

WOOD/ Honor Comes Hard
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Dear Archive Folks
It would have been nice to have
a human beings name on the
form - But, it sounds like a
worthy project so here's my little
real life piece for you. Talk to me!

HONOR COMES HARD

by

Saint James Harris Wood

S.J.

I was afraid, naturally. In the purgatory of county jail you wait months on end for the bus to prison, and listen to talk of race riots, stabbings and the mayhem that waits in the penitentiary. Thanks to a 22 year 8 month sentence for multiple counts of 2nd degree armed robbery (no weapon), the state of California wants me in a Level IV prison, mostly reserved for lifers, murderers and those who are steadily in trouble no matter where they find themselves on the streets or in prison. Many of the Level IV convicts have been locked up for 20 years or more. I couldn't imagine what this had done to them. I couldn't imagine any of it. Every single thing I knew about prison, and myself, suggests nothing but disaster.

From county jail I went to Donovan State Prison's reception yard where the warden and his minions evaluate criminal history and propensity for violence. During my five months on the reception yard I saw a couple of child molesters get beaten up, the Southsiders (Mexicans) stabbed a couple of their own, and there was a period of racial tension when the skinheads became unhinged because a Caucasian Crip celled up with one of his black homies. We also had a sit-down strike over poor living conditions and a fight between two guys in the chow hall that caused 20 other guys to get pepper sprayed. However, none of the grim prophecies concerning my

physical safety were fulfilled. I notice, during these initial months of incarceration, that as long as one doesn't get into the mix (gambling, drugging, going into debt, or trying to run things), prison for the most part is not near as dangerous as advertised by the numerous lifelong pessimists, here in force, who scared me by giving voice to their own morbid scenarios. Prison is relentlessly stressful for the kind of people who expect the worst and always find it, literally drawing violence and mishaps to themselves by the sheer force of their contrary wills and profoundly jinxed lives. While in prison it behooves you to keep your distance from these doomed characters.

Then there's the matter of respect—the sort of deferential respect usually associated with the Mafia or United States Senators—a careful, formal brand of respect. Mainly you take care not to insult or annoy anyone by word or deed. Unexpectedly, as a whole, most experienced convicts are politer than your average free citizen, and unusually considerate of others' moods. It's judged foolish to be stabbed for bad manners. I am insanely polite; it has served me well in prison. While in County Jail I had five fights in four months, all of them over nothing in particular, while I tried to figure out how to act. During five years on level IV prison yards I've had no fights, unless you want to count a couple of minor scuffles on the basketball court that ended with handshakes and expressions of deep respect. Everyone here craves respect whether they deserve it or not.

I left Donovan's Reception Yard after being assigned to Tehachapi State Prison in the high desert of California about an hour and a half east of Los Angeles. My first week on the mainline, a man six cells down from me was stabbed to death because a group of White shot callers *thought* he was a rapist. It turned out to be bad information and as a consequence at least one of the killers was stabbed himself while he languished in the hole. How this can happen is beyond me, and I hope to never find out. As a consequence of the murder all the Whites on the yard were locked down for two or three months, I can't remember how long really, time loses all meaning under such circumstances. This incident did bring home to me that men in prison die because of gossip and misinformation.

Over the next two years there were approximately 15 stabbings on the yard (two of which resulted in fatalities) and four or five serious fights. I was locked down for a week here, a month there, at least seven months all together. The Blacks and the Mexicans were going at each other for a while and ended up locked down for five months straight, in addition to the seven months the rest of us were locked down. In another incident, two drunken Southsiders attacked a guard for unknown, probably drunken whimsical reasons, which resulted in all of us getting locked down for a month, the monotony only broken when angry correctional officers tore up our cells while searching them.

I am not affiliated, meaning that I am not in a prison gang, and so avoid being personally involved in the major drama and violence. There is a segment of the prison population, not so euphemistically called knuckleheads, who orchestrate and sometimes actually encourage situations that can lead to a fight or a riot. Although not affiliated, as a white man, I am expected to participate in any spontaneous riot that erupts around me, and attack the Blacks or Mexican or whoever it is that we happen to be against that day. If I don't jump in, any number of things can happen. At best I'll be beaten: at worst I'll be stabbed to death. Through blind luck, the only riot that had the bad grace to erupt around me was in county jail. I didn't participate but was given a a rigorous warning, and a pass due to my ignorance and dope sickness. Once you've graduated from county jail to prison you're expected to know the rules. The learning curve is sharp and humorless. Fortunately, though many of the convict rules are based on ignorance, they are easy to understand and follow.

I got through two years on a regular Level IV yard with little trouble except for the lockdowns caused by other people's propensity for trouble. The biggest problem is living day in and day out with the idea that something could go badly wrong at any time. You could be on the yard, playing pinochle, bearing no grudges against anyone—and if the Whites' leaders decide to jump, you have to jump, and could easily be killed over an issue completely unknown to you.

Some convicts are reputed to have shanks on their person at all times or within close reach, because they are always ready and always afraid. They exist in a fixed state of wary crankiness, perhaps with good reason. Living with men who steadily believe that they are going to be attacked is a burden. I am able to live under these tense circumstances, detached and aplomb, by combining Zen calmness with my well developed powers of denial and a touch of careful fatalism. I hang out with the men on the yard who simply want to do their time by reading, playing chess, cards or softball, and educating themselves. I stay away from the element who need to tell the rest of us how to live; though, of course, if they single me out for instruction I usually have to listen.

Though physically unharmed and relatively comfortable in a monkish way at Tehachapi, I was subjected to the constant lockdowns, trapped in a 12'x6' cell 24 hours a day, 7 days a week except for a 15 minute shower every three days. An accomplished reader of escapist fiction, I discovered I had a genius for finding and collecting books under the worst circumstances. So, though lockdowns are terminally boring, designed to crush your heart and spirit, I think I bear them better than most. More than one study suggests that people eventually go crazy under the lockdown regime. In some prisons entire yards go down for a year straight. The average yard has 1,000 people (5 cell blocks, each holding 200 prisoners) who can all be locked down because of two or three madcap convicts. I became used to the sporadic lockdowns and, because of severely diminished expectations, actually lived in an odd state of contentment, gratified that I hadn't been beaten or killed.

Then . . . for no reason I was ever given, they transfer me on a bus to another Level IV prison in the city of Lancaster at the edge of the high Mojave desert. This is immediately disconcerting because every yard has different rules (I'm speaking of the unwritten inmate rules) depending on the quota of knuckleheads and the degree of mayhem they choose to foster. I have to learn and to a certain extent obey these new rules. On many Level IV yards local custom demands that the races mix as little as possible—no sports, no card games, no anything really. The Whites

share tables with the Blacks at chow because the guards force us to (nearly 100% of the whites who make the decisions for us, are wholeheartedly racist). If a White convict has an argument or an issue with a Black or a Mexican, a fist fight is not allowed, it's either settled by discussion or with shanks. That's how it was at Tehachipi. Still, I was surviving there, feared change, and felt the move was a negative thing.

Whenever I arrive at a new prison a week or so is spent in a cell block optimistically called Orientation. Part of the process compels you to meet a committee of the local corrections officers, doctors, counselors and administrators. At committee I was told that I'd arrived on the Honor yard, and asked if I wanted to stay here. I'd never heard of such a thing and it sounded suspicious. Sensing my well-honed paranoia, one of the committee, my counselor it turned out, announced the salient fact, the deal maker: The stabbing ratio per inmate on the Honor Yard is the lowest in the state, and actually better than some small towns with a similar population. Any sane person anywhere in the world wants to live where the stabbing ratio is low. In return for this safest of yards, I had to sign a document that swore that I wouldn't attack anyone, and that I would submit to random drug tests. That's all—a fair trade I quickly figured, and signed their document. I went back to my single cell in Orientation and waited to be assigned to a regular cell block.

That night, a few convicts, firmly in the knucklehead category, stopped by my cell to warn me that the Honor Yard was “no good” and that it would be in my best interests to refuse it. At breakfast the next morning I am told by another convict that the knucklehead faction of the Californian Prison population looks darkly on the Honor Yard because 1) The races mix on the yard during recreational activities, and generally get along. 2) Inmates don't check each others paperwork, policing out sex offenders. 3) It's what's termed “A Soft Yard” meaning the gangs don't run anything and 1 & 2 aren't enforced.

Regardless of what the knuckleheads think, I decide to stick with my decision, and within

days I am transferred to a cell I share with a 65 year old Viet vet named JJ I first met at Tehachapi. I settle into the Honor Yard. And it doesn't seem bad at all. The first thing I notice is than no one takes notice of me. On a regular Level IV yard, within hours of my arriving, an assessment team of white guys would stop by the cell and ask politely about my journey and my last pen. They also ask if I need anything like a soup or a bar of soap, or maybe even a cigarette or a cup of recently brewed wine. They eventually get the the crux of the matter and ask to see the paperwork which lists my charges and history of criminality. After you've survived this ritual you're put on a vague probationary period that might not ever really end if you're unaffiliated. On the Honor Yard I am ignored, neither greeted nor interrogated. That was fine. I visit the library, read in my cell, walk the yard, and within a week find a couple of people to play chess with. As each day passes I slowly relax, gradually losing the wariness, which I barely knew I had built up over two years on a hard yard.

Over the next month I came to wonder how, in the midst of the worst years of my life, I got so lucky. Lancaster is brimming with activities and programs. One of the first skills a seasoned convict picks up, if he is to maintain some small degree of sanity, is the ability to program. This means setting up a schedule of activities every day to keep your mind and body busy being alive, rather than focusing on the grim fact of your time. Convicts cherish their programs which can include an exercise regimen, guitar lessons, sports, religious studies, self help groups, even a daily card game—anything that is done routinely is better than doing empty time. Lockdowns kill programs. Lancaster has softball and basketball leagues; peer to peer educational classes in music, art and philosophy; Yoga classes; an Arts In Corrections facilitator who teaches painting, sculpture and whatever else the nascent artist cares to pursue; and a whole range of other activities that the prisoners in Tehachapi never even heard of. It is programming heaven. Also, I immediately see that the racial scene is far less virulent than any other prison or jail I'd had the misfortune to know. There is still some division because at least half of the convicts on the honor yard are LWOPs (life

without parole) and had already done decades in some tough joints where they'd been trained all the way down to the cellular level that the races should be regarded as eternally separate. And yet all the sports teams and activities groups were integrated. I came to discover that there hadn't been a stabbing, a racial incident or a riot in over five years, which is an astonishing statistic, so I'll repeat it. In five years, on a Level IV yard full of murderers, bank robbers and people who were never going to get out of prison— there had been no violence in five years. I have about 13 years to go on my sentence and this is truly where I want to do my time.

After a month of decompressing and getting used to the lack of tension (the best part my new yard) I start to notice trouble. I hear that a group of guards, of all ranks, are actively against the Honor Program. I can't understand why anyone would be against it, especially the guards, since they are as likely as anyone to get stabbed on an ordinary Level IV yard. Then one day I run into two fellows recently arrived from Tehachapi, Diesel and Big Jim. Diesel tells me that they were kicked off the yard at Tehachapi for fighting. The committee told me that only inmates who have had no serious trouble or write-ups in five years are supposed to be on the Honor Yard. I also began to hear that ad/seg kickouts (men who have finished their time in the hole for serious infractions) are being put on the Honor Yard, distinctly violating the alleged criteria. Every day brought more evidence that the staff at Lancaster had abandoned the Honor Program. There are rumors that the warden and his committee are placing people who are usually put on the P.C. yard (protective custody, where informers and other undesirables go) in the Honor Program, undercover with fake paperwork. This is bad. If you leave this yard, for whatever reason, and end up on a hard yard, and the knuckleheads believe you've been living in close proximity with PCs, you may be dealt with harshly. As it stands, the Whites and the Blacks in other pens throughout the state are ambivalent about people coming from the Honor Yard, and deal with them on a case by case basis. However, the Southsiders have put the word out that any Southsiders who do the Honor Yard will be stabbed if they show up on a regular yard.

So, whoever is running things here at Lancaster, they no longer fully endorse our program or care about its inhabitants. As my time on the yard goes on, more and more convicts arrive who do not even come close to meeting the criteria. And yet . . . this is where an especially interesting phenomena is noted: Not only are there dozens of unqualified convicts on the yard, but I also see a couple of the guys who told me in Orientation that this yard is no good, and all are obviously enjoying the lack of violence and the seemingly endless opportunities for programming. A “when in Rome” type of syndrome seems to be in effect. This is a phenomena that the California Department of Corrections should be interested in. It all ties in with my belief that a very small percentage of the prison population are the sociopaths responsible for making prison a hellish, dangerous place for the prisoners and staff. My limited experience in prison, as an unaffiliated outcast of sorts, has given me the ability to spot and categorize the cold blooded shot callers who thrive in the war zone they’ve turned the average yard into. I suggest that it’s 3% (or less) of the incarcerated population who thrive on violence, and even while in prison, want to run criminal enterprises such as drug dealing, gambling, extortion and god knows what all; and are ready to kill convicts or correctional officers in order to keep the population of their imprisoned kingdom under their sociopathic sway. I estimate that approximately another 17% of the inmate population are lifelong born followers and criminals who go along with the 3%, which is understandable on one level, the head gangsters are willing to kill you if you don’t follow their lead. That leaves 80% of the convict population who prefer to keep a low profile, want to program and stay out of the mix while the minority creates lockdowns and chaos. Most of the time this 80% who try to do their time with the least amount of trouble are not impacted by the knuckleheads except for the riots and lockdowns. As I noted, when the followers spend a short time on the Honor Yard, they finally do what they do best: follow the program that the shot callers on that particular yard eschew.

I contend that given the choice, 90% (or better) of the convicts in the California prison system would choose to live on a yard without all the violent bullshit that is currently the norm on

a majority of the yards. And yet Lancaster's Honor Yard—called "One of the shining stars of the system," by State Senator Gloria Romero, in the Los Angeles Times—appears to be under attack by correctional officers, their union, and their advocates in the political machine who take every opportunity to sabotage the program. It's the state employees who are responsible for placing people on the yard who do not meet the criteria of the Honor Program. I am relatively new to all of this and have no idea as to what state political machinations are going on, and unaware of the Department of Corrections agendas that are in play. Still, even I can see that it's preferable on humanitarian grounds (not to mention less expensive) to run a yard where the inmates program peacefully and the staff is not in constant physical danger. Lockdowns that go on for months are not only stressful for the inmates, but for the staff who have to escort inmates in handcuffs to showers and medical appointments, cell feed us, and do their usual jobs and all the jobs inmates usually do.

The disadvantages of the normal yard are endless and the way they are handled is the essence of inept. From my low position in the scheme of things I've heard numerous theories as to why the correctional officers, most specifically the guards' union, are against continuing the Honor Program and spreading the concept throughout the state. Some of these I've culled from the inmates and some have come from correctional officers who were nice enough to try and explain their position to me.

1) The guards make more money when there's riots and lockdowns because of hazard pay and overtime. *(This is what the inmates think—correctional officers deny it, but several admitted it's easier to get raises while their job is dangerous)*

2) I estimate that 30% of the guards hold the view that criminals deserve nothing but punishment. The contempt towards us from this faction is palpable and impossible to miss when you are the object of their scorn. *(This is just human nature at it's worst and probably can't be fixed or legislated. A whole other article could be written on why a penal system based on rehabilitation is better than a*

punitive one)

3) A Level IV Yard with the freedoms of an Honor Program—longer day rooms and recreation time outside, unsupervised inmate education and activities—creates security problems. This assumes that there is a physical threat to staff or inmates (*This might have been an argument against the Honor Yard in 2000, but in 2006 after five years of no violence . . .*)

4)The logistics of a separate yard/ I don't totally understand this argument but the administrators say that it's difficult to move inmates around and place them on a yard when the system is so crowded and one of the yards has a special criteria. This is presented as the most reasonable of reasons that the Honor Yard is untenable. (*There are only 600 beds on the Honor Yard and there are thousands of inmates throughout the state who qualify for and would gladly take part in the program*)

At least reasons 3 and 4 have a rational cast to them. Reason number two is just human nature at its worst. Number one is greed. The guards' union would rather have higher pay and job security than a safe workplace and prison yards where inmates are allowed to do their time productively. You have to wonder what type of people don't mind getting higher pay at the expense of someone else's suffering. When the state and its spokespeople make statements about why things must remain the same, following the old model—their favorite excuse is that the prisons are too crowded to fix. Supposing that overcrowding can't be fixed, that is more reason to have yards dedicated to non-violence and rehabilitation.

So, I arrived on the Honor Yard 2 years ago, and I suffer because I miss my family, and castigate myself daily because I'm not there for my children, and miss not having a woman in my life or a satisfying career, and . . . well, there's a lot of reasons one suffers in prison, hundreds of indignities large and small; however, I spend my time writing and thinking and trying to improve myself. I can do this because I'm not fighting and rioting and worrying about what the maniacs are up to on the yard, what atrocity is planned, and who might stab me in the neck. During my two

years on the Honor Yard I noticed, from the beginning, that the local administration was slowly losing interest in the the program. Day by day, inch by inch the Honor Program is being deserted. In five years there have been four wardens, three of them unwilling to openly commit to the program mainly, I assume, because of the powerful guard's union. Not the entire union, but the element that is against us (yes, they are openly against prisoners if they are against our program) seems to have wrested control from the majority. I can't help but compare them to the unreasonable convicts among us who believe only in brute force as an answer to . . . everything. Even the director of the CDC can't seem to stand up to the guard union. California has lost two in the last year and one of them openly stated the guard's union made the directors' job impossible.

In the last year we have been locked down as often as not for one spurious reason after another. I have to suspect it is petulance on the part of the guards' union who have been against the Honor Program from the start and succeeded in ending it last month—only to have their distant bosses in Sacramento insist that it be reinstated because Governor Schwarzenegger wants to fix the Department of Corrections and actually renamed it the Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation. Since then, we are on little lockdowns off and on, the guard's way, many feel, of breaking us. And yet, the inmates on the yard continue on with their non-violent ways, reacting to the example of the long term residents of the yard, and, one would like to think, their own innate humanity. The sort of humanity that most every person alive is capable of given the chance. I absolutely did wrong and accept my time. When it's done I'd like to be a better person, not one acclimated to fear and violence. I'm thinking that every tax payer in California would prefer that.