

Going to jail: The last free evening

by [Brian Doyle](#) in the [October 3, 2006](#) issue

You enter through a door in the back where a big sign says All Prisoners Must Be Shackled. New prisoners are admitted at seven in the evening. There are seven men waiting by the door tonight. Five are white and two are brown. The youngest might be 20, the oldest 60. Four have plastic grocery bags with their personal effects, and one has a brown paper bag. Another cradles his belongings in his arms. The youngest man has no personal effects that I can see.

One man waits by the door for a moment and then strolls over to a car across the street. There is a woman in the driver's seat, and he says something to her but she doesn't look at him or speak to him. The man opens the back door of the car and snaps his fingers. A dog jumps out and nuzzles his hand. The dog and the man walk off around the block, the man lighting a cigarette as he goes.

One of the men by the back door of the jail is standing with a woman and two small boys. The man and the woman and the boys all have short blond hair. The woman is talking quietly. The boys, maybe six and four, are running around and knocking each other down and bickering and laughing and whining. The younger boy tries to spit on his brother but misses. The woman says something terse and for a half-second they settle down.

The blond man watches them but doesn't say anything.

The man with the personal effects cradled in his arms is surrounded by a knot of friends who are not going to jail this evening. The friends are all joking and laughing, and the man going to jail banters a little too but then falls silent.

After a while a police officer shows up with a roster of the prisoners to be admitted. He reads off the names one by one, and as he reads the names six men line up by the door. The seventh man, the man who looks like he might be 20, says to him, "My name is Moreno."

"I beg your pardon?" says the policeman.

"Moreno."

"Sir, I don't have you on the admitting list."

"I must be here seven o'clock."

"Moreno?"

"Moreno. I have a letter."

"May I see the letter?"

"I don't have the letter now. Moreno. Seven o'clock."

The policeman talks on the intercom for a moment and then he turns back and says, "Well, we don't have you on the admitting list for tonight, sir, but come on in and we will square this away, OK?"

"OK," says Moreno.

"You have any personal effects, Mr. Moreno?"

"No, sir."

"OK then. Come on in."

The door opens and the men walk in single file under the sign that says All Prisoners Must Be Shackled. Three with the plastic bags go first, then the man who had been walking the dog and smoking, then the man with his personal effects in his arms, and then the blond man, who kneels down for a moment to hug the two boys before he goes through the door. Last is Mr. Moreno, and then the policeman. The door closes with a sigh and a hiss.

As soon as the door clicks the blond woman walks away fast and the boys run ahead of her, the older boy chasing the younger one, and the friends who had been joking and laughing drift away slowly. The woman in the car drives away fast, the dog peering at me from the back seat.

I walk up the street thinking of caged people and why we cage people, and about the people who love the people who get caged every hour of every day in America, and then I walk past a slew of young oak trees all fluttering and glowing in the late summer light.