

Focus on Your Life

By Jennifer Anderson

A sunset is such a beautiful and amazing thing to watch. I get lost in the magic of the stunning colors streaking across the sky. As it sets down past the razor-wire and I hear the guards shout to corral us all back inside for the night, I snap back to reality. The smile melts from my face as I remember where I am. I am in a Federal Prison Camp in Bryan, Texas.

Entering the tremendously loud unit, which houses two hundred twenty-five girls/women, a diverse number of races and walks of life mingle and converse on their way to their rooms.

A variety of women, most who have never been gay a day in their lives, are now “gay for the stay.” Desperate for any affectionate touch, they seem tortured to be torn away from their current significant other for the forty-five minutes it will take for count-time. “I love you, Jessica!” is shouted from the room beside mine, a girl proudly claiming her love, though just last week they were both “in love” with someone else. The officer, furious that the *no inappropriate relationships* rule is being broken, shouts out, “Focus on your life!”

Officers are not immune to this Twilight Zone that we live in. Mr. Focus seems to be immune, but an ample number of officers begin their jobs with a career in mind and become distracted by the desperation in these women’s eyes. Men who thought they were happily married get lost in the basic lust and need for companionship that the inmates show them, and soon their career is forgotten. Inmates, completely lost in the situation, also grow distant from their own husbands or families, or quit programs that will get them home to their children early.

Simply being observant in a six month period, it is effortless to see the madness. Stepping off the property, the spell is broken, leaving the inmate or officer behind. How ridiculous the situation was is suddenly clear in the "air of freedom." The loved-one is left to mourn for a day...maybe two. But mourning time here is also in an alternate universe. Healing time is miraculous and the hunt for the next unhealthy relationship will begin within approximately forty-eight hours.

A common myth about the federal prison system is that there are queen/kingpins here. But, honestly, only a handful of inmates have ever seen big money. They frequently take on the Army's logo and "be all they can be," with tall tales of things they have had, seen, and done, but the majority of them were drivers, small-time dealers, or even just pill buyers. A large percentage are doing life on the installment plan. They continue their criminal career upon release, only to receive sentence after sentence.

Many inmates I have run across, mostly in the drug trade, have entire families of criminals. They take turns doing time, designating someone to keep the children while another is gone, someone to send absurd amounts of money (illegal, I'm sure) to keep them comfortable, etc. They look at the time-out like an occupational hazard, almost like paying taxes is to a productive citizen.

Though the insanity here is not curable, the BOP (Bureau of Prisons) does supply Prozac. At a medical facility you can receive many types of medication. But here at FPC Bryan, your choice is what we have a contract for...Prozac. Stressed out, depressed, anxious? Prozac is what you get. You stand in a "pill line" twice daily, press your ID card to the window, and the unpleasant nurse will hand you a tiny paper cup containing your dose of medication. You dump

it into your mouth, swallow it with water from the fountain beside you, then show your empty mouth, including under your tongue, through the window (just in case you may try to sell them later).

“Next!”

The most popular method of comfort for inmates is calories. Since so many women have gone years without eating well, either from the lack of funds or the excesses of getting high, they take this opportunity to make up for lost time. Starting in county jail, they gorge on sweets and noodles. For those who can't afford to purchase an abundance of food at the commissary, their arrival here at the camp is their relief. We are fed very well from our national menu, and any additional funding is spent on our hot and cold bar, where we are offered four sides on each. Our four sides may be healthy; beans, coleslaw, pasta, potato salad, or soup, but they are also self-serve. The gluttony is repulsive. Happy, sad, or stressed out, some women will feed every emotion. I have seen many women gain a hundred pounds or more in a year or less. The most amazing part is that, in asking the heavy-eater about the weight gain, they will blame it on the amount of carbs consumed on the offered kitchen food. Somehow they never come to the realization that it is as simple as *putting the fork down!*

In addition to our health-food, we are also offered a wide range of recreational activities. Many of them are offered in classes; aerobics, pilates, yoga, etc. A small percentage of women substitute exercise for their addictions. They obsessively exercise three or more times per day and consume a startling number of laxatives in an attempt to control anything they can. They are joined from time to time by those who have physically enlarged during their stay and now have

ninety days remaining until their release. For some reason, they believe they can contain their weight problem in that short amount of time.

While observing the foolishness around me, I also take time to recognize my own insanity. Climbing up onto my bunk, I reflect on how exactly I got here and where things began to go wrong...