

THE INCOMPLETE MEMOIRS OF A TEXAS PRISONER

1987: FIRST IMPRESSION, YOU REALLY JUST HAD TO HAVE BEEN THERE

Matthew 25: 36 "... I was in prison, and ye came unto Me."

Matthew 25: 43 "I was ... in prison and ye visited Me not."

Matthew 25: 45 "Inasmuch as ye did it to the least of these,
ye did it unto Me."

Sooner or later the question is asked, usually by a relative or a friend: "What is prison like?" I spend all day, every day, wishing that I myself didn't know. The simplest and most accurate answer, ironically also excuses a bad joke: "You had to have been there." But that won't do because the question will no doubt come from someone who deserves a better answer. The question is not asked flippantly so I cannot answer it that way.

The main problem is that pre-formed ideas about prison are waiting to color any response: vague snippets from movies, newspaper articles and television drama -- all whose accuracy leaves much to be desired. Any graphic explanation, if one were possible, stands NO chance against these media-reinforced rumors.

Not that the facts about prison are any better than, or even worse than, the living truth; no, they are just different.

What IS prison like?

It is easier to describe what prison is NOT like. It's not like a country club. It's not like a dungeon, a cave or even a torture chamber. It's probably not as bad as you think it is, but then again, it may be fer, FAR worse.

This leads up to my favorite inaccuracy: "Prison is what you make it." In a very narrow sense that IS true, although you most certainly cannot make it into a vacation, no matter how hard that

you might try.

Another handy stand-by: "Prison is a learning experience." Now that one IS true, although the same thing could be said about having a heart attack.

There is ONE thing that describes prison, an all-encompassing truth, an inarguable fact. Regardless of how you got here, how long you must stay, what job or unit you are assigned to, prison is ... lonely.

So, "REALLY," You say, "what is prison REALLY LIKE?"

Okay then: Prison is going to sleep at night, wondering who, if anyone, is missing you. It is missing your loved ones so much you have to harden your heart just to survive. It is nonchalantly waiting for mail call the way an alcoholic might nonchalantly wait for happy hour to begin.

Prison is hearing a song on the radio that transports you to the exact time, place and feeling of when she last said: "I love you." Friend, You would rather be transported straight to hell, itself a close cousin to prison, than to be ambushed by memories like that in such a manner.

It is praying for world peace -- for the completely selfish reason that you want to live long enough to hear her say it just one more time. To be able to hold your Mom, a child, anyone. "Nuke me in Austin, Dallas, Houston, Waco, even Zavala; dear God, just please, not in prison ..."

Any hunger, terror, depravity, injustice or humiliation that may be connected with prison most certainly takes a back seat to the isolation and loneliness involved. Being one number

against the many goes against the human grain. Granted, the food IS horrible. And meeting someone in the dayroom who would rather beat you up and steal your watch than look at you can be quite disconcerting, to say the very least.

But most all that can be handled, dealt with.

EXCEPT ... the loneliness.

I am not saying that the popular concepts of prison are inflated, or even totally wrong. I only mean to say that they are all secondary to the twin specters of isolation and loneliness, which are, in FACT, quite inconcievable.

Okay now, so: "What is prison REALLY LIKE?" You ask.

If You don't know by now, well ... You really just had to have been there, I guess.

God willing, You and anyone else who reads this never will be. At least, not on MY side of the bars, anyway ...

1993: RIGHT TO PASSAGE

I lay here shivering non-stop, no longer used to the air-conditioning after six years in prison. Too chilled to sleep under a single sheet and hungry for more than jello and laxatives. I cannot leave the cot I am chained to and am not able to sleep under the unwavering gaze of my own personal guard -- all so my soft stools can be poked and prodded for a single valuable asset.

I convinced the prison psychiatrist that I didn't know what I was gonna do beforehand, it just happened. He labeled it as some garbage like spontaneous rage syndrome or some such psycho-babble. The important thing is that he really believes it. I

guess that I sold that hog!

The guard is another matter entirely -- he knows better. If it were his call I'd be on the first thing smokin' to the Lollipop Factory for a Thorazine holiday, learning how to weave baskets while drooling on myself. And the nurses, they know better too. The shrink is the only one whose opinion matters though. Thank God for that. I do NOT need a psyche tag on my records.

I'm solo. Not exactly a loner because I have a couple of friends and a few acquaintances. I'm solo because I don't belong to a gang. I have no tattoos. I've NEVER understood WHY criminals would permanently mark themselves for easier identification. That is crazier than a soup sandwich if you ask me. I mean, even nuttier than what the guards are trying to prove I did, what ... two days ago now, is it? I'm too tired to think straight and it's too cold to sleep -- or did I mention that already?

Anyway, where was I? Oh, yeah -- NO tattoos for me. I'm short and wear glasses. I look just like the square that I am. A little geek in a Texas prison full of bad-asses and one gang after another looking for an easy mark, or at least one that isn't too difficult to take.

This prison unit, Coffield, is in the far northern part of the system. Far enough from the main headquarters in Huntsville that a lot of things go on that shouldn't. For example, the guards staging, or allowing, fights among the prisoners for the guards' entertainment. Only two rules: One -- no injuries bad enough to require medical treatment. The infirmary keeps records of all treatment; Two -- no grudges. Once a fight is over, it IS over.

Grudges bring revenge. Revenge brings blood. Then rule number one is violated. Pretty simple.

The men seemed to LIKE to fight though. Like a sport. But since when is hurting each other fun? I remember the first time that I was chosen to fight. My opponent was some Aryan Brotherhood bone-crusher who was five inches taller, sixty pounds heavier and had at least six inches longer reach than I did. In a testament to the power of fear and what all it can accomplish, I was SO scared that I nearly killed him. So much for Rule number one. But then, no one had ever bothered to tell me about these "rules" before the fight, not that THAT little detail seemed to matter to anyone. This caused me to be chosen for fights more often than most of the other men. It also resulted in three to five guys against me at every fight from then on. Not very good odds, no matter how you look at it. And I never won another fight again, either, until this last one.

Some days saw me chosen for two or three fights. I'd never win, but I did always manage to get some serious licks in on two and sometimes three of my opponents. I had to keep fighting until I won my right to passage without HAVING to fight. If a man was to refuse to fight, he would wind up being someone's bitch -- and then he would be an unwilling participant in an entirely different kind of show put on for the guards' entertainment.

Anyway, after a fight we always told the guards it was over to avoid going to lock-up. Lock-up is like a prison in a prison. Your swill is brought to you -- usually with a guard's spit or snot balls in it, or the devil himself only knows what else. Lock-up

has a private shower too. But being removed from the cellblock's never-ending insanity only lasts for a few days. When you return you're considered a catch-out. That is NOT a good thing. So I never, EVER, let on that it ain't over with. I just live on, as the old saying goes, to fight (or in my case, get beaten up) another day, or after shift change; keeping my resentment and my steadily growing anger to myself as I nurture it and watch it grow.

I lost count of my fights after the fiftieth. I suppose it did not help that I kept calling the gang scums Airhead Punkerhoods and Airhead Circlejerkers. Just forget all about contributory negligence -- how about some contributory stupidity? Yeah, that'd be me all right.

Still, the LOOKS on everyone's faces. I will never forget that if I live to be a hundred! Best damned birthday present I ever had -- ever WILL have -- in my entire life! Yeah, it was my 38th birthday. Looking back, I guess I should have seen it coming all day long. No fights, not even a cross look from anyone. Returning from the ptomaine tavern after a tepid tray of turgid swill at the supper meal, I went to the three row dayroom to wait for a cell call. I believed that I'd finally crossed the threshold for the right to passage without having to fight even though I had steadfastly refused to join a gang or pay any protection. Yeah, RIGHT ON!!

As I entered the dayroom and the door clanged shut, so did everyone's mouths. This is ALWAYS a BAD sign. A survival trick that I'd perfected over these last six years was using the light

refracted on the outside upper corners of my glasses like mirrors in order to see behind me. As I scanned the dayroom I also checked behind me. The hair on the nape of my neck stood out when I saw that the stairway crash gate was also shut and there was no sign of the guard. And in the dayroom there was, oh holy Jesus ... about nine feet away from me stood the biggest man I have ever seen in all of my 38 years. He looked at me with eyes that were bottomless pools of pure evil under low, beetled brows. He had a swastika tattooed on the left side of his neck, lightning bolts on the right, with a skull and cross-bones on his throat. His job-stoppers were the REAL heart-stoppers though. Adolph Hitler's face was tattooed on his left cheek, Heinrich Himmler's face was tattooed on his right cheek, with a large pentagram on the middle of his forehead that had the lower point of the star running down the bridge of his nose to the tip. I felt my eyes begin to cross when I tried to look at it, no doubt the intended effect. Man, this guy was so buff I'd bet his shit had muscles in it! Then this monster whose size dwarfed Jimmy Dean's Big Bad John of song said to me: "Duh-uh, hey Shorty, happy birthday. I'm your present from the AB!"

My sphincter slammed shut so hard I'll bet it was heard all the way to Dallas! I saw two AB members flank him on each side while two more of them moved behind me for a back door pincer movement. I knew then that I not only had NOT earned my right to passage, and if the AB had their way, my 38th birthday would be my last. So, contrary to what I told the shrink later on, I knew what I was gonna do, HAD to do, if I was gonna leave that

dayroom alive.

Instead of trying for a corner in the normally expected and classic defense posture, I bounded -- not ran but bounded -- three leaping steps toward Bigger John, as I now referred to him in my mind. At the end of my third bound, I leapt onto him, wrapping my arms tightly around his neck and my legs in a vise-like grip around his waist. Then I clamped my teeth around his nose flush with his face and bit down like a pit bull dog. No man in the dayroom was any more surprised than me when Bigger John's nose parted company with his face and, lubricated by his blood, slid down my throat! It crossed what was left of my rational mind in that nanosecond that ole B.J. (as he'd now become) was surely gonna kill me for this, so I figured I had damned well better get in all the licks I could before then.

As I let go of his neck and leaned back for more punching room, I saw that every man in the dayroom had caught the wall. I never in my life, prison notwithstanding, saw so many genuinely horrified expressions in one place at the same time as I did right then and there. While I observed all this, so as not to lose the advantage I had gained so far, I started hitting ole B.J. harder than I had ever hit anyone in my life -- right there where his nose, with that downward-pointing tip of the pentagram on it -- used to be. I could hear and feel the crunching of his cheek bones and lower orbits breaking, along with a couple of my own knuckles. I knew that if I were to let up though that this big sum-bitch would kill me for sure and certain. So, I kept on punching with everything I could muster -- and from somewhere deep

within me -- found some reserves I didn't know I had and hit him even more.

After taking twenty or more of these punches, B.J. finally managed to break the death grip I had with my legs around his waist. I sprawled to the dayroom floor but came up with my fists flying, running toward him for more. As HE ran AWAY from ME, I found that shock time was not nearly over with yet. I and the entire dayroom full of men heard ole B.J. yelling at the top of his lungs: "Bodds, bodds; ep ee, ep ee; ee bid by nodse. Oh GOD, bodds eeese ep ee; ee bid by nodse!" over and over and over again. You see, the FACT of this aircraft carrier-size Aryan Brotherhood mosnster PUBLICALLY snitching was even more shocking that what I had just done to him!

In the ensuing melee after the bosses arrived, I managed to get to my cell without being arrested. Once there I stripped and washed the blood off of myself while my cellmate tore my clothing into strips and flushed then down the toilet. Before I could get my spare clothes on, Jimmy hit me in the stomach, then he stuck two fingers down my throat. Up came the evening's swill, along with B.J.'s nose, and all was flushed to the sewage treatment plant, where it all belonged anyway as far as I was concerned. Jimmy had been in prison for many more years than I had at that time, and his prison savvy was to save me later by helping me to get rid of the evidence right then. We were sitting in the cell, with me enjoying what was to be my last cup of coffee for the next three days, when the guards showed up. There was eleven of them for the one of me. After what they'd heard that I'd

done, I was really surprised that none of them wore face masks.

No preamble on their parts, just: "Okay Lyon. Where's his nose?"

"Hell, Cap'n, I don't knows!" The convicts in the cells to either side of mine and in the tier above broke out in raucous laughter. Some of the eleven guards joined in, which really pissed off the Captain, Lieutenant and one of the Sergeants who were in charge of the posse. The other Sergeant barely managed to stifle his own laughter.

The Captain ordered the rotunda boss to roll my cell door open and I was handcuffed when I stepped out. They marched me to the infirmary where they poured ipecac down my throat until I became convinced that I was gonna puke my ass hole up. Being so close to the evening meal and none of that coming up either, even the stupidest guard there eventually figured out that I had already vomited up and gotten rid of the evidence. Whether it was my wisecrack to the Captain or fear of reprisal from the Aryans, it was decided to chain me to a cot for three days in the infirmary. I was fed a steady diet of jello, laxatives and all of the water they could force me to drink. The stated intent was to help me pass ole B.J.'s nose, just in case it was further along in the digestive process than all of that ipecac-induced vomiting could reach. Also, since no staff members SAW me bite B.J.'s nose off, they HAD to have it as evidence in order for them to formally charge me with anything.

After three days and nights of sleepless shivering, steady chemically-induced diarrhea, and now twenty-two pounds lighter;

I was released from the infirmary to the security staff. As a writ-writer (prison-speak for an inmate lawyer) would have put it: "No corpus delicti, no case. No case, no charges." And so it was to be in this case.

"Is it over?" the Major asked me.

"Yeah," I replied in a shaky, somewhat weak voice, "it's over." I was sent back to my old wing, same cell, same job. There was one huge difference though ... I was never chosen for another fight. I had finally earned my right to passage.

2003: THE ASSASSIN

I am a convict in the Texas prison system. Texas is a real no-nonsense state concerning law and order. In 2012 I remember a statistic published by the U.S. Justice Department reporting that one in every seven Texas citizens was under one kind of criminal justice supervision or other or awaiting execution. By contrast, at the height of Stalin's most brutal purges in 1936; one in every eight Soviet citizens were in the Lubyanka, a gulag or awaiting execution. And Texas is a democracy ... go figure. There is a tourism ad for Texas that goes: "Texas ... it's a whole 'nother country." With the statistics I quoted above in mind, I would suggest something like: "Texas ... come here for vacation, leave on probation, return for your revocation and stay for a lengthy incarceration." I have a right to be bitter I guess. I am doing a life sentence for a murder I did not commit and was found guilty in a court by a judge who was the deceased's father-in-law and whose own son was the second chair prosecutor.

No doubt patterned after its judicial system, Texas also has one of the most brutal prison systems in the world. The federal court eventually got involved, literally taking control of the whole shebang in a civil rights lawsuit called Ruiz v. Estelle. This suit was, and remains, the longest-running civil rights lawsuit in United States history, the actual trial portion lasting 287 days. It was filed in 1972 and decided in 1980 with Judge William Wayne Justice exercising active oversight of the system until the suit's termination in 2002. Since the suit's 2002 termination, the prison system has slowly but surely been returning to its pre-Ruiz conditions in a great many areas.

Because of the way I was convicted (railroaded) I represented myself on the appeals from my case. Were you in my shoes then, would you have trusted the convicting judge to appoint a lawyer to represent you on your appeals? No, I didn't think so. In 1990 I applied for a storage box for my trial records and legal materials I needed to keep in order to continue working on my case. The prison's law librarian flat refused me a box and told me: "Get rid of that legal trash within thirty days or we will find a shank in your cell and you'll have another conviction to appeal." I filed for, and was granted, a temporary restraining order from a federal judge to protect my legal papers and records. The TRO was personally served on the prison system's director, the Coffield unit's senior warden and law librarian by a deputy U.S. Marshal. After that, everyone left my legal materials alone but I was 'visited' twice by two of the warden's boys, a pair of Stockholm Syndrome suffering sycophant inmates who beat the

taste smooth out of my mouth. By then I had already learned the necessity of staying in shape and had learned how to fight, so those visits were not as bad as they could have been. The whole thing was an extremely valuable lesson for me though.

Ten years later I had transferred to the Hughes prison unit to attend university classes given there toward a BBA degree. The law librarian there flatly refused to comply with the storage box order so I filed a motion to the court to compel compliance with its order. The court responded by revising its order to TWO boxes and having the U.S. Marshal send a deputy to serve the new, revised order on the new unit's officials. A year later I had still not been given the boxes so the court ordered the unit's warden, major and law librarian to surrender to the U.S. Marshal for transport to federal prisons for contempt. I got both boxes, as well as the undying hatred of every guard and staff member at that prison unit. And yes, there were problems from the Stockholm Syndrome suffering crowd of sycophant inmates trying to curry favor from the staff. I was adequate at defending myself though so I was able to handle that without too much trouble. Self-defense was still a recognized right in prison back then. So even though the unit staff hated my guts because of that court order, they didn't go ballistic on me for defending myself. I exercised in my cell for three hours each day and worked out with weights for two hours a day as well. I stayed aware of my surroundings and remained hyper vigilant at all times.

The main retaliatory thrust against me this time came in the form of two major disciplinary cases. Both cases were completely

and entirely bogus but I was nonetheless found guilty. (Sound a bit familiar?) This caused me to be sent to medium custody for a year. I stuck it out, fought when I had to, and was returned to minimum custody and my classes at the year's end. Still, I stayed super aware of my surroundings and remained hyper vigilant at all times.

This unit is one of the new designs built in Texas during the 1990s. Two billion dollars went into expanding the Texas prison system to one with 116 prison units as opposed to the 16 units in existence when Ruiz was decided in 1980. (The primary issue in that suit was overcrowding.) The cells here have solid steel doors rather than bars, with two vertical slots to allow the guards to look in the cell for head counts. There is a solenoid inside the door frame that retracts a latch that in turn holds the door closed. This is operated by a guard in a control picket. There is a barely audible whir (the solenoid activating) then a faint click (the latch lifting) followed by a nearly indistinct thunk-whish sound of the door opening and sliding just slightly ajar. You learned to listen for these sounds because often the guards would let some of their Stockholm Syndrome suffering 'boys' into your cell to beat you up or let several guards in for that same reason. Anyway, a person had to learn to be prepared for most anything whenever you heard your door opening -- especially in the dead of night.

In 1976 my army unit was mobilized from Germany to Beirut to set up an aid station about a half block from where a U.S. Marine barracks would be bombed into oblivion in 1982. We were always

on a high alert and remained hyper-vigilant to the point where we never achieved an REM sleep state at night. Although this lasted only eleven days, it made such an impression on us that it took many months for us to get back to normal. Being in prison in Texas is like living in Beirut year after year after year after year after year. So when I was finally visited by the assassin, as unprepared for it as I turned out to be, I was still nonetheless ready.

I had done my customary three hours of early morning exercise that Friday, followed by two hours of weight training in the rec yard. I had done an unusual four hours on the weights later that afternoon and another two hours that night. By rack time, I was unbelievably tired and fell asleep -- as deeply asleep as I had ever allowed myself to in prison -- much more deeply than I ever should have -- and a lot more deeply than I have ever been able to do since that night.

It was around 2:30 a.m. when I was aroused by the whir, click, thunk-whish of my cell door opening. My eyes opened and I saw a solitary figure opening my door just enough to enter. As dim as the night lighting was, I could still see the man was dressed in a black shirt and pants rather than the Confederate-gray uniform that Texas prison guards wear. Epinephrine flooded my weary system in an effort to provide energy for me to overcome my way-too deep sleep state caused by overworked muscles resulting from the previous day's excessive workouts on the weights.

The assassin bent down and to his right, extending both of his hands to the side of the cell door just outside of my ability

to see. As he came out of his crouch I could clearly make out the silhouette of a pair of wickedly curved carpet knives in the assassin's hands. My adrenal glands' spigots opened wider than the Hoover Dam's floodgates when I recognized those carpet knives in the hands of what had to be an assassin dressed all in black from his head to his toes.

The assassin was three slow, silent steps inside of my cell when the tsunami of epinephrine finally overcame my over-tired and nearly paralyzed muscles. I half-sprang, half leapt from my narrow bunk and landed on the floor in a stance that would have made Bruce Lee himself proud of me. My feet were a bit wider than shoulder width apart and my arms were positioned for defensive arcs in an anticipated response to the assassin trying to use his carpet knives on me. I began to lean slightly back in order to deliver an offensive kick to the assassin's right knee when he made his own first move.

The assassin dropped the bananas he was holding while saying: "God bless you. I am SO sorry to have startled you ..." while backing away as quickly as he could. When he tripped over his own feet and sprawled to the floor, only then did I see the white square in the front of his collar. In my effort to check the kick I had already begun, I too wound up on the floor. Still wary, I was back on my feet in an instant.

By now the priest had crab-walked backward out of my cell and was regaining his feet. I crouched down and, sure enough, what I had thought were carpet knives really were just bananas. I was by then shaking uncontrollably from all the adrenalin in

my system and was barely able to pick the bananas up from the floor and set them on the cell's tiny desk. The priest leaned into the cell and gently placed two more bananas on the floor while saying: "God bless and be with you." while closing the door behind him.

I walked to the door and looked out of the count slots. The priest had gone to the ground floor and was talking to the guard in the picket over the intercom. The guard then turned on the low wattage bulbs that are usually turned on inside the cells during the night head count times. I returned to my bunk where I shook from the aftereffects of adrenalin overload until well after eight that morning. I was never able to bring myself to eat those bananas either, in spite of the fact that we seldom receive fresh fruit in prison.

2006: DEPRESSION

Well, hell. Lock-up ... again. A prison inside the prison. My personal things held in the property room until I am released. Prisoners yelling and screaming twenty or so hours a day, quiet only during meals and morning rounds by the nurse and prison psychiatrist.

Day four and boredom rules. The shrink stops at my cell.

"How are things today?"

"I'm awful depressed, Doc." A chorus of shouts tell me to cool it before I wind up in the rubber room. "Hey guys, I got this." I yell back as the shrink whipped out his notebook and began to write.

"How depressed were you?"

"Well, I was gonna hang myself earlier." I said while I watched him furiously write in his little notebook.

"How did you handle it?"

"Well, first I took my shorts off."

He scribbled on while looking at me askance. "Why did you remove your shorts?" No yelling or screaming now -- you could have heard a pin drop in the cellblock.

"We have no clothing or bedding here. I was gonna make a rope from them to hang myself with."

Mollified, he continued writing and asked: "What did you do once you removed your shorts? Did you make a rope from them?"

"Nope. Once I got my shorts off I saw I was already pretty well-hung so I put 'em back on and forgot about the whole thing."

The shrink ripped his notes from the notebook, balled them up and threw them at me. As he stomped away, I heard language I'd not heard since army basic training. And him a doctor...!

2007: AND THEN IT GOT WORSE

History has always been one of my favorite subjects. I have a particular fascination with Russia's history and its people. They have, for hundreds of years, consistently persevered under horrendous conditions that most assuredly WOULD have broken any other people. Many historians cite this ability to survive such inconceivable and often inhuman hardships as a trademark of sorts, even an ingrained part of Russian national pride. In a great many interviews with survivors of Stalin's purges and the siege of

Stalingrad during the second world war, when asked how they were able to get through those horrors, many would just smile at the interviewer and reply; "And then it got worse."

It is now 2007. I had managed to survive twenty consecutive years in the Texas prison system and am now eligible for parole consideration. By 2007, however; my trial judge (the deceased's father-in-law) had become a senior district judge. My trial judge's son (the deceased's brother-in-law) who was the second chair prosecutor against me, had become a district judge in the adjacent court. The first chair prosecutor against me is now the district judge in my court of conviction. All three of these judges protested my parole release and I was given a five year set-off, the maximum allowable under a new law that was unconstitutionally retroactively applied to me. I recieved a letter, signed by all three of these judges, TELLING me that they got me that five year set-off. They further promised me that they would continue to do the same thing every five years until I die in prison.

I received my 2012 five year set-off on 9-11 of all dates.

I received my 2017 five year set-off on 12 October, my birthday. I expect my 2022 five year set-off on Christmas eve if the current trend continues.

So, in 2007, for me, things got worse. I often wonder if I have some Russian somewhere in my genealogy though, because it is now 2018 and, despite my knowing I will never leave prison -- doing a life sentence for a murder I did not commit -- I continue to survive....