

## ***Jason Trask***

### **New Plantation**

The first time I heard about the high school on Rikers, I was working at Morgan Stanley as a word processor. A co-worker told me her brother-in-law taught out there. I'd had a couple of teaching jobs, and though I'd loved working with kids, after a year or so I'd always quit. It had something to do with teachers walking around in short sleeved shirts and they're talking about retirement plans and educational methods and they're talking about the kids as ruining the school. But from what this woman was telling me, Rikers was so intense that "professional" teachers rarely lasted. I asked her to find out how I could get a job out there.

A few days later, she told me to go to the Board of Ed. on Court Street in Brooklyn. I'd been there before, to get my substitute teacher's license. They had you move around from desk to desk, floor to floor, getting signatures and papers stamped, and then you'd go and wait in some line to see someone at some window who would send you to some desk. I'd been so discouraged by the process that I'd never even used the substitute license.

But a year or so later I got bored with word-processing and went back to the Board of Ed. The person on the phone who retrieved my file said, "You only interested in sub work? 'Cause I got a full time job."

"Yeah, but I'm not certified."

He told me I could get certified as I taught. "Some schools won't allow it, but these guys want someone bad."

"So where is it, this job?"

"Out on Rikers Island."

An hour later I was in his office filling out paper work and talking to the principal, Miss Jones, over the telephone.

She asked me, "Do you think you would mind working with incarcerated boys?"

"Mind it! I'd love it."

She was silent. I knew I sounded like a wide-eyed white boy. She just waited. "See, the thing is," I went on, "I heard about this school a while back, and at the time I thought I'd love teaching in a place like that, you know? I mean, I've only taught college kids, but my favorite kids are always the ones who...who are on the edge and are..."

"If you've only taught college kids, you've never taught kids on the edge," she told me.

"Well, listen. I'd love the chance to try. If you don't think I'm doing well, I'll leave."

"You surely will," she said.

I laughed, and that was the right thing to do. She laughed too, and I knew we had an agreement.

The next morning I was at the bridge to Rikers flashing my new photo ID. My first impression of the guards was they all had this look of absolute boredom. It didn't look genuine somehow. It just went with the uniform. It was like they feared that if they looked anything but bored, people would think they were new. The look said, "I've seen everything. Don't even try to surprise me." They gave me a temporary pass for my car and a few minutes later I was driving over the bridge. I parked in one of the incredibly huge parking lots and followed other pedestrians toward an uncertain destination. Huge chain link fences with razor wire lining the top were the stand-in for vegetation.

We ended up in a room full of lockers and a metal detector. I followed the others to a window and slipped my photo ID through the slot. The officer who took it pulled a numbered card from an envelope on a giant bulletin board. He put my card in its place and handed the numbered one to me. I clipped it to my shirt as though I knew the routine. I felt confident. It surprised me when he yelled through the slot, "First time here?"

"Yes."

"Wait."

From my ID card he knew where I was going. He got on the phone and told me someone would be right down.

Soon a young black woman appeared on the far side of a window. The officer indicated that she was my guide. I walked through an electrically controlled sliding door into a room the size of an elevator. After the door had shut completely, another door opened on the other side, and now I was at the intersection of several huge corridors, each a tunnel with lines converging into a vanishing point. But the thing I couldn't get over was the smell. This was a smell that seemed familiar, yet I didn't remember having smelled it before. It would take me about a year to realize what it was. It was the smell of a human barn.

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