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1800 wds.

TALKING IN CIRCLES

By

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(pseudonym)

At least twice a month I walk down to the south yard at Club Fed L.A. — Terminal Island Federal Correctional Institution in San Pedro, California. My stroll usually takes place in the evening at a time when I am sure there will be few of my fellow inmates present. The south yard covers a little over an acre of the island and has a combination baseball diamond/soccer field surrounded by a half-mile running track. The grass is reasonably well-kept and a couple of palm trees stand sentry over the plot. Constant off-shore breezes bring in a variety of "outside" smells: exhaust from passing cars, cooking odors from nearby staff housing, and the heavy diesel exhaust from departing cruise ships. We welcome any contact from the exterior of the

prison walls. The Pacific Ocean kisses the east side of the yard, only 10 feet beyond the two, 15-foot-tall, razor-topped chain-link fences.

My bi-weekly visits usually coincide with Monday Night Football or when a particularly violent film plays at the prison theater. Then, or when a boxing match is broadcast on cable, I am guaranteed most of the inmates are inside and away from me — my favorite times. I used to work in law enforcement and have difficulty establishing relationships with the homeboys, so I adjust my schedule to avoid the exposure. I am comfortable with that.

I generally sit in the baseball bleachers since I can gain some elevation and peer over the razor wire to see the Long Beach skyline across the harbor. I slip in my ear buds, insert a Shadowfax tape, maybe Vivaldi, or George Winston if I'm in the mood, light up a foul cigar and enjoy the tranquility; as much as there is where over 1100 felons reside within the five-acre plot. Unfortunately, the silence never lasts in prison. You might experience a few hours stillness between 2 – 4 AM, or possibly a few moments mid-morning. The rest of the time you'll hear some idiot shouting across the yard just to say "hi" to a friend he saw 10 minutes before, or two guys will debate sports teams at 2 AM on a weeknight, ignoring the fact everyone else is trying to sleep. The jabber is constant. Most inmates have such low self-esteem that talking or shouting out brings attention and gratification — someone is listening!

My last trip to the south yard was typical. I wanted to write letters to my daughters, instead, I ended up jotting down pieces of conversation I overheard as groups of convicts walked around the track. Nobody ran or jogged. Their pace was as if the men were strolling along a boulevard, talking with the homeys in the 'hood.

When I arrived, there were three groups. All were veterans of the system. I've only been in custody 27 months, but I can pick them out readily. There are few first-timers here, less than 10%, I'd say. Two groups had three men walking abreast and the third was just two older guys. The assemblage was a good representation of the overall prison's ethnic makeup and age span. One bunch was young Black men; the second two heavily-tattooed Mexican gang

member-types and a biker; the third an older white man and a equally aged Black man. Three of the individuals were men I had seen leave Terminal Island on parole in the past year. They were already back on violations. That, too, was standard, but where could you find a better atmosphere to do jail time – we were on a beach! All but two of these guys were heavy smokers.

What deterred me from writing my daughters was what I heard as the initial cluster passed below me on the first loop around the track. One guy was doing all the talking, loudly, of course. A stiff breeze blew from the west, rustling the dried fronds in the nearby palm trees. The setting sun brushed sparse clouds with a pale pink hue. A flock of bickering crows settled noisily into an avocado tree behind the warden's seaside residence, roosting for the night.

The approaching speaker was about 22-years-old, arms covered with tattooed topless hoochies and *pistoleros*, the figures '213' etched on the nape of his neck. The numbers must have some significance – maybe to help him find his way back to the 'hood if he ever wandered too far from home. At least the area code provided some direction to a nearby city. One of his companions had a better idea: his neck tattoo read very specifically: '18th Street'.

I slipped my ear buds out and listened, even though hearing him was no problem. "...and then my fucking attorney told me to take the deal...can you believe that shit?" the *bandito* said. He waved his arms in jerky motions as they strolled by the chain-link baseball backstop and swept around the track towards me. "He said the prosecutor dude told him I did 'great bodily injury' to the bitch and I was looking at five more years...shit, I didn't hurt her none at all, man!"

One of his pals shook his head. The other nodded. The trio looked like those stupid bobble-head dolls. As they slipped by just below me, the vocal one suddenly stopped on the track. Curly and Moe kept walking, their heads nodding. They finally realized Larry wasn't with them and they, too, halted and turned to face the orator.

"All I fucking did was stick the gun in her mouth and told her to give up the fucking money...it wasn't her even her money... it was the bank's. The stupid bitch; I didn't hurt her none at all and

the DA says it was great bodily injury and another felony charge. I fucked her up mentally or something.”

Thankfully, they started moving again, all three shaking their heads in unison.

“I can’t believe it, man. I didn’t do shit to her – sticking a gun in somebody’s mouth don’t hurt, there wasn’t no blood, shit, I shoulda pulled the fucking trigger and...”His voice faded as they rounded the final leg of the 220 on the west side of the track.

I had a hard time believing what I heard even though similar conversations go on constantly. I try to ignore them, but the topics of crime, fellow criminals, and how badly the system treats prisoners are all I ever hear in this place. These men must have families, normal friends and pleasant memories of something, but I never learn of these things.

Seconds later another group passed the backstop. All three homeys were talking at the same time. They reminded me of the flock of crows fighting for the best branch in the nearby roosting tree. Each one wanted, or needed, recognition over the others.

“It ain’t right, man. The motherfucker’s innocent!”

“No bullshit, man...they frame him just like they did to us...”

“Motherfucking O.J.’s innocent, maaaaan...the bitch got what she deserved. He ain’t a murderer. She deserved it and so did the White boy...”

Fortunately these youngsters walked at a faster pace and were soon out of earshot. Unfortunately, I knew that also meant they would return in about three minutes. I cranked up the volume on a Shadowfax piece and tried to put my pen to paper, but could not begin: Dear Carrie...Dearest Daughter... The atmosphere was too tense in this fishbowl. I was afraid my words on paper might reveal my anxiety.

A harbor cruise boat chugged by, its PA system barely audible above the wake it created. “...on the left is Terminal Island Prison...home of some of the worst offenders in America...Charlie Manson did time here in the 1970s...”

The passengers looked like cardboard cutouts lined up at the railing, all afraid to make eye contact with us. I waved. Two 10-year-olds took a step back, reacting as if the prisoners were mannequins. One reluctantly waved back, the only sign of life on-board.

The two older men approached, ambling along, one with a pronounced limp, and I picked out one voice well before home plate. It was a 60-year-old guy, bald as the soccer ball he absently kicked out of his path. He looked a bit like George C. Scott as General Patton. His voice was gravelly, too.

"...the house was as close to the ocean as we are right now," he said, pointing at the glistening surface just yards away. I figured the old guy was a white-collar criminal, maybe a deposed CEO? "After we got it, my old lady had a wall knocked out by the pool so we could see the waves breaking on the shore at night. Awww, man, it was beautiful. When the waves hit the shore they shined real bright...the phosphorous, you know?"

His description was graphic. I, too, pictured the breakers shining. His companion smiled, teeth flashing in the waning light. He nodded approval and they passed beneath my aerie.

"There was this huge lawn by the pool and a couple of cabañas on the edge where me and my wife would spend hours just..." The voice vanished with the breeze.

I took a deep breath and looked up to see a few stars twinkling. A glance showed the *bandito* band still at least a minute away and I enjoyed the brief silence. Their approach started my heart racing, much like when I knew a vehicle or foot pursuit was imminent when I was a cop; the verbal assault only seconds away.

"...the fucking deal the DA wanted was two more years and the fucking judge gave me all five! Five extra fucking ears for robbing just one bank and sticking a gun in some old broad's mouth...she didn't get hurt, man!" The companions nodded agreement.

"But the judge didn't know I did three other banks that same week..." he laughed heartily, "...and when I get out, fuck this three-strikes shit, there aren't going to be any more witnesses," he said ominously. "I ain't coming back to jail, man!"

The *bandito's* voice faded, replaced by the rapid pace of the homey team. "...wasn't the way I'd do it, man. Motherfucker should have shot them but I knowed how he felt...a knife gits somebody's attention...real close and personal..."

"Yeah, yeah. Especially when you got somebody to hold the vic while you slip it in...it lets them know, man...I done it that way once..."

"No shit, man. O.J.'s fucking innocent, the bitch deserved it."

Involuntarily I shook my head, and then put myself in check. There was no need — I was a fly on the wall. Since incarceration, I never eavesdropped on a description of a vacation at Big Sur, or overheard an inmate discuss a 1957 Chevy he once owned, or an affectionate reference to a favorite dog. More likely was a discussion about a robbery committed in a Carmel gift shop or a '57 Chevy stolen for a getaway car. A chat concerning a neighbor's dog shot with a pellet gun because he was barking was probable. I never heard any normal experiences. Maybe former LAPD Chief Darryl Gates was right when he stated, in the late 1980s, that the forbidden police chokehold (or was it baton blows?) did not affect criminals — only "normal" people. His original statement was more ethnic-specific, but as applied to felons in general, he was right; these boneheads haven't a clue. The typical offender's life is like my observations at the track at Terminal Island: they never get anywhere and are totally oblivious of their surroundings — talking in circles; a revolving door.

When I first got here I assumed other inmates enjoyed the sea breezes, the green grass and the ocean view. I know better now. Never do they comment on the beauty of a sunset, articulate the awesome cloud formations or reveal how tranquil the warm winds make you feel. Never.

At least the aged pair of inmates seemed to share light moments discussing the beach house. I looked forward to their return orbit. The bald man's voice had softened and I could not hear it until he was almost below me.

"...Hell of a deal. The old man was a degenerate gambler and his wife died. He was living with a bimbo and owed me almost 80K. A couple of my guys dropped by his house one night and

bounced him off a wall a couple of times. The bitch tried to call the cops so they dropped her, too. They got the message and I told the prick his house was mine until he paid me. We just evicted them!" Bald guy's companion laughed heartily

Before their voices faded, I slipped out of the bleachers like a dog caught on the new sofa, shaking my head. Into the shadows of the nearby dormitory, I disappeared, walking back to the questionable shelter of my cell. I called my daughters first and told them I loved them.