

## COUNTY ERECTIONS

by

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I willingly gave my country four years in the 1960's, but giving an almost equal amount to my county was unplanned. I usually slept well in my cell in the Los Angeles County Jail, but woke up to a nightmare.

"An erection! I need an erection!"

These are not the words you expect to wake up to in a jail, or anywhere but an asylum, but that's what roused me one morning in 1996. I recognized the voice of my friend, Dat Nguyen, in the adjoining cell, but the words unnerved me.

My neighbor in the 24-hour-a-day lockdown of the Protective Custody Unit was a 45-year-old Vietnamese cocaine salesman and reportedly former ARVN regular during the conflict. Apparently he learned more than battle strategy working for the government in Saigon. The hyperactive, five-foot-four-inch guy was well-liked on the row of 26 cells, but I questioned his tenure after this blatant statement.

"What did you say, Dat?"

“I say I need to hode erection...”

“That’s what I thought you said, but it’s only 7 a.m. and these folks aren’t awake yet. I don’t think anybody wants to hear about your penis.”

“Peeniz...what this peeniz, John?”

Dat’s English was generally good but the majority of it was learned from American GI’s and other criminals in Saigon.

“Penis, Dat. You know, your dick...an erection.”

“No, no, I no say dick, I say election. I want to hold election for, you know, one of us to be spokesperson for the tier. We need representative to speak for us about bad mail.”

Now I started to get the picture.

Mail delivery problems plagued L.A. County Jail inmates in the mid-1990’s. When O.J. Simpson was there he reportedly received over 4,000 pieces of mail per week — sometimes more. The mailroom assured us our 3-4 week delivery delays would disappear when the O.J. trial was over. After Simpson escaped, the mail problems persisted. Ten months later our complaints about delivery and other issues were ignored.

“Dat, there’s nothing we can do about it. We’re prisoners. Stirring up the tier won’t help. It’ll just bring you grief.”

My inscrutable neighbor digested this gem from my vast jail experience. I heard him jump down from his upper bunk next door. I couldn’t see him because a six-inch-thick wall separated us. Bars on the front of the cells and another wall across the narrow tier walkway allowed sounds to bounce back into the cubicles. His rubber sandals slapped the hard floor like an impatient mother bringing her hands together to get a recalcitrant child’s attention.

“No, no, my friend. This is America. You know? The democratic process is recognize by everyone. How can deputies ignore our problems if we organize?”

I sighed, remembering my recent experience with the official jail complaint process.

Several issues of my Playboy magazine were intercepted and stolen by deputies and I had the audacity to complain, in writing, to the senior supervisor. I did not turn in the culprits by name even though I knew the thugs involved. The complaint asked the supervisor to, at least, have the now-used periodicals forwarded to me when the cops were done with them. They never bothered Popular Mechanics or Audubon, just Playboy. My closing statement implied outright theft by his employees since I saw my issue go into a deputies back-pack as he went off-shift. Still, I did not roll over on the thief. Twelve hours after depositing the document in the complaint box, I was awakened at 7 a.m. by a clipboard slapping my metal food tray slot. The senior deputy and his toady chose me for a “random” search for contraband. Stripped naked, I was handcuffed and forced to watch as they tossed my cell. After two years in custody, and eight cell searches without any write-ups for contraband or disciplinary action, they scoped out everything in my cubicle. Being a former law enforcement officer kept the damage to a minimum but they walked away without comment, having made their point why I was chosen for a random cell search.

“Dat, this isn’t a democracy. This is L.A. County, it’s a...a Plutocracy”

He laughed. “You mean like Pluto, the Disneyland dog?”

“Well, not quite...actually, yes. Like Disneyland...Mickey Mouse.”

“Oooohhh, yes, I understand. Mickey Mouse outfit. ARVN was Mickey Mouse outfit, too.”

He continued chuckling and asked me if I wanted him to zap some hot water for coffee. We had no microwave oven until Dat showed up; lukewarm tap water the only available liquid for a cup-o’-soup or coffee. His fix endeared him to us all.

On his first once-a-week, 30-minute tier time for a phone call, he spotted an empty cell. Well-lit, none of us wanted the cubicle because the bright lights made it difficult to sleep during the day. Dat requested a move and he relocated. He found the armored, recessed light fixture contained 2 - 100 watt bulbs, and 2 - 40 watt globes. Covered by an aluminum grillwork with over 500 tiny holes drilled in it, the metal box formed a perfect oven.

Dat filled a plastic sandwich baggie with water, tied it off, forced it against the grill with a piece of cardboard and secured it in place by slipping the edges under the upper and lower rim. By stuffing the two ends with socks, he insulated the counterfeit microwave oven. Ten minutes later the water steamed. Dat quickly capitalized on his invention. A bag of boiling water for coffee or a soup was worth a single serving of instant coffee in return, or two baggies for a candy bar. He did a booming business. My water was free since I helped him write letters to his attorney and a judge. America, land of opportunity!

While he nuked my water, our conversation focused. "John, I want to hold an election and make one of our comrades a spoke-man. He can take petition to..."

"No, Dat! No petitions. We can't provoke these people. We have to accept the way it is. We'll all be leaving here soon anyway and move on to someplace else. This just isn't worth fighting for."

He chuckled evilly. "You do that to us in Saigon in 1975, too."

"Asshole," I muttered, but he was right.

"I come out for telephone today. I speak with everyone on row. We elect someone to speak out, but maybe you want to be spoke-man, John?"

"No thanks, Dat. I'm too angry after yesterday's mail. I'm not in the right frame of mind..."

"Ahhhh, yes," Dat replied sagely, "the evil male faces."

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In Tuesday's mail I received a letter from my parents and several photos of Mom and Dad. Mom smiled brightly in both pictures, looking affectionately at the headless torso next to her by the Christmas tree and at the dining room table.

Unknown to me, one of the Los Angeles County Jail regulations is listed as 'Prohibited Photographs': "No photos of male persons with heads or faces depicted larger than a quarter will be allowed." My dad's face was slightly over-sized so a center punch-like device was used to behead him. Then the pix were then sent on to me.

I was later told that inmates received pictures of their homeboys flashing gang signs and tattoos and these provocative photos caused "tension" and fights among opposing gangs. By excising the faces of males in the snapshots the censors figured they diffused the problem. Right, decapitating my 82-year-old father allowed me to live peacefully with my peers.

The rest of the mail restrictions were equally as stupid: "No newspaper clippings," but photocopies of news clips routinely came through; sometimes not. Logically, we were forbidden to receive "genital or pubic hair clippings," — no mention whether photocopies of pubic hair clippings were acceptable.

"Dat, do what you need to do, but I don't think any of the jail veterans on this row will participate."

"We soon see!" Dat shouted. "I hold elections at Disneyland!"

Dat once told me how ARVN interrogators took North Vietnamese prisoners up in helicopters and dropped them out from great heights. I wondered if he had not had a similar mishap at an early age and survived.

Two hours later I heard a PA announcement, "Nguyen! Tier time," followed by his gate opening. He shuffled up to my door with a betel-nut destroyed smile, holding a sheet of paper and a pencil.

"You sign petition, Everyone will follow your lead..."

"No. I won't sign your petition. Go away." He frowned and moved on to the next cell, out of my sight.

Dat's attempt at organizing the tier lasted for about three minutes before he came stomping by me, muttering something in Vietnamese. He continued on to the module deputy's desk. Their heated exchange went on for about 30 seconds before he was ordered back to his cell. The heavy gate slid shut with a metallic crunch sounding like an anvil dropping on an insect. Dat continued ranting for 10-15 minutes then asked if I wanted another cup of coffee. I agreed to the payment, too: I would help him write his Congressman.

"But, Dat, you don't have a Congressman," I said, only after I got my coffee, "you aren't a U.S. citizen yet, but maybe we can send something to the ACLU."

"Aye-Cee...what that, John?"

"It's the American Civil Liberties Union."

"Ahhh, yes; the unions. They organized. I a Teamster union man once. They very strong people."

"Right, Dat."

I climbed back into my bunk while musing over the content of the letter and how best to present the problem to the ACLU: arbitrary beheadings, quarter-sized-faces, pubic hair clippings...they'll never believe it,