

## Precious Keepsakes

by DC Campanella

Whether it's the stress, the change in diet, the hard water, or the ubiquitous grime in prison, something in here is not good for the skin. This was true in 1991 as it is today, and Noxzema reminds me of that. Of all the assorted cosmetics and remedies inmates use to preserve their visage, Noxzema stands out to me the most. The product has a distinct aroma, what a marketing expert might call "arctic fresh" or "mountain frost." Whenever I catch a whiff, I'm instantly and too briefly taken back to a more youthful time. The passage of time in between always feels heavier in these moments. I often pause at this concept, especially in those moments, when memories surprise me by their distance and make my life feel like sand slipping through my fingers.

My cellmate Duane showed me the oldest jar of Noxzema that I have ever seen. He pulled a cardboard box from under the bunk, put it aside, and then pulled out the box behind that. As he rummaged through its contents, long, thin strands of brown and gray hair dangled in his face. His hair was a remnant of his past, a piece of the 1980s that he kept since 1991 when he was convicted of felony murder.

He handed me the Noxzema, a golf ball-sized navy blue plastic jar with the label long ago peeled off. With the lid unscrewed, I could see the yellowed contents of what was once a bright white facial cleanser. It had never been used, leaving the product in a perfect dallop of what had come to look like warm margarine. Despite its aged appearance, it still had that distinct aroma shared by nothing else in the world. I can only describe it as a mixture of cologne and chlorine, powerful enough to linger in that jar for thirty years.

Duane came to prison at the age of eighteen as a perfect specimen of the late-eighties era. He had a mullet, rocked out to big hair bands, and drove a '72 Dodge Polara, a car he describes as a "boat with wheels" for its width, adding that he could watch the gas gauge go down as he stepped on the accelerator.

The closest I came to seeing the young Duane was through the old photos in his worn-out album. In one image I found memorable, he was standing next to his prom date. Even though Duane was much younger and all dressed up, there was something so familiar in his expression. His face said, "I'm surrounded by idiots." He wears that expression often. I couldn't help but draw a comparison between the photograph and the Noxzema. They were both a part of a matching set, and in very similar condition.

The twelve year sentence I received pales in comparison to what Duane's reality has been for the last three decades. During the first few months I shared a cell with him, I felt compelled to investigate the passage of his time; I needed to know if he felt the same sense of sand slipping through his grasp. I had to know what thirty years of this life was like, with the cheap fabrics, metal toilets, and dinners of slop. So on one of those frustrating prison days, I asked him.

He said it wasn't always like this. The food used to be good. Before the state allotted sixty-five cents per inmate meal, they used to serve quality meat, a variety of fruits, all the milk you could drink, and they had salads at dinner. Real salad, he added, with cucumber and tomato. Not just the handful of tepid lettuce they now serve us once a month. These were the days when a prisoner could still spend a weekend with his family in a trailer and receive care packages of food and clothing. Duane said that in a way, I was lucky to come to prison after everything good stopped, that I did not know how much better it could be.

Spending years in prison doesn't shock me anymore. Doing time has changed the way I look at it. As prisoners, we all suffer the effects of incarceration, both the obvious and the unexpected, even if we can't always put it into words.

The old Noxzema spoke the words I could not find. As I reflected on that jar of Noxzema, it became a valuable artifact of incarceration. This reminder of the adjustment to prison was like a little museum piece. I hope Duane keeps it forever. It is important to remember our journeys through prison, whether we carry them in Noxzema jars, heavier hearts, or lines on our faces.