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Train of Thought

Sheila J North

His feet are tennis-shoe clad bricks: as hard, heavy, and hot as the cement platform beneath them. He casts an envious look at a nearby sign depicting a blasé-looking man standing waist-deep in a pool, enjoying a cigarette.

What he wouldn't give to be in a pool now; what he would give to be anywhere but where he is now. He wishes, also, that he, too, were smoking a cigarette: it would give him something to do with his hands. They were beginning to twitch, an involuntary counterpoint to the nervous tic in his right eye.

But no, he doesn't have a single cigarette. He had thought about sneaking a pack or two into his bag, but what was the use? His smokes would probably have been stolen as soon as he got there. Besides, don't they confiscate all your personal stuff (cash, chewing gum, coomb, etc.) when you arrive?

He had forgotten to ask, and now it is too late. Everything is too late: his apology; his promise (real or feigned?) to change his ways. He had even cut his hair, but his attempt at portraying the clean-cut, All-American type had failed to make an impression. Caught before (this is not his first offence, or even his second), this time, they weren't letting him plead off, short back and sides or not.

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He glances at his watch (my God, will they take away his watch, too?), and sees the train is due any time now. Less than a minute to make a break for it, as if it were possible, as if there were any point. Besides, he asks himself, is it really going to be that bad? Some hard work, a fair amount of it in the fresh air, and the whole thing lasting more than a few months.

Yes, comes the answer, it is going to be that bad. He is going to be confined: subjected to the whims and controls of others, as helpless before them as a weed before the reaching fist of a gardener.

It's time. Moaning, the engine pulls up, leering its cowcatcher grin, pulling with it a load of unpleasant images: sleeping on an unfamiliar bed in close proximity to tens of hundreds of other guys; the ultimate in non-private shower and toilet facilities; quantity, not quality cooking.

The train cries again, more softly now, drawing him involuntarily forward, much the way a cobra is said to mesmerize its prey. He breaks into a fresh coat of sweat; feels a heavy, restraining hand on his shoulder. Someone is speaking to him.

“Goodbye, Jimmy. Be a good boy, have a nice time at summer camp, and remember your mother and I love you.”

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“Yes, Dad.”

The condemned man nods, and wipes his nose on the sleeve of his t-shirt.