

Nineteen days in the hole.

That's the longest stretch they can give a man. Any longer than that makes even the sanest bloke babble like a baby. It's the darkness you see, the black silent well that swallows you up when that second outer door slams shut.

When the first door closes, there are still four ribbons of light edging the cell entrance, not much I grant you, but sufficient to see your hand in front of your face, or to make out the dim square shape in the corner as your bunk. But a moment later, the second door closes too, entombing you in total darkness and absolute silence.

That's what sends men crazy.

Nineteen days they gave me. Plenty of time to reassess my attitude they said and maybe I'd be a better person for it. Hell, they said. Look at Barry Jamieson. Went into the hole a convicted child killer, came out a born again Christian begging the world's forgiveness. He'll be eligible for parole in two years.

So there is hope. A faint glimmer to catch hold of and keep alight for the next nineteen days.

Then perhaps they'll turn their attention to some other poor bastard.

### **Day One**

Two guards collect me from Cell Block C and escort me through the bluestone corridors to the hole. They tell me to strip off and change into a pair of thin cotton overalls, T-shirt, socks and slip on shoes with no laces.

The door to the cell stands open, three metres by two metres of grey concrete. An iron bunk bed along one wall but no bedding. A toilet pan in the corner with no seat or lid. One fluorescent tube way up in the ceiling encased in a metal grid.

That's it. Nothing more.

The warden arrives. He reads from a charge book.

“Prisoner 7703. You have been found guilty of a serious assault upon a fellow prisoner and have been sentenced to nineteen days incarceration in the maximum-security isolation unit. Conditions are as follows:

1. The prisoner shall receive three meals daily, which shall be passed to him through the food slot.

2. Use of lighting in the unit is restricted to three periods of twenty minutes per day coinciding with meal times. The cell shall remain dark at all other times.

3. After the last meal of the day, the prisoner shall receive his mattress, blanket and pillow. These items shall be surrendered again before breakfast the following day.

4. At no time shall the prisoner attempt to communicate with the officers on duty. Nor shall they communicate with him.

5. There will be no soap or razor privileges.

6. There will be no change of clothing for the duration of the sentence.”

The warden snaps the book shut.

“I suggest you use this time alone to search your soul and examine your conscience. Guards, place him in the cell.”

With that, he walks away.

The guard, the one known as Jerry, takes my elbow and manoeuvres me inside the cell. He hisses in my ear.

“I hope you suffer like hell you little piece of shit.”

The inner door clangs shut. Four ribbons of light remain just for a moment. Bang! The outer door closes.

Silence.

Blackness.

The hole.

I feel for the bunk edge and sit down. Its hardness shocks me and the metallic cold seeps through the thin cotton of my overalls.

I close my eyes, open them, close and open. It's darker when my eyes are open.

Reg Darcy, a lifer, gave me some advice about the hole.

“Don't waste your energy by shouting or banging. No one can hear you in there, it's soundproof. Just do your time quietly. Try to sleep as much as you can. Try to dream your way outa the hole cos you sure ain't gonna get outa there any other way.”

I get to thinking. What if I have a heart attack? Or my appendix bursts? Or something in my brain spurts blood? No one will hear me scream. I could die here in the hole and nobody will know.

### **Day Two**

The light snaps on, blinding me for a full minute. The door opens.

“Bedding.”

I gather up the blanket and pillow and hand them over.

“Mattress.”

That goes too.

The door closes again. Food slot slides open. Tray appears.

This is breakfast. Porridge. Slice of bread. Mug of tea.

I eat the porridge greedily and gulp down the tea but I save the bread for later, folding it in half and putting it in the front pocket of my overalls. I take a piss.

The food slot slides open and a hand beckons for the tray. I pass it back. The lights go out.

I close my eyes against the blackness and try to conjure up a warm beach in bright sunshine. The cold edge of my iron bunk makes it impossible.

### **Day Three**

Lunch is over and I am plunged once more into darkness. I have taken to singing old tunes, memories from childhood. It seems to bring me some comfort.

There was an old woman who lived in a shoe

She had so many children she didn't know what to do

I twist the button on my overalls round and round and round.

She gave them some broth without any bread

Whipped them all soundly and sent them to bed.

The cotton snaps and the button drops to the floor and rolls away.

I get down on all fours and crawl around the cell. My fingers are grey spiders searching the cold concrete for the button. Eventually I find it and grasp it tightly in my hand.

I toss the button into the air.

Crawling crawling, hunting the button.

Twenty three times I hunt the button, until the light snaps on and my dinner appears.

Broth without any bread. And a potato.

### **Day Four**

There was a crooked man  
Who walked a crooked mile  
And found a crooked world out there  
That sent him to his trial  
He copped a crooked judge  
Who tried a crooked case  
Banged up inside a prison  
What an awful shitful waste.

I rub the prickly growth on my chin, take a piss, clean my teeth with my fingernails, do thirty push-ups, nibble on the bread saved from breakfast, then hunt the button seventeen times. Eleven times the button rolls under my bunk. Not once does it roll into a corner.

### **Day Five**

I have discovered that if I clench my eyes shut for long enough, eventually a tiny pinprick of light appears on the inside of my eyelids. If I concentrate on this glimmer it grows and grows until there is a large expanse of white light behind my eyes, like a movie screen.

Now I can play any film I like, rewinding the good bits again and again.

There's my Dad in a grainy black and white home movie. He's wearing a hat, throwing back his head and grinning at the camera with that dazzling smile of his.

There are kids swinging on a tyre and beady-eyed chooks peering out of their ramshackle pen.

Is that singing starting up? Mum in an apron carrying a cake on a wooden tray.

Happy Birthday to you, Happy Birthday to you.

Six candles.

Come on son, a big blow. Hip Hip Hooray. Make a wish now.

What did I wish for?

A bike probably. Or a shiny red scooter.

### **Day Six**

It is beginning to stink in here. They pass in a bucket of water every couple of days to chuck down the pan, but it's hardly enough. I rinse my face, armpits and groin in the water before it goes into the toilet, but my body is starting to reek and there's a putrid taste of decay in my mouth.

### **Day Seven**

Dance to your Daddy

My little babby

Dance to your Daddy, my little lamb

You shall have a fishy

In a little dishy

You shall have a fishy

When the boat comes in.

Clench the eyes shut and concentrate.

A heaving ocean swell and the sound of men's voices carried on the spray. I'm huddled in the cabin, ten years old and shivering with the taste of salt on my lips. There's buckets seething with grey greasy fish slapping their tails against each other. My father empties out the bait jar over the side of the boat and I imagine the sharks circling below, black shapes that twist and turn in the icy water. One of the men yells

at me to get cleaning the fish. He hands me a heavy wooden scaler and a large knife. My hands are frozen stiff and I let the fish slip onto the deck. It flip-flops around on the timber slats and I stumble after it, sliding in the sticky wet mess. The men all laugh at me and suddenly I need to be sick.

As I lean over the side, the boat heaving and lurching, I see a dark shadow moving below me.

It is the shadow of fear itself.

### **Day Eight**

Today there is a piece of glass in my porridge. I may have swallowed some without knowing. If my insides start bleeding, that'll be the death of me. I suspect Jerry is the culprit, or the boss man, Morgan. I must sift through all my food very carefully from now on, in case they try something else.

I hunt the button fifty one times.

### **Day Nine**

Ring-a-ring o' roses  
A pocket full of posies  
A-tishoo A-tishoo we all fall down.

A darkened room.

Floral wallpaper and my mother's shape in the bed, rising and falling with each shallow breath. My father pushes me forward, his fingers firmly on my back, and I see my mother's face against the pillow, thin and pale, her hair fanned out like weed. She whispers something I cannot hear and I kiss her cold cheek, murmuring love and fear in the same breath. Her eyes are opaque pools full of shadows where death tries to hide its frightful face.

She smiles up at me in a final gesture of love.

### **Day Ten**

I have lost the button. Ten times I crawl around the cell, scraping my hands across the cold floor, feeling every slight variation in the concrete's texture, covering every square inch again and again.

Nothing.

My need for the button is as strong as hunger.

I slump onto the bunk, my chest heaving, spluttering in the godforsaken darkness, the sobs rising up to the ceiling like small storm clouds.

### **Day Eleven**

I cannot stop shivering.

I huddle underneath the iron bunk and try to make myself small.

### **Day Twelve**

If that mocking bird won't sing

Daddy's going to buy you a diamond ring

There's a huge pair of iron gates and a tall iron picket fence surrounding the place. Dad's got hold of my hand and he carries my small suitcase in his other hand. His face is grimly resolute. Our shoes crunch on the gravel as we approach the front verandah. He does not speak until we reach the door.

"It won't be forever matey," he says and hugs me close. "Just until I can get things organized."

Later, a boy asks me why I'm in the orphanage if I've got a father.

I tell him I won't be here for long.

### **Day Thirteen**

I find the button. It is wedged between two metal slats on the bunk. I cry a little until the lights snap off.

When the boys came out to play

Georgie Porgie ran away

There is a circle of boys surrounding me, ugly angry boys who kick hard with their black boots, who hit hard with their fists, who spit words and snot and venom. Then they run away and I can see my reflection in the blood that has pooled on the asphalt. I am thirteen years old. There has been no visit from my father.

**Day Fourteen**

There is a note on my meal tray. It reads:

*Has the hole swallowed you up you little shithead?*

I laugh and tear the note into strips.

Jerry again? Or maybe one of Morgan's boys.

Whatever. I couldn't give a rat's arse anymore.

**Day Fifteen**

The knave of hearts he stole the tarts

And took them clean away

The keys are right there in the ignition. Try the door.

It's locked.

Of course it's locked. Smash the window. Break the glass. C'mon hurry up.

Splinters of glass glinting in the moonlight and then we're driving and laughing through city streets, faster and faster, no coppers to be seen. Rip out the radio, clean out the console, dump the car.

Easy. Too easy.

Afterwards we share a few beers.

Like real mates.

**Day Sixteen**

How would you like to swing on a star

Carry moonbeams home in a jar

Living rough they call it, down by the river, thieving out of bins, huddled round fires, keeping one step ahead of the authorities. Gotta be ready to move on, bundle up your stuff and move along. Sleeping under bridges, in doorways, in parks. Gotta be careful. There's people out there who'll smash your legs with an iron bar or mess up your face with a broken bottle given half a chance. Stick with the blokes you trust boy and steer clear of strangers.

### **Day Seventeen**

Jack fell down and broke his crown

It was self-defence I swear to God. He came at me stupid bastard came at me with a knife. I know it was a knife cos I saw its blade flash in the moonlight, saw it slice through the night air, felt the air part in front of my face, so I pushed him and he tripped and he must have hit his head on the concrete but I didn't mean to kill him I swear to God.

Manslaughter

Slaughterman

All the king's horses and all the king's men

Fifteen years you bastards

Fifteen stinking years.

### **Day Eighteen**

Little Jack Horner lay in a corner

Lay there wishing I was dead, with my insides aching and my prison issue overalls down round my ankles, face to the wall, eyes closed tight, Morgan and his boys laughing, crooning in my ear, their hands on my wrists, their weight on my back, weighing me down, taking it in turns, eyes shut, legs spread, do what you're told and we'll look after you, be a good boy and Morgan will take care of you, Morgan takes good care of all his boys, that's a pretty little arse you've got son and now it belongs to me.

Dance to your Daddy, my little babby.

I take a metal file from the workshop and fashion it into a spike.

In for a penny, in for a pound.

Morgan gets what's coming and I get nineteen days in the hole.

Can't ever put Humpty together again.

**Day Nineteen**

## WARDEN'S REPORT:

April 6<sup>th</sup>

Prisoner 7703 completed his nineteen-day sentence this morning at 9am.

I was present along with two other duty officers when the doors to his cell were opened. The prisoner had hanged himself with a rope made from the torn strips of his overalls. This rope was attached to the metal grid in the ceiling. It is not clear how the prisoner managed to reach the grid, but a water bucket was present on the floor of the cell and may have been used to assist him in his endeavour.

The two officers cut his body down immediately and checked for vital signs, but there were none. The prison doctor was summoned and he declared the prisoner dead at 9.17am.

Whilst this death is unfortunate, it was impossible to foresee and therefore to prevent. I recommend that the Prison Authority remove the metal grid from the ceiling of the Maximum Security Isolation Unit to prevent any future suicide attempts.

End of Report.