

ALONE AMIDST A CROWD

An Essay on Prison Life

One of the many ironies faced in prison is the fleeting chance moment of friendship found there. That moment, surprising and most unexpected, comes onto the yard and into your cell, your life, so very suddenly that you are left feeling incredulous at it's happening. It comes about usually at the discretion of the guards, who have decided to move a person for concerns of safety or convenience.

You have left your cell to go to yard for your daily regimen of exercise or to work at the maddeningly mind-numbing job you have been assigned to. When you return, there he is, the new face occupying the space once inhabited by a former individual you had known but briefly. Such is the way that it is, a life contrived and filled with ambiguous events. Here today, gone tomorrow. Sometimes, that stranger that had come into your life for a day, a week, a month, has gone to another cell, another block, another facility.

Sometimes, he is just gone, and will never occupy any space anywhere at all except for that forever place, the long-lasting house that holds the same inevitability for man and beast. Therein lies the irony. A man does not come to prison ordinarily to make friends, but merely to survive. But when he does, it is generally short-lived and undesigned. Cruel indeed is the system that devours all in it's insatiability. The emptiness left behind by the passing of those to whom you have formed some sort of bond; a bond rarely, if ever, understood by those in the outside world; the smiles and the laughter, the stories shared at once funny yet sad, some believable and

some chock full of fancy and bravado and empty humor - all fade away into the gray walls and bars, the steel hearts filled with pathetic promise.

An interesting silence ensues when a cellie leaves; one permeated with soft whispers and rustlings, cracking and creakings; almost as if the ghost of your old cellmate still prowls the narrow confines of the man cage. A space far too small - almost inhumane in and of itself; a tiny dog run for a human - too small for one much less for two or, sometimes, three or four. One can still hear the soft snore, the raspy breath, the slurp of coffee in the morning and the rare sigh of contentment. You look, half-expecting to see him peer around the edges of his book, or peek over the top of his T.V.. You look but are quickly disappointed. It is then that you begin to hate the next poor fellow who will soon fill the doorway, bags and boxes of property in his hands and a look of fearful expectation. There is also, oftentimes, a barely submerged machismo along with a shaky facade of a somewhat contemptible toughness. You recognize this look. You've seen it a hundred times. You wear it yourself.

And it is this look that you **must** have, for the camaraderie, the partnership, the joining of forlorn souls in a place that gives irremediable birth to a relentless male violence; none of these things can come to fruition unless there is a mutual understanding, a respect given and received, and acknowledged as necessary. No emotions, no huggy-touchy feelings at all of compassion or sympathy can survive at first until the mettle, the strengths, the fearless denial of retreat, can be ascertained.

Some there are who claim territorial privilege and propriety, a " I was here first so this is my house and these are my rules, my program," scenario. Much like the old rooster and the young rooster squaring off for a duel of sorts, and may the best bird win. And unless the men, in this case, are ready

and willing and eager to assert their strength, and the situation devolves into combat, the new man acquiesces to the prior resident and things progress from there, either for good or bad.

Weeks and months go by and the fragile peace becomes a solid partnership. Share and share alike. Me casa es su casa. What's mine is yours and vice versa. Food items and some clothing is shared without question. Hygiene, such as soap or shampoo, is handed out freely. Pictures from dusty albums are exhumed and resurrected to lengthy explanations and definitions. Marriages, jobs, children, all become common fodder for conversation, and first names become familiar as they are parceled out with pride. Crimes of conviction are shared, with the proper court documentation for verification. Soon, all topics are opened to discussion, even religion and politics. Sports teams are extolled and champions idolized. There is very little that is not openly shared and now, there is nothing that you will not do for your cellie. Once you have parceled out your life to your new and true friend, dispensing memories of lives shattered or built anew, you make promises of how it will be, "Once I get out I can send you a package and stamps. I'll write faithfully too, 'cuz we're best buds." This "cementing" of friendship with sincere words and high-sounding guarantees, falsely creates a deeper sense of trueness in the relationship. It isn't until months or years later that you discover how very quickly the walls crumbled.

Why do we make these claims? Simply because men who are alone, even though surrounded by thousands, fear loneliness the most. What is strange is that sometimes, quite often in fact, a bond is formed that can be stronger than one formed in marriage. On the street, a husband and wife are working one third of their day. They really only share a few hours in the evening and on weekends, and even then, they are often hours apart. They only really

share a closeness, (hopefully a beautiful oneness), for such a brief and tender moment. Jobs, children, friends, parents, all take a bite out of the time allotted to them. Hours are spent watching television or surfing the web, answering emails, looking at new websites. They have time for a few rushed and frenzied minutes of passion to spare at night .. maybe. And time is always, it seems, in short supply.

But in prison, cellies are with each other almost twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. Time is what they are surfeit with and wish they weren't. They walk the track and eat together, become work-out partners, offering sweaty support and encouragement. They mostly watch the same shows on T.V., root for the same sports teams, and cover each other's losses in the betting pools. Their beds, kitchen, and bathroom are in the same tight space, so they are always acutely aware of the need for privacy and a moment of extra space, and respect must rule as absolute and is jealously guarded. They will wash the other man's clothing and occasionally his back. They are intimately knowledgeable of the other's body odor, personal hygiene or need thereof, and to show consideration, will leave the cell for the yard when one of them is needing his "cell time" alone.

Alone. An interesting word. How can it also be a 'feeling', an 'emotion'? Yet somehow it epitomizes the moment, the harsh, chilling, frightening second when one realizes that that word actually describes one's existence. Another phrase, emptiness, also embraces the man, (or woman, for I am fairly sure they experience much the same things), sitting in a cell by themselves.

The cell, of course, is not actually empty, for you are in it. But again, that feeling or emotion overwhelms you, leaving you bereft of self-certainty and you are left with a sense of complete loss, an emptiness, even though you are surrounded by hundreds of other living creatures. The sparse room,

trimmed in the usual clutter of home-made lines of plastic or linen torn from sheets, cardboard shelving, and photos razor cut from magazines; those little things you and your former cellie(s) have dreamed up to make this concrete mausoleum a little more home-like and comfortable and are ever changing. The guards mostly over-look such things, for it is easier and less troublesome to leave them rather than to tear them down. This gray box echoes still with the sound of nothing; a hollow reverb of breath and sigh, creaks and groans, framed by memories of that one cellie you had come to know very well and, yes - love; but love in a much different way from how you love the wife, child, mother, father, dog, that old Chevy pick-up, the color green. That stuff of legend, of books and movies.

It is a love of comity, of camaraderie, of shared experience reminiscent and not unlike that special moment of birth shared between husband and wife. It is also a love sometimes born of necessity. That old saying, "Necessity is the Mother of invention", I believe had its birthplace in the prison environment. Some things are spontaneous, coming into existence as if bursting from a womb of fertile ideas. But this love is not a sexual love, although that too exists in this cold, ugly, and sere emotional desert. Rather it is a closeness felt akin to that of soldiers in a foxhole; sailors on a storm-tossed ship; air crewmen being buffeted in a flak bombardment. For death is always prowling about, a ~~feared and hungry predator stalking the halls~~ and yards in search of its next victim. It is a feeling, a love often felt more closely, more intense, than that of the brother of your flesh. It is a difficult thing to define, much less express, to those outside the wire; and one hopes that they will never experience it.

This feeling is also something that is rarely spoken about; it is just kept close, or at least tucked away safely on a shelf or in a box, away from

prying eyes or questioning hearts. And, it is something seldom spoken about to friends or family on the street. They would not comprehend the depth or the divergence from the norm such a revelation would show or suggest. Oh, you might ask your wife, mother, sweetheart, brother to send a little something; money, stamps, a small package, to your friend, but you make it sound not too meaningful or intimate, not too caring, lest you appear weak or effeminate, or, heaven forbid, under compulsion. You might say to them, "Oh, I just wanna do my buddy a little favor, ya know? I mean .. he's always lookin' out for me, so ..."

For you love your friend, your cellie, your fellow inmate, the way that men do who are forced to live together in extremis. Soldiers, sailors, and prisoners, all experience this, bound as they are by the common denominators that define and divide their isolated and the oft-times dangerous conditions of their limited existence. Men who live such obscure lives; obscure in the sense that no one outside of their truth could possibly believe it; who live in sparse and ugly and critical environs, are or can be likened to the caged animals in a zoo. Prisoners incarcerated in America; some two million of them, do roar and pace and slowly lose identity.

The lion or bear or wolf all pace because of three things; hunger, boredom, and impatience. And those three are inextricably linked to their surroundings and captivity itself. They are trained to obey certain commands, fed at a certain time, and are limited in their personal space and restricted in the freedom of movement. They are completely dependent upon their captors and wholly compliant with the schedule set for them. They become immune to the whips and chains, but not to any changes in their own personal program. That is the one thing they can claim as their own. That and their favorite place to lie down, the place they choose to defecate, how many paces in their walk

from one end of their cage to the other, how they turn, what corner they stop at to stare outward from. They know their limits in that they recognize at which point they cannot cross. And finally, how they jump at the opening of their cage door.

We are akin to those same beasts. We live and exist at the whim of those who control our movements; the feeding, the opening of the doors, the call to yard or day room, lights on, lights out. Even being ducated (scheduled), for medical or dental, for work or for visits or for a package. We pace our cells or dorm rooms, grow impatient when our program is disrupted by some real, or whimsical reason of the guards, and complain about the quality and dispensation of our food. Quite often we have to eat where we also crap .. and we all jump when program is resumed and the doors open. We roar. Oh yes! Like crazed beasts, it seems sometimes, we roar.

And then one day, your friend, your cellie, your companion, is gone. The fear, the consternation, the anger, the anxiety, all return; a crashing down of a plethora of emotion that attempts to smother you, to press you down and overcome your resistance, to make you cry out in your pain and loneliness. You are forced to admit, in your weakened state, that you are but a boy in a man's body, with whiskers and gray hair, aches from arthritis and the coldness of living as well as from aches of the heart, and you must acknowledge that you are not as you pretend. That hard, rocky island, able to stand alone against the storms and crashing seas, able to withstand the frigid hurricanes of apathy that beat at you constantly, able to hold up under the harsh sunlight that has exposed you.

You are just a man alone in a vast mixed company of like individuals. And empty without friendship.