

Big Sis, Slim the Wanna-Be, and the Hole

Working through the stacks of paperwork on my desk when I'm interrupted by a phone call. "Salomon" I said, into the telephone receiver. A female voice replied, "Yes, I'm calling for Mike, Mike Shaffer."

"And your name is?" I ask.

"I'm Mary Shaffer, his sister. I heard he's in the hole. I want to know if he's ok. Can he make calls?"

Her brother, inmate Shaffer is a 21-year-old inmate, a *wanna-be* in Pri\$neyland, a fresh recruit in the white supremacy gang. Although I have a revolving caseload of 250 inmates I do know him. The way it works in prison, staff members remember troublemakers first, or they remember how an inmate stands out. Other Whites call him Gomer or Slim, because he is thin and awkward looking. Some of the older inmates, I imagine, know him only as one of the youngsters.

And the telephone number you're calling from? I ask.

702-555-...

I write down the number to add to my computer entry, because all calls are supposed to be logged. There is no way of knowing, for sure, if the person on the other end of the telephone is who she says she is. It could be the inmate's sister, or it could be his girlfriend, perhaps a victim. As the gatekeeper of knowledge, and a representative of the Department, I have to be careful what I say about inmates. Most information is confidential and cannot be shared with the public. In the case of felony batteries, sometimes the caller is both victim and caring friend or relative. If the caller is a parent, they could be both old predator and new victim in the cycle of

domestic violence. I am only authorized to talk to the next of kin. I check the computer for next of kin information, the inmate's whereabouts in the prison, and his disciplinary record.

Scanning his records, I saw that Slim escaped from the Department's boot camp two years ago. He would have had the felony, a burglary, removed from his record had he graduated from camp. Instead he ran away. Didn't get very far, just a few miles, as he made his marathon run to Vegas, twenty-five miles away, in the desert heat. Slim had numerous disciplinary reports over the next last two years, mostly for failure to follow rules, disobeying orders, and abusive language. The youngster shaved his head, hung around with skinheads In Unit 5.

Unit 5 was an all-White housing unit after the deadly Black-Hispanic "disturbance" on the big yard last year. Inmates had been racially segregated afterward, White, Black, Hispanic, to reduce serious violence. Unit 5 was still predominantly White. But White on White "beat downs" occurred on a semi-weekly basis. Because the unit was so understaffed, officers didn't know anyone had been hurt. But there were a regular lot of inmates who mysteriously fell in the showers, or got hurt playing handball, the common price for not following the gang rules.

Like a good recruit, Slim shagged stray handballs for higher ranking members, sat with other recruits at meals, didn't talk to Black inmates, got fresh tattoos. Lately, Slim threatened officers, and was sanctioned to lockup, "the hole." He never went there, though. There weren't enough lockup beds. So Slim kept on getting in trouble, kept on living in the unit until I emailed housing, and told them he didn't belong here, in the general population.

"Do you know his back number, prison number?" I ask the outside caller. "87655" she says.

"Ok, well, first, there is no hole here. He's in lockup. Looks to me he's involved in the gangs here. His last disciplinary report was for threatening staff."

So they write him up for that? There was a pause, then she said "Let me ask you, who's in charge there?"

I was tempted to tell her that due to fiscal shortages, Pri\$neyland had been dangerously understaffed for years.

What do you mean? I asked.

"Why do they feel threatened?" she said. "Mike's only 140 pounds. He was supposed to be in YOP, the youth program."

I don't know why he wasn't in the program, which was just as gang infested as the regularly yard anyway. But I did notice his age.

"Your brother is 21. He's an adult. He's acting like he wants to be in prison forever. If someone threatened me, I'd take it seriously. People don't joke around here."

Slim's sister fired back, "I'm not stupid. We have relatives who work at Metro (the Vegas police). Is he going to Northeast, the max?"

I think that's where he'd like to go. I don't plan on sending him there, but I may not have control over that.

"But he's just a wanna-be" she replied.

Maybe, I said. But based on his actions, I think he wants to go to Northeast, see what the max is like, you know, where inmates play for keeps.

The next day I received a kite, letter, from Slim, asking when he was going to Eureka—

Northeast State Prison. I put it on the bottom of one of my piles of paperwork. It seems like sometimes I never get to the bottom of my stacks.