FIRST MINUTES OF FREEDOM

WITHOUT GATEKEEPERS

Getting released from prison can be one of the happiest moments for some. But that joy can fade quickly when the realities of life in the free world take hold. The reality is that most have great fear about facing the world — and failure — once again. $50 in cash is what you’re handed when you’re released from prison. You walk out at 5pm and look around. Not much seems different — hopefully it’s different enough to keep you from a repeat performance.

You head toward your aunt’s house. It’s the address you gave Case Management. Most of your family and friends rejected you after hearing about this “trip” to prison but you hope she will let you stay a few nights. As you walk the streets and ride the bus, familiar faces from your past — drug users, dealers and prostitutes — you are immediately confronted with temptation. You might even be offered the opportunity to make a deal that will increase your start-up funding by at least tenfold: just sell a little crack.

You get to your aunt’s house at 7pm only to find out she will not let you stay the night, or any night. She makes you a sandwich and sends you away. You throw your laundry bag containing your prison possessions (a few changes of underwear, socks, and t-shirts and maybe a fan and some shower shoes) over your shoulder and leave.

You’re hungry, but money is tight. The dollar menu at McDonalds is your lean cuisine — $45 left.

It’s getting dark. You look around for a place to sleep for the night and find some bushes and trees in the nearby park that you think you can crawl into and not be seen by the cops. It’s summer time and won’t get too cold at night and it doesn’t look like it is going to rain.

An ambulance siren wakes you at 5:00 a.m. It’s the next morning, time for your first parole visit ... can’t be late or you’ll get revoked. You’re not familiar with the bus system and it takes you 30 minutes to plan your route. One wrong move will cost you time, money and maybe your freedom. One dollar, five busses and three hours later, you arrive at the parole office just in time. You anxiously wait for two hours before you are called in to see your parole officer. She isn’t rude, but she sure isn’t welcoming you with open arms. $14 in parole fees are due. $31 left.
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It’s past lunch by the time you leave parole. You are starving. McDonalds again. $26 left. You use the McDonalds bathroom to clean up a little bit. You search the neighborhood for a thrift store. No one will hire you if you are wearing the ill-fitting clothes you wore walking out of prison. You find dress pants, a shirt, a tie and a pair of shoes at the local thrift store for $10. $16 left.

You are dedicated enough to find a local unemployment center that offers computers to start your job search. Tomorrow you will hit the streets and fill out applications after you apply for food stamps. Five days until you owe $300, or you’ll be considered for eviction. No address = parole violation = bad. No dinner tonight, need to conserve money. You head back to the park for the night.

The next day is a total waste. You spend $3 in bus fares ($13 left) and 12 hours in line at the Food Stamp office, and you walk away empty-handed. If only you would have known to arrive when the line started forming at 4:00 a.m. No food stamps, no job, but you need some food and get a loaf of bread and jar of peanut butter. $8 left.

Morale is taking a nose-dive as you head back to the park again. You have one clean set of underwear and socks left.

The rejection you receive job-searching the next day is brutal. The bus rides costs money ($6 left) and time, and HR people do not take kindly to felons. One office even escorted you out with security guards. You have been out four days, and you’re not even close to a job lead. Hunger strikes again and all you can get is a candy bar. $5 left.

At the bus stop on the way back to the park, a shady character offers a deal that is hard to refuse. You’re an expert at selling dope. Go forward with your $5 or revert to a life of fast money? Which would you choose?

—Keith Roys