



## Reform School

by David Breitkopf

David recently had short stories published in *The Cynic* and in *Metazen*.

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I was sent to a reform school when I was a kid for stealing a mule. Actually, I just wanted to ride the mule but it took off and the cops finally flagged me down on the Long Island Expressway.

So they sent me to this reform school in upstate New York, and right away my roommate, Brutus, tried to intimidate me. He grabbed me by the shirt and lifted me up like a small dumbbell. And though I was angled with my feet above my head, I looked him right in the eye and said, “You don’t scare me.” You’ve got to show people whose boss.

This so unnerved Brutus that he stubbed me out like a cigarette in the ceramic ashtray he’d made that day. Fortunately for me, he neglected to fire it in the kiln so it fell apart before I did.

But I didn’t stay sore at my roomie for long. I knew I’d need his help. The scheme I was planning would require Brutus’ skill set. So I cultivated him, plied him with flattery, let him cheat off my tests, and stole desserts from the cafeteria for him.

Finally, when I knew I had his confidence, I broached the subject of escape. He looked at me, and I knew beyond a reasonable doubt that he was thinking. But then something broke over his face. Later, I would put two and two together and recognize this as his smile. He agreed to work with me. We shook on it, and he broke my pinkie.

The plan was brilliant in its simplicity. There was a weak spot in the wall of our cell, O.K., bedroom. Everyday after midnight, we sawed away at the spot with an emery board I made in shop class. Everyone else was making ashtrays, but I didn’t smoke, and convinced the teacher I was just trying to break a bad habit of biting my nails. The fool.

It took us about a month, and on the night of the planned escape Brutus and I waited breathlessly in our beds until the guard made his midnight round. We then slipped through the hole in the wall, and jumped the two stories down into the hawthorn bushes below. I still have a faint scarlet Z scar on my cheek from the thorns.

But there was no time to cry over spilt blood, we leapt to the ground and ran for freedom. We were nearly halfway to the barbed fence when we heard the alarms go off, but that just made me run faster. But then I had to slow down and wait for Brutus, who was finishing the

dessert I'd stolen for him: tiramisu.

When we reached the fence, the watchtower light swung over us momentarily blinding us. I looked back at my hell for the past four months, silhouetted like a wife scorned, and yelled, "So long suckers." Then turned to Brutus and said, "You know what to do."

Brutus picked me up and heaved me like a shot put into the air. I will never forget that exquisite sense of freedom I felt at that moment as I arced gracefully through the night, rather like a swordfish breaching into the air.

But then something went horribly wrong. In mid-flight I was suddenly stopped like a home run ball caught above the fence, or rather a swordfish mounted on a wall. I realized I was caught on the barbs of the fence, having in fact made it over the fence, though my pants at the last moment caught the final barb. I was dazed. The lights flashed violently all around me. The sirens blared over and over like an insane trombonist. Brutus was yelling behind me, but I couldn't make out what he was saying. It sounded like, "I want peanut butter and jelly," but even I knew he couldn't have been saying that.

I tried to climb out of my pants, which as it turns out is not so easy to do when you're dangling from a barbed wire fence. All I managed to do was twist around like a propeller. Eventually the guards reached us. They cut me down, though not before playing a game of airplane with me.

Brutus and I were tried and convicted. We were separated, and forbidden to speak to each other. The worst thing is they sadistically subjected me to making ashtrays for the remaining days of my incarceration. Thus, I was forced by my shop teacher to take up smoking.

Years later, after I became a model citizen (I do an occasional embezzlement for friends), I inquired about Brutus' whereabouts. He apparently had been sent to prison in upstate New York for stealing an armored truck. He hadn't changed much in all those years. Still brawn over brains: the cops caught him red-handed, pulling the truck along the Long Island Expressway.

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