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Old Folsom Prison—East Gate

James M. Thorne

One approaches the east gate at Old Folsom in an old, blue school bus that ferries visitors from the modern check-in facility, past the faceless, gray concrete panels of New Folsom, and then turns left along the massive, hewn-granite walls that march down the hill to the east gate. The bus pauses periodically along this descent and inches over three speed bumps set in the asphalt for some obscure administrative reason.

I wonder aloud as to whether the staff had once used this odd stretch of road as a drag strip as we hunch up our muscles to absorb what the old bus's springs gave up absorbing years ago. My wife simply shrugs her shoulders and watches gray granite slide past the window.

At the turn of the century, when the state of California began looking for a new prison site, the local granite around Folsom attracted their attention. Hard labor was considered to be redeeming in and of itself, and so the prison grew as the prisoners walled themselves in with ancient stone and redemptive labor.

At the bottom of the hill, the bus makes a wide U-turn to the left and parks opposite the gate. Disembarking, we get our first full view of it.

Dante would have loved it. Hand-hewn out of the granite by those early prisoners, the gate has character—it's a minor architectural wonder. Imposing, Romanesque, medieval, it has anchored the northeast corner of the perimeter wall for the better part of a century. Yet there is a studied, deliberate asymmetry to it that is curiously modern. The main arch on the left, with its frowning stone portcullis and iron gate, is balanced on the right with the corbelled and witch-hatted watchtower. Contrawise, the small personnel gate on the right, with its own arch springing from the haunch of the main arch, is balanced on the left with a great iron lantern that may



Folsom State Prison, Folsom, California.

or may not have ever given light, but seems so appropriately placed that the gate would be incomplete without it.

There is a cartouche above the personnel door that says “FSP,” for Folsom State Prison. A small sign adjacent to the door states, in English and Spanish, that firearms, drugs, and explosives are not allowed. No sign tells one to “abandon hope, all ye who enter,” but the grim massif of the gate and the portent of what it symbolizes are not encouraging.

The gate is not unphotogenic. The authorities are proudly aware of it and keep the area well landscaped, and have even designated a spot up the hill for the taking of pictures, although cameras are not allowed to visitors going inside. Hollywood discovered the gate, however, and the footage of it pops up both on television and on the screen from time to time. The 1979 movie, *The Jericho Mile*, about prisoner Larry “Rain” Murphy, who ran a 3:52:09 mile on an Olympic qualifying track built for him in the main yard by his fellow prisoners, was filmed in its entirety at Folsom Prison, with many of the prisoners as actors and extras. A substantial portion of Edward James Olmos’s gritty little film *American Me* was filmed at Old Folsom, again with some of the guards posing as extras for the film. Some of the opening sequences to *Frankie and Johnny* were photographed at the

east gate, and *America's Most Wanted* featured Old Folsom on one of its programs.

In the movie *Frankie and Johnny*, Al Pacino is shown jumping back and forth inside and outside of the large gate upon his release. In reality, that gate is a vehicle gate, and all personnel enter and exit through the smaller gate on the right. Here, the sense of the medieval is heightened on passing through. If the gate is an iron maw, the antechamber inside is its stone gullet. Tiny and dimly lit, the antechamber reveals nothing but stone and iron—there is no softness anywhere—and spider webs and exposed plumbing decorate the unlit ceilings. In the winter, a single radiant space heater takes the chill off only those who are directly under it.

We wait patiently in line until a guard within a bullet-proof glass cell determines that all other doors and gates are closed and locked and finally pushes the button to allow us to enter the final screening room. This room is every bit as small as the antechamber, but has white, plastered walls and even a ceiling. Central to the room is a metal detector, which is sensitive enough to detect underwire bras and metal buttons and to send disgruntled visitors back to their cars to make clothing adjustments. My wife and I learned early to dress simply and nonmetallically. We remove our watches, and I remove my belt, and we put them in our shoes, which now sit on the counter awaiting inspection. Stocking-footed, we pass through the detector undetected and now wait for our shoes and watches and my belt to catch up with us.

When we are fully dressed again and have answered to a roll call, we accompany the guard out the rear door and into the bright and welcome sunlight of the inner yard. We are told to walk in pairs and in line, and, like schoolchildren, we descend the hill from the gate toward the visiting area, our eyes anxious and searching. (There! I think that's him—tall, with blonde hair. Does he see us yet?)

Posted regulations inform us that we are allowed one embrace and one kiss, and that our visit will be terminated if we try to squeeze any more love than that out of our visit. I let my wife receive the kiss and the hug and we look around for a free table and chairs. (He looks good—he's been working out. He'll probably tell us what he can press.)

Most inmates do bulk up while serving time. Weights were popular—part of survival training. (I wish I didn't have to think about that.) The outside public seemed to worry about this from time to time. The idea of brawny ex-cons out on parole bothered them, and “tough on crime” politicians regularly attacked weight-training within the prisons. The inmates were puzzled by this. “What are we going to do? Walk into a bank, flex our bicep, and demand money?”

Prison administrators, for a while, walked the balance. Weight piles gave a necessary outlet for energy, and they also allowed inmates to gain a certain amount of respect—a hands-off type of respect. Nevertheless, sensitive to criticism that they were running “country clubs,” the wardens and administrators no longer allow the weights. The prisoners adapt by doing push-ups with someone sitting on their backs or squats with someone on their shoulders. (Country clubs! I wish people could only see. I wish that they could feel the bureaucratic arrogance that reduces men to numbers, to nonpeople. The same pettiness that allots one hug and one kiss—prison regulations that tell you how much you can love and no more.)

We talk and eat. Vending machines supply sandwiches and snacks although there are nearly always long lines. There are some microwave ovens with their long lines as well. Conversation centers on family and friends—less and less about old friends from outside, and more and more about cellmates and workout partners. I worry sometimes about this acclimatization. Home is not here—it can’t ever be here! But maybe he faces reality better than I do. He points out one of the more famous inmates, a handsome young man sitting with a pretty girl; he was convicted in the Los Angeles Billionaire Boys Club case. The waste of such beauty depresses me.

He mentions that a bishop from one of the Folsom wards comes in regularly to visit him and often brings in freshly baked brownies or banana bread. This is absolutely forbidden—contraband—and not allowed in, period. Who knows what drugs the good bishop’s wife could slip into the recipe. But the Catholic priest, who is in charge of church visits, sees the Tupperware under the books and winks at the guard and tells him not to look too closely. The treats taste especially good because they are contraband.

He requests a subscription to *National Geographic*. The magazine is quite popular within the prisons. I am somewhat bemused by this. I love *National Geographic* myself and can understand that there is a certain amount of escapism between its pages—“far away places with strange-sounding names” is the way the song goes. But he explains that the magazine is small enough to slip in underneath your shirt, but thick enough to stop a knife blade, and I am brought back to reality with unpleasant abruptness. (How can one live like this! My heart hurts just to think about it. The check goes out to *National Geographic* as soon as we get home.)

The loudspeaker blares out that, due to overcrowding, some visits will be terminated, and we listen for his name to be called. When it finally is, we get up, yield our table and chairs to another family, and go to the gate for our regulatory hug and kiss. I suppose, now that our visit is already terminated, my wife could steal a second kiss, but she never does. We say

goodbye and form up in our column to be marched back up to the east gate. He will be stripped and searched—all body orifices—a humiliation that is now so matter-of-fact that it is no longer humiliation. But what does it do to the human soul—of both guard and prisoner?

Upon arriving at the gate, the process is reversed. We go back through the stone gullet and are regurgitated from the iron maw. Our blue school bus is there waiting, and we pull away from the fearsome, frowning gate and up the hill toward the three speed bumps, and try not to think about *National Geographic* as the gray, granite walls slide past the other side of the bus.

This essay by James M. Thorne (jmthorne@comcast.net) won first place in the 2007 *BYU Studies* personal essay contest.