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**Nevada**

### **Let the Side Show Begin**

Late morning in the cell block. I'm in my office with the bottomless pile of paperwork, scribbling responses to requests for information. The inmates have been served lunch. The food slots on the cell doors are closed, locked. The rotunda lights are turned off. When I walk onto the tier again, and pass by the cells, I smell corndogs. Many of the cells, inmate "houses," appear dark. Many cover their cell windows with towels, insulating themselves from the western winter.

The unit is silent. As I retreat to my windowless office, an old soul music song emanates from an inmate's boom-box. I grin:

So let the sideshow begin

Hurry, hurry, step right on in

Can't afford to pass it by

Guaranteed to make you cry\*

Earlier in the morning, a few inmates were awake as I did my tour of the cell block. It wasn't much of a sideshow, actually. There were a few loud, young "cell warriors" who disrespected others on the tier, not understanding they could pay dearly in the future for their disrespect. And there were a couple of hopeless characters I often avoided in the name of benign neglect. "Hamster" O'Neil, an obsessive compulsive murderer who liked to tear anything to pieces. And "Lizard Man" Jones, a 50-year-old violent homeless man, who licked his drooping lower lip and liked to make a racket, which angered most of the tier. He was returning to the street in a few days.

Most of the inmates, though, were men in their twenties and thirties, mostly Latino, looking and sounding no different than any other young men. Many inmates had no business talking to me; I was part of the machine oppressing them. The only noise came when a group of gang members called cadence to their group exercise routine. The unit was easy to handle because it was in lockdown, for an

indefinite period of time. The lockdown occurred after a series of violent incidents among Hispanic gangs. So no inmates could barge into my office. Although a few inmates complained, there were no uprisings, no massive flooding and burning.

Valdez the lifetime criminal was one of the few regulars. He was preparing a lawsuit against the State, me included, for being "denied due process," claiming he really wasn't a gang member. We talked regularly about inmate rights, and he showed me his citations. He said his case was for everyone in the unit, yet he denied any gang affiliation. I asked him if he would be willing to go to an open yard, and have his freedom. Valdez lost his eloquence for a minute, stammered; he knew he was a dead man with the Southsiders and the Mexicanos, that he was now in the unit for his own safety, not as a form of punishment. But the judges didn't understand. Out of pride, Valdez would win his freedom a year later, and a knife in his back.

Joe La Follete was the other inmate I spoke to. He seemed different than most inmates: articulate and thoughtful: an intellectual with a criminal mind. We often shared information about how gangs and administrations thought and operated. He was in his late 20s, had spent most of his adult life in prison. He was in prison, "down" for the second time, for robbing a store in the Tropicana Mall, with his homies. He said he was influenced by "America Me" and "Colors," said "those movies, they made our clique realize we gotta take it to the next level."

While other inmates watched "Cops" on tv, LaFollette watched "Nature," said he learned a lot about how animals prey on each other. He spent much of his time taking notes and reading. His book collection included The Art of War and The Prince. But for all the reading he'd done, the inmate had no way out, for a very long time. "You know Salomon," he said, "sooner or later, the gang shit is all a dead end. I don't wanna die in prison, ya know?" Lafollette told me later, his father often beat him with an electrical cord when he acted up. But he never blamed those acts of violence for his fate. The last time we talked, LaFollette mentioned the writer George Jackson; he said he understood his own fate, but asked me why the biggest psychopaths in society weren't in prison.

I had no answer, no good answer, for him.

\*Blue Magic (1974) Lyrics by Bobby Eli/Vinny Barrett