

Shortly after my brother, Sam, was released from jail, he asked me if a friend of his could stay with me. I was initially hesitant—I don't like most of the people I know, why bring a stranger into the mix?—but after hearing a bit about his friend, I could not say no. Smelly<sup>1</sup> had spent *over a year in Rappahannock Regional Jail*<sup>2</sup> after being extradited from Kentucky for *less than a gram of cocaine*. He had a bus ticket home, but had nowhere to stay between his release and his bus ride home, which was a gap of about twenty-four hours. I thought about what I would want for Sam if he had been in Smelly's position, and quickly agreed to pick him up from jail and let him stay at my house.

Picking Smelly up from jail was fairly anticlimactic. We introduced ourselves, and piled into my car in a way that seemed almost normal. In truth, Smelly was just a normal person. He was polite and appreciative, and had I not picked him up myself, I would not have guessed that he had ever spent time in jail.<sup>3</sup> After getting breakfast and running to the store for some essentials I thought Smelly might need—such as a toothbrush and new socks<sup>4</sup>—Smelly and I spent the next couple hours in the waiting room of Sam's general practitioner while Sam attended his appointment. Had I been Smelly, this would have annoyed me, but Smelly was not bothered by it. When Sam's appointment finally ended, we wandered around downtown and then ordered pizza for dinner.

The power dynamics that I observed are rather distressing. Rappahannock Regional Jail is, of course, in charge of the inmates, but once inmates are released there are no resources available to help them transition back into normal life. Inmates are forced to rely on their friends and families, or in Smelly's case, on a stranger. RRJ does not provide former inmates with a phone to call a ride, let alone a bus ticket or money for a hot meal. And there are homeless shelters and parole officers, but both are a far cry from the organized aid that is needed.

This distinct lack of resources is what inspired me to help Smelly, and while I was happy to do so, I find it incredibly problematic that I had to. Average citizens should not be providing this aid: the government should. And while people may not want to spend limited tax dollars on criminals, it is truly in everyone's best interest. Because if someone gets out of jail and has inadequate access to resources, he or she is likely to resort back to crime, which will lead to more jail time, which is incredibly expensive.<sup>5</sup> From a fiscal perspective, it would be wiser to

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<sup>1</sup> I just want to mention again that Smelly is a nickname, and that's also how he introduced himself to me. I did not come up with it.

<sup>2</sup> I interviewed this super tough criminal last year and he told me that he'd rather spend five years in an inner-city DC jail than one year at "the rock." (He'd been to both.) RRJ is basically the worst jail ever.

<sup>3</sup>Note: people who have been to jail apparently call jail time being "locked up." Between the three of us, I was the only one who called it "being in jail." And now you know, just in case you ever want to blend into a rough crowd.

<sup>4</sup> Another tidbit of jail info: RRJ only issues one pair of underwear per inmate, regardless of how long he/she spends there. So, Smelly had been wearing the same pair of state-issued underwear for the last year, which is probably the main reason we went to the store. Sam was traumatized by RRJ's underwear stinginess, and he insisted we go. I felt weird mentioning that in my paper, but now you know.

<sup>5</sup> Between 20-40 thousand per inmate per year. Seriously.

spend a little on prisoners when they are first released to facilitate their transition back into normal life, so that we could save a lot in the long run.