



THE INNOCENCE DEVICE

WILLIAM KOWALSKI

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Summary: In a dystopian future where there are only prisoners and those who guard them, a young man survives an uprising and stumbles toward the freedom he's never known. (RL 3.5)

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*To those who have lost their freedom...
remember that nothing can contain
the human spirit.*

ONE

Long ago, in the twenty-first century, when people broke the law and were put in prison, they were kept in cells and not allowed to move about freely. The authorities took away the sunlight, the fresh air, the open spaces. Sometimes they even took away the company of fellow men. The largest of these prisons was called McDowell.

As time passed, more and more laws were made. And more and more laws were broken. More and more people were sent to McDowell. Soon there were too many

prisoners. They could no longer be kept in cells. There was simply no more room.

So the jailers of JustiCorps, the guardians of good, decided to show mercy. They built The Wall around the prison and released the inmates to wander around inside. The inmates were still prisoners, still the property of JustiCorps. But now they could live more like those on the outside. They could breathe the fresh air, and they could feel the sunshine.

At first they thought this meant they were free. But if they came too close to the Wall, they were shot. They learned to stay back. And they learned that their freedom was a relative thing.

Over time more and more prisoners came to McDowell, until things got to be the way they are now. These days, most men in the world are in McDowell or places just like it. This is because almost everything is illegal. Talking back to a policeman

gets you five years. Any kind of drugs gets you twenty, easy. Drinking and driving means life.

Someone has to guard all these prisoners, which means most of the guards are women.

It's been this way for a very long time. No one remembers anything else.

Inside The Wall, the prisoners made a city, because making cities is what people do. And because JustiCorps is good and merciful, they allowed this to happen.

The year is now 2147. Today, as the early-morning sun comes up, the city the prisoners have made stretches in all directions, as far as the eye can see. The great Wall runs around it. Too high to climb over, too dangerous to approach. There are towers every hundred yards. The Wall is so big and has been there so long that no one even thinks about it, just as they don't think about the air they breathe or the

ground they walk on. No one even remembers what is outside. Outside The Wall, the world doesn't exist.



The prison city of McDowell seems to fill the entire valley. There are many thousands upon thousands of houses. All of them are one-story high. They're made of scraps of wood, clanging sheet metal or flapping pieces of plastic tarp. They lean shoulder to shoulder, like judgmental aunties at a wedding. Sometimes they collapse. Sometimes they burst into flame. Hundreds of prisoners die. Their loss seems to make no difference. There are always more prisoners to take their place.

The lanes between the houses are dusty and filthy. Children of prisoners run up and down, even at this early hour. Raw sewage trickles through ditches. Chickens and goats

cry out for food. Dust rises. The city stinks. People are born, suffer and die. There's a kind of order in the chaos. But it disappears as soon as one looks for it, the way a faint star system can be seen only out of the corner of your eye.

The day will be hot again. Every day is hot now. Hotter weather means less food. All over the world, crops are failing. Water is disappearing. Less food means more crime. More crime means more prisoners. But now, even with all the space inside The Wall, there is nowhere to put them. The prison city is already filled to bursting. There will be trouble very soon. Things cannot hold as they are.

In the middle of all this chaos is the old prison building. It rises above the city like a castle, throwing a shadow over the houses that surround it. This shadow is the only cool place in the valley. And it's the only thing that everyone gets to share for free.

Everything else—food, water, firewood, clean air—has a price.

In the old days, the prison building was where all prisoners were kept. Now only the most rich and powerful live inside the cells, away from the heat and dust and noise—and far away from The Wall, symbol of their imprisonment.

Krios, the highest-ranking prisoner, lives here. So do many of his minions. If the rest of the city is a ghetto, the old prison building is a palace. Only those with money can afford it. Privilege radiates outward from the center, the way water ripples after a stone is thrown. The closer you are to the center, the more you have to lose. For this reason, some people like being on the outside.



Chago is one of those who lives far from the center of things. He lives near The Wall,

where nothing of importance happens. His life is quiet. Nobody knows his name. He's safe. He owns nothing. But he prefers it that way, because it means he has nothing to lose. He is left alone. In some ways, he is as free as it's possible for a prisoner to be.

Chago's house is not really a house. It's a large box. A stiff breeze would blow it over, if there ever was any breeze. It has no windows, no pictures on the walls, no luxuries of any kind. Wood pallets on the floor support his rag mattress. A rough table stands against one wall. Two plastic five-gallon buckets sit by the entry. These are all he owns. There is nothing to do in this house except sit or sleep, so he spends as little time here as possible.

Chago spends a lot of time waiting in lines. When he needs water, he walks to the pump with his buckets and waits his turn to fill them. When he needs food, he stands in another line for hours, waiting for his ration. He was given a hot plate by

JustiCorps, because JustiCorps is good and merciful. But that only works when there is electricity. Electricity is a luxury reserved for the wealthier prisoners. Chago has never used his hot plate.

Instead, there is a small hearth where Chago can cook—when he can afford firewood. The smoke is supposed to go up through a hole in the roof. Usually it just swirls around and goes into his lungs. Chago is only twenty-four, but already he has the cough of an old man.

If his ration doesn't come, and if he has a little money, Chago might buy some food from one of Krios's men. Krios controls most of the food sales in the city. This is why he is so rich.

But if he has no money, Chago sleeps hungry. JustiCorps is supposed to feed all the prisoners three times a day. That has never happened. There are a lot of things that are supposed to happen here and don't.

And there are many things that shouldn't happen and do.

But you don't complain, because JustiCorps is good and merciful. And if you are heard complaining, you might get sent to Gratitude Training.

No one ever comes back from Gratitude Training.

JustiCorps is good and merciful.



Chago gets up this morning before the sun comes over the mountains. He blows last night's coals into life. There are a few precious sticks of wood left from the last bundle. He breaks these up into little pieces and drops them on the coals. Then he boils water and adds heaping spoons of coffee grounds to the pot.

He got these grounds from the garbage of a wealthy prisoner. They have already

been used, so he must let them sit in the hot water for a long time. Then he filters the coffee into an old mug.

For his breakfast, he cracks a hard-boiled egg on the table. He rolls it back and forth, feeling the shell crunch under his palm. He picks the bits of shell off and saves them in a can. JustiCorps requires that he do this. When the can is full of eggshells, he will give it to a guard. The guard will give it to the Dirt Department. The Dirt Department will give it to the farmers. The farmers will turn it into compost and use it to grow food. Some of that food will be used to feed chickens. The chickens will lay eggs, and Chago will be allowed to buy them. JustiCorps tells the prisoners that this is the Cycle of Life™, and that they invented it. If you fail to observe the Cycle of Life™, you are in violation. That means another ten years on your sentence, easy.

He eats the egg in mouse-sized bites to make it last longer. Between bites, he takes a mouthful of coffee. As he eats and sips, he stares blankly out the door of his house. People pass his doorway, averting their eyes. It's considered very bad manners to look into someone's home, even by accident. Fights break out over this all the time. Often they are fatal.

It seems the whole city is out and about this morning. Out here, so close to The Wall, everyone is poor. Their clothes are little better than rags. Men and women walk by. Many of these women are free, but they live here anyway with their men. They are carrying buckets of water, live chickens, bundles of sticks, baskets of food. Some of them carry machetes to protect themselves. That's because the things they carry are all they own in the world. There are plenty of hungry people here who will kill you for your things or die trying. They have nothing to lose.

Chago thinks about nothing as he eats. He has nothing to think about. Well, there is one thing—one bright spot in his mind that is so special to him, he dares not visit it. He's afraid that if he thinks about it too much, it will be taken away from him. And that would destroy him. So he forces himself to forget about it for today. He keeps his mind blank.

There is only the day stretching before him, filled with meaningless labor. When he's done with his breakfast, he wipes his mug clean on a rag. He folds the rag neatly and places it on the table. He stops and checks himself in the shard of polished metal he uses as a mirror. He frowns at his close-cropped hair, his dark skin, his thin face, his eyes that seem too pathetic. He would like to look tougher. If the world could see inside him, they would see what kind of person he really is. And they would

destroy him in a moment. So he must be sure that never happens.

Then he pulls a curtain across the doorway to his house and leaves for work.