

## Author's Note

The liberation of people with developmental disabilities was the result of large-scale social change in American society. Prior to the liberation, the eugenics-era, social-control movement searched for the feebleminded, isolated them in large state-run institutions, sterilized them against their will, and abandoned them, subjecting them to unimaginable atrocities.

Large-scale societal change begins with awareness that initiates social action. Although this chapter is fiction, every type of incident depicted in the story has been documented either through investigations made by justice officials, journalists, and university faculty or through my visits to Eastern Oregon Hospital in Pendleton, Fairview Training Center in Salem, Lakeland Village in Eastern Washington, or Idaho State School and Hospital in Nampa. You will also notice that the main character confuses time and tense. This is intentionally written this way to make a particular point. Once inside the institution the senses are deprived of natural light, there are no calendars and clocks, and time is warped from intense trauma. The present moment becomes confused with past days that one would prefer to live in than the endless pain and suffering happening in the present. This effects the language used in the inside the institution as it simplifies, sentences shorten and the meanings express the intense post traumatic stress that builds like steam in a kettle. The reason for this writing style is to bring you, the reader into the dark recesses of an institution for the feebleminded so you can fully experience the social actions of the eugenics movement that began at the beginning of the twentieth century and continue to this day.

Warning:

The following chapter includes violent imagery, profane language, and descriptions of extreme abuse. Please avoid reading if you feel the content might upset or offend you.

# Chapter One—Being Feebleminded: Eastern Oregon, 1919



The warm sun is good. Another day with no clouds. Father and I walk for a long while. We are looking for the wild ponies. We woke when the sun woke and began walking toward it. We must be quiet. Cannot wake Uncle Jack. I like walking with Father.

Outside our cabin he begins to talk to me. "Today we will look for the wild ponies." Father spoke seriously. He knew how much I liked looking for the ponies. "We will walk towards the rising sun until it is over our heads, then we will turn toward the snowy mountains until we reach the hot spring water."

Father was taking us to the edge of the grasses where the wild ponies eat and sleep.

"Now, Jimmy, when we get to the edge of the grasses you must be quiet."

"Yes, Father!" I promised him.

I wont scare the ponies this time. Last time we walked into the grasses I'm so happy I let out a happy Yahoo! That was the only time we saw the ponies that day, and they were running away from us toward the river that runs fast.

"No, this time I'll not scare the ponies Father. I promise." He smiled at me.

I feel so happy. I am with Father and we are walking to see the wild ponies. Maybe this time we will be quiet and they won't run! I am so happy. I am with Father, and we are walking to see the ponies. Sun is shiny and warm, I can smell the sage and feel the cool winds blowing down from the snowy mountains. We stop under the big juniper tree where Father tells me my story. How this is the place he found Mother on a warm sunny day...

No! I hear the Lady with Many Keys jingling. I don't want to leave Father. Soon we will see the wild ponies. No! Not now Lady with Many Keys! Please don't come. Don't bring your keys here. Father and I are walking to see the wild ponies!

When the Lady with Many Keys is close, I can hear moaning and crying. Mean Man is yelling at the boys. He is still far away, but I can hear him.

“Git out of bed now! Don't make me take off my belt today! Git your stupid ass out of bed!”

Mean Man is hurting someone. I hear his belt slapping someone. I hear someone scream every time Mean Man hits them with his belt.

“Git out of bed now, goddam it! Don't make me hurt you more!”

Someone is crying and sobbing. They hurt. It is still dark and the Lady with Many Keys and Mean Man are coming. They will be here soon. Oh please, Lady with Many Keys, don't come in! Let me walk with Father and smell the desert air. Please don't come here.

I can't see them coming. We have no windows, 'cept a tiny window on the iron door. We don't look out that window. They look in. I don't know when they are coming. But they are. Maybe there is time today. Time for Father and I to see the wild ponies. Time to crawl quietly through the sage and sweet grass and lie down. The ponies maybe come to us. I can hear them. They're coming. I can hear them breathing and snorting. I can feel their heat and sweat. Yes! Today is the day. I reach out with a handful of sweet grass and touch the...

No! Her keys are in our door. No! God no! Don't let this happen again! Not now. The grass, the wild ponies, the sage, the sweet desert air, the warm sun...Father...They are disappearing...Please come back Father! Please come back wild ponies! I have sweet grass...

Mean Man and the Lady with Many Keys are in our room now.

Mean Man is telling the Lady with Many Keys, "I beat that son of a bitch so hard my arms hurt!" He is laughing. "Where's my bucket? Git my bucket little puke!"

"You shouldn't talk to the residents that way Dave," the Lady with Many Keys is telling Mean Man. I like her. She is new here and sometimes, when she is alone with us, she sings. Sings like a spring robin.

Mean Man is talking now. "Residents?! You're kidding me! You newbies are all the same. You come here on your high horse. Bullshit! They aren't residents. They ain't even human. WHERE'S MY GODDAM BUCKET!"

The boy in the first bed comes running with the big bucket. It used to be shiny, but now has food and poop on it and little white worms crawling on the outside. We sleep in a big cold room. I am in the last bed. My name is Jimmy, but the Mean Man calls me boy.

"These sons of bitches are half asleep. I'm gittin' some hot water. I'll be right back." Mean Man is leaving the room.

When he is gone, the Lady with Many Keys is talking in her loud voice.

“Come on boys.” She calls us boys, but we are full grown. “Boys, you know what to do. Wake up and get out of bed. You have to be standing quietly in front of your bed, or Dave is going to hurt you.”

Our room is big and we are many. It will take some time before Mean Man and the Lady with Many Keys come to my bed. So I lay there and wait. I am remembering how I got here...

Talk spread fast one day in the village by our tiny ranch. They say she was a nice lady. I never saw her. She had candy for the children and flowers for the mothers. They say the candy came all the way from Portland and was sweeter than honey from the honey bee. I don't know. I never ate some. The nice lady visited many homes in the village, and everyone was happy when she came to their house. And she listened good. They say she was a real good listener. Real polite like.

Anyway, she never came to our cabin. She ends up at Uncle Jack's place, Father's uncle. Mother and brother Quinn died a year ago. It gets cold here, and that year it snowed and snowed. Brother Quinn went out to gather some chickens that got out of the hen house. It snowed harder and harder. So hard you couldn't see your hand in front of your face. Mother went out looking for brother Quinn. She told me to stay put.

After a long time, Father came back from hunting. “Where's your mother Jimmy?”

“She's looking for Quinn.”

”How long ago did she leave Jimmy?”

“I cant remember. I'm sorry Father.”

“Oh, my God!”

Dang nab it Jimmy, now there you go again, moving from one story to the other before you finish the first one! No wonder others in the village used to laugh at you. But tell you what, I could put away more hay than three men my size! Now finish your story Jimmy. The first one. Before Mean Man comes.

So anyway, this nice lady ends up at Uncle Jacks. Now I don't like to be around Uncle Jack too much. Especially late in the day when he's been drinking. Jimmy! Ok, ok, I know, stick to the first story. So, I guess this nice lady sits down with Uncle Jack and listens to him drinking and telling stories. All the time she's writing in her book. Then the nice lady up and goes away, and we ain't seen her since.

Later on, Doc is visiting Father, and he has this dressed up fancy man with him. They're talking to Father real serious like. I was hoping Father ain't sick. I wouldn't know what to do now that Mother and Quinn are gone. So there they are when the Fancy Man pulls out this fine piece of paper and rolls it out across the table.

"This is your family pedigree chart," Doc is telling Father. "Explain it to him, Superintendent Lydon."

"Yes sir," says the superintendent. "Well you see Lucas, here's you and your ma and pa. And here's your pa's brother, Uncle Jack. Now down here is you and Mrs. Morse, God rest her weary soul. Now below you and the missus, in these boxes, is Quinn and Jimmy."

"I ain't following," says Father.

"Well it's science, Mr. Morse." Doc is almost whispering now.

For a while I can't hear them at all. So I crawl over to the edge of my bed and peek over the loft to down below. Father is holding his head in his hands.

"Are you sure Doc?" he says.

"Like I said Lucas, it's science."

Now Fancy Man is talking. "He'll be fine Mr. Morse," he says. "He'll have food and warm shelter and lots of other men just like him."

"And the women folk?" says Father.

"Well no," says Fancy Man, "we keep the men separated from the women. I think you can understand."

"Yes, I suppose that's best," says my father. "Can I come to see him? I get up to Pendleton to sell my potatoes in the Fall."

"We don't think that would be good for Jimmy," says Fancy Man, "it would only make him pine for you more. You see—"

Father is interrupting Fancy Man, "Doc?"

"You know Lucas," says Doc, "since June and Quinn passed in that storm, things ain't been the same. The scientists say that you and Jimmy will be better off. In fact, they say the whole nation will be better off in the long run. Kind of like going off to war. It's right for the country."

Father packs me a bag of clothes and puts in some jerky and apples. I love apples!

“Jimmy,” he tells me, “this nice man is going to take you for a ride in his fine carriage. He’s a nice man Jimmy. Now you do what he says.”

“It sure is a pretty carriage, Father,” I say.

So, I get in and wave goodbye to Father. He looks kind of sad. Like he did when we buried Mother and Quinn. Fancy Man and me drive and drive and drive. We leave the big river and drive over the hills to the city. Pendleton, I think they call it, and there along the railroad tracks is the biggest building I ever seen, and the street going up to it has a bunch of pretty trees. We drive right up to it and...

“Ow, ow, owee! No! No!” Mean Man has just dumped a bucket of boiling water on one of the boys. “Aiyeeee!”

“Now git your ass out of bed, you lice infested heathen!” shouts Mean Man.

“For God’s sake, behave yourself Dave!” The Lady with Many Keys doesn't like Mean Man giving us the water treatment. “You’re just upset because they took you off the women’s ward. What happened there anyway?”

“Nothing,” he spits. “It’s none of your damn business!”

“I heard something about you washing the women down?”

“Listen here,” Mean Man says, “it’s like I told you. They ain’t human and that there is a scientific fact. I was just washing ‘em down like cattle.”

“Science?” says the Lady with Many Keys, “What do you know about science?”  
She is laughing.

Mean Man's face is as red as the setting summer sun. "Just you wait, Mariam," he says. "One of these days, one of these perverts are going to corner you alone when I ain't there to protect you. Then you'll see."

I don't know if she meant to help us, but the Lady with Many Keys just got us enough time to all git out of bed. We're all standing straight and tall for inspection and to get our work orders. It's a long line. I never was much of a good talker. I guess that's why folks at home always said I was kind of different. But I ain't too stupid. Whenever Father and I were out hunting, he would ask me to count quick how many antelope were running together. "You're good with your numbers, Jimmy," he used to tell me. Father was always kind to me. Not like Uncle Jack.

So, standing in line in front of our beds, I s'pose there is more than forty boys (we're men but they call us boys). This place is big, dark, and damp. We're in one of the big rooms and there's maybe fifty more sleeping rooms like ours. Then there is the turd room. Least that's what they call it. That's where the real bad off ones go. They call them the half-boys. They just sit there in their own poop, making odd sounds and acting strange. Must be thirty or so turd rooms.

It's time for Mean Man to send us to work. He starts at the front of the line, far from me. He counts down ten boys and says, "You feebleminds will work in the garden today. And I don't want you eating no green beans! So help me, if you do, I'll beat you so bad you won't walk for a week. Now go with Missus Curtis and git some grub." The boys leave with the Lady with Many Keys. Gosh, are they ever the lucky ones, being outside in the sun and fresh air and all.

Mean Man counts down another fifteen or so boys. “Now, you smell this room you dumb fucking morons?” he says. “Listen to me and listen good. This place smells worse than a skunk fart. I told you yesterday to clean all of the sleeping quarters on this ward. And this is what I get? Christ all mighty! Why I don't put more of you into the infirmary I'll never know.”

The Lady with Many Keys is back now, and Mean Man is talking.

“You clean this ward today and you clean it good,” he shouts. “Remember, I just as soon send your heathen souls to the ash room as I would whistle Dixie. Now git your sorry asses some grub with Missus Curtis.”

One of the boys is slow to move with the others. A different mean man broke his leg three moons ago, and he limps a lot. He doesn't see Mean Man coming, and I don't say nothing. Mean Man comes from behind him and kicks him real hard in his back. Limping Boy goes flying against the wall and down to the ground trying real hard to breath.

“You cripple bastard. I'm going to polish my boots on your sorry ass!”

The Lady with Many Keys stops the boys on their way to grub and comes running back to Limping Boy.

“David! Stop it! Stop it right now!” Her face is red, and boy, is she ever mad! “I know that we got to move these boys on in a timely fashion, but you're making matters worse. It'll take twice as long if we have to take this boy to the infirmary!”

“You don't know a goddam thing Mariam,” says Mean Man. He's quit beating Limping Boy.

It's our part of the line's turn. I close my eyes and hope with all my might. Maybe we can clean horse stalls or feed the hogs. I'd like that. I'm a real good animal tender.

I don't see his fist coming. At least when I see it coming I can brace myself and not get hurt so bad. But Mean Man's put a leather strap over his knuckles and he hits me real hard. My face hurts. Blood is pouring out, and I spit out a tooth. But I'm not falling down else he'll start kicking me. Mean Man is talking to the rest of the boys but looking straight into my eyes. He's so close I can smell the whisky on his breath. He's smiling that evil smile he smiles when he beats you. Just like Uncle Jack used to do when we were alone and he was drinking.

"Now hear this boys!" Mean Man was screaming like a banshee. "I was going to be easy on y'all, til I caught this boy day dreaming. Anyone else want a knuckle sandwich? How the hell are you going to get your work assignment when you're day dreaming? When you stand in line you pay attention to me and nothing else!"

Lady with Many Keys is back and coming down the line to where me and Mean Man is.

"Mother Mary, what on earth is going on here?" She's looking into my mouth wiping the blood on my face with the edge of my dirty shirt.

"Aw Hell, Mariam, it's nothing." Mean Man backs away from me. "This dumbass was sassing me, so I gave him a tuning up."

"David, you're working my last nerve," Lady with Many Keys says. "I'm going to report you to the superintendent!"

“You know, Mariam,” sneers Mean Man, “you ain’t much smarter then the rest of these feeble-minded. You haven’t learned a thing since you started here.” Mean Man’s sick smile was coming back. “No one says nothing about what happens in here.”

You know, Mean Man is right. Worse things happen here than getting punched in the face. A lot worse and nobody says a thing.

Mean Man has assigned us to the turd rooms. It’s the most horrible place I ever seen. Lady with Many Keys is walking us to the grub room. There will be hundreds of boys there trying to get a bite or two to eat. You see, even though there is hundreds of us, there’s only food for about half of us. On the way there, the Lady with Many Keys hands me her kerchief. She’d soaked it in a bucket of cold water.

“Here Jimmy, hold this to your mouth. It will stop the bleeding.”

She did it! She said my name. My name, Jimmy!

I haven’t heard anyone call me Jimmy since Fancy Man brought me here. After we drove up the beautiful road to this big place, a man called Judge read my name and said something about me being feeble-minded. Judge said Oregon law said I was unfit and then said some long words that I didn’t know. Next thing I know, I’m in a bed with wheels. There’s a man in a white coat lashing me down with straps to the bed with wheels. Real tight like. Then he pulls down my pants and turns up with a big ole knife. I screamed when he cut into my peepee. I was in the infirmary for a while before I could walk.

She called me Jimmy!

Just as we're going into the grub room, I hand the Lady with Many Keys her kerchief back.

"No, Jimmy, you keep it. Its full of blood anyway."

I don't usually get this kind of kindness here so I tuck the kerchief deep into my one pocket so nobody will know I have it. That was the last time I saw the Lady with Many Keys. The kind ones don't last. There will be a new Lady with Many Keys. Like there always is. She ain't going to be too kind.

Getting grub is like a big ole wrestling match. The winner gets a mouthful or two of rice. It's the wriggling rice because some of the rice is kind of swimming around. I don't feel like eating grub this morning. My mouth hurts too much anyway. But, I stick with my boys, else I'll get the tar beat out of me.

Pretty soon, Evil Man shows up to collect us. They say he used to be a boy like us. They say he still lives here. Just not with us. He don't talk much. He don't smile much. Not even a smile like Mean Man. You gotta be real careful with Evil Man. You gotta think ahead of things because he don't talk. He points and we move. Now he's pounding his fist on the table and throwing the spoon the boys was using to eat to the floor. He's snarling like a bobcat. Like I says, you have to move when Evil Man points.

We're walking to the turd room. It's in another building. Oh, the sun feels so good on my face and the air sweet and cold. I can smell Evil Man when he is close. He smells like poop and vomit. The turd rooms are different than our room. They don't have beds here, just dirty cribs on the floor. Kind of like baby cribs. In the morning they pile grub into a big wooden bowl and everyone goes running and crawling to it, scraping up and

gulping down the grub and worms and whatever else is on the floor with their hands. These ain't boys. I mean they kind of look like boys, but act wild. I ain't too sure where their wildness comes from. I kind of think it comes from the way Evil Ones treat them. They don't talk. They moan a lot. They don't get clothes like we do. They have what they wore when they got here, and a lot of them are wearing threads or nothing at all. Everyone calls them the half-boys.

Someone is screaming now. I'm looking back toward the cribs. Evil Man has tied a chain to a half-boy's peepee and is yanking this poor soul out of his crib by pulling on the chain. Evil Man is not mad like Mean Man, he's laughing and smiling like he likes it. He pulls this poor half-boy across the room to what's left of the pile of grub or whatever is in the pile. Half-boy just lays in the pile squirming around in pain like a worm on a hot rock.

"Git! Git! Git!" Evil Man is yelling at us boys.

It's time to move these half-boys to the Box. Least that's what they call it: the Box. The Box ain't nothing more than that. It's a big, square, cement room. Ain't nothing there but a hole in the middle. That's where all the pee, poop, and pus gets washed down.

After we push 'em through the door into the Box we boys get to work. We don't wait for Evil Man. Sometimes, he just up and disappears into the Box. I s'pose he likes it in there. I don't like thinking about what he does in the Box. One time he came out laughing and got a couple of us boys. "Lookit, lookit!" When we went into the Box what we saw made me sick in my stomach. The half-boys was hitting, biting, and kicking each other. One of 'em was bashing his head against the cement wall. Some of 'em

were biting their own flesh and pulling out their own hair. There was Evil Man, laughing at what he taught them to do and making us watch. He laughed harder when we watched. The Box is where the half-boys stay until it is time for them to come out for grub and go to sleep in their cribs.

Like I was saying, we boys don't wait for the Evil Man. We go right to work or else we'll git it and git it good. I heard once that this place can turn a boy into a half-boy and I don't want to end up in the Box. With the half-boys in the Box, we start working on the cribs. We lift up the straw mattress and shake out the bugs and shake off the poop. One of the boys beats the mattress with a big wooden spoon. The other boys sweep up the floor under the cribs, fill a bucket with hot water, and mop the floor and wipe down the crib.

We work hard to clean. Many times during the day Evil Man will call out, "Box! Git!" Then we take buckets of water and mops into the Box. We don't bring the half-boys out. There they are, mostly naked, and we throw buckets of water all over the Box. It's cold, dark, and smelly, but we scrub everything down. Then we wash what's left down the drain hole in the middle of the Box. The half-boys scurry around, slipping on the wet floors, screaming and crying. Some of them are so upset they bang their head on the walls and are biting themselves. I don't like it. But like I say, this place can make a boy a half-boy.

I heard it's the same with the half-girls, 'cepting it's men like Mean Man that clean up their Box. I guess that's what the Lady with Many Keys was saying about Mean Man. She heard that he was washing the half-girls down but that ain't the half of it. I heard it said that he made more than one half-girl have a baby, but I ain't saying for sure.

Evil Man is screaming again, "Box! Git!" What's he want now? The boys just did a cleaning and he ain't particular about clean like Mean Man is. I hope it ain't to watch his evil antics. Me and another boy go in. Inside he has all the half-boys up against a wall. On the other side of the Box is a half-boy laying down. He ain't moving and he ain't sleeping neither. Evil Man don't have to say a thing. We two boys know what to do. We done it before.

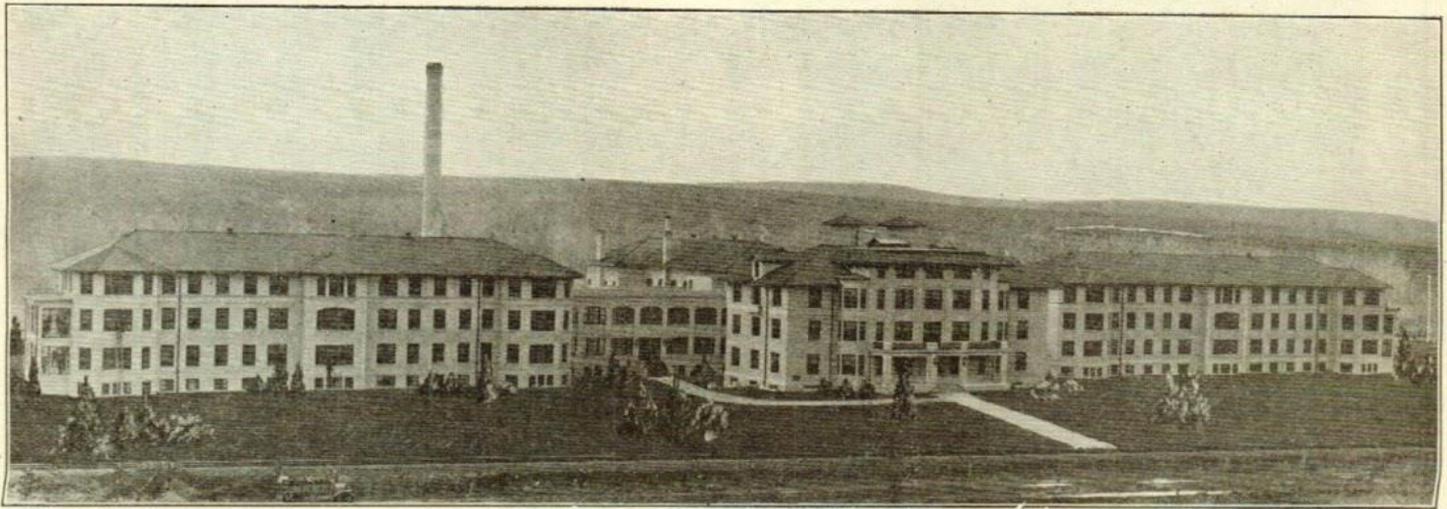
I grab the arms. The other boy grabs the legs. And just like the big bags of potatoes we used to take to market back home, we pick him up. We're taken him to the fire room. They'll put his body in an ore cart and roll him into the fire. When there's nothing left but ashes, they'll let 'er cool down. When its cool, they'll push the cart out of the fire room to the ash room across the way. They dump one cart after another into the ash room. It's a big room. I reckon it could hold five Boxes inside it. Now the ashes are in a big pile.

When they buried Mother and brother Quinn, preacher man said lots of nice things about them and about Jesus. Whenever I take someone to the fire room, I say something bout them. Something like, "Sweet Jesus thank you for ending their pain. They didn't deserve this. Rest their weary souls." Cceptin one time, an evil man ran a hose up the rear end of a half-boy and turned the water on full blast till he was killed. That time I said, "Sweet Jesus, pray for this evil man's wicked soul. He's going to Hell."

I think about Hell a lot. Mother and Father used to say if I didn't mind my manners, I would end up in Hell. Well, here I am, 'cept I don't know what I did to git here.

After grub that night, I can't wait to sleep. Sleep is where I escape this Hell. Even though my mouth is still hurting, and there is crying and moaning all around, I'm sleeping before my head lies down...

Even though its early, the warm sun is good. I'll wake up Father cuz we got all our chores done yesterday. Today, I'm going to touch a wild pony. I love wild ponies.



EASTERN OREGON STATE HOSPITAL, PENDLETON