

## Overcome the Podcast - Episode 4

by Christian Bowman

Compared to the winter I had just weathered, it was a warm Sunday evening when I heard the news. It was about 50 degrees around 6pm and dropping. I had just walked through campus after meeting strangers at the old brownstone where we lived. I passed by the Van Pelt library where I used to work. Passed by the statue of Benjamin Franklin in front of College Hall where Sonia and I used to sit on the grass while she studied and I wrote. The gothic architecture gray in the waning light of the early March dusk was shadowed under a blanket of low heavy clouds that didn't seem to move. The public payphone was pressed up against my ear. Every once in awhile, someone would walk by and I would turn away from them. I was trying to fight the tears to be able to talk to my Uncle but he was a Vietnam Veteran and had steeled himself to talk very matter of factly with me. It straightened me up and pulled me out of the darkness for a moment. Although, he speculated on a variety of possible outcomes, the reality was, there was only one solution. I was going to need to turn myself into the police.

**My name is Christian Bowman, and this, is Overcome.**

I only had just a little bit of money left from the job in Austin. I didn't have anywhere to go. And he was right. I needed to go back to Pontiac.

It was hard to wrap my head around the the fact that there was now a criminal element to this. I was still having a hard time wrapping my head around any of it. I had just watched my mother and my girlfriend die. I had just learned that two other people had been killed. I had just been told I would never walk again. I had just fought my way through physical rehabilitation. I just returned to find I had nothing left of the life I had begun developing with Sonia and my only solace was in the letters Sonia had written to me and the guitar that MJ had given me in Austin before coming back to Philly.

But, this wasn't going to go away. I called my brothers and my stepdad and they all said the same thing as my Uncle. I needed to go and face this, and I needed to do it now. My brother began laying in to me and yelling at me about the grandmother and the twin who had died. He continued to scream that I killed them. He told me I would be facing multiple counts of vehicular manslaughter. He was always a little more mean than others, but it began to anchor into my heart. The more I spoke to everyone, the more I began to think I was about to go to prison for the rest of my life.

I walked around for hours that night. Trying to imagine a life in a maximum security penitentiary. I breathed each breath deeply, thinking they might be my last breaths of freedom. What better town than Philadelphia for the concept of freedom, I thought. I walked and walked, all around the city, until I met a girl on South Street super late at night. We got to talking over a cup of coffee. I told her what had happened. It just sort of bursted out unedited. I didn't get her name, but she invited me to stay with her for the night. She tried to kiss me when we got back to her place, but I pulled

away and she just held me. She let me take a shower and go to bed. As I fell asleep next to her, I did my best to keep my composure. It was the first time I had touched another woman since Sonia died. She knew and comforted me. She told me “She was a good witch and that everything was going to be ok. There was a reason she met me that night.” We snuggled and as I fell asleep, I felt ok. Despite all the people who had tried to wish me well up to then, it was her voice that gave me a little human comfort in the moment.

The next day, I left before she got out of bed. I looked in the mirror on the way out. I realized that I still looked like a young hippie teenager. I had long hair and my clothes were tattered and torn. Whatever lie ahead of me, I needed to find a way to get ready for it. I took some of the cash I had left and went to the barbershop. I had them cut off my long flowing hair and shave my baby face fuzz mustache. I went to a thrift shop down the street and purchased an oversized suit, shirt and tie for twenty bucks. Went to the bus station and purchased a one way ticket to Illinois. It was leaving the following day. I stepped out and didn't know what I was going to do that night. Then, I suddenly ran into my friend Tony outside, who I had known before I met Sonia, and he insisted that I stay the night with him. It was a random little reminder that I had been a kid once, before the tragedy. We were young again for one day. We had a soft pretzel with mustard and drank root beer till we got sick. We microwaved hot pockets and ate pop tarts with butter while we watched the Goonies on belly aches. We laughed and had a food fight and talked about the girls we knew from 9th grade. I found out a few years ago that Tony had died mowing his lawn on his front yard. Mid mow, his heart had

given out and he slumped over in the middle of the neighborhood. Even though we had our ups and downs as childhood friends, the day before I went off to go turn myself into jail made me feel more grounded than I had felt in a long time. A taste of being human for a moment before I became an inmate.

It was Tuesday. The trip was a long and strange journey. Some of the most interesting people watching happens at bus stations. It would take almost a full day of driving and stopping before getting to St. Louis. When I got there, I called my friend Ally, who used to live with us off campus. I remembered her saying that her parents had a place there and she was going to be there after school. They were nice enough to let me come and stay for a night before catching the connecting bus and heading up.

It was great to see her smile. We laughed and cried about Sonia. They were very close. She was the nicest person. She let me stay in their basement and I grabbed a sweater from her dad to go to sleep in. I put it in my bag the next morning. I didn't mean to, and it strangely haunted me afterward. I felt terrible though afterward. I tried to send her an apology and wanted to ship it back to her but never heard from her again. The last I heard, she had moved to Alaska and was mushing the Iditarod.

The connecting bus leaving Missouri to Illinois was leaving before dawn. Ally gave me a big bear hug and told me "good luck". The Greyhound got on the road and every mile marker that passed brought me closer to the bars of a cell. As the sun rose, the fear enveloped me. I wouldn't have run, I had to answer to the other family, but it

was getting scarier by the minute. I worried I would see the site of the accident, as we began driving on I-55, but the bus routed around East and took a different road in. By the time it pulled into Pontiac, the sun was low in the sky. The town had been quiet. We parked and I walked off the bus. I nervously asked for directions to the police station and a nice old gentleman pointed the way. I walked down main street passing the town square with the old courthouse in the middle. A nice little town. I was in a suit carrying a backpack and a guitar. I got a couple of strange looks from passerby's. But they nodded and smiled. My heart was beating hard as I read the sign and looked at the doors.

I walked into the police station around 7pm on Thursday, four days after I had found out about the warrant in Philadelphia. I anticlimactically walked up to the first officer I saw, put my guitar on the ground and told them I was here to turn myself in. They looked around a little confused as I put my arms out, then I told them my name and what it was about. I expected them tackle me the way my brother had built me up. He very nice and gently put handcuffs around my wrists and read me my miranda rights. It was March 11th, my 18th birthday.

They knew I had lost people in my car too and seemed concerned about my well being. It seemed everyone whispered and looked over to see me. Although the accident was 231 days before, it was fresh in their memories.

I went through the booking process, had my fingerprints taken and my mugshot. I changed out of the suit I had and put everything on the counter, changing into a jumpsuit. Although I was wearing a suit, I was wearing motorcycle boots. I swapped them out for a pair of flip flops. They took my guitar and the thirty two dollars I had left in my pocket. The little leather bound address book and a photograph I still had of Sonia. Before I left the police station, the arresting officer wished me "Happy Birthday." I smiled, then frowned. Then they took me to the Livingston County Jail.

By the time I had been fully processed, it was lights out for the inmates. There was a small staircase that went up to a row of rooms along a balcony that overlooked a community area with tables and chairs and a television on the wall. Beneath the balcony was another row of rooms. There was a telephone on the wall and a few books, mostly sultry paper backs filled with dime store romances and tattered bent pages where the sex scenes had been re-read. My room was on the second floor overlooking everything.

The guard asked me if I was hungry since I missed dinner and offered me a small sandwich. I was grateful. He gave me a thin pad to put on the bunk that was attached to the wall, on top of another bed and two others on the other side of the cell. He handed me a small pillow and a rough gray blanket. A man on the bunk across the room was clocking me. His eyes glimmered from a window light, watching. I smiled to him and put my stuff on and crawled up. The cellmate rolled back over. Then the guard closed

the door. The sound of the lock echoed like the small clicks of the handcuffs. Somehow louder than normal.

I lay awake all night. Watching the guards come and do the rounds. Feeling the fabric of the jumpsuit against me, the scratch of the blanket. The mattress pad was so thin it was almost like sleeping on the metal frame. The stiff little travel pillow and the smell of hard detergents on the fabrics. The cellmate woke in the middle of the night and drank from the water fountain that also happened to be a sink and exposed toilet seat, all in one. I turned away from him and stared at the wall.

The thoughts running through my head: Vehicular manslaughter. Prison. Four Counts. How in the fuck did I get here?! What did I do?! I kept flashing back to images of my mothers body, shaking, her face covered in blood, her jaw loose, her eyes sunk into her skull. I kept seeing those two white sheets on the grass outside of the other car. The blood stained fragments of glass. Sonia's gurney turning away from mine.

Breakfast was being served very early in the morning. I was starving and ate all of it very fast, then I passed out. Nightmarish dreams in the vein of Pink Floyd's judge slamming down a monster gavel gave me chills as I clutched the movers blanket. It was day time by 6am for the rest of the inmates and I was growing delirious. The door opened and I would have been able to go into the little population area down in the pit of the jail room but I stayed in my cell all day and night. Every once in awhile responding to the guards who would check in on me frequently.

When I woke up, my cell mate had been released already. I had the room to myself, at least for a little while. I asked the guards if they knew anything about my court date or if there was any news about anything. As nicely as they could, they let me know they didn't have any news for me yet and I would just be here until they did have something for me. They reminded me I was able to make telephone calls and told me about a bondsman that could get me out for a fee, along with a few lawyers in town. I had no money, nor anywhere else to go.

Days passed by. It had been Thursday night when I turned myself in and Friday they had only just begun the booking protocol in the system. It would be at least until Monday before I would even go in for the arraignment process to be introduced to the charges and make a plea.

I asked for some of my thirty two dollars to be put into a commissary account so that I could make some internal purchases. They provided me with a few basics like a toothbrush and shampoo, but I wanted to send some letters out to Vanda and Jimmy. I needed a pencil, some paper and envelopes... along with the stamps. And a telephone calling card for long distance conversations.

It took a little while to accommodate the order, which also included a couple of snacks like a bag of chips. The mind cannot dwell in the dark twisted spinning chaos full time... I needed a little distraction and so I ended up reading the romance novels and

watching the news. I played cards with a few of the inmates. The weekends brought a lot of drunk drivers in overnight on Friday and Saturday. Not so many on Sundays. My room would fill up, then people would get transferred out and it would just be me again. Sometimes they would only spend a few hours in until they made bail.

The US Department of Health and Human Services published a paper called THE PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPACT OF INCARCERATION: IMPLICATIONS FOR POST-PRISON ADJUSTMENT

In the paper, Craig Haney from the University of California, Santa Cruz says: The adaptation to imprisonment is almost always difficult and, at times, creates habits of thinking and acting that can be dysfunctional in periods of post-prison adjustment. Yet, the psychological effects of incarceration vary from individual to individual and are often reversible. To be sure, then, not everyone who is incarcerated is disabled or psychologically harmed by it. But few people are completely unchanged or unscathed by the experience. At the very least, prison is painful, and incarcerated persons often suffer long-term consequences from having been subjected to pain, deprivation, and extremely atypical patterns and norms of living and interacting with others.

Finally, I was taken to a room with a few other inmates and I was brought in front of a judge who let me know that I had been charged with Driving While Intoxicated. I didn't understand. I hadn't been drinking. He let me know that the toxicology report had come back from the hospital and there was THC in my blood system. I didn't get it. The last time I had been near any pot was from almost two weeks before the accident at

a concert while on the vacation in Italy. I had questions but he reminded me that this was only the arraignment. I needed to save my questions for another court date which would be determined at a later time. I would be informed when that date would be soon. He asked if there was anyone going to post bail for me or if I was going to appoint a lawyer to my case. I let him know that I didn't have anyone. He looked at the guard and nodded and I was walked me back to my cell.

I got back, my head spinning. DUI?! What did they mean? I wasn't intoxicated on the road, the jet-lag hit and I was drowsy. How was the THC still in my blood system? Did they mix up my test results? And where was the vehicular manslaughter charges my brother was telling me about? When was my court date? What the hell was going on?! Was I going to spend life in prison or not?!

I had worked myself into a frenzy, and maybe, while in the arraignment chamber, caught a bug from someone. It began with a light cough. Then a fever set in. Chills and shaking. It continued to get worse. Sneezing, and coughing deeper. Within a week, I was full blown sick. I would whip myself up again about the charges and questions about my court date would be but then I would fall back into the blanket on the cot.

The cough had become a serious issue with the other inmates. People were complaining. They brought me cough syrup but the first dose wasn't doing anything, so I asked for a second dose. Then a third. Halfway through that night, I found myself in a hallucinogen state. It was a dark trippy feeling that exacerbated all of my compounding

feelings. Sorrow, fear, anxiety, deep depression, and guilt. It felt like that guilt, that internal anguish and torture, was more punishment than the jail could ever provide, but I was here and I was doing it. I kept trying to breathe and find acceptance. I felt claustrophobic. The sickness started to take hold. I didn't get bailed out. I was in jail for the deaths of four people. And every time I coughed, it would suddenly amplify each one of those thoughts and drive me mad.

Weeks passed. When you are in confinement, your mind wanders. At first, you go through a series of What If's. What could have beens. There are times where you imagine the greatest achievements before you get pulled back to the cold reality of jail when you hear the guards key chain ring on the rounds. Isolation and confinement have their own set of psychological changes. They vary widely as just a weekend in lockup can attest. Watching those incoming inmates, and my own personal experience, I think everyone on one level or another experiences a sort of bewilderment when they're arrested. Whether they show it or not is up to the individual. After long periods of boredom and monotony, I went through bouts where I couldn't sleep at all and other times when I slept away an entire day. I didn't really experience anger or hostility while I was there, but others did, a strange kind of fatigue came on however, and at times, the only thing I could do was continue to take the pencil and paper I had and write. Then, one night, they let me know I had court in the morning when I would be going to learn my fate. Four weeks after arriving there, I would be going to see the judge.

The day had come at last. I had hoped that I would be able to wear the suit I purchased just for the occasion, I wanted to take a shower and brush my teeth. I had imagined the hard gavel coming down for weeks now while I stood with my tie on a white shirt proudly accepting my fate. But instead I was pulled out of the jail house suddenly in my jumpsuit. I thought I would at least have time to take a shower in the morning, but I didn't. I had been under suicide watch based on the details of my case so my jumpsuit was a different color than everyone else's. I was walked down a hallway and led to a door. I wanted to at least lick my hand and pat down my hair but I was in handcuffs.

I was escorted in, the court was full of people. There were a few other inmates in jumpsuits nearby. To me, it seemed like a big crowd of people seated behind the lawyers. I was instructed to stand against the wall, then to sit down and wait. A court appointed lawyer introduced himself and let me know that I would be coming up next.

My name was called and I stood up. The lawyer pulled me around to a table and then another set of lawyers and people came to the other table. Some of them crying. Then I began crying. I tried my best to breath through my nose and out my mouth as the details of the accident were read aloud. I looked over and I can only guess that the people who were crying were the family, the mother and father who had lost a grandmother and a daughter. My imagination of standing strong in a suit was suddenly the skinny little crying kid in an oversized jail jumpsuit, barely able to maintain my posture.

A manilla folder came out. The court proceedings became a noise blur. I couldn't pay attention to anything they were saying. I was staring at this folder full of fear. Which was immediately justified. As they opened it, it was like I got pulled into a vacuum for a moment when I saw what was inside. The photographs of the accident. Images of the cars, crumpled and broken. The metal and glass shattered. Photographs of my mom's body. Of Patricia's body. Of Katie's. I felt like I was going to faint. My knees got weak. I couldn't breathe anymore, it was just snot and tears coming out of my face. Although the pictures were only being displayed for a brief moment, the details were being branded into my memory. The engine that had pushed through the dash and into Sonia.

It took the judge calling my name several times before I was able to look up and remember where I was. Standing in front of the family of those who were affected by the accident. In front of the court who was about to decide my fate. Standing there in flip flops and handcuffs. Tears streaming down my face.

I tried to wipe my nose on the shoulder of my jump suit and straighten up. I took a big breath in through my nose to try to man up in the moment and ready myself to really hear the sentence. The last month I had been preparing my mind to accept that I would spend the rest of my life in prison. So I wanted to really hear it. Then, the judge began to speak.

He called my name and let me know what I was accused of. Then took a long pause, looked at me and let me know how sorry he was for my mother and girlfriend. Then he reminded me of who was killed in the other car. And that I was at fault. He recognized that, with the tickets showing my travel as part of the evidence, that I had just arrived. He stated that the jet-lag contributed to my drowsy driving. He reiterated that I should have recognized my exhaustion and pulled over. But he also knew I was a seventeen year old kid who just watched his life get torn to shreds. He brought to attention that there was a little bit of marijuana in my mom's purse. And made sure to let me know what it may have looked like. That perhaps I had been smoking on the road and drifted when I was high. He let me know that this was considered one of the worst accidents in I-55 history in the area. The judge made note of the people who stopped to help and everything that was done to save Mike and Jenny from the other car. And what was done to save me.

Then, he let me know that, while he knows I was not under the influence based on the trace amounts of THC that was in my blood system, the State of Illinois required that anyone involved in a fatal car accident with any amount of an illegal substance in their system must be charged with a DUI. He also said that it took a long time for me to respond to the warrant, but then followed up that he knew I hadn't been served. Apparently, my older brother had received the news but not told me and I only found out when I called my Uncle. The judge told me he knew this because my Uncle had called them. He noted that I turned myself in. And he was told I had good behavior while I was in jail, and therefor, I would be sentenced to thirty days. Because I had

turned myself in on my 18th birthday, a month before the court date, he would count my days toward the sentence and declared my time had been served. I would be released the following day. I looked over at the other family, who was still in tears. Then he gently tapped the gavel.

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