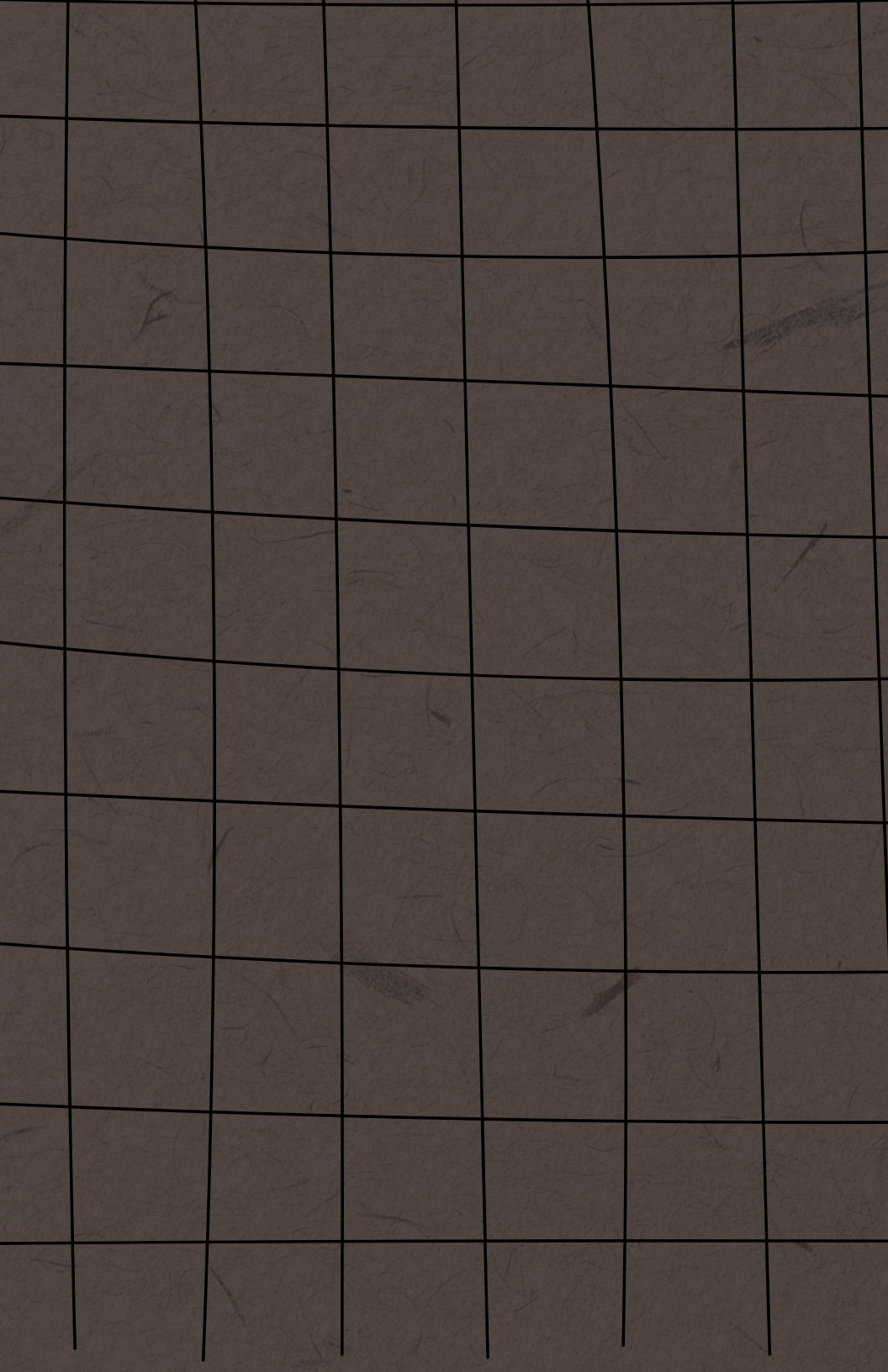


How to

Survive

Jail





How to Survive Jail

Strategies from a Stop
Cop City forest
defender facing
domestic terrorism
and RICO charges.

Written and Designed by Priscilla Grim



On March 5, 2023, 23 people, including me, were arrested and charged with domestic terrorism. It happened on my second day in the encampment in Atlanta's Weelaunee (South River) Forest that I had joined to report on the protests against the

building of a militarized police training facility known as Cop City. I am now one of 61 people threatened with up to 20 years in state prison in one of the largest state-level racketeering indictments in the history of the United States.¹

After my arrest, I was held in pretrial detention at DeKalb County Jail for 31 days without a bond, an indictment, or a hearing. Though I still have not been indicted on the domestic terrorism charge, whether I eventually will be

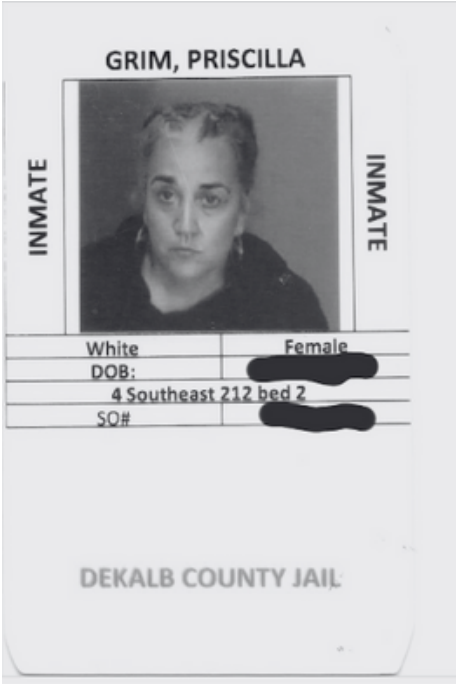
could remain an outstanding question for the next few years. An additional 41 Cop City activists face domestic terrorism charges, though only a handful have been indicted so far. My indictment and arraignment on a racketeering charge months later put me in Fulton County Jail for 27 hours. Both jails in Atlanta were terrifying in their own ways.

Though I had been arrested before, I had never been given a significant charge or spent extended time in jail until I arrived in Atlanta. A former Atlanta resident, I had become curious about the Stop Cop City movement when I read about the City Council deciding to ignore the wishes of the people² and move forward with building the Atlanta Public Safety Training Center, a.k.a. Cop City, pushed by one of the largest and most well-funded police foundations in the United States.³ After learning about the murder of Tortuguita, an activist with the Stop Cop City movement who was shot by Georgia state troopers over 50 times, I decided to fly down and document the

movement's efforts on my Instagram.⁴

As a street and media activist since the 1990s, I understood how the punishment of activists at the behest of corporations had intensified since I participated in the 2011 encampment of Occupy Wall Street in New York City.

Our arrests during the Stop Cop City Week of Action were a sign of greater political repression to come.⁵ In the spring of 2024, more than 2,000 people across the United States suffered violent arrests and were jailed on flimsy charges after calling for their academic institutions to divest from Israel and an end to the genocide of the Palestinian people.⁶ With ever-increasing investment in new detention centers, jails, and prisons⁷ alongside drones⁸,



robot patrols⁹, and "digidogs"¹⁰ in the streets, law enforcement is innovating new ways to funnel people into the labyrinths of the prison-industrial complex, especially people of color, activists, people without homes, people suffering from untreated mental illness, and pregnant people miscarrying unviable pregnancies. As the criminalization of the crises of modern life intensifies, making everyone more visible to police, more and more people will be pushed into jail.

People use the terms "prison" and "jail" interchangeably, but prison is where a sentence of longer than a year is served after conviction for a "serious crime" — jails are very different and often much worse¹¹ because people are meant to move through and out of them quickly. Jails often lack outdoor recreation, and many of the programs, such as libraries, found in the long-term carceral environment of prison.

I hope this guide never becomes relevant to you. But if it does, I want to see

you survive the pretrial incarceration experience of jail.

You could be placed there for a few hours, a few days, a few weeks, or even a few years¹² without a charge, without hope, and in psychological freefall. You must survive.

Be patient

When you are arrested, if you survive your initial contact with police¹³, you will be handcuffed. The handcuffs will be very tight, and your body will be twisted painfully. Telling police how they are hurting you will probably not influence how they treat you; still, attorney Mo Meltzer-Cohen¹⁴ advises that you must do it anyway. Asserting your constitutional rights — in this case, the right to be free from excessive force or the right to have your pressing medical needs addressed — does not in itself function to constrain or influence the behavior of the police. What it does is enable your attorney to

make certain kinds of arguments on your behalf. Suppose you do not tell the police you are being hurt.

In that case, it will be impossible to argue later that they were deliberately indifferent to your serious medical needs or used excessive force against you in a way that violated the Constitution.

In the meantime, patiently waiting is most effective. Breathe deeply if you can. Find a happy memory and let it fill your mind. Shift your body as you can to find comfort. When you feel it is safe not to be fully present, rest your mind inside memory or fantasy.

Notice the people coming out of the jail as you go in. They once stood in your place and are now out. You must believe you, too, will survive and leave incarceration. Believing you will is part of the battle. Every day you are inside, you are closer to being outside. As someone wrote on the wall beside my

DeKalb County Jail bed, "One day closer to home."

When you enter the jail, you will at some point be relieved of your shackles and wait in a holding cell for processing, sometimes with many others and without a place to sit for hours. If the others are asleep or have closed eyes, respect their unspoken demand for solitude. Be patient. Do not yell at the guards. If you are screaming at them or making the communal experience difficult, your reality will become dangerous, potentially lethally so. They have all the weapons and power.

The guards will bring you into another room to change into a uniform and receive jail bedding. Keep your eyes away from the other people in the room. In DeKalb County Jail, I was brought into a room with six other forest defenders. We were commanded to strip and stood naked as the guards slowly handed us our uniforms. Looking away from our comrades during ritual humiliation became a necessary practice

in the following days and weeks to maintain our collective humanity and sanity. One of my advisers, attorney Keegan Stephan¹⁵, counsels loudly announcing that you do not consent if you are told to submit to a full strip search without probable cause. I wish I had known this before entering Fulton County Jail, where I was instructed to open my body for inspection and did as I was told. I would have said that I did not consent to this light sexual assault, however routine.

It may be very cold¹⁶ or very hot¹⁷. In both DeKalb County and Fulton County Jails, freezing air blasted into the cells and common areas the entire time I was there. While in the holding cell, I kept placing my hands inside my armpits and sat as close as possible to others to try to get warm. I meditated on hot, wet summers in New York City, visualizing heat bouncing off the pavement and enveloping my body. Others paced; some slept.

You face unique dangers the moment you

enter jail. From 2008 to 2019, Reuters reported¹⁸ more than 7,500 deaths in jails across the United States. You will witness life being threatened. Prepare yourself emotionally to meet the moment when it happens. Do not talk about the reason you were arrested. You are under surveillance at all times while you are locked up. Every phone call is monitored and recorded. The two largest prison phone companies use voice-print technologies funded by the Department of Defense to archive the voices of everyone who speaks on their lines¹⁹. In every conversation with anyone except your attorney, anything you say can and very much will be used against you.



Check the vibe.

When you walk into the podcage – it may be a large common room with cells nestled into the walls and a glass wall in front, a kind of human terrarium – with your cell assignment, look at everything around you. The layout

reminded me of a dingy yellow-beige Broadway set with a staircase down the middle. Notice the words scrawled on the walls and the smells. Look at the faces of the others being held – your comrades in this new unintentional community. Open your heart and be kind but not foolish. Think of your first few hours in the podcage as the first day of school or a job but without freedom of movement, speech, dignity, or humanity.

Watch the guards.

The guards are your only connection to food, water, phones, toilet paper, and other items necessary for a basic level of humanity and survival. They are complicated characters in this reality. I barely slept the first two weeks I spent in DeKalb County Jail; instead, I would stand at the door to my cell and watch the guards all night. I wanted to understand the rhythm of the podcage. Over the month I was incarcerated, I learned there would never be a

predictable schedule.

The guards I watched enjoyed looking at Instagram and playing games on their phones. They were less interested in performing their duties, especially bringing food to the podcage; calling in plumbers after water poured through leaking pipes, flooding cells, showers, and common areas; or moving forward with processes such as being booked into the jail or taking people to the medical facilities. Guards frequently withheld hygienic necessities such as toilet paper and menstrual pads. During the 27 hours I spent in Fulton County Jail, and the 31 days I spent in DeKalb County Jail, I learned the best way to deal with the guards involved working with others to collectively figure out how to do the guards' work for them.

A friend processed in Fulton County Jail told me they kept asking the guards why they remained in a holding cell after their bond had been paid. The main guard deliberately mispronounced their name and the names of everyone else being

held while claiming she did not know where anyone stood "in the booking process." The group offered to write down everyone's names and the stage each had reached. Within thirty minutes, the guards released everyone with paid bonds. Always look for a third way with the guards. They are petty bureaucrats with weapons and very little oversight, and their primary power consists of their ability to do nothing or to say no to any request. One guard can single-handedly change your incarceration experience into a never-ending journey inside the bureaucracy, courtrooms, programs, and voids of jail, the entry point of the prison-industrial complex.

Make friends.

People are often sent to jail for the most minor reasons, so the likelihood that you will be in a podcage with others suffering the same confusion and anxiety as you is very high. Introduce yourself — think of it as an underground

party with the worst theme possible. You will probably meet someone who has been in the podcage for an extended period. That person will have a lot of advice to help you adjust and become a good community member. Listen and use what makes sense.

My first 24 hours in DeKalb County Jail were spent listening to Raja (all names have been changed) instruct me on how to care for the cell we shared. She had been there for almost two weeks. She managed to make it into an immaculate environment by cleaning it daily, slapping soap on the walls to fight gnat infestations, and saving every unused item. She had saved the little soaps given with rolls of toilet paper and placed them on the cell windowsill, where the sun would bake them and release their scent. Were it not for the scratchy wool blankets, lack of pen and paper, constant hunger, and unrelenting screams from those deemed too mentally ill to roam the podcage freely, I could almost trick myself into thinking I was in an under-resourced dorm room.

In the common area of the podcage, Bible verses and "Dulce is a lunatic" were written everywhere. I asked, "Who is Dulce?" She wound up becoming one of my closest comrades. Held in pretrial detention for a year and a half, she had become the podcage's mom and mutual-aid hub. People gave her the items they didn't need to take with them when they left jail. When I was arrested, my glasses were in my bag. I didn't know I would be held for so long, so I didn't ask for them — always ask for your glasses. If it had not been for Dulce, who gave me a pair of glasses a former resident of the podcage had left or forgotten, I would not have been able to read or see any details during my time incarcerated. For the first two days, I had to ask the other forest defenders to help me read my jail ID numbers so that I could use the phone and set myself up with commissary orders. Dulce also said, "If the podcage energy seems off, lock yourself in your cell." Her guidance saved me from violent encounters with people unable to regulate their emotions.

You will have only a tiny area available for movement. Many jails in the United States do not offer access to the outside²⁰ to exercise, stretch, or simply walk. This was one of the hardest conditions of confinement for me. I typically walk miles daily between work, mothering, and friending to keep my mind clear. I tried to dissipate my anxious energy through bodyweight exercises I could remember: planks, wall pushups, tricep dips, squats, leg lifts, and glute bridges. Others did yoga sessions together. I had fallen and twisted my ankle when I was arrested, causing a recent injury in my knee to swell, so no yoga for me. When in mental distress, exercise, even a little bit, can help.

Jails across the United States are filled with people suffering from mental distress, and that will complicate your effort to connect with others. Be sensitive and aware when people act in unpredictable and abusive ways. Stay calm, and remember you are dealing with someone who probably does not have access to therapies, medications, or

tools to self-regulate and is, like you, dealing with inadequate food and sleep deprivation, the perfect storm of life-threatening dysfunction.

Waste nothing.

Every item in jail has multiple purposes. At DeKalb County Jail, the elastic loops from face masks became hair ties and held broken glasses together. Salt, purchased from the commissary in small packets, was used not only as a food seasoning but also as a cleaning agent for surfaces and mouths. Toothpaste served as a putty to stick things on the wall. Dulce taught me how to use threads that had fallen off our uniforms to remove facial hair. We offered to thread anyone who wanted a jail salon session. The plastic bags our lunches were delivered in became water containers to slide under the door for people on 24/7 lockdown in cells without running water. Most of the cells in the podcage had plumbing issues. Some had

clogged toilets, others had toilets that would not stop flushing, and some, like mine, had a sink that would occasionally stop running or run so hot I could make a cup of hot chocolate straight from the tap.

Take note of the many names of corporations you see during incarceration. Jails are a world built by elected officials and the government in partnership with corporations charging fees²¹ on everything from commissary money to food and hygiene.



Eat.

Even if the food served to you seems inedible, find ways to eat around the edges, avoiding mold and insects. Focus on proteins more than carbs unless the protein is rotten. Eat slowly and drink as much water as possible to curb your hunger. Beware of the cookies. The sugars can upset your digestive system.

When you feel hungry and angry, go to sleep, if you can, until it passes. Sleeping will help you conserve energy and avoid taking "hanger" out on your podcage comrades.

If you can afford the food in the jail commissary – the fare of gas stations and rest stops – buy it and share it with others. I held off from buying food because the way others made ramen with hot water from a dirty communal shower head disgusted me. But after being denied bond a second time, while abstaining from eating most of the food and becoming lightheaded and confused, I realized I had to start preparing myself to survive this experience differently. I had felt above incarceration in a way I am not proud of. I had known I would be getting out and that when I returned home to Brooklyn, my people would be ready to help me heal. I thought it would be maybe a week until my release.

I understood I had to commit to the experience to survive, so I needed to start eating. Myla, a podcage mate, had

often offered me a taste of her food. I finally relented, and she showed me how to prepare the ramen with water from the shower, covering the top with a plastic lid to trap the heat and "cook" the noodles, lending me her bowl and an extra spoon. My hunger transformed the mixture of Cheez-Its, mayonnaise, and spices into cuisine. I prayed to the ancestors to protect me from the communal shower head bacteria that might also be present. Strong memories remain of my starvation-inspired love of shower water jail ramen.

Do. Not. Gossip.

Most jails do not have anything to distract you. Without books, music, or games, people are left with conversations. When talking about life on the outside loses its shine, the focus will shift to those in the podcage. Don't do it. Do not engage in gossip or hearsay. During moments of boredom, fill the time with meditation.

Hearsay might be upsetting. The last time I allowed myself to engage, when I wanted to gather as many stories as possible about jail to bring to the public, I wound up horrified and deeply scared that I would not survive my stay behind bars. Someone returning from the medical unit reported she kept hearing screams. She asked a guard what was happening, and he told her, with a callous roll of his eyes, "Someone is being raped."

Since I could not verify the account, I decided to stop documenting what I had not witnessed firsthand. I went to my cell, locked myself in, cried, read a postcard from my daughter, and meditated on walking in my beloved Prospect Park, visualizing the old-growth trees, ponds, ducks, and swans — all of which I knew were still standing, still present, and ready for me on my return.

Live.

While in jail, you will experience

moments that affirm life. For every person who is freed, shout encouragement as they leave. If someone has a birthday, honor it. When good news from the outside comes through, celebrate. Find ways to keep your humanity, even if it is reading and journaling before dawn when the podcase is at its quietest.

The crumbling buildings of jails and prisons are as ineffective in rehabilitation as policing is in keeping people safe. Safety and security begin with a home, food, freedom of movement, and connection to others. A better society is founded on respect for humanity, dignity, and belief in the potential of all. The punishment of incarceration lies in separating people from society, not a total violation of human rights, not cruel and unusual punishment. While jails exist, our responsibility is to spotlight how they fail everyone on every level while demanding their dismantling and decarceration for all. When you find yourself inside, remember your responsibility is to stay sane and alive

until you are free and can join the struggle to bring everyone outside. Don't opt for silence after you are released. There is no shame in getting caught in a system designed to capture people. Remember you are loved, and your mission is to be released alive and able to tell the tale while fighting to close every jail.

Priscilla Grim (she/her) is a Nuyorican, mom, comrade, and activist based in Brooklyn, New York. She has written for Scalawag, the Indypendent, and the forthcoming anthologies No Cop City, No Cop World and World War 3 Now?

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Footnotes

1. <https://n.pr/4gU7YGO>
2. <https://bit.ly/atlppubliccomment>
3. <https://bit.ly/atlpolicefoundation>
4. <https://bit.ly/inweelaunee>
5. <https://nym.ag/3XXXWf1>
6. <https://nbcnews.to/3Ydzk3l>
7. <https://bit.ly/billiondollarprisons>
8. <https://bit.ly/nycdrones>
9. <https://bit.ly/robotpatrols>
10. <https://politi.co/3XMF56k>
11. <https://bit.ly/jailsnotprisons>
12. <https://bit.ly/yearsinside>
13. <https://bit.ly/policekillingsrecordnumbers>
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