

On the Verge of Hell

JUDITH VAZQUEZ

Judith Vazquez was born in 1956 to parents who emigrated from Puerto Rico. She grew up in Harlem, and later moved to New Jersey. She became the first female licensed electrician in Jersey City, and also did plumbing, carpentry, locksmithing, and mechanics. In 1992, Vazquez was arrested and held at the county jail. She was tried in 1995 and sentenced to thirty years to life for first-degree murder, although she still maintains her innocence and is fighting her case. After trial, she was transported to the Edna Mahan Correctional Facility for Women (EMCF) in Clinton, New Jersey, where she currently remains.

At the county jail, Vazquez spent three years in solitary confinement before, during, and after her trial, without ever receiving an explanation or any due process. She also experienced several additional years in solitary during her time in the maximum security section of EMCF. In 2013, she was finally transferred to a minimum security section of the prison. Now fifty-nine years old, Judith Vazquez has two daughters and four grandchildren, two of whom she has never met.

MY FIRST THREE YEARS (1,095 DAYS) IN SOLITARY WERE PURE HORROR. I was put in solitary in the county jail the minute I was arrested, as I waited for trial.

After I arrived at state prison, I suffered years of rape by guards. I became pregnant and was forced to abort in my cell without any medical aid. Due to the depression and desperation I felt because I had nowhere to turn to for help, I then found myself back in solitary by my own choice.

The day after my arrest, after having bail set at court, upon my return to the county jail, the guards escorted me from population into another area. I was supposed to remain in population while I awaited trial, but they placed me in an area that held just three cells. These cells were meant for females only, and next door through a glass window you could see the men's side, which had more than ten cells. The three cells were empty; I was the only female there. I remember asking the officer why I was there; she said the judge had ordered I be placed there. I thought it was for a night or two, but it turned out to be a nightmare. I went in and never came out until three years later.

Why the judge placed me in this other area, as opposed to population, is beyond me. Many times, very late at night, some captain or lieutenant would open my door and look at me and say, "You are a pretty strong woman, Vazquez, a man would not survive all these years locked in like you have." I would respond, "You can go back and tell whoever put me here, the judge or the prosecutor, that you can put me in a closet for all I care but you will never break me!" They would laugh and slam the door shut. Deep down inside I was afraid, but I could not allow them to see my fear.

Being in this cell for three years felt like a survival task. Much of the food served to me was raw, such as the hot dogs. I would get a lotion bottle and shampoo bottle and put one on top of the other and put one end on the edge of the sink and the other end I would use to press the hot water button so it could stay running. I would then sit there and hold one hot dog under the running hot water for a long time until the hot dog would feel a little hot so that I could eat it, although knowing it was still not fully cooked.

Some late nights I would be awakened by the men yelling, asking the officers about getting help for a very ill male inmate, but no one would come. The next day the ill inmate was being carried out in a body bag. One night I heard screams from the men about a man hanging in his cell. Officers did not show up until thirty minutes later.

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There are things that people use every day and take for granted. Things such as nature. Who would ever think that to be denied nature would be such a big deal? I had no open window. My window was about four inches wide and maybe three feet tall. My view consisted of just bricks and barbed wire. If I could see maybe a dime-sized piece of the sky, it was a lot. As time went by, I noticed a little plant growing from between the bricks. I would look at that plant every day. It was the only view of nature I had. Oh boy, did I love that plant. It was my buddy, my pal. I would watch the breeze blow it from side to side and I would close my eyes and pretend that wind was blowing across my face. I never thought I would crave nature so badly.

As time passed, I started to resent the plant. I wanted to be the one feeling that breeze. One day I couldn't take it anymore, so I grabbed a plastic garbage bag and sealed it around the window, covering it completely. I refused to look at the plant enjoying the breeze I craved. Months went by and the cell was dark all day long.

One day, I decided I had to tear down the plastic bag. I felt I had to find a way to get air! So I began to scrape the rubber seal that held the window to the frame. I used my fingernails to scrape and scrape for days, weeks, and months. It got to the point that my fingernails began to bleed. They hurt so bad that I would cry. But I needed some air. I believe it took about six months of scraping and bleeding before I finally made a tiny little hole. Wow . . . wait. . . . Sorry, I had to stop writing, my tears started to come down as I remember what I went through in that room. At times, I feel it is just past and forgotten, but I guess not.

The hole wasn't big enough so that I could feel a breeze come in, but it was big enough for me to hold my nose against it and inhale. Upon seeing this little opening, I acted savagely. I only had room to put one nostril at a time against the hole, and I would breathe in so hard. It gave me a sense of being human again. I had a secret in that room that the officers did not know about. It was my secret air supply, which was what kept me alive. I no longer felt jealous of the plant. If anything I sort of made the plant my friend again; it was all I had for company.

Thinking back about being in that cell brings tears to my eyes. Three years in a cell might not sound like so long to a civilian who has never been to jail. But I can tell you, those three years felt like a lifetime. It changes people. It turns you into someone you never thought

you would be. Your life is just never the same. It's like when a soldier goes to war; there are things that will stay with that soldier forever, and he finds it hard to speak of and ends up having to live with PTSD. Well, being locked in a room for three years is just the same. It plays with your mind, with your emotions, with your life.

One day I felt I could not take it much longer. I felt the world closing in on me and without any control or knowing this was going to happen, I just busted out screaming, uncontrollably. I screamed without being able to stop. As I looked down at the floor, it seemed as though I was standing right at the edge of a cliff. The floor had somehow cracked open and for a moment or so I was not at the jail or in the cell. I was on top of the edge of some ledge where when I looked down I saw an endless pit of fire and darkness. I saw people screaming, crying, and burning.

In my eyes and thoughts I was looking at hell. I was right at the edge, and as I screamed I was trying to keep my balance. I was about to fall in and I managed to throw my balance where I fell back and landed sitting down on the floor and the pit had closed up and I was back in my cell. By then I was able to control this screaming and stopped and I was terrified and frightened from what I had just seen. I then rubbed my mouth with my hand, feeling I had drooled, and found blood on my hands. This screaming that unexpectedly burst out of me and that I was not able to control was so strong I actually bled from within.

The officers did not hear me because I could scream all I wanted and no one would hear or if they did, they ignored me. But what made this even more crazy was that at that moment when I had fallen back on my butt and sat there wiping this blood from my mouth, my door was opened by the guard and she had a priest with her! Somehow I guess the priest was at the jail that day, maybe seeing other inmates. I'm not sure, because I had never ever seen a priest there before. But the look on my face was so surprised, and he just looked at me as he saw me on the floor, and he asked me, "Are you OK?" Then he went on to tell me how he had heard about me being there and decided to come back and say hello and let me know if I needed him I could ask to see him.

I have no explanation for this. I was not sleeping and didn't dream this. I was up and pacing the floor with worries about how I was going

to find help, or if I was there forever. But I never forgot what I saw. As a matter of fact, now that I have spoken on this for the first time, I may just sit down one day soon and draw this scene.

Although I overcame my claustrophobia in my jail cell, I developed another phobia—agoraphobia. When the day came for me to be transferred to the state prison, EMCF, the officers had to fight with me, and drag me out. I did not want to leave my cell. I had become used to this life of solitude. I feared being around people. I wanted to be in my cell all alone with my plant. I felt so dehumanized. Sorry . . . again I had to stop writing because my tears were coming down.

When I first arrived at the state prison in 1995 in general population, I felt like a space alien seeing our world for the first time. To see the green of grass and trees through the barbed wire and gates felt unusual. But what was really weird was to look up to the sky. It was huge, beyond huge! As I slowly spun around looking up, I can still hear myself saying, “WOW!” Other girls would look strangely at me. To see a television was even more odd. They had new shows I had never heard of, new commercials, new products in advertising. But these new visions did not last long because my eyes hurt so bad I broke down crying. To see all this light and color was too much for my eyes after spending three years in darkness.

Once you arrive to state prison, you are assigned a job. I worked steadily, but staying to myself. I worked and went right back to my cell. Then in 1998, I began to experience the sex abuse by the officers. I became pregnant and was forced to abort in my cell by the officer who abused me. I thought that day I was going to die. This abuse went on until 2001. By then I had sunk into a depression. In 2004, I became disabled and could not work anymore. With no job to go to, I had to remain in my cell all day and night. In maximum, there is very little movement. If you do not work or go to school then you must stay in your cell. I remained idle and again found myself in a form of solitary from 2004 to 2013.

In March 2013, I was classified from maximum to minimum and moved to what we call “grounds,” and the transition was from night to day. When I was told I was moving to grounds, I had an anxiety attack. I was terrified! A couple of nurses were called to sit with me and calm me down. I told them, “Look. Imagine a shoe box. I am kept

inside of it with the lid closed. Twenty years later, here you come and open the lid, pull me out, and tell me, 'Ok, Judy, go ahead, you are free of solitary.' AAAAAHHHHHHH!!!"

These people have no idea of the damage they did to me by keeping me in this "shoe box" for so many years. They provided me with no therapy in getting one ready for such a big move—they think it's nothing. But I must say that the "grounds" is beautiful. Lots of trees, grass, and animals, and it's peaceful. I actually am allowed to go outside and walk. Something I had not done in more than twenty years! You should have seen me trying to walk; I looked like a nine-month-old baby taking her first steps. Still I walk funny. Mind you, for more than twenty years I basically just wore slippers and to wear shoes or sneakers feels odd to me. I feel I was actually dehumanized.

Even after months of these beautiful "grounds" I find I cannot cope or adjust. I find myself putting myself back into solitary. Sometimes, I fear I may not be able to get out of this solitary confinement "urge" I find myself having. As much as I want to go home, I fear walking out the front gates. I have sort of found myself sinking back into solitary. Not because "They" are putting me there. This time it is "Me" doing it to myself.