

When I first arrived on death row, the guards decided they were going to welcome me to the neighborhood. So they took me to the part of the prison they call "The Hole." It's a very small, very dark, filthy part of the prison that's in complete isolation. And for the next 18 days they beat the hell out of me. They used to come in at about twelve, one o'clock in the morning, and they would chain me to the bars of the cell and beat me with nightsticks. They beat me so bad at one point that I started to piss blood. I still wake up at night sometimes now dreaming that I'm pissing blood again.

They starved me. They tortured me.

Eventually word of what they were doing started to leak out into the rest of the prison. Other prisoners started to hear about it. So they went to a deacon from the Catholic Church, who used to come to prison to bring Catholic inmates communion, and they told him what was going on. And he went to the warden's office, and he told the warden, "I know what you're doing to this guy. I know you're killing him. And if it doesn't stop, I'm going to go public."

So that night they took me out of the hole and put me back in a regular prison cell. The other prisoners told me later that they had expected to see me carried out in a body bag any day. And I think the only reason they didn't murder me is because they realized they were being watched.

When I was a kid my family was incredibly poor, beyond dirt poor. When we did finally move into a trailer park with running water and electricity, we thought we were really moving up in the world. I used to take refuge in books and music. Reading became a sanctuary for me. It allowed me to escape the world I lived in for a little while.

I'd read Stephen King novels over and over, listen to music like Iron Maiden. I started dressing in black all the time because it was like a security blanket for me. It made me feel a little safer in an unsafe and scary world. I didn't have many friends; in fact, my only real friend was this skinny blonde kid with a mullet named Jason Baldwin, and Jason was with me the night I was arrested.

It was me, Jason, my sister, and my girlfriend sitting in the house, in the living room watching movies, when the cops started beating on the door. Hammering on it. And when I opened the door, they were pointing guns at me. They swarmed into the house like ants. They stampeded over everything and pawed through every single possession my family owned. They put me and Jason in handcuffs, threw us into the backs of cop cars, and took us to jail.

I spent all night in a cell about the size of a closet. I wasn't allowed to go to the bathroom, wasn't given so much as a drink of water. Every so often a cop would come in and ask me if I had anything to tell him, or if I was ready to make my confession yet. This went on all night, until the next day when we were given an arraignment hearing.

At this hearing the judge tells me that I'm being charged with three counts of capital murder. That I'm being accused of killing three children as part of a satanic sacrifice. He says someone has confessed, but he refuses to read the confession in the courtroom. Instead, I am put in a broom closet somewhere in the back of the jail and given a transcript of this confession.

I'm only 18 years old, and I'm in complete and absolute shock and trauma. I'm suffering from sleep deprivation. My life has just been destroyed. But even reading this thing, I could see that there was something wrong with it. It made no sense. It was like some sort of bizarre patchwork Frankenstein thing that they had stitched together.

Turns out that they had picked up a mentally handicapped kid in our neighborhood and coerced him into making a confession, and then he was led to implicate Jason and me. Nothing in this confession made any sense whatsoever, but it didn't matter to them. I was put in a cell, and I kept thinking, *Surely someone's going step in and put a stop to this. Surely, someone is going to rectify the situation. They can't put you on trial and prove you've done something you haven't done.* It seemed to me that science would say that's impossible.

But they did.

They took us to trial, and the evidence was the Stephen King novels that I read, the music I listened to, the clothes that I wore. And they found us guilty. I was sentenced to death. Not once, not twice, but three times. The judge read these death sentences in this really bored, monotone voice, like it was just another day at the office for him.

People asked me later, "What were you feeling when he was sentencing you to die?" It's almost impossible to articulate. If you've ever been beaten, when you're punched in the head, you don't register pain. You see a bright flash of light, hear a loud noise, and you're completely disoriented, you have no idea where you even are for a few minutes. That's what it was like when he was reading those death sentences; it was like being repeatedly punched in the head.

They sent me to death row. I was in a cell for about a week before I noticed a shadow on the wall. It was from the man who had already been executed who was in the cell before I got there. He had stood against the wall and traced around himself with a pencil really, really lightly, and then very subtly shaded it in. I mean it was so subtle I didn't even see it for about the first week. And then after I saw it, I couldn't un-see it. So for years I slept on a dead man's mattress, stared at a dead man's shadow, and lived in the cell with ghosts.

They filed appeal after appeal on my behalf, all before the same judge who sentenced me to death. He denied them all. Even when new DNA evidence came in that excluded me and the other two guys from the crime scene, and instead pointed the finger at one of the victims' stepfathers and the man who was providing the stepfather with an alibi, the judge still said, "This is not enough."

Then we were allowed to appeal to the Arkansas Supreme Court, and by this time awareness of what's going on, public interest in the case, had been building. There'd been documentaries, there'd been books, countless newspaper articles and magazine stories and TV shows. So the Arkansas Supreme Court knew they were being watched. And in the end that was the only thing they really cared about, winning the next election. So they ruled that all of this new evidence would be heard, and the prosecutors realized that meant there was going to be another trial.

So a deal was hammered out -- an Alfred Plea. What an Alfred Plea means is that I plead guilty, and I walk out of the courtroom, and I can still publicly maintain my innocence, but I can't sue the state.

And people have asked me what I was thinking about the day that I went into court knowing that I could very well go home that day? And the truth is, I wasn't thinking anything. By that time I was so tired and beat down that all I wanted to do is rest. I was dying. My health was deteriorating very rapidly. I was losing my eyesight. I knew I wasn't going to make it much longer.

The prosecutor said that one of the factors for him making this deal was the fact that the three of us together could've collectively sued the state for \$60 million. I knew they could've had me stabbed to death for \$50 any day of the week. Happens in prison all the time. So I knew if I didn't take that deal, one way or another I would never live to see the outside of those prison walls. So I took it.

I've been out of prison now for almost two years. I lived in terror every single day for the first year or so, but it's getting better. I'm still scared sometimes, but I'm trying to fight my way through it. And I know that I will eventually be free from fear and anxiety. I'll do it, and I'll be free, because if there's one thing that I learned from 18 years in prison, it was how to fight.