

## MISPLACED

As I lie in the bunk reading, I am torn away from the pages by the unmistakable sound of gum shoes squeaking, property boxes bumping against the wall, and the thuds of fists crashing against bare skin. The occupants in the cell above mine are fighting. With my thumb between the pages of the book, I lay it on my chest and listen to the altercation. As the fight intensifies, I sit up and put my feet on the floor, and the book slides diagonally across my chest and onto the bed. I am staring up at the vent from which the sounds escape. After what seemed like minutes, but were actually only a few seconds, one of the men could be heard pleading with the other, "Stop, I don't want to fight any more."

Fights are a common occurrence in prison. The difference between this fight and what is considered a common fight is that this fight is between, for all intents and purposes, a "normal" inmate and an inmate who suffers from mental illness. After a spew of profanity and threats of a worse beating if the mentally ill guy does again whatever he had done to bring this beating on, the ruckus stops.

It is doubtful the mentally ill guy even knows what, if anything, he had done wrong. After all it is blatantly obvious to anyone who sees him that he suffers some form of mental illness. He talks to himself--sometimes using exaggerated forms of gesticulation--he is unclean, and he appears to always be spaced out. Guys like him, the mentally ill, are preyed upon every day. They are bullied, tricked out of the best food on their trays, strong-armed of their commissary, and along with being physically assaulted, some are sexually assaulted.

The incarceration of the mentally ill has been on the rise since the 1970s.



And considering the cuts in mental health budgets nation wide, the incarceration of the mentally ill will not decrease any time soon. So in the mean time, no help is coming literally or figuratively. As for the unfortunate guy in the cell above me, he is also on his own. He has to sit in that cell in fear for his well being, if not for his life, until the cells are opened for brunch, ten hours from now.

If he makes it out the cell, because of the bruises of his face, he will be stopped by a guard, hand cuffed, taken to health care, then to segregation where he will be placed under investigation. After a short investigation, his cellmate will also be placed in segregation. Contrary to popular belief, the mentally ill guy, being that he is vulnerable, will not be placed in protective custody or in a ward for the mentally ill. After serving a thirty day stint in segregation for fighting--in his case for being a human punching bag--he will be placed back in general population in a cell with a "normal" inmate who is ill equipped to deal with his special needs. So the chance that he suffers some kind of mistreatment at the hands of another inmate is more than likely; it is inevitable.

I am still sitting on the edge of my bunk peering at the silent, dark vent. Although the fight has ended, it's going to take me a few minutes to shake off the thoughts of what could possibly happen to him if, unaware, he violates some prison mores. Contending with a feeling of unease, I finally lie back in my bunk, reopen my book, and gaze at the clock. It's 11:15 P.M. Nine hours and forty-five minutes until brunch. Hopefully he climbs up into his bunk and doesn't do anything but breathe until then.

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