

No Need to Know

The embarrassing and enlightening lessons of prison work build over years. But most prison workers are so caught up in the day-to-day, so lazy, incurious, or afraid, they miss the bigger dramas. Some have been burned for doing more than the minimum. Caseworker White tells me, "I used to be interested in what was going on, but that just increases your work. You still get paid the same." Others are unwitting dupes, victims of lies and secrets. At Eureka max, S/CO Romer told me "I used to get stuff about gang members, but the investigators accused me of going to their side." So he refused to be openly curious anymore. Some knew the deal between administration and workers, and shared their stories and opinions with their people they trusted. Senior Officer Contreras, who had no interest in promotion, said matter-of-factly "bosses just want to blow sunshine up our asses. No wonder we have so many problems." Witness this three act play.

In Act 1, we see the escapee, inmate Spencer. The young man is serving a life sentence, for robbing a cab driver at gunpoint, dousing the victim with lighter fluid then dropping a match into the cab. Ten years later, when I was his caseworker at Northeast, he was languishing. The quiet, unassuming predator had become the victim, beaten down in prison after he refused to clique up with the Aryans. Unable to safely walk the main yard, Spencer was sent to protective custody. After two years as a *PC*, Spencer removed himself again, snitching on an inmate tax scam and dope deals there. When the young lifer asked for an out-of-state transfer, I did the paperwork.

I never thought about Spencer again, until three years later, when I was reminded by a caseworker calling from Northeast max. "Did you hear about our out-of-state guy who escaped? I think you got him moved. Did you see it, made national news, CNN. Remember Spencer?"

My heart sank. The caseworker muttered “good thing you covered your ass with paperwork.” Five years earlier, not long after Spencer was assaulted, he was caught with a hand-made grappling hook and rope. Newspaper reports say that’s the way he and another inmate climbed the old stone walls of the Midwest Max. I covered my ass, placing the incident prominently in the transfer request.

But the report didn’t stop Spencer from his escape. The old prison wall had a gun tower on top, but it was unmanned, due to budget cuts. Spencer and his cellmate hid out on the prison yard, got over the wall, and separated. The cellie was quickly caught, but Spencer went on his crime spree, robbing cabbies, until he was caught at a convenience store. Apparently he told a store clerk he was an escapee. Spencer was smart enough to get out of prison, but not smart enough to stay out very long.

While the escapee made national headlines, the Midwest Governor, a future presidential candidate, called for heads to roll as he diverted questions away from the unmanned, unfunded gun towers. Officers, as usual, would be the first scapegoats. In this case, however, even the warden was fired. “Crap,” I thought. My act, simply writing a report, set off a series of events, resulting in crime victims. And it ended the careers of a prison warden and several officers. I wondered how many other decisions I’d made resulted in unknown, unintended, and far-reaching consequences.

Act 2. Investigator Asher comes to my office. Closing my door, she says “can I talk to you?” “Crap,” I thought. “What’s she going to try to get from me?” Does it have to do with the escape? I’d been through the investigations tightrope before. I knew failing to answer Asher’s questions would result in a mark against me, even though the interview was voluntary. But I also knew anything I said could be used to fire me, or anyone else they might be targeting.

Apparently, Asher had been talking to anyone who could be held responsible in the gang violence three weeks ago. Three weeks ago, Brown Pride Lokos were involved in a melee with Mexicanos, only minutes after the Lokos arrived in the unit. I was in another one of my units when the incident occurred. I learned later the gang members had broken off broom handles to use as weapons, and S/CO Contreras fired several shotgun rounds to quell the violence. It wasn't until the senior yelled at the two inmates still standing that he would shoot them point blank, that they sat down. I heard the investigator was concerned that the senior officer had tipped off the Mexicanos, and had been in the second story control room rather than on the floor. His actions may, in fact, have stopped another unsolved murder in Pri\$neyland.

I told the investigator I only had a few minutes, I needed to get to one of my other units, again. She said she was busy too, but wanted to talk to me. She sat down and asked if she could turn on the tape recorder. I said yes. I don't even remember what the investigator asked. I told her when I was at Northeast Prison, I had protested the Brown Pride Lokos move to Prisneyland, that others even thought it was a set up. I told Asher I thought the department wasn't serious about gangs, and continued violence was bound to happen. I told her gangs often formed as organizations for self-defense, when prisons wouldn't defend them. Frankly, it was amazing no one was killed. It was only because officers were watching, communicating, and acting, that no one was killed. But that didn't stop the administration from looking for a scapegoat. The investigator shut off the tape recorder.

Act III begins. I ask the Captain Aaron about the possibility of a race war this summer, between Blacks and Southsiders. He tersely replied, "can't worry about what ifs; can't be paralyzed by what ifs. Gonna get 65 inmates in this week from the jail; gotta move 65 out. If we don't get it done, we're fucked." Only a few fights occurred that summer; I wondered if keeping

the rumor going might have delayed the race war. Instead, several staff members were walked off the yard for providing drugs and sex to inmates. I was not surprised.