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Words: 1821  
About Prison Life  
California Men's Colony  
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*"I must wonder; will a TED talk lance this boil of mass incarceration and free the prejudices in our heart?"*

### Beyond the Surface

#### RJ Donovan Correctional Facility 2017

"You down for a TED talk?" my man Jay asks. I got one eye on Jay in a narrow window another eye on a contraband Samsung smartphone in my hand. "Say again?" I'm trying to get out of a Pornhub portal I slipped into half hour ago. "Ted?"

Jay's words squeeze through a tight crack into the cell. Something about an event in the prison sponsored by *Kurios*. All I draw from memory on Kurios is *fire* oatmeal cookies every Christmas.

I say, "Yeah, pencil me in bro."

"Seriously?"

"For sure. You got me when you said UC San Diego coeds."

We laugh as Jay scribbles my name in a composition notebook.



This is the true story of three buddies from South Central Los Angeles, a TED talk, and a chance encounter with the power of humanity.

Otey Mesa is border rat country on the rim of San Diego/Tijuana. Ten miles north into SD is a small airport and RJ Donovan. The airport is seen from the prison exercise yard. Some days a pork belly cargo plane drops pro sky divers and paying first-timers close enough to make out colors in parachutes from our jungle gym in the yard. The airport also means RJ Donovan don't employ cellphone jamming technology. Not this close to an airport.

I close my eyes and turn on prison chatter and can't tell a convict from cop because there are no good or bad guys in the yard only folk touched by the fickle finger of fate. If there's a protagonist here it's not me. I'm Ali, doing 82 year to life for first degree murder and attempted murder. It's not Jay, he's sentenced to life without the possibility of parole (LWOP) since age 16. And it's not Gene who's Jay's cousin and my cellmate. Gene's an LWOP, too. We're all washed up. Three guys with the odd fortune of being buds before shipwrecked in prison. We crack jokes about how young, fit, ageless we look in our 30s. We've served a combined total of 51 years between us. Nobody's talking about a parole board hearing or assembly bills or senate bills only cellphone bills and visits. Now TED.

The whole TED thing takes the A-facility by storm. Nobody quite knows what Jay's signing us up to. Who's Ted? What's he gonna talk about? I YouTube it. Looks pretty cool. I send a link to Gene's phone. He's below talking to his Baby Mama right now but he'll see it and we'll talk about TED.

Gene and I stay up till two, three in the morning. Facebook. YouTube. Instagram. Netflix. Charge up. Talk. Dominoes. Talk. Crash. Our nights go the way of a fast card shuffle. Wake up do it again. But TED promises to break this stale mate doing life in the can if only for one day. I'm in. Gene is on the fence. He don't trust white people. The cops are white. The Judge...white. Guards...white. All Gene sees white justice and black grief. I tire of his tirade, crash. But he does have a point. I just wish I can show him different. I must wonder; will a TED talk lance this boil of mass incarceration and free the prejudices in our heart?



**RJ** Donovan's TEDx event comes together seamlessly in a matter of months. Grips put up a soundstage, mixing board, and flat wide televisions in the Gym. The next Saturday black curtain with 200 chairs arrives on a flatbed truck. Our last Saturday is Rehearsal Day. All speakers come inside the prison for the first time. I'm a Speaker Shadow. My role is to guide and support my designated speaker through a magnificent rehearsal and event day experience.

I arrive and meet Team Lead, Ron, in a green room for a quick overview of the Activity Room (Gym). Our Core Team and speakers walk through a door off the prison yard. The "outside speakers" are three guys and two gals. About 40 people hold down the room. It's a handshake rodeo and smiles. Conversations gush natural and easy. I've struck gold in a lovely 30-something brunette with a small mouth and perfect white teeth. Marsha. I answer all her questions. We're clear on event day expectations. The look I give her is smoldering, showing her that I think she's hot.

The cop is a black woman who comes off more auntie than correctional officer. She pretends not to see us from across the room. I'm risking Hole time but Marsha's a snake charmer.

Marsha says, "You have convincing eyes."

*Convincing eyes?* I think to myself. She got my tongue in a granny knot. It's obvious. A golf cart load of cheeseburger and fries and soda arrives courtesy of Ms. M, and Kurios. Ms. M is French; she comes from old money, and is a missionary inside Donovan. She gets a kick out of feeding us Big Macs and Famous Amos. We love her generosity. She also pretends not to see us sometime.

Marsha probes, "When do you get out?"

"I got life."

"How?"

"I shot and killed a rival gang member. It was stupid," I say between bites. "I didn't have to do it. He should be alive today. I feel so terrible for his family and all."

This stops Marsha like a bullet in the breast. I montage my childhood in 60 seconds. She's got a granny knot of her own to untie as we wrap rehearsals and say goodbye.

Rap music is on ape-shits loud in my wireless earbuds. Gene's in-boxing Jay. They're talking TED. I'm on Facebook, scrolling Marsha's Wall. Greece. New York City. LA. Marsha lives a life I will only visit on social media in prison. I need a new life. I Netflix and chill till my phone dies. I'm staring at the ceiling long after Gene's crashed in his rack.



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The Activity Room looks and smells amazing Event Day. The baked food and sweet lady fumes and strange music makes for an outer worldly experience that instantly transports beyond RJ Donovan. I stroll inside with Gene close. There are 220 people. Our youngest visitor is 11. Henry. I lean in, say, "Don't worry about nothing. I got your back, bro." Henry smiles and we fist bump. His grandpa warms. We shake hands as two fathers. I show them seats. I spot Gene. He's an iceberg in a sea of white faces. Jay pulls up on him. These two chop it up for a minute. Then, Jay takes the stage and grabs a mike. It's clear, we got jobs. No babysitting Gene. I find Marsha. The TED talk is a go.

I shadow Marsha. I carry her water bottle. I go for her snacks. I do everything one might expect but take her hand in mine like a couple. Our show runner directs us to the stage.

"Marsha, hun, you're on next." Ron says queerly. Ron's uniquely made but it don't matter. We're a TED family today.

It's all eyes on us. People in blue, people in green, people in black patch sleeves, and people in street wear eyeball Marsha and I from green room to stage. I count my paces to ignore five hundred eyes on me.

Backstage an organizer, Jan, hands Marsha a tiny wireless mike. The speaker on stage is closing.

A Gooner is posted within pepper-spraying distance of the stage and covers an exit. We call her White Widow for the way she crawls over a cell during security searches. But the Widow is unexpectedly chill and minding her own today.

Still, I don't move. Marsha's left holding the mike.

Jan zeroes in. "Here. Let me help with that." Jan throws a little side-eye my way like, *Ali don't get in trouble*.

I hear a booming "thank you," and the audience wakes in a roar of applause.

I take Marsha in one sweeping glance. "You look fantastic."

She blushes. "I'm nervous."

"You got this."

"I only had one week to write my speech."

"Listen. There's a bet in the yard."

"On?"

"You," I say in a conspirator whisper. "I got five burritos says you kill it."

We crack up in muted laughs.

"I'll teach you a handshake," I say, "a little hand magic."

I stick a hand out. She presses her flesh into mine. I slowly crank my wrist counter clock wise, my hand pirouetting until my elbow is out and fingers point skyward. Tiny creases and cracks on my brownish knuckles stare back like vein in redwood twigs. I easily melt my fingers onto hers until our hands and our grip is one boxing glove. Her painted fingernails wink at me.

She says, "Do it again, Ali."

This time we're in synch. We smile. Our grip is charged with energy I haven't felt in ages. She awakens a volcano of sexuality in me that I have to put away.



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Jay calls Marsha's name. My gaze falls on her tight little rump up three stairs and onto center stage. Marsha starts: "I am an explorer living for moments when my heart opens in new ways. Unknown depths most often found with people in conflict. Theirs or my own. Harsh edges and razor blades can have a way of pounding or slicing out humanity. I instinctively fear these places but am intuitively called back to their teaching grounds. My explorer loves new dimensions of understanding. And my soul is enlivened by the authenticity that is revealed."

Five minutes later Marsha closes to a roaring ovation.

By intermission Gene's commanding a crowd of anyone who'll listen to the frame job LAPD and Superior Court put on him. Not what I wanted or expected but I'll take it.

We eat lunch. We wrap the day with free talk. The visitors exit. We make a Soul Train line and send our Core Team off to rousing applause and high fives. I think everybody ekes out a tear or two today. Lifers. LWOPS. SHU kick-outs. Short-timers. Ms. M. Jan. Ron. Jay. Myself.

Back in the cell Gene's on his phone with Mom. He won't shut up about TED. I'm on Messenger. Marsha's green light is on.

I send a pair of eye emoji.

I'm happy to share in 2021 Jay is home on California's Senate Bill 9. I'm parole eligible by 2030 under Assembly Bill 1308. Gene's still knocking on the appeal court's door.

And none of us use, borrow, or promote contraband cellphone use in prison.

Larry "Ali" DeMinter, CDCR# [REDACTED] is currently incarcerated at CA Men's Colony. He is the author (under the penname **Ali Moseley**) of a novel *Broken Wing* and a chapbook *Words I Never Got Spoken: How I Remember Juvenile Hall*. His work also appears in *Silent Screams: Poems from Uncharted Territory*, and *ANTHOLOGY (as Larry DeMinter)* published by the William James Foundation.

Note: Please do use my pen name Ali Moseley; and okay to contact.