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Approximately 350 words  
Non-fiction

TWO SPECIES: PEERING IN AND PEERING OUT

by

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Recently a tour of civilians was escorted about the prison grounds by administrative custodial staff. As the small group of bright-faced youth -- probably college students studying law -- ambled their way into the housing unit, I made careful study of their individual and collective countenance.

As they peered into the cages of the double-celled spectacle inside, I looked for tell-tale signs of shock or surprise that two people, let alone one, could be



crammed into such closet-sized space. Whether it dawned on anyone of the group that, with today's mandatory sentences, the occupants are subjected to that ridiculously small space for life, is beyond me.

I wondered if any of their curious minds compared the exhibition before them to past memories of some zoological display. If perhaps they had considered the notable dissemblance in roaming room for the animals in a zoo to that of these cages for people; the latter with considerably less.

I questioned if, by chance, just one of them might have attended the thought: It is a crime to tether a pet to any stationary site for a moment longer than three hours, yet human beings are routinely stuffed into bathroom-sized, concrete and steel cages for the better part of twenty-three hours a day -- for decades!

Surely at least one of them noticed some of the bright, meticulously shined stainless steel sink-toilet combinations that meet the entrance of these notorious human receptacles. Yet had they contemplated the possibility that the impetus behind such minute detail could have been driven by some untreated compulsive disorder? Or that right next door the distinctive clutter and confusion of the interior could be a sign of neglected chronic depression.



After years and decades of caged confinement, some of the occupants of the cells, not unlike myself, peered curiously back at the meandering lot; as if the two sets of people were of different species.

Restricted only to conventional prisoner-blue garb and uniform guard-green on an elongated daily basis, the bright fushia, lavender and cream-colored blouses and skirts made like a colorful, soft traveling garden spilling gently across the dull grey of concrete.

The tour, a rather quiet and uneventful occurrence in and of itself, endured for less than seven whole minutes, but for me, the memory of the uncharacteristic, irregular event, not only lingers with me several weeks later, but is libel to rewind for yet still years ahead.

MAY 2010