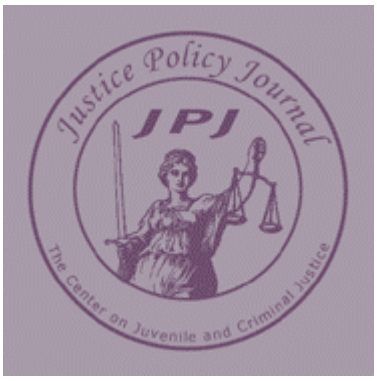
Prison Stories

Dahn Shaulis*



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Editor's Note: This document contains some unique insights from a former prison guard and caseworker in Nevada. We hope our readers will gain some of their own insights from reading these unique stories. Each of these stories was written at different times between 2004 and 2007.

Abstract

From the moment I entered the prison gates in the summer of 2000, I began observing and taking copious notes about my prison work experience. My intent was to compile enough notes for grounded research of prisons so I could eventually find a job in academia. My seven years saga included assignments in maximum lockup and death row, mental health and medical units, protective segregation, and close custody gang units. My last job was in an intake mega-prison where my caseload was often 300-400 inmates at a time, with a stint in "Iraq," a haven for gang member violence. By the time I left, I was less a participant-observer, and more a critical insider looking for an escape. Fictionalized names and places, and composite characters, are used for ethical reasons.

Warm Bodies was based on ethnographic notes of my training as a correctional officer, in 2000. The Gap, the longest story, began as a reply to a friend who was doing research on prison casework and a counter to overly dramatic media representations such as Oz. Growth Industry was based on my dissatisfaction with prison work as I became more aware and more critical of a failed justice system. Stare Down was written as I dealt with rock kicker inmates in "Iraq" a place where inmates languished and gangs flourished. Finally, I wrote Si, Su Honor, Paper Shufflers, and The Restless Vet as my frustration with the system was reaching unbearable levels and my education in critical criminology was becoming more advanced.

About the Author

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Warm Bodies

Even after years of prison work, it feels like a fog here. There are the planned gang assaults, *hits*, we rarely see, except for the aftermath. And there are acts extortion, drug deals, assaults on staff, excessive use of force by staff, rape, mail scams, inmate demonstrations, cellmate murders, and escape attempts. Seems like I'm always somewhere else when things happen. The only way I learn about the *drama* is when I receive information: due process paperwork and disciplinary reports, discussions with staff and inmates, grievances, and secret and often undependable information. I have developed a network of staff sources. I also have used inmate sources, some more reliable than others. At the same time, I have learned who cannot be trusted.

For the Correctional Officer Trainee, also known as the *COT* or *fish*, the lack of awareness is at its highest. The fish is lowest in the hierarchy, and has little or no information to exchange. The trainee also has not developed credibility or demonstrated his or her skill or trustworthiness. In many cases, the COT is ignored, and sometimes even abused. I know, because I was a fish not that long ago.

When I was hired, the Department of Prisons, as it was called then, was looking for almost any warm bodies they could find. A $150 million prison, Mojave State Prison, was still being built, and new officers were needed. Some of the new staff came from a smaller prison that was shutting down. Some transferred from other prisons or were officers in other states. But many were completely fish, people with little or no prison-work experience: casino security guards, armored car drivers, taxi cab drivers, construction workers, and ex-military. There was a physical agility test, an interview, a physical, and a urinalysis, but it seems almost everybody was hired, even if they didn't quite pass. There was no psychological testing. There was a

background check, but apparently it wasn't thorough enough for some of the criminals and sadists that were hired.

Starting pay seemed pretty good. Trainee pay was three times higher than my jobs as a substitute teacher and university instructor. But there were some initial financial burdens. I needed to buy a dependable car, and pay for my uniforms. We didn't get paid until about the fourth week of training, which was difficult for those living paycheck to paycheck. The drive was 100 miles a day, round trip from Las Vegas to Indian Wells. Some people got together and carpooled to save money.

Peace Officer training lasted four weeks at Mojave Desert Correctional Center. There were three classes of about 25 officers, most who were going to Mojave after training. Almost all the trainees were White working-class males, 25 to 35 years of age. There were a few exceptions: a young Black woman, a Korean man. A few of us were younger or older than the norm. The fish came from several lines of work: casino security, Brinks drivers, construction workers, limo drivers, cab drivers, ex-military; a few had been officers in Arizona and New Mexico, looking for better pay.

The most memorable part of the first day was going through the maze of gates, the walk down a long corridor, to the prison yard, for the first time. The most visible part of the prison looked like a college campus, with manicured lawns and a classroom complex. But there was no doubt, it was a prison. As we walked past the chow hall, and the middle of the prison yard, known informally as *Times Square*, inmates yelled at us; other inmates stared, and staff didn't discourage it. I tried not to stare back at the inmates, but I could feel my heart race we walked to our classroom. Many of the inmates were twice my size. Most of them were Black.

Each class had one or two primary instructors, *PIs*. Our PIs were Sams and McGervey. S/CO Sams was a new Senior Officer, and impressive in size and stature, a former soldier with military bearing and a sense of humor. McGervey was an overweight man with a penchant for telling tales of his exploits.

One of our first classes was on con games. We were told that each of us would be tested by inmates, and that we would make mistakes in judgment. Our instructor told us the right thing to do was to report our mistakes to our supervisor. On one video, we were told we should report officers if they were doing something wrong. Senior Sams said we would see things that were done wrong, that that experienced officers would say "we don't do things here that way," but that we should do things by the book.

We teamed up for cell inspections. Putting on latex gloves, handcuffing inmates, doing pat down body searches, and then searching cells for weapons. At first, it was intimidating, using cuffs on inmates the first time. We picked partners, and I was teamed up with COT Rove. He acted like he knew exactly what he was supposed to do, after being a volunteer cop in California. The cells were about 4 feet wide by ten feet deep, with a bunk bed, a closet, and a toilet. We pulled there sheets, and checked everywhere. Rove really seemed to enjoy throwing the inmates things away.

An officer tells us that gangs are not as outwardly appearing as they used to be, and that the shot-callers are often polite and reserved, and never have drugs in their cells; "they have *punks* hold their shit." Several of the officers also talk about inmates *nutting up*: becoming so impulsive they lose their ability to control their own behavior.

By the second week our POST class was showing its characters. Rove volunteers to answer all the questions, and makes comments about inmates, calling them scum. Other COTs

are making ruthless jokes about him, and one of the few female COTs, Hooks, has regular verbal fights with him.

Training classes from C/O McGervey were often read straight from the thick training manual, promoting heavy eyelids in the group. Occasionally, S/CO Sams and a few other instructors would spice up the classes by sharing their experiences of real prison work, and how the dry manuals related to real prison situations. Rarely did we get another taste of the yard.

CO's do not carry weapons. No gun, no baton, no pepper spray, just a radio, flashlight, and handcuffs. The only armed officers are in towers and control posts.

Weapons training and defensive tactics lasted half a day each. The training was so quick, and with such little practice, I wasn't sure I understood very much of it. The range master said "if you did, well, don't take it that much, if you didn't do well, work to do better." He told us that he had been in corrections 15 years, and that in his class, the top graduate was the first to leave. He told us that the key thing was to go home every day, having done a good job.

One day we had a fire drill at the *fish tank*, the intake unit for new inmates. Officer Collins, our instructor, told us that security was our top priority, and that we shouldn't mix custody levels. He also said that one must always have in the back of their mind, the possibility that the fire is a diversion for a killing or an escape attempt. He says that even if you saved lives, you will be remembered poorly if one escapes on your watch.

As we did the fire drills I felt anxious. Officer Collins asked for volunteers to escort inmates out of their cells to the outside. COT Jones was assertive, but not condescending to the inmates as he ordered them to sit down on the small hill outside the unit.

Officer Collins then showed us the firehouse and the auto shop. The inmates who talk are engaging; one can see how the con games can begin. Collins tells us that there are cell phones on

the yard, and lots of drugs, sex, and gang activity. He says that we can't stop it all, but we must do what we can to keep the prison from being out of control. He jokes about putting inmates in the hole, and getting sued for doing his job. He smiles as he talks about accidentally injuring an inmate while he was restraining him. I notice that as our training is almost done, some of the COs start revealing more about prison politics, a "politics of the fist." Officer Atkinson tells us that you can use inmates to take care of other inmates. "If one inmate is talking behind your back, you can set him up. Search another inmate's cell and take something as contraband. When the inmate asks why you are taking it, tell him to ask the other inmate."

Another officer said "the inmates may not fear you, but they fear the consequences. If they assault you, the CERT teams will take him by force. Four of five people will come at you. If you are on the yard, the shotguns will come out. He will lose his good time, and most likely go to max, or taken care of.

It seemed like we were being given two messages. The formal message was don't use excessive force, be *"firm, fair, and consistent."* The second message, the informal message from several staff, was that inmates are bad people, "scum" and we needed to "keep them in line."

Towards the end of training we participated in a mass *shakedown* in the hole. We put on latex gloves. We went to a cell, and had the inmates back up to their food slot, so that we could cuff them up from inside the cell. Some of the inmates were imposing, a foot taller and 150 pounds more than I. But it seemed easier than the first cell searches.

Another COT and I go into cell C-38, upstairs, and shake down the bed and clothes. We look in every corner, underneath their beds and TV stands. We go through their medicine bottles. We go through their mail and paperwork, but only to check for contraband. I open a jar of liquid,

and it smells funny. Officer Collins tells me that it is hooch. I found my first contraband, a half-gallon of inmate-made alcohol, *pruno*, and did my first disciplinary report.

Some of the cells seem tidy, others look like pig sties. The walls look different than the other units, with lots of graffiti scribbled on the walls. Many of the signs are undistinguishable to me, though I do notice a 5 inch "SS," lightening bolts, on one of the walls.

One my drive home, COT Getz and I talked about the hole. Getz says "what are they (the inmates) really alive for?" He said he recalled a 22 year-old inmate with a gang tattoo, and thought "these guys have lived one way their whole lives. They won't change. They know they're thugs. When they leave here they will go back to the block. What chance do they have of changing? Why are we paying to keep these people alive? Why are these people still breathing?"

On graduation day the COTs had lots of time to time to talk. COT Jones, the honor student, shared a story indicating he's been a thug himself. He talked about his prize fighting dog that had been injured in a fight. He said he couldn't take it to the vet until the dog's face healed, so he had to shoot it. He talked about the daughter he took care of, but not the mother.

The graduation ceremony was held in the prison's visiting room. Several administrators gave speeches. Family members of the new officers were there, and we received our badges. I don't remember much about that day, or the speeches. I do remember one speaker, though, who said we were tasked with "managing the unmanageable." He also made a comment that seemed particularly strange and contradictory with his previous words, that inmates, not the staff, ran the yard, and that we needed to be conscious of that.

The Gap

Northeast State Prison fits just behind a desert mountain range, out of the public's view. It is 300 miles north of Las Vegas, 350 miles east of Reno, and a few miles from Eureka, Nevada, an economically depressed high desert mining town. The high-security facility is at the end of a two lane road. A complex of gray slab buildings, it is surrounded by a series of fences topped with razor wire, stadium-size light poles, a small building for trustee inmates. Several six-story gun towers outline the perimeter. The mountain chain to the east is an extra barrier for any inmates with thoughts of escaping. Not that anybody has ever successfully escaped from the Eureka Max. Only the thin two-lane road, the gap, allows for travel in and out.

For many of the thousand inmates here, this is the end of the line. For others it is their home, their small city. For the three hundred and thirty staff members: officers, administrators, maintenance workers, teachers, accountants, nurses, and mental health professionals, the prison is 40 hours of purgatory and a bi-weekly paycheck. Anything more will likely land you in trouble. When I drive through the gap going west, I prepare for another day of the prison work. And when I leave the gap going east, I prepare for the free man's world, as old con Douglass calls it. My drive on the two-lane highway cuts through eleven miles of sagebrush and ranches. The trip is usually uneventful. I slow down for a dog or a cow crossing the road, see a few ravens or magpies, maybe an eagle, dining on a freshly crushed jackrabbit. The roads can be dangerous during the winter, but spring was here, for today anyway.

Everybody who has been to prison, or worked in prison, has a different set of tales. It would be dishonest to begin this story with a dramatic event, because much of my work as a case manager appears routine. In a way, the routine nature of the job lures some into complacency and a false sense of security which leads to later stories. Five days a week, Monday through Friday, I

walk through the gatehouse, and put my keys on the counter. The gatehouse officer takes my keys and puts them on a numbered board, hands me a gold metal wafer, a chit, which I will return to her when I leave. I go through the metal detector. If anyone brings anything in, like a lunch box or nap sack, it is checked by a security squad officer. I rarely bring in anything anymore, not even food, to avoid the hassle. I sign in and make my way past the first of a series of heavy metal doors. On my way to work, there is the routine slam of several gates and thick steel doors. When I first came to prison work, the crashing sound of steel on steel was imposing.

But I barely hear it anymore.

I walk up the hill to the administrative offices, scoop six inches of paperwork from my mailbox, and stuff it in my soft briefcase. Usually, I leave my contact telephone numbers on the board and escape to lockdown or the infirmary, my two units. Sometimes, I forget to sign out and Mildred, one of the administrative aides, pleasantly scolds me, shouting "Salomon you idiot, get back here and sign out." And we both laugh. Today I have mental health treatment team, so I stay in the admin building longer than usual. My meeting in the infirmary isn't until 9 am, and I can get some copying and rosters printed before I leave. I try not to stay up in admin too often. Caseworkers seem to get in greater trouble here. If there is one thing I've learned in corrections, it's that being invisible has its advantages.

The paperwork mountain supposedly ensures accountability. For staff, there's always some kind of paperwork to be churned out. Senior officers fill out logs for showers, exercise, staff movement, maintenance work orders, and cell searches. There are also endless requests or kites, medical kites, telephone kites, barber kites, emergency grievances, regular grievances, canteen requests, and accounting request forms. Seems like every time an inmate wipes his ass, or cries about not getting something just the way he wants it, someone is required to log it in,

write a report, and make ten copies. I answer an inch or two of kites and grievances, then make my way to the infirmary, through the maze of heavy steel doors.

The infirmary houses a mix of ages and infirmities: psychotic, suicidal, bipolar, fetal alcohol syndrome and crack babies, senile, extremely anti-social, and severely disabled. Others are acutely sick and injured, or pretending to be sick or crazy. And we house inmates just because there are no there are no other cells to safely house inmates. The 30-man lockup unit is frequently loud, with inmates yelling, screaming, banging, and setting each other off.

Treatment team is held almost every Wednesday, to see how inmates are doing in the mental health unit. The mental health director, the part-time psychiatrist, the psych nurse, and I talk to inmates and discuss their progress or decline. We see some of them in the recreation room, others at their doors, depending on how safe it will be. Two correctional officers, COs, escort the inmates from their cells to the recreation room. Each inmate is escorted there, restrained in leg irons and belly chains, an assortment of interlocking metal shackles. Experienced inmates learn to shuffle so they don't trip.

All of the inmates we see are mentally ill or mentally retarded. All of them, one must be reminded, are also criminals. Inmates know they can escape their problems by being disruptive, threatening to kill themselves, or if need be, cutting themselves. Their reward is a large single cell in the infirmary. Others are unhappy with being in the infirmary, where smoking is prohibited. So they kick on the doors, yell, and threaten staff, hoping for a ticket out of the infirmary and a place to get smokes.

In the mental health unit, an inmate may be laughing one minute, screaming and banging the next, nutting up. A psychologist may sometimes quiet an inmate with words, with silence, by letting things settle naturally, or by giving the inmate drugs--voluntarily, or by force. Allowing

the noise to continue may set up a chain of problems, with several inmates, rather than one, creating a disturbance. The most disruptive inmates are placed behind two sets of doors. When it's necessary, an inmate may get four-pointed: systematically gang rushed by five officers in riot gear, placed in one of the two seclusion cells, stripped naked, and held face-down in soft restraints. Some inmates appear to enjoy the drama as if it were a form of entertainment.

Today, the treatment team is limited, because the psychiatrist is on leave. The mental health director has inmates sign their treatment programs and briefly discusses their recent behavior. Some of the inmates ask about their psych drugs. For me, it's a pleasant break from being at my computer. I talk to a few other inmates while I'm in the infirmary. Three are waiting for beds in lockdown or GP (general population). One is "decompensating," and needs to be reviewed for a forced meds panel. He seems to enjoy himself though, singing, and smearing feces on his cell window for all visitors to see. Two others are yelling threats because they want to go to another unit. Another is screaming incessantly "get me out of here." When I speak to him, he says he's supposed to have been released from prison. I explain to him, again, that he is being held for court for propelling piss on an officer. He either doesn't understand or doesn't want to understand. I suppose it doesn't matter, the results are the same. He yells again, hoping someone else will tell him he can go.

Another inmate, a 75 year-old jail-house lawyer named Wolff, has written a grievance about his living conditions. When I arrive at his cell, Wolff is proud to show me his paperwork. The first paper he hands me is his list of life accomplishments: his purple heart from Korea, his record as a top-selling marketing man, his contribution to the political community, and his accomplishments in the prison law library. He has shown this to me before, but I act is if I haven't seen it before. "Impressive," I whisper, while thinking "you forgot to mention your

crimes against children." Then the old man hands me a case against the State. "This is how I forced the Warden to dim the hallway lights at night." I nod my head. See, this is my commendation from the Warden, how I provided information about rapes at Northwest Prison." I nod my head again, and whisper "Very interesting, but I have to go." Behind him are three large cardboard boxes marked in large letters "pending civil rights," "habeas," and "exhibits." As I pick up my briefcase and head out, he scoots his wheelchair close to the cell door and softly says "Oh, and I had to sue you, nothing personal." I nod and say "ok." I know it's just more paper work if I ask.

After my little trial with Wolff, I pick up the infirmary telephone and call the housing caseworker. "Hey, we need to get two of these idiots out of the unit. They're stirring up shit here." She responds in monotone "no beds." I think she is lying, or too lazy to come up with a solution, but there is nothing I can do. I look at the unit roster and highlight the inmates who are discharged, answer some kites and grievances, and head out to my office in the hole, maximum custody lockup. Again, I go through several doors, gates, and fences that are opened by officers in control towers. It wasn't long ago that I was doing a job something similar to his. I try not to forget the hassles of being an officer. The walk is another pleasant break from the noise, conflict, and another mountain of paperwork.

The hole, as some call it, is not really a hole, not like in the old days. In fact, some officers call it the "bed and breakfast," because most inmates have a private cell, they don't work, and officers serve them three warm meals a day. Some inmates even have televisions with free ESPN. Inmates with money have CD players and hotpots. Lockdown inmates can also check out books from the school and law libraries. And if they have money on their accounts, they can buy hundreds of food items. If they are indigent, they can get free writing materials and postage

to file law suits against us. Fortunately, only a few take advantage of that perk. Though the maximum lockup does have its advantages, it restricts some freedoms. Inmates are usually kept in their cells 23 hours a day. When they do leave their cells for a shower, or exercise, or a visit, they are strip searched. Cells are regularly searched, but not often or thorough enough to find every homemade knife, shank, or bindle of drugs.

Inmates housed in lockup are a mix of characters: youngsters, gang shot-callers, old-timers, victims who are too strong or too weak for protective segregation, disciplinary problems, and "pain-in-the-ass inmates," pitas. Some residents are here for a few days or a few weeks, because they refused a bed move and won't live with a cellmate. Hole rats are here for years. And there are the idiots, the extremely anti-social inmates. Bed space is limited in the infirmary, to only the most serious problems: if an inmate floods and burns, threatens to harm himself, he gets a ticket to the infirmary. Most residents are quiet, but a few make life miserable for everyone.

Much of my time is spent in my office writing reports on the computer, and making phone calls. About three inches of my paperwork is generated from a few pitas. I shut the door, but the noise is still overwhelming. I use earplugs to soften the din of inmates yelling threats, playing loud music, whistling, and banging on doors, walls, and floors.

The infirmary and the lockdown units are the loudest units in the prison. The yelling and kicking on doors comes from just a few inmates. If you say anything to certain offenders about the noise, they'll shout "FUCK YOU, THIS AIN'T YOUR BUSINESS." A mentally ill inmate who is sensitive to the noise and threats, yells back, and bangs on his cell door, feeding the noise monster. Instead of resolving the conflict, you have added fuel to the fire, and may just become the new target.

I used to be more involved in resolving conflicts, but found benign neglect was often more helpful, at least for my career. S/CO Romer said “Damn Saloman! Why do you have to stir up hate and discontent? You got inmate Renard all riled up.” The day before, I had told the assaultive inmate “if you don’t settle down, you may have to spend the rest of your life in here; I’d hate to see you leave this place in a body bag.” When I left the mentally challenged man, everything seemed fine. The next day, he yelled at a nurse “Salomon is gonna kill me.” The word got to my bosses. The Captain of Programs told me to come in the office, shook his head, and said “stop stirring shit.” I complied.

As I work on a few inches of paperwork, the housing caseworker calls and asks me if I can clear some beds in my unit. I give her a couple of names. Inmates come in and inmates leave. And for several months we have been getting more in than out. The only way to make it work, at all, is to circulate inmates. There is no choice other than to let some inmates out of lockup, even if it may cause another assault. Not surprisingly, we also have had more assaults for the last few months, about one a week. But if Central Administration needs beds, we find the beds.

I break my paperwork routine by going onto the tier, to the doors of inmates’ cells, their houses, trying to address their concerns and making obligatory visits. If the information is personal or confidential, I write on my notepad, so that other inmates cannot overhear the conversation. Sometimes I get gang information, but one rarely knows how good the information is. Most do not want to talk, which makes life easier for me. Conversations are reasonably polite, but sometimes inmates go off, get angry and threaten.

Today was one of those few days an inmate decided to go off on me, enough for me to do a disciplinary report. The inmate called me to his house and said he wanted to go back to general population, but refused to cell up with anyone. The inmate shouted at me, so that the whole tier

could hear “You faggot…you do things for your boyfriend!” I wrote the report, another atom for the paper mountain, and turned it into the lieutenant’s office on my way up front.

It’s quitting time, but I’m still thinking about the prison’s never-ending problems as I walk through the routine maze of doors and gates. I head out from admin to the gatehouse, talk briefly to the operations and security chief, about the gang problem, hand in my chit, get my keys, and head home.

There is a traffic jam at the gap. For a few minutes the traffic is stopped, and then it starts moving slowly. I see a body down on the road, two correctional officers kneeling, a motorcycle, and a helmet 50 feet in front of it. The head of the victim has a large bloody gash across it, but is otherwise unrecognizable. As I drive past the accident scene, I wondered if the officer would live, if he was in pain. Someone tells me the next morning that it was an off-duty C.O. trying out his new motorcycle. The officer, they say, skidded into the sandy berm, and hit the mountain wall. The victim’s name is familiar, but I’m not sure I remember him. The next day, there is a note in the administration building, asking for donations, for the family of the deceased. A few days later, the man and the event are all but forgotten. There were rumors, only rumors, that he had killed himself.

Growth Industry

I stood with hundreds of others at the conference hall entrance, anxiously waiting for the doors to open, nametag prominently pinned on my shirt. Those lining up near me were also wearing name tags, indicating their entry fees were paid in full. Being overly enthusiastic, and cheap, I paid my fees months in advance, to take advantage of the "early bird" rate, then booked the least expensive motel room near Disneyland. In January, I drove the 500 miles of highway, sagebrush, Joshua trees, and barren mountains between Eureka and the Anaheim convention center. The chest pains that I had gotten used to, disappeared. And for a few days, I felt free, like I had escaped.

Security people flanked the entrances as the mass of attendees expanded. Above the doors, large banners read, "Anaheim, California, American Correctional Association, Annual Conference of Correction." ACA, as insiders in the business called it, was the professional organization for corrections in the US. It had been in existence for more than a century, promoting the humane treatment of prison inmates, and professional standards for prison workers. Its magazine, Corrections Today, was considered the trade journal of the industry. But "corrections" to me seemed to be a euphemism for something less noble, less hopeful for society. Most of what I and other participants did was bleak prison work. And prisons were on the rise.

Ten years ago, I had been a soldier in the enormous military industry. A decade later, I was a worker in another industry, the expanding prison biz, hoping to advance. But my life after the military, a degree in sociology, and a few years of hard times, made me more skeptical of authorities and their propaganda. It was impossible to miss the salesmen caged in information booths lining the cavernous hallway, working the crowd like confidence men, spewing the

advantages of their companies' x-ray machines, drug detectors, heavy duty locks, razor wire, and pre-packaged behavioral programs.

From a quick glance at the entrance, the conferees were a mix of White, Black, and Brown. Some dressed in dark suits and ties, others in polo shirts, casual pants, and shorts. Some suits had colored ribbons attached to their nametags, proudly identifying tenure and status in the association. Though the crowd was mostly male, there were a few women with clout. Our state's Director of Corrections was there. I had hoped to talk to her, and did for a half minute. She smiled and politely shook my hand when I introduced myself.

The conference hall doors opened to several thousand empty chairs, a stage, and a large American flag. The chairs filled up in just a few minutes, the audience now numbered in the thousands. A former NFL football coach gave a generic motivational speech about professional development. It was a good speech. I'm sure he must have given it several times since his retirement, as he raked in the cash. Seminars were held throughout the day, in smaller venues, with topics ranging from gangs to prison ministries, to drug treatment programs, to mental health. There were also half-day trips to local facilities. I went to see the Orange County Jail, a "state-of-the-art facility" for the management of offenders in the wealthy California community. We took a tour of a unit, made up of clear plexi-glass cells for constant observation.

The next day, the hall was converted to a correctional trade show, with scores of informational booths taking up every corner of the conference hall. Sales people smiled and offered free key chains, pens, and other freebies to promote their wares. Hundreds picked up their trinkets and signed up for the cash raffle. I ordered professional books, and took some business cards, as if I would someday be networking.

Returning to small town life in Eureka was lonely. Had no friends in town, didn't want any. Although I had friendly co-workers, I learned, early on, to "trust no one" in prison work. I also knew people's business got around quickly in a small town. I requested transfers for more than two years, to no avail. The 500-mile roundtrips to Vegas were difficult. I rarely left in the winter, holing up in my bungalow. The winters were bitterly cold, and I reduced my living area to 15 feet by 15 feet. During the summer, I interviewed for positions I didn't want, just to be visible to those who could hire me elsewhere. I prepared for another winter holed up in Eureka, and took up drinking after another inmate murder and more chest pains.

I finally did get a call from the new Warden in Mojave Prison, an engaging former Captain at Northeast Max. It was an offer I couldn't refuse, because I had no other offers for escaping Eureka. The Warden admitted "Salomon, it's a challenge, most of our caseworkers have less than two years experience. We want to make it like Eureka. But I hear you want to come down here." I knew racist gangs and gang violence dominated prison life there, and that Mojave would look more like a max prison every day, just leaner in security staff. As I accepted the job, I wondered if I was any better than the salesman selling miles of razor wire.

Stare Down

The rock kicker unit is prison purgatory: not quite lockdown, but not much better. Inmates wear blue jeans rather than orange jumpsuits, get more phone calls, if there is someone who'll take their collect calls. They have a rec yard for exercise instead of the dog pens. They can be out in groups of four dozen for feeding and exercise. There are no educational or rehabilitative programs here, though, not even bad ones. The last psychologist quit months ago and hasn't been replaced. From some inmates, there are larger advantages or disadvantages. Racist and criminal gangs, control day-to-day activities here; youngsters are told who they can associate with, what they can or must do.

For the bully and predator, there are more opportunities to do business here. For naïve or weaker inmates, the youngster or bitch, there is more opportunity to be the victim. Inmates must walk the steep winding hill to the chow hall, eat with the appropriate associates, and give up food items to others if required. Today I see three dozen rock kickers for regular reviews and parole reports. What should be quick and easy information sessions sometimes end up in demands. And there are no officers around to control the situation. Inmates are not the only ones who can be victims of violence in prison. Ms. Rodriguez even has her office set up so she can escape, if need be. But I do not want the reputation as the caseworker bitch.

Isaiah's a 19 year-old Black man who has had 25 disciplinary violations, in the last year, ranging from failure to follow rules, to abusive language, to threats. None of these d-tickets were enough to land him a trip to lockdown, however. The teen offender is tall and lanky, wearing baggy pants he pulls up as he walks upstairs to my office. Senior Conteras tells me that Isaiah has been associating with an older inmate in the unit known for creating hate and discontent at other prisons.

Only last year, Isaiah and an older friend killed a man. Isaiah kicked the middle-aged neighbor when he fell to the ground, while his homie beat the victim with a cane. I asked the young man "why did you do it?" Isaiah said "man, the dude beat my nephew. I thought it was over, til da nex week. We waz chillin', smokin' Garcia Vegas, he bumped into me. Dude had problems wit his brain." I asked "couldn't you have done anything differently, couldn't you called the cops? The teen stared at me as if I were crazy. Isaiah, like many other inner-city youth, had little use for police. They take care of their own business, because cops don't show up, or they bully you too. Backing down, I thought, would violate the culture of honor, the need for respect.

At the end of the review, Isaiah wants a bed move, says "my cellie dirty." I call Senior Conteras on the telephone to check out the claim. Contreras says "his cellmate is a Muslim, he washes his feet in the sink." Isaiah says "yeah dude, he washes his feet where I be eatin'." I ask "what do you mean?" Isaiah replies "that where I get water for my ramen and shit."

I tell Isaiah "I can't do the move; it wouldn't be fair to do the move. I want you to show progress, then I can get you out of the unit, get you to a program. I don't want this place comfortable for anyone. No move." The corners of the Isaiah's mouth curl downward. I see his muscles tense, as he stands up. I know I must stand my ground. If I allow this move, then I must allow more bed moves. And bed moves mean less stability. I am NOT going to be the caseworker bitch. I know he has already killed a man, less than a year ago, and I know he is immature, angry and impulsive. I hold my pen tight in my right hand, so I can stick him in the face, the eyes, if necessary. It actually feels good to feel this much adrenalin, as I think about fucking him up. The inmate continues to stare at me for a moment, then walks out, muttering "get off you ass muthafucka and do your job."

Just another day in Pri$neyland. I hear they've added fried pie to the store list.

Si, su honor

"Soldado" is a 19 year-old inmate from one of my lockup units. The young man walks into the conference room, wearing an orange jumpsuit, his round beige head shaved, almost shiny, his hands behind his back. I tell the inmate "take a seat." I don't remember his name. He doesn't remember me either, asking me, in a barely audible "are you my lawyer?" I shake my head no.

Soldado is on my caseload, so I must appear at his immigration hearing. The hearing is held in a teleconference between the immigration court and three prisons. There is a large television in front of us, with a small camera on top. Inmates from other prisons go first. All the hearings seem exactly the same. There is a judge, a translator, an attorney for Homeland Security and a clerk. The judge and the translator speak at the same time, making it difficult to pay attention to one voice.

In each case the inmate is read his charges, told he can have counsel, but he's not entitled to a court-appointed attorney, told there is a volunteer agency that might help, found to be in violation of immigration laws and deportable, and asked if he wants to appeal. In each case, the compliant inmate says "si, su honor" for most of the questions, and "no, su honor" for his request for appeal. None of the inmates had attorneys. The attorney for Homeland Security looks through her notes and appears bored. The clerk goes in and out of the courtroom.

While Soldado is waiting his turn, I ask him how he got across the border. He says he had documents. "How much you pay?" I asked. He replies "My parents paid $3500." Soldado revealed that his father had been a cop, but was "pretty sick now." I asked "how long would it take your folks to get the money?" He said "working day and night…three years." He was nine years old when he crossed the border, thirteen when he got to the youth facility the first time, sixteen when he came to prison.

I asked the young man about his prison sentence. He said "two ten to lifes…took a deal." I figured, he would spend most of his life in prison, when he got out, if he got out. His parents would probably be dead, his relatives would most likely forget him. I asked Soldado if he told his family about the prison situation. He said "no, I don't want to hurt them."

"You got family in the US?" I asked. "Yeah, my sister, brother," he said. "They legal?" I asked. He nodded. I asked Soldado about the crime. He said matter of factly, "it was him or me." I asked him about the years in between. Soldado replied "got kicked out of school, you know, mostly for drinking." From there, he went to a youth facility, joined local wanna-be gangsters along the way. Said he installed insulation on houses when he got out of the youth camp before the incident.

I asked Soldado about the prison gangs. He said "people don't understand, if you got a lotta time to do, you gottta get along." In this case, that meant he had to follow the racial line against Blacks, or face the consequences. Only last month, Soldado had been in the youthful offender program: a mix of hardcore bangers, wannabe gangsters, and other teens who had committed violent felonies. He was charged with being involved in a potential uprising there. The program had been moved from a private prison after one uprising, then to a softer state prison yard, before coming to Pri$neyland.

Staff joked about the youth program, which received federal funding to serve the youngsters extra snacks, "cookies and milk," but had little programming and supervision, and lots of violence. Last week, a Latino youth was beaten down in the chow hall, for talking to Blacks. The racial politics of California, and the county jail were well known, and debated, with fists, feet, rocks, and hand-crafted knives.

Now it is time for Soldado's hearing. He shifts in his seat, speaks in Spanish rather than English, seems barely audible. He replies "si, su honor" several times, does not request for an appeal. I wondered if he even thought about staying in the US after he got out, if he got out. I noticed the lockup inmate wasn't even wearing handcuffs, which was against safety policies.

The next day, I talked to another caseworker about Soldado and other young men in the system just trying to fit in this gang-dominated prison. Caseworker Cervantes said "think about it this way. Who's the biggest gangster in America? It's Bush…we're all bein' pimped out by the rich, ya know? But what choice do we have?" I nodded, remembering I had been, still was, a soldier too. It's as if the caseworker's words gave Soldado's actions more sense, and there wasn't as much difference as I had thought, between the young man and me.

Paper Shufflers

"It's not easy slowing down, when so much has to be done." That's what I thought the first few months working here. But it was impossible to continue the pace of work. Instead of counting the number of reports completed, I counted stacks of overdue reports, telephone calls to make, and stupid bureaucratic answers from low- and mid-level bureaucrats. Fear and frustration built to anger, hatred, and even a brief notion I was going crazy.

I frequently could not remember inmates in front of me, or their issues. I complained, threatened about the situation to my boss, sometimes got help. I didn't feel very good, though, about giving up some of my work; most others also had revolving caseloads of 250 to 300 inmates. I had a vision of being alone with the Director, beating him down. For awhile, that was the only thought making me feel good. I became so obsessed with problems I wondered how I could undermine what I saw as a corrupt and uncaring administration.

My boss, Womack, said my job was simple, "ask the crook the necessary questions, throw him out, press a few computer keys, and go on to the next one." Regarding grievances, he said, "contrary to popular belief, your job is to deny them." I understood what he meant. Sometimes with criminals, benign neglect was more productive than blind service. When I said "our caseloads make us just paper shufflers," Womack replied, "that's right, we're paper shufflers. Get used to it."

Hughes, the other supervisor said "if you don't watch out, the inmates will eat you alive. You got to control your time, dictate the schedule." Hughes stressed "we aren't counselors, we're caseworkers. "Ya ain't trained or paid for counseling." He was right, but it wasn't easy.

The inmates in my rock kicker unit were complaining "man, when's open door? The last caseworker had it." The last caseworker, who had a smaller caseload, regularly allowed inmates

to walk into his office without appointments. Yes, inmates could eat anyone up, especially anyone who cared. And caring made me a mark. So I slowed down and cared less, well, a little anyway. Got officers to handle some preliminary paperwork and encouraged them to taker a greater role in classification. I explained to inmates that I was overloaded, and needed their patience; some listened, some were only concerned about their own issues. But my changes weren't enough.

Something had to change, and it would probably have to be my attitude, about inmates and staff. Little else seemed changeable. Maybe if I pretended I was uncaring, lazy, and "worthless," neither staff nor inmates would ask me for much. I asked a prison psychologist for the telephone number to the state's counseling center, but didn't seek counseling.

Perhaps I could burn some sick leave, like many workers did, to survive in Pri$neyland. There was indifference even among doctors, nurses, and psychologists paid to care. Didn't want to resort to that. Yet I wondered if resigning to the bad attitude was necessary for surviving work.

When I confided to Caseworker Becker about my situation, he whispered "don't volunteer for anything. I used to think the way you did. Then I came to the understanding that if it's not good enough, I tell them I'm doing the best I can." They can't afford to fire us."

The next day, Womack said "dude, you're my rock," as I was volunteered to classify 25 new inmates. Apparently one caseworker was out sick, and another was at a job interview at another prison, so someone had to pick up the slack. I thought if I was his rock, he was really in trouble. Before I left, the boss said "I'd switch you positions in a heartbeat." Knowing how crazy his workload was, I said "and I wouldn't, switch you positions." If you don't watch out,

supervisors can also eat you up, just like inmates can. For some reason, that was a difficult lesson to learn.

The Restless Vet

Benjamin Dyson marched swiftly into the psychologist's office, leaned on his cane, and mumbled "I want outta here. I ain't gonna live with that ugly black dude." The unit psychologist, Dr. Beck, calmly sat on the front of his desk, and replied "what's the problem?" The inmate's right hand tensed as he tapped on his leg. His sunken jaw tensed in a chewing motion. He stared at the psychologist, but no words came out, only the look of disgust. His initial words seemed strange to me, given that Dyson was Black himself.

I wondered if the old man remembered his celly issue when he became quiet, whether the problem was real or imagined, whether he was too proud to snitch. There could have been many reasons Benjamin Dyson was angry, frustrated, and now quiet, some which remained accessible, some which I could only weave together. I knew he was 73 years old, and in prison for the first time. For a man of his age, Dyson looked athletic, even with the cane, but his memory was another story. I was used to receiving a several grievances a week from him, usually two or three on exactly the same issue, a lost piece of property or an impolite nurse. By the time I answered each grievance, the old man would smile and say "oh, just throw it away." Dr. O'Leary said "he's got dementia, he's not gonna get any better."

How did this man get to prison for the first time, at age 73? I wondered and scanned thorough what little was known about him. In the last three years of his decline, I knew Dyson was homeless, in county jail, on probation at a halfway house, back in the county jail, and finally, in prison. He had been in two other units before occupying a bunk in the prison's extended care unit. A prison report indicated he was shaken down in another unit, extorted, by younger inmates he had earlier befriended.

The criminal arrest report stated the old man set a small fire in a vacant lot to stay warm in the desert winter. He invited a police sergeant to join him, and when the property owner was asked if he wanted to press charges, the owner said yes. Dyson was arrested for arson, taken to court, and given probation. Later, he became a technical violator, when he threatened his parole officer, which got him to prison. When I asked the old man about his odyssey, he told me "I came out here and got married again, it was a big mistake."

Dyson said he was a vet, too, but like most of the hundreds of inmates on my caseload, I knew little else about him. One time he said his sister received his Veterans checks, but he hadn't heard from her in months. Then, a VA caseworker called, asking for his incarceration date, so they could adjust his payments. Inmates, she explained, weren't entitled to benefits while incarcerated. The caseworker said he typically got two thousand dollars a month. I then wondered, how was it possible, a veteran with these benefits ended up homeless?

Dyson told me he lived in a bad neighborhood and people stole from him. I wasn't a social worker or a psychologist, and I didn't delve any further. It wasn't my job. I did know half-way houses and monthly apartments were notoriously high-crime areas. But this is the only place poor people could live in the class-divided county.

Before he left the unit, Dyson was granted parole. One problem though, he'd be required to have an approved residence. For many inmates without families, this meant living in a half-way house. When I explained the issue to Dyson, he said matter-of-factly "I'm going to the veterans' home in Boulder City, I ain't goin' back to a halfway house." But the home didn't take able-bodied vets, and the closest soldier's home was nearly 800 miles away. I tried explaining the problem to him, but he wouldn't listen. Two weeks later, he was sent to the mental health unit in Carson City.