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2024-1-ES01-KA220-ADU-000255317

Technology Literacy

Freedom Under
Password





My name is Sven. I'm 41 years old, though sometimes I feel more like fourteen. That's the symbolic age I give myself after spending the last twenty years locked up in various prisons across Flanders. The current facility, where I've been for eight years, is more than 100 kilometres from home—so visits, as you can imagine, have been rare.

I entered prison at age 21 after a chain of bad decisions and circumstances that don't need much detail. My childhood was more street than home: absent parents, lessons learned on curbs and corners. Even so, I finished high school and trained in construction. I worked for a while until one night—a fateful fight—sealed my sentence.

Since then, I've spent the 21st century behind bars. At first, I shut myself away—not only in my cell but inside myself. Over time, I opened up: classes, fellow inmates, something resembling routine. But in here, you stop being a person. You become a number. And someone else decides for you—when you shower, what you eat, when you can call your mother or your lawyer... even what clothes you wear. Autonomy? A luxury that's not on the menu.

When I entered, I had a Nokia 3210, about 200 euros in cash, and a pack of cigarettes. The holy trinity of survival. I've watched society evolve like someone peering through glass: internet, social media, smartphones... all of it grazed past me but never touched me. I used to say, "Who needs all that to live?" I never did.

But today, the gates of Wortel Penitentiary in Antwerp finally opened. Freedom. They gave me clothes my mother sent and 75 euros to get home. She, now elderly, couldn't come to pick me up. My kids—both grown now—didn't even know I was getting released. I've dreamed of this moment for years, but this morning, freedom weighed on me like a 500-kilogram slab. Fear. Raw fear. But a firm decision: I won't go back. So, I put one foot in front of the other and started the 900-meter walk to my first challenge—the bus stop.

That's where my journey began. I tried to pay the fare, but the driver said they only accept card or mobile app. App? Thankfully, a kind soul tapped their phone and the blessed "beep" let me board. First hurdle cleared.



In the city, I needed to change buses—but the stop had moved due to construction. “Look it up on Google Maps,” they told me. I didn’t ask what that was—I had a feeling I’d sound ridiculous. So I used the ancient technique: asking aloud and hoping someone kind would answer. And yes, dressed in plain clothes without prison garb, people respond differently.

Finally, I made it to my mother’s house. Everything the same, almost like time hadn’t passed. Later I learned she also has internet, a TV with content in dozens of languages, and a smartphone she uses like a teenage tech wizard. I used to be the one who programmed her video recorder. Life's ironies. “You need to go to city hall and report that you’re living here,” she said.

Done and done. I wasn’t going to wait one more minute to let them know I was free. But then—another invisible wall: you need an online appointment, and for that, identification through the 'Itsme' app, essential in Belgium. To install it, you need either an identity reader or a banking app. More labyrinths.

I went to the bank to check if I had an account. Now, they only serve people with appointments. Imagine needing a slot just to access your money... My mother booked one for me on her phone, of course. Then we went to buy mine. Took a while to install the basics. My mother, at 78, types like a digital ninja.

I had to create a password: eight digits, one capital letter, and a special symbol. What the heck is a special symbol? I tried names, dates—none were “secure” enough. In the end, I remembered the brand of my art teacher’s snug jeans, how they sculpted her rear like marble. Guessed her pants size and added an exclamation mark. That one worked. They advised me to use different passwords for every app, but for today... I’ve had enough digital immersion.

For two decades, I dreamed of no longer being a number, of becoming a full citizen again. But after this first day, I’m starting to suspect that everyone out here has also become numbers inside some algorithmic system. Who sentenced them? And when will they be released?



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