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Palido y Los Mexicanos

As I glance away from my desk, I see yet another one at my office door. It's Denzin. He's an Anglo inmate in his early 20's, with a thin mustache and goutee, a member of a local Latino gang, the Macho Lokos. I only know him because of his gang affiliation and because I had recently seen him for his six-month classification review. His fellow gang members, his homies, call him "Palido," because of his white complexion.

Apparently, the inmate ditched a group counseling session to come to my office. He crosses his arms, says "I need a bed move." I do not ask Palido to sit down. "What's the problem?" The inmate says "My cellie. He's Mexican, don't speak English, pretends he don't understand. Dude, he's dirty. That's the way, you know, they are." I shake my head at Palido and say "bullshit, you two got to get along."

Two days later, the youngster quickly slips through the closing heavy steel door, gets to my office, asks again for the move. "Ain't we don't get along, we just different, he don't speak English." I tell him "no bed move. You know I don't like bed moves. If Lokos and Mexicanos can't get along, they'll pull all Lokos off the yard." Palido says "man, I'm just doin' my own time here. I got a girlfriend and, you know, a kid. I'm getting out soon, I'm tired of this bullshit...Something's gonna happen. You might as well lock me up."

In this case, I didn't want to create more problems by having an inmate locked up. Besides, there were no beds in lockup. My hands were tied, and bluffing to send him to the hole would threaten my reputation. I couldn't press Palido into a threatening confession this time. Sometimes I can get battling inmates to come in, ask "who's going to throw the first punch?" Usually no one speaks, and I say "well, I guess it's settled. No one's going to get hurt." If someone was willing to say they'd be the aggressor, I could get them removed from the unit. I often give a long-winded lecture to disgruntled inmates who often say "fuck it" and leave before I reach my conclusion. The problem was further complicated because I don't speak Spanish, and there are no staff interpreters readily available. I only had one side to the story, and only one celly to lecture.

I hate doing bed moves anyway, and do whatever I can to avoid them. Inmates use bed moves to conspire with homies, to extort weak inmates, to run various criminal operations, and even to kill their enemies. The caseworker who authorizes such moves is called an idiot by inmates and *inmate friendly* by staff. On the other hand, I wasn't one of those who referred to an inmate death as "population control." I didn't want to perpetuate the common notion that violence is just part of prison life, the jungle, and nothing can be done to prevent it.

When I was the housing coordinator at Eureka, I had to make questionable moves to fill beds; a few ended in fights and stabbings, and in one death. I remember talking to inmate Sanchez, days before Travieso killed him. Sanchez was a Brown Raza member, and Travieso, I learned later, was establishing a new gang, the Macho Lokos. Both agreed to live together, and the move was necessary. Beds had to be filled. Word is, the day after the murder, Travieso stabbed Sanchez about a hundred times, cut his neck from ear to ear, masturbated over his corpse, then, using the cell intercom, called the officer to get the body out of the cell.

Two days after my last talk with Palido, two Lokos shotcallers see me on the yard. Traditional shotcallers, they are respectful, seasoned convicts. I say "we can't have this. You guys have to deal with the Mexicanos." One gangster, Conejo, says "we ain't racist." I reply, "we're all racist; everybody's racist in America." "The best we can do is recognize it in ourselves, and not accept it, you know?" Conejo was silent, then said "we'll we're not that racist." I wanted to laugh, but kept straight faced. Conejo whispered to me "hey my cousin is Mexicano." One inmate in the adjacent unit, a Loko lieutenant, named Topo, agreed to move in with Palido. And the Mexican, Fuentes, agreed to move in with Topo's cellmate, an older Mexicano. I thought about doing the move just so I could have the top shotcaller in my unit, so I could keep tabs on the Lokos.

I saw Palido again, yesterday. He was still living with Fuentes, and nothing had happened yet. Palido said his celly told staff he had an enemy in the adjacent unit where he was going. Fuentes had no listed enemies, but had been in two other fights. Another Lokos inmate offered to live with Palido; he had a kite with signatures of everyone involved in the move. I called the housing coordinator, and she agreed to make the move. I didn't know whether I had started or stopped some drama, probably just transformed it a little.