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Wade: Getting Over the Mountains

Getting Over the Mountains

Marvin Wade

It was my first time headed up north, and I was shackled to a gang member, jostling for legroom. I thought to myself, *He has the aisle seat; I got the window seat. If he bangs against my leg with his leg one more time, I'm just going to shoulder him out of his seat.* He must have read my mind or felt my energy because that was the last time he tried to bully me in the connected two seats we shared.

We were headed to Downstate Correctional Facility, which most referred to as “Downstate.” I found this comical, though, because to us, anything past the Bronx was known as “Up North.” On we rode in silence; for the most part, I lost myself in thought as the mountains came into view. But despite being lost to the passing world outside of the bus, I occasionally had to remember where I was. The guy I was shackled to had a few of his homies with him on the prison bus. I was by myself, a neutral. With no other “bout it” neutrals on the bus with me, I had a feeling that once we got Downstate, they were all going to move on me. But just in case, I was ready for him and his boys if it popped off.

In November of 1994, at the age of 24, I was arrested and detained at the Brooklyn House of Detention on a charge of second-degree murder. I thought it was all a game, and I believed I would be going home soon. I held on to this belief even as I was being transported on a bus to Rikers Island. The ride had no impact on me at the time. I was truly naive to it all. I took it all as a joke. I took life as a joke. Nothing seemed real to me at this point. A year later, at the age of 25, I was convicted and sentenced to 25 years to

life. Now here I was leaving Rikers Island on a bus traveling north. I was about to leave everything I had and everyone I loved behind me. It was then that reality began to set in for me. Not until I was sitting shackled on that prison bus that cold December day in 1995, leaving Rikers for Downstate, did I begin to accept that this shit was real!

I remember trying to savor all the things that passed me by as I looked through the gated window. The people, vehicles, buildings...you name it, I tried to absorb it all. The fact that I was linked at the ankle by a small chain to a 250-pound gangbanger didn't make grasping it all easy for me. He and I didn't speak to one another except for when he asked me, “What you claiming?” I told him, “I'm neutral.” I guess it was based on my neutrality that he first began to leg jostle, but that wasn't happening. What a lot of bangers and neutrals found out throughout my bid was that I was no sucker. So he and I ended up having a very uncomfortable ride, with lots of dirty looks, leg positioning, and indirect comments by him to his homies on the bus. I ignored him and just stared out the window at the ugly-looking mountains. Damn, I missed the skyscrapers already.

There wasn't much violence either of us could do to the other at this point, what with our being shackled at the ankles and handcuffed at the wrists. I was prepared for a fight with this brother and his homies as soon as we reached Downstate and were released from our restraints, but after a few more dirty looks at each other after we landed, we went our separate ways. Three days later, he was stabbed in the neck by a fellow banger

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but survived. That was one of the first acts of brutal stabbing I would witness upstate, while on the island there were mostly slashings and fights. This was the start of an entirely new world for me.

For the next twenty-five years, I never traveled back to the city. Instead, when I traveled, it was from prison to prison. No skyscrapers. Only mountains. I hated the view of the mountains. The trips were so stressful. Before every trip, I would be handcuffed in the front and ankle-cuffed to another prisoner. The cuffing in the front wasn't with just the handcuffs themselves; the link of the cuffs was encased in a small metal box that allowed for no flexibility or movement of the wrist, just pure torture for the hours of the bus ride. You ate with these cuffs on, and even if you had to take a piss (in the bathroom in the back of the bus), you had to do it with the cuffs on and with your ankle-mate still attached to you just outside the bathroom door. So inhumane.

During these trips I would also always worry about whether all my property would make it with me—my pictures, food, clothing, and footwear. I had only about three bags of property, but they were all I had and were everything to me. Some guys traveled with six or seven bags. Anything over three bags, you had to pay for shipping. Your property traveled either with you on the bus you were on or on a separate bus. It would all be scrutinized and processed by the correctional officers from the prison you were leaving and then scrutinized and processed by the correctional officers of your new facility. They would be helped by other prisoners. You always traveled with the possibility of an officer looking out for his pet prisoner by of-

fering him a few of your items as a gift or the conniving efforts of some prisoners to take things from you on their own. Your property was always at risk; I was robbed a few times, usually of sneakers. With all these things to think about and deal with on this ride, the mountains were usually all you saw outside the window. Their presence felt to me to be the proverbial “welcome mat” on the way into the abyss. I despised them.

In 2019 I was granted parole after twenty-five years incarcerated. I was now in Fishkill Correctional Facility. About 40 days before I was to be released, I was told I was going to be transferred to a minimum-security prison called Queensboro Correctional Facility in Long Island City in Queens.

In the morning, a handful of other brothers and I were preparing for our trip to Queensboro. I was pinching myself to see if I was dreaming. I really couldn't believe I was headed back to the city and going home. The bus ride to Queensboro was a trip I'll never forget. While watching the last of the mountains pass me by as we made our way to the city, I frowned in hatred at them. They towered above me with a smirk, it seemed, tempting me to put my middle finger up to the window at them, but instead I just turned my head down in the direction of my lap in deep thought. I hated those mountains. Memories of all the torment I had experienced and witnessed in all the prisons I had been in flooded my consciousness. The mountains reminded me of all those things. They reminded me of all the different prisons I had been transferred to. They reminded me of the many painful trips from Sing Sing Correctional Facility to Westchester County Hospital for my herniated disc.

And they reminded me of all the times I had stood in the middle of the prison yard wondering if I'd ever make it out alive, surrounded by barbed wire fences, a concrete wall, and the mountains in the backdrop. So I couldn't wait until those mountains were no longer in my peripheral vision and were behind me, literally and figuratively, along with all the prisons of upstate New York.

When the familiar buildings first came into view as we entered the Bronx, laughter was shared and tears were shed by all. Some guys more familiar with the area pointed out the schools we passed, or the parks. "Yo, that's Shoelace Park!" yelled E Money, a longtime Bronx resident. Finally coming home after 30 years. I thought about all the brothers on this bus ride and how together we all probably totaled over 300 years incarcerated. That's when my tears started. It was so unbelievable. No more fucking mountains! On my trip from Rikers to Downstate, enemies had unfortunately been formed on that bus filled with so much uncertainty, fear, and anger. But on this bus back into the city, with freedom only days away, forever friendships were forged. E Money was being paroled to the Bronx; I told him that my cousin lived in the Bronx. So we made plans to hang out and toast to freedom once settling in. And that was exactly what we did after meeting up at the Fortune Society building in Queens (the location of an organization that helped returning citizens with their transitions home). We didn't go to a bar to toast; we simply went to the corner deli. He grabbed a Diet Pepsi and I grabbed a bottle of water, and we toasted to freedom. What a moment. What a trip. It was a bus ride wrapped in hope, joy, and optimism. Things

that had been lost among us all for so many years were found on that road to freedom.

I was finally released on November 14, 2019, a day I will never forget. A beautiful overcast Thursday. Breezy, not cold. I wore a black cotton hooded sweatshirt with pants to match. A white T-shirt underneath the sweatshirt and a pair of black Timberland boots on my feet. I kept it simple and inexpensive. Didn't care about going home in style, just wanted to go home.

I waited in anticipation for my name to be called to sign out, grab my documents and property, and head on out the door. It seemed like forever. I still at times thought I was dreaming. Because over the years in prison I had always had dreams of being released only to have it turn into a nightmare when the CO's couldn't locate my paperwork, the doors wouldn't open up to the outside, or someone would force me into a fight and I'd be brought back into the cell block—you name it, I dreamed it. So the longer they took to call my name, the more worried I got. Then finally I heard the CO yell out, "Marvin Wade!" Other prisoners who were still waiting to be released clapped in celebration. I went into the office, signed my release papers, grabbed my documents and property (just my hair clippers, pictures, and all the short stories I had written over the years), and headed toward the door to freedom.

The facility sat right on the corner of Van Dam Street in Queens. Thousands of people passed by this building every day who probably didn't know it was a minimum-security prison. As I approached the front door, I could see my mother through the plexiglass window in the door, pacing back and forth

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on the corner across the street. Unbelievable. *Please don't be a dream*, I said to myself. "Good luck," said the CO as he swung open the door for me. "Thank you," I said in return. My mother's beaming face as she watched me walk through those doors is forever etched in my memory. I still don't remember how I made it across the street to where my mother stood along with my brother and his wife. Did I run? Did I jog? Did I fly? I don't know. I definitely don't believe I walked. But what I do remember is the long and tight embrace my mother and I shared. It wasn't only 25 years for me but 25 years for her as well. This day was long overdue.

Seeing that my mother and I didn't want to let go of one another, my brother and his wife eventually joined in with a group hug. What a beautiful moment.

My first meal was two Big Macs and fries from McDonald's. It felt as if it took me three hours to finish that meal. I thought the workers there would eventually ask us to leave, but they didn't. Every bite of the meal tasted the way I had dreamed it would taste, and I wanted to savor it.

Before heading home and sharing long embraces with my stepfather and my nieces and nephew, we went to my sister's burial site. My sister Donnette had passed away from cancer in 2017, a few weeks after her fiftieth birthday. She had been my light. She had been there for me emotionally more than anyone else. I had been able to share things with her that I couldn't with anyone else. I'd received a letter from her almost every week. Whenever I was at my breaking point, there would be a letter from her to lift me back up. At her burial site in Brooklyn, I thanked her for being there for me and for

all her letters that had gotten me through so many dark days. My sister not being there to share in my joy was and still is my only pain after my release. I told her how much I loved and missed her and held myself tight in my own embrace, saying softly to her, "I made it home, Sis. I made it home."

In the summer of 2020, I met a beautiful young lady with whom I shared a great few months. She knew that after just coming home after so many years, I wasn't ready to be in a committed relationship; I was honest with her about that. But she was a free-spirited being with her own light, so the openness we agreed to have in our relationship was mutual. It was a beautiful and unforgettable summer and fall. I learned so much more about life and the world from "My Ecuadorian Goddess," a title she loved. To this day we are still great friends. On one hot summer morning, we were leaving my cousin's house in the Bronx trying to decide where to eat breakfast. She loved to travel, loved to drive. She said to me, "Hey, I know a Mexican restaurant upstate, great food and music—let's go there and eat." The minute she said "upstate," I thought of mountains. *No way*, I said to myself, and I immediately shot down that idea and suggested we just eat there in the Bronx. But she was insistent: "I'm tired of eating from the same old places. Let's try something new."

"But they're not old to me, babe," I pleaded. "I mean, we can even go down into Manhattan or Brooklyn. There's plenty of places to eat in the city."

"But I don't want to eat in the city," she pouted beautifully. "I want to eat upstate somewhere." After about a five-minute back-and-forth, I grudgingly agreed to go

dine upstate at a place called Maya Cafe and Cantina in Fishkill.

I was quiet as she drove. This was the start of the third most impactful trip of my life. As the mountains neared, I began to get anxious. She asked me if I was okay. I nodded yes, but I wasn't. It was then I knew that my dear friend was deliberately trying to help me to heal. I had spoken to her during the summer about my hatred of the mountains.

She loved the outdoors. She had worked at one time as a travel agent. She knew all the best deals and discounts and took full advantage of her opportunity to travel all over the world, showing me the pictures from all the places she'd been, from the illuminated caves of Mexico to the beautiful beaches of Saint-Tropez in France. She adored and appreciated nature, from the mountains to the trees to the birds to the ocean. She would always try to convince me of their beauty. But I guess because I couldn't be free to truly appreciate the beauty and blessings of these things, I rebelled against them, especially the mountains. "There's no beauty in the mountains," I would say to her.

But I was wrong.

That hot summer morning as we drove up to Fishkill, I finally began to see the beauty in all of nature. The birds as they flew above...the flow of the Hudson River when we passed it...but especially the mountains. Those mountains. I can't pinpoint specifically what it was that sparked my sudden appreciation of them. I can just remember not turning away from their majestic presence and truly taking them in rock by rock, sort of the same way I had tried to take in all the people, places, and things on that gloomy bus ride from Rikers to upstate

back in '95, face by face, street sign by street sign, building by building. But I was taking it all in this time in a way that felt as if I was gaining something in my life and not losing anything. I sat up in my seat and admired the strength and depth of these peaceful giants. I took pictures as we drove by. I realized as I clicked away that I had hated something I had never truly known and had always associated with loss and the prison system, a system in which I had experienced and witnessed so much pain and sorrow within. The mountains had never done me any harm, and yet I had hated them with the same fire I had against the system that had enslaved me and kept me far away from my loved ones. But on that day I saw their beauty and felt the spirit of these massive beings. I no longer hated the mountains; I loved them, I appreciated them. We enjoyed a great meal at the Mexican restaurant and even ended up staying overnight at a nearby hotel. We drove and drove further upstate during the night, just taking in and appreciating the sights and sounds that encompassed us. The moonlit sky; the summer night breeze through our windows; the sound of life in the air that for so long in my life had been filled with sounds of despair, hopelessness, and at times dead silence. My friend told me as we drove around, "You are free, Marvin. You are free!" I laughed in agreement. She laughed. The mountains laughed as well. I was finally truly free.

We are constantly in motion. Even as we sit still, we are moved, sometimes seemingly without a purpose, but always with the meaning of it all in the end. Life is a trip. Just pay attention to the signs along the way. It's your only chance to make it back home.