

A DAY IN MY LIFE

Awakened by the brilliance of 6:00AM lights, I arise, grab my toiletries and walk down the long, stale white corridor toward the restroom. First, I must wade through a bevy of inmates blocking my path while vehemently discussing last night's televised basketball game. These men do so without any consideration for those still trying to sleep or pass through. I step across the threshold and into a room with two rows of sinks where all sorts of men - white, black, Mexican, tall, short, fat and slim - are vigorously brushing their teeth, shaving, washing their faces or - as disgusting as it sounds - blowing their snot into the sinks and then expending trifling effort to leave no residue for the next of the 160 men housed in this unit.

Next, I navigate through the two lines of extended rumps and wheelchairs and into the section of the restroom housing six urinals and five toilets, only one handicapped accessible. Before reaching the urinal, I must first step across an ever-resent puddle of water, presumably a mixture of dirty water from the leaking urinals, drainage from the leaking mold-covered pipes above, and urine. To my left are two white men bug-eyed and stiff as totem poles already high on synthetic marijuana they and others have been awake and smoking all night. A single black man as wide as a Mack truck is doing chin-ups on a metal bar affixed to the sides of a shower stall. Because of the man's enormousness, the bar already ~~eventually collapses~~ ^{wavering} will ~~collapse~~. Because of the man's obvious strength, no one will say a word when it works its way from the wall.

While standing in front of one of the urinals, I overhear a man from inside one of the toilet stalls frantically speaking into one of the hundred or more illegal cell phones possessed by inmates on this compound. Hearing his voice reminds me I do not have access to the wall-mounted telephones or email service because a few owning these devices attempted to hide them inside one of the TV viewing rooms. Of course, those with cell phones lose nothing while those of us dependent upon institutional phones and email must go without for twenty-one days. I wash my hands but not before pumping the wall-mounted soap dispenser only to find it once again empty. After leaving the restroom, I turn left and begin the long walk down the corridor and through the same collection of men who are now arguing not about what team won and why, but who will win next week's game.

After placing my toiletries in their respective places inside my small, antiquated metal locker, I grab my plastic mug, spoon in some coffee and creamer, and begin the walk down the same corridor and through a now larger and louder cluster now arguing about who is "the greatest of all time." After passing through, I soon reach another puddle of water in front of where the unit water fountain had previously been anchored and now occupied by a black vacuum used to suck up water that now constantly collects on the white, tile flooring from a leaking ceiling and wall drain that has never been repaired.

I pass a TV viewing room on my right filled with black men watching BET on one television set and ESPN on another and approach another ever-present puddle of water. This one was in front of the unit ice machine inside what is called "the microwave room." Already at this early hour, men are cutting up vegetables stolen from the chow hall that will be cooked later along with other stolen items and eaten as their evening meal. I walk passed them to get to the water water spigot on the wall where I fill my mug with 185 degree water. After a quick stir, I attempt to wash my spoon in the sink next to the spigot only to discover it still does not work, just as it has not in weeks. The basketball debate has now relocated to this tiny room making hearing anything else impossible. I navigate through the mass of bodies who look at me as if I have intruded on a debate no less significant than the Scopes trial deliberations on evolution.

As I exit and head toward my cubicle, I see men reclined in blue plastic chairs in front of the computers. A few men are logged on checking account balances while others log in hoping against hope the unit email service is again activated. As a few men leave, others remain ensconced with their chairs turned away from the computers so they can witness everyone's coming and going, just as the do while sitting on their front porches back home. The barely audible intercom is announcing in muffled tones about a "move" being opened or closed, call-outs to medical and elsewhere being cancelled, and for some poor souls to report to the lieutenant's office where they will probably be sanctioned for some behavioral oddity.

After two cups of coffee, I don the ubiquitous khaki uniform and await the next opportunity to walk to the library. There I hope to find a current selection of newspapers and magazines to peruse. Sadly, more times than not, I am told when I arrive "the staff didn't go to the mailroom." This means of course that nothing but the same now obsolete periodicals are being offered to those of us almost totally dependent on the prison library for new and current events.

An hour later, I return to my housing unit where I, along with everyone else, will wait to be called to "chow." In the chow hall we almost assuredly will be served some embodiment of chicken that we will incessantly debate whether it was better or worse than the previous hundred or more times it has been served. When we are called, be it twenty or ninety minutes later, we will sprint to the chow hall along an incongruous indirect path chosen in the name of security. Once we arrive, we will join several hundred others comprising two separate lines so long out the door that none of us will ever complain about DMV or post office lines again.

We take seats - blacks on the north side, whites and Mexicans on the south end -- where we have precious few minutes to socialize with men from other units. All the while, others are busy bagging their food inside empty Folger's coffee ziplock bags so it can be eaten, sold or bartered for drugs later. Fifteen minutes later, we exit the chow hall and travail an even longer indirect route back to our housing unit. Along the way, several will be pulled aside by one of the several compound COs

and shaken down so any stolen chow hall food can be removed from their persons. Confiscated food will then be placed at the feet of the vanquishing officer who will stand proudly over it like a pirate flaunting his plundler.

After enduring the 200-yard walk, we arrive at our housing unit where the ritual of fighting for one of the five toilets begins. Afterwards we change clothes and prepare to spend the next three hours at rec, the library, the chapel, or asleep on our bunks.

At 3:15PM, "Yard Recall" is announced over the intercom and everyone returns to the housing unit where they await the 4:00PM "standing count" and the officer change that is inevitably conducted at least twenty minutes after the hour. After count, we gather at the front of the unit for the most anticipated event of the day. During Mail Call we stand around the officer in anticipation and hope that a letter, package, magazine, newspaper or even junk mail bearing our name is pulled from the canvass bag. As the bags contents are emptied onto a plastic chair and we see not even enough mail to sustain a brief fire, our hopes for anything from the outside world are dashed, just as they were the day before, and the day before that.

Most disappointed, we return to our bunks where we bide our time until chow. Afterwards, we will search for something to occupy our bodies and minds until the 9:30PM standing count followed immediately by lights out. Once the lights are extinguished, we pile onto our stiff, plastic-covered mats where prayers are said for family and for a night of peace. If not a full night, we ask for simply a few hours of tranquility away from the inanity of our environment where productivity is always a challenge, our sanity^(s) in doubt, and where we must look forward to nothing more, nothing less, than the same for the many days ahead.