

A Day of My Life.

ONE

A day on Death Row is not something I would wish on anyone. We sit here, day after day, awaiting the Ultimate Punishment for crimes we may, or may not, have committed. Now, this is not about any persons guilt or innocence, it's just a mere glimpse into a day in the life of the Condemned.

As we sit here, the days turn into months, months into years and years into decades. Most of the Condemned men & women of America are securely locked away in their states' Maximum-Security Facilities. Contrary to the mainstream media hype, the prisons of today are far from being Country Clubs. This is especially true for the Maximum-Security prisons. They remain some of the most outdated, rundown and dilapidated Dungeons - that would likely shock the conscience of the average person.

At the prison where I am held, I am confined to a one-man cell for 24 hours a day. That's all day, every day, unless the prisoner gets a lawyer visit, or is fortunate enough to receive a visit from a family member or a friend. We are supposed to get 3 hours of outside recreation, twice a week. Each cell is a 7'x9' cube, with 3 solid walls and a steel-bar grille as the front wall, which provides an open view of the cell to anyone walking by. The accommodations for each cell include a metal bunk with a thin mattress, a floor locker-box for legal papers and a smaller one for personal possessions, a small table attached to the wall, a tv stand also attached to the wall, and a sink/toilet combination. Each wing has 14 of these cells, and there are 24 wings. Everything in this building is controlled electronically, so throughout

each day we hear the incessant buzzing and popping of the doors and locks, as well as the slamming of heavy steel doors. There is no carpet. There is no central heating or air-conditioning.

I can see my entire "house" with a quick sweep of my eyes. It's basically a bathroom with a bunk where a tub would be. A Prisoner spends so much time in his cell, that he knows every crack and rust spot. If it's Summer, it's extremely hot on the wing, while during Winter it's extremely cold. And then there is the constant stench of urine, sweat, dirt, and defecating men.

As days go by, time seems to lose all significance, and the extended periods of confinement is a challenge to even the most stable of souls. Very often, the solitude and combined degradation takes its toll on the frail human psyche. Each day is a carbon-copy of the last, with no change expected in the future. The many people I've met on Death Row have hopes, dreams and a strong Will to contend with the predicament of being Sentenced to Die. Still, there are a few who are sadly resigned to surrender to the Government that seeks to steal, kill and destroy in the name of Justice. For the indigent, the illiterate and the incompetent, there is virtually no reason to expect anything but certain Death.

The truth of the matter is, many of America's Condemned have already died in spirit. Being left alone in a foreign world of the Capital Crimes Justice System, abandoned by family and friends (though not all death row prisoners are abandoned by all loved ones), is a terribly difficult challenge. Probably because of the natural human instincts, many

of today's Condemned hope to be spared the Ultimate experience of suffering their demise at the hands of the American Justice System.

Death Row, not unlike any other part of the prison, is tattered with all sorts of individuals. There is no single description that would describe every prisoner. While there are some truly sick and evil prisoners that have been sentenced to Die, this is the exception rather than the rule, as more Death Row Prisoners may well be victims of circumstances themselves, or persons guilty of killing someone but not guilty of the Death Penalty, but not being fortunate enough to have a qualified attorney representing them at trial and were therefore wrongly convicted of First Degree Murder and subsequently wrongly sentenced to Death. From day to day, one can lie back on his bunk and listen to one legal horror story after another, as fellow Prisoners try desperately to get the next to see his point.

Meals are delivered to us in our cells, through an opening in our cell doors. Each Prisoner is fed 3 times a day, the regular, bland and scanty institutional meal. A diet hardly sufficient to satiate the average adult appetite. Prisoners who have the financial support of family & friends can counterbalance the poor diet with canteen items such as sandwiches, soups, candy bars, chips, etc., but all too often many Prisoners face long hungry nights.

Day to day activities include talking, playing chess, watching TV, listening to the radio or MP3 Player (if a Prisoner can afford to buy any of the electronics), writing letters to friends and family, or to an overworked public defender or a post-conviction

attorney who is equally overburdened.

The staggering task that is every mans burden on the Row is Filling the hours until he can sleep again. The options are few. There is talk; endless, disembodied, mostly insane talk. The Prisoner steps to the front of his cell and begins talking loudly, and his voice echoes along the wing. No one can see him, because all cells face the same way, with a thick wall between them. Talking this way is called "getting on the door", and some men will be on the door for hours, yammering about cars, politics, sex, past memories, dreams and every other possible subject. They will bet on whether it will rain by sunset. Some men are insane and will rave about space aliens or about men coming at them through the air vents at night. Only 14 men live on each wing, so the conversations get stale, yet it continues day after day, month after month, year after year.

Reading also passes the time, at least for those who can read. Books, magazines and newspapers make their way from cell to cell. After lunch, perhaps a year can be killed by a nap, and then a literate Prisoner might write letters to his family, friends and lawyers. We used to be able to paint, draw and crochet, but prison officials took our art supplies and replaced them with cheap, barely usable items, and took the crochet supplies completely, all under claims of Security. And still, all of these activities don't begin to fill the time. Not when there are 365 identical days of the year and the years pile up. A Condemned man learns to paint pictures with M&M's. He learns to make picture frames from old newspapers. He plays chess with the man 3 or 4 cells away by shouting out his moves.

Caged in a cell, even the most stable man

needs something more powerful than his own wits to get him through. That something is a TV (if he can afford one). It drives the hard-liners in Legislature crazy to think that the Death Row Prisoners have TV's in their cells. Yet, it would be hard to find a prison guard who opposes it. TV is the only thing that makes Death Row manageable. Prison staff call the TV's "electronic tranquilizers." Once, a lawmaker told the Warden that he should take the TV's from us Vermin. The Warden told him, "you take them. This place could not exist without them."

The luxury that makes time endurable is the canteen. If a Prisoner is fortunate enough to get money from his family & friends, he is allowed to spend up to \$100 a week on canteen items. Chips, cookies, coffee, soups, sandwiches, pastries and other various items are sold. As well as hygiene items. If we want real soap, real toothpaste, or deoderant, shampoo, etc., we must buy it ourselves. Even toilet paper. The prison gives us one roll of toilet paper every 10 days, but it doesn't last 10 days. So, we must buy more. If we want clothes, other than the old dirty clothes that the prison gives us, which is white but so dirty it is brown and full of holes, we must buy our own. If we want paper, pens, stamps or envelopes, we must buy them.

Mail comes anywhere from 7pm - 11:30pm, Monday - Friday. For those of us who are lucky enough to get mail, this is an important time. This is our connection to those we care about. For some Prisoners, it is their only connection. Mail time can be a great time, or a terrible time, it depends on if the Prisoner gets any.

People on the Row can make anything for any purpose. He learns to make a "water bug," a crude wire-heating element that can boil water for coffee, tea and soups. He learns to make a "fishing line", which he can throw down the hall to another prisoner, so that he can send or receive something on the line. He learns to use a hand-held mirror as a "spook", which he uses to look down the hall to see if a guard is coming or not. Usually to see if it's safe to use his water bug or his fishing line.

Twice a week, two wings go outside for rec. There is just enough space for part of a basketball court, a volleyball court, and a little space to stand out of the way. Of course, we might not have a basketball or a volleyball. The balls often get popped on the razor wire on top of the fence. Rec is the only chance for prisoners to see and talk to each other, face to face. There is lots of hand-shaking. For some prisoners, this is their only chance to touch another human. Still, some men never go outside, for one reason or another.

Three times a week, after dinner, there are showers. A man strips down to his boxers, is handcuffed, and walks with the guard down to the shower, which is the size of his cell. He is locked in, the cuffs are removed, and he's given 5 minutes to wash, then put back in his cell. We never know if the water will be hot or cold.

And being a human, Death Row prisoners also have a sense of humor, and spend many afternoons teasing, jesting and laughing at each other. Over time, you can come to know, like, and even have genuine friendships with a fellow prisoner. Sure, in the back of

his mind, he may never know whether his friend was once a murderer, but at the present time he is simply another Human Being that reciprocates his friendship.

There are bad days on Death Row. Days full of stress, confusion, inexplicable heartache... the heart of the Condemned is not always callous and unfeeling. I've heard the news reporting on Capital Defendants who have shown no remorse, but I've also heard grown men cry when they earnestly and sincerely apologized for an act, that the men themselves are still hard-pressed to understand.

The hallway lights go out at 11pm, though a few stay on constantly. The prison is never completely quiet. Gates are always clanging, there's the tread of guards' feet, the pops of locks, the slamming of doors, nightmare ravings, and muffled sobs of despair. The night slowly eases into morning, the lights come back on, and another day begins on the Row.

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