

SHINE BRIGHT

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I am just myself. An individual, at times lost within the entirety of the masses. Comfortable in the identity that I subscribe to: the entity of self, of myself. I'm also a card-carrying member of many groups, floating in and out, trying each on before usually discarding. "I" transforms into "we" when I hear: American, Woman, Daughter, Smith, Mother, Gemini, White, Felon, Inmate, College Graduate, Beach Bum, Nerd, Privileged, Hoodrat, Valley girl, Addict, Leader, Follower, Fan, Leftie, Thick girl, Wine Lover, Warrior, Advocate, or Basket Case.

I'm not always a willing member of the group, but there are instances when stereotypes clear the pathway and throw me on in. Mentally, I could toss a coin to decide my reasoning; heads, I love to debate; tails, I strongly shy away from conformity. "Anti-group" might in fact be the collective by which I'm most inclined to define myself. In the end, I'm just not too crazy about defining myself through a group lens. I'm the anomaly in most groups. I can speak like the natives do if placed amidst a colony of valley girls; with little-to-no effort I'd be welcomed into the flock, of that I've no doubt. Focus in a bit though, and notice I'm thick, especially compared to the cookie cutter Brittany and Becky. On paper, it gets even worse: felon (check), inmate (check). Then the final nail in the coffin: I'm a nerd who moonlights as a hoodrat? Not really the true blue, "NuGammaDelta4Life" type of member after all.

My group, however, takes its membership so seriously that an "ex" will become attached if the label becomes outdated. I will forever be a member, we all will be, and those few who hold the power ensure that we will remember our place. We are a growing population, diverse and inclusive; once you join us, it's a lifetime affiliation: gang-gang, blood in/blood out, with us or against us type of commitment.

We are different. Our walk: so smooth, so sure footed; the experience of traversing through hell can be spotted by a kindred spirit. Our talk: those uninitiated would need a translator to understand. Bam Bam, meatwads, blue tags, kite writers, cord-b, lugs—the code that only we can decipher. The lens through which we view things: altered. Being treated like rotting decay, our vision became crystal. Recognize that each of us is part of the WE made up of hustlers and go-getters; we make something out of nothing on the daily; we turn mud into diamonds flaw-

lessly. The pressure designed to break us, only bends us, our flex. Through sheer perseverance, it becomes encrypted into our base programming, coded through our DNA. That drive we have: our legacy.

We *all* have had our backs pressed against a wall. We've cried tears borne of frustration, taking up the smallest space possible in the filthy holding cell of the county jail, unable to ignore where this path could end. We've learned, carefully, how to gauge speaking up when witnessing our brethren being verbally dressed down by staff, tackled to the ground by full grown men, and being handcuffed so tightly bruises score the wrists.

We've carried the weight that bows our shoulders in response to the prosecutor's allegations: rubbing my son's back softly while he sleeps in his crib, disfigured into propaganda slung at me, the reasoning for ending the life of the child inside me; heroin rubbed in our face while the jury watches silently, urging them to scream guilty and push us on the bus to intake at WHV; the intentional repression of my identity as Ashleigh Smith, forcing me instead to embody inmate 698500. Yes, we know tragedy as well as trauma.

We evolved, learning to sleep comfortably on our three-inch thick mattress; multiplying countless variations of the art of preparing a pack of ramen, Chinese fried with sweet mustard glaze is, hands down, the winner; building honorary families to laugh, cry, celebrate, and grieve alongside. We realized the strength residing in us, individually and as a whole; smiling at those harsh words that once cut so deep; finding kernels of humor inside this hell and remembering to let go and laugh; refusing ever to just lay down and suffer quietly. With each moment we honed our very selves, becoming a *we*, with hands held steady, now thriving in the midst of any pressure.

On the individual level as an inmate, I often feel alone, invisible, and misunderstood. Side note: maybe inmates and emo-tweens are actually kindred spirits, must research. I have a deep rooted and unwavering sense of loyalty to my community; I am you, you are me. I've jokingly stated my position on things as Team Criminal when debating various prison related topics with staff, who are always representing Team Cop, for the record. In all seriousness, though, the continued marginalization of my community is a subject I don't play about. I feel that the trajectory of my life placed me here to equip me with tools I need to become a catalyst for change. I will continue to voice the largely unknown horrors I've experienced and stood witness to throughout my incarceration. I will always strive to humanize, on the individual level, the persons that make up the mass of incarceration. I will eradicate the commonly portrayed drug addled, whoring, thieving enigma and build in its place the unassuming, hardworking, and law-abiding individual that is the more accurate representation of the returning citizen. I will illustrate to the

majority that there is focused intention to oppress us by keeping us within the confines of this group. I will let people see how we are forced to compete blindfolded against those who see, barefooted against properly shod, always separate and for damn sure not equal.

What is the point of all of this? Why is this planned, implemented, buried, and ignored? Why do the faceless few that wield power perpetuate this caste-like system in our democratic society? It's quite simple, really. In order for those few to hold onto to their perceived power and remain at the top, there must be a population targeted to be systematically down, for their power to be lorded over. Our resistance and resilience sickens them, makes their hearts race, their palms sweat; it puts all the tics from their nervous fear on display. Holding us down, first with chains, then with labels, out of self-preservation assures them security. This urgent, overzealous, intentional, systematic oppression that we endure, all of this focused pressure they try to break us with, it doesn't work.

Realization shakes them to their core. We become diamonds. Yes, diamonds. We are multifaceted, tough, and hardened. Whatever we find ourselves up against will most assuredly break before we will. We will draw attention to ourselves time and time again because we shine bright. That is what we do and what we will continue to do, shine so damn bright.