next door. And later, in the wee hours of the morning, sometimes there would be the sound of someone finding what passed for love. Weekends were interesting for the variety of odds and ends being hawked along the tiers. At different times someone would walk by with a box or sack, calling out their wares to each cell, "sandwiches, Sandwiches, SANDWICHES, Sandwiches, sandwiches." These sounds would grow and then fade as they came then passed; "weed, Weed, WEED, Weed, weed"; "heroin, Heroin, HEROIN, Heroin,

heroin.” And one night I almost fell out of my bed hearing, “head, Head, HEAD, Head, head. . .” Literally, everything could be had for the asking, if one could afford the price.

I was eventually assigned to one of the education programs as a student. I didn't feel that I needed to go to school, as I already had my GED. But the GI Bill would pay me money to go. I didn't need that. My learning didn't take place in school, however, but on the yard and in the block. Every day there were fights and shootings. I didn't know from one minute to the next if I would be targeted for the simple fact that I was the next guy ready to go around a corner, or because I might have seen something someone did. These fights weren't fistfights either, but always involved a weapon of some sort. Such strong violence was the result of a system that gave the same punishment for killing someone that it did for fighting or wounding someone. And it was much safer to get rid of an enemy permanently than to have to deal with him again later. Such logic fermented extreme violence for anything from a misunderstood glance or mistaken identity to theft or assault. One solution to fit all circumstances. Also, there are some people who just like to kill people. Survival demanded that a weapon be always immediately available.

Don't get me wrong; I'm not a stranger to violence. But this was worse than a war zone. This was anarchy at its worst. My emotions ran a gamut of depression, disgust, loathing, hatred, fear and helplessness. These feelings were at one time directed at myself, then others, then the prison, then back to me again, in a mad circle of confused insanity. At night after a long day in the classroom, I would sit on my bed, with my feet propped up on the wall, and shake. These were light, and nervous trembles that ended after a half an hour or so. My head was always turned to face the bars, causing my neck to be stiff a lot of the time. I was about as miserable as I could get and still live. I knew in my heart that I had no future, no life worth living. The odds of survival seemed more and more insurmountable. Was I going to have to become one of “them”? Did I need to give up what little humanity I held in my heart just to survive? I was at the end of my proverbial rope and ready to give up.

Then, in September of 1976, I was sitting on my bed staring at the wall across from me. I had given up watching the bars. I had also stopped carrying a weapon. Mine had been a sharpened welding rod with tape on one end for a handle. I didn't care anymore whether someone came at me through the bars or otherwise. I just didn't care. I sat there, counting the holes in the wall, looking into each one, wishing I could crawl into it. That's when I saw it. On the wall right in front of me, right at eye level, someone had glued two words from some book; two simple words that changed my whole outlook on life. Two little words that gave me hope, a future, a new life. Someone had glued the two simple words, 'you can' on the wall where they would be seen by anyone at the point in their lives where they were examining the wall that closely. Someone had been in my mental state before, or at least knew of that state. 'You can', the words drove into my mind like a spike. I can do it! I can survive! I can be me! I can get out of this hell and live a life worth living! I sat there and stared at the words. An hour past. I didn't notice. Two hours, three. When I looked away my eyes were burning. There was a lump in my throat making it hurt to swallow, and the tears running down my cheeks wet the front of my shirt. For the first time in years I cried.

In school I paid attention to the teachers. I began to excel in my lessons. I avoided places and situations that could be more dangerous than necessary. The chapel and Dead Man's Alley were completely off-limits because they were known kill zones. I did everything to be invisible to everyone everywhere. "I can" became "I did", and within a year I became eligible for transfer to a lower-level institution. Life changed. I changed.

I have now been in prison for over thirty-two years. Politics is keeping me in here now, and I may never get out. But I have lived a good life in here. I don't have to hurt anyone, and I enjoy work. Life is good. And, to whoever thought enough of other people to put those two words on the wall, I owe you my life. Thank you.