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Personal Essay
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THE PIG, THE TREY, AND THE BOY WHO WOULD BE SHREK

It is never a good thing when the OIG wants to know your name. In the Texas Department of Criminal Justice--Institutional Division (TDCJ-ID), the investigators in the Office of the Inspector General are the real cops with real badges and real power--not even the rank, much less the COs (correctional officers), want to be seen with them. We used to call them IAD (Internal Affairs Department), but that was back when there was no one to cry wolf over how the coyote guarded the hog barn, and TDCJ-ID was known by the more honest and less bureaucratically euphemistic TDC (Texas Department of Corrections).

It was another long-count morning and my meth-mouthed newboot cellie was in a foul mood. This is not unusual for him (nor is the inability to quickly clear count atypical for this unit). He's a short-timer with two years served on a seven-year sentence (which, as is so often the case, involves a convoluted oral history that begins with him shooting up a rival redneck Okie's car in an unsuccessful attempt to collect on money owed for dope cooked, and ends with the paperwork revealing a glossed-over domestic abuse charge for Steve's retaliation against a girlfriend whom he "would've never thought would've snitched on him"). Steve is from Vernon, a supersmall town

outside Wichita Falls in extreme north-central Texas. Vernon's best known for its state-run mental health facility. If Steve represents the mean for a Hamilton County native, then it's no wonder they built one of the largest psych wards in the state so far from the heart of anything.

Stoopid Steve really wants us to call him Shrek. He's a six-foot-two-inch pasty-white redhead who has acquired a marshmallow-soft penitentiary belly-flap that hangs over his elastic waistband like a genital collop, and when he laughs or smiles or simply stands around with his mouth bewilderingly agape, it looks like he only has a single protruding tooth in his entire cartoonish head. But, alas, for poor Steve, because even with all these fine attributes, "Shrek" is not his name to be. For one, we already have a Mexican whom even the laws call Shrek, and two, Steve is not well-liked. Like Willy Loman, Steve puts his greatest stock in the opinion of others. Also, like Willy, Steve is always rushing about and trying to hustle a nickle from a dime or seeking a commensurate pat atop his puppy-eager head. This would all be for the good if Steve wasn't what we like to call a "dumb-ass" (or "idiot" if you are more technically inclined). As Hillbilly is fond of saying, Steve has the shit-talker's habit of letting his "hummingbird-ass write checks that his killdee mouth cain't cash." (Which actually sounds bass-ackward to me, but who's going to argue with a sixty-five-year-old convict who's served over thirty-five tight and who showers without shower shoes because he likes how it feels?)

Steve goes to school Monday through Friday, taking Cognitive Intervention from 8-11 a.m. First Count is at 6:45 and the second is scheduled for 8:15, so on a good day the cell doors should roll between 7:00 and 7:30. Everyone not already at work or a lay-in is racked up and probably asleep, so count should, theoretically, clear quickly and easily. Not so much, not on this unit, and doubly so on this day. It was after 8:00 when count finally cleared, and then, after one-section had already been dropped but before the rover could roll the doors on our section, all normal movements and operations came to a silent halt. The OIG was on the scene.

This didn't sit well with Steve. He'd already spent the better part of an hour slumped sideways on the toilet bowl, staring out the door in the direction of the control picket while sipping on an always and never-finished cup of mint-stick-infused 50-weight joe and listening for the not-so-distant and tell-tale slams and clangs that would shift his ample ass into full-bore door-sweating overdrive. So, when the cell doors did not roll on Steve's immediate mental command, he began bellowing like an antsy ogre at the Camp Swampy starting gate, "Bossman! I need out for school!" Did I not mention that Steve usually shows as much since as Yosemite Sam after a fully-loaded four-day crack bender?

Still, Steve did call me to the door so that I could tell him that the two females in free-world clothes were the OIG. You would think the gold badge clipped to the investigator's belt might've

tipped him off. But again, alas, and again, no, because I also had to explain to Steve what the OIG was and that we should not expect to go anywhere until they had finished doing whatever they were there to do. This knowledge did not stop Steve from continuing to bleat and bellow like a caged wildebeest. To say that Stoopid Steve is a true jewel of opportunity might be the karmic understatement of the year.

The conventional convict wisdom, BTW, is that Steve is one good ass-kicking from getting his heart right. It's not a question of if, but of when and by whom? Based on our brief and enforced three-week history as cellies, I'd say the even money is on me.

At least Steve is an honest, if tempermental, hustler. His main business is "warshing." He charges 25¢ an item and, unlike most, he will also wash socks and drawers. Some days his unwashed pile is stacked a foot-high because the drying line is already full. This washing is all done by hand in the toilet bowl, usually with bleach and a skin-scorching industrial-grade detergent smuggled out of the unit laundry. His business model depends on the fact that TDCJ does not launder personal clothes (t-shirts/gym shorts/etc.) and that our cotton-white uniforms and necessities are randomly issued on a first-come, first-served basis. Many, if not most, prefer to wash their own socks and boxers, while a sizeable minority like to wear "tight whites," uniforms that are starched and/or waterpressed by hand. Another not to be understated factor is that necessities

exchange usually requires a three a.m. wake-up call, and then getting trapped in the dayroom until 5:30 or later--whether you wanted to go to breakfast or not--because the rovers are wont to disappear until after your section returns from chow. So, you can see why Steve's locker should never be empty, even if it's hardly ever stocked with the zu-zus and wham-whams his sugar-spastic brain so desperately desires.

Steve also sidelines as the section errand boy and front man. He spends much of the day trafficking and trading, moving contraband from cell to cell or passing it under the door from section to section. (Contraband, however, is broadly defined. Sending a homeboy a freshly made taco qualifies, for instance.) I never said Steve had it easy, only that he is a dumb-ass--a moody, shit-talking, temper-tantrum-throwing dumb-ass who doesn't know when to shut up or how to stay in his lane, which is never a good combination for a clumsy-ass white boy who looks like he was born to be slapped.

So, unlike Steve, when I see the OIG on their way to three-row, I know it's time to step back, chill out, and listen with my biggest mouse ears. I do convince Steve that it's not the brightest idea to try and deliver a stack of washed clothes before school since the presence of the OIG tends to inspire even the most lackadaisical CO to do their own impersonation of a jittery, if algorithm-challenged, version of Robocop. However, nothing except for a physical threat will make Steve retreat from his spying spot at the door,

especially when the OIG officers and their rover escort have stopped at our next-door-neighbor's cell.

To try and curtail Steve's annoying nosiness, I point out that we share a pipechase and air vent with forty-five cell, which means that the OIG will probably pay us a visit once they've finished with our neighbors. This was also my way of telling Steve to get on point as it pertained to any obvious or go-to-jail contraband. Yet there Steve stood, his face glued to the crack in our sliding door, eye-fucking a cell he could not see inside of, while I reclined on the bottom bunk in quiet exasperation. Until, that is, Steve spun around with a comical look of unfettered amazement and said, "Cellie, you were right! How'd you know that?"

"I keep telling you, Steve, I've been at this rodeo for a long, long time."

When our door popped open Steve rushed out like he was the next contestant on "The OIG is Right!" That's when I realized I'd made a tactical error. By allowing Steve first dibs I was forcing him to survive by the strength of his own wit and wiles. Not a good idea. Ever. It only got worse when I heard Steve blurt out, "I don't give statements, but I'll talk to you."

That's another thing to hate about Steve, he always, always talks like he's standing on the wrong side of the barn (just like he always cranks the radio to eleven and slams the cell door like he's a junior lawman-in-training). And in the early morning, before

the dayroom can fill and the TVs lie silent and still on their high and neck-straining stands, even the humblest of inside voices can bounce from cell to cell like a titanium-jacketed ricochet.

If only I had gone first, then Steve could have heard me say, "Good morning."

"Good morning. How are you today?"

"I've been better."

The OIG smiled and chuckled at this, though her steno-book-wielding aide-de-camp stood behind her with a rather anxious look on her face. I don't think she'd ever visited a cell pod before.

"My name is Officer Simpson and I'm an investigator with the OIG. Last night we had a report of a sexual assault at about two a.m. in forty-five cell. Did you hear anything?"

"No, I was asleep at that time. I go to bed early and get up early."

"Is there anything else you can tell me about the situation?"

"I only moved over here about two weeks ago. I don't even know their real names."

"Oh, so you don't know anything," she said, and clicked off her digital voice recorder.

"Sorry," I said, which was only partially true. I didn't like Pig and I'd been carefully "economical with the truth" (to steal from Jasper Fforde) because she'd conducted our interview within full view and open earshot of a TDCJ guard and a sectionful of

the most ethically-challenged and gossip-mongering convicts on this side of the razor-wide divide. Though Officer Simpson is, upon closer inspection, actually cowgirl-cute in her own no-nonsense, makeupless, and pony-tailed way, and there was an obvious intelligence flickering within her searching brown eyes, I wondered if she ever had any real intention of discovering the truth, or if she was just going through the paper-pushing motions? Afterall, who interviews a possible witness to a suspected crime in such a public and potentially provactive forum? That's definitely one to be filed under, "Not wise, guys. Not wise."

Steve's response, however, could best be filed under, "WTF?" Among other things, Steve vociferously claimed that Trey was a "catch-out" and that he "knew Pig and Pig wouldn't do nuthin' to that man." All this even though Steve had been asleep and didn't give statements.

In all honesty, I did want to talk with the OIG, and not just because Officer Simpson and I had had the tiniest of moments--Hey, I did make her smile! (And one should never underestimate the effect a woman's smile can have on a man's psyche) --but because I had information that could help square the deal for all involved. I told the truth when I said I didn't know what happened in forty-five cell at two a.m. on the preceding night, but I could still help set the contextual table so that maybe she could find the "truth," wherever its chewy center might lie. But she never gave me that

chance, not really. I'm sorry, although I adhere to and promulgate the Aristotlean and Dharmic premise that an ethical life is a good and happy life, I ain't no Stoopid Steve.

But me being more attached to the idea of me than I should be, I couldn't let it go there. Of course I would offer Steve some convict-friendly advice after he had returned from school and leeched the juju toughies out of his system, but more than that, the Rube Goldberg gears had started turning in the story-making part of my brain. I am coming up for parole for the fourth time in twenty-four years, and I freely admit that I'm feeling more than a little desperate for home cooking, Netflix, and a room to call my own, so I suppose that's my official excuse for why my mind's S.S. Minnow drifted off into such fanciful and uncharted seas.

They like to say snitches get stitches, but in my experience, snitches don't get shit. Don't get me wrong, no one wants to be labeled a snitch, just as no one wants to be called a ho, punk, or coward. However, unlike the Hollywoodists and Thug-Lifers would have you believe, it's neither a death warrant nor even an automatic end to the general population line. There is no such thing as omerta anymore--if there ever was--especially for those in the game (whatever "game" that might be--dope, tobacco, punks, winning a female, etc.), because snitches and snitching are just part of how they do time. The playas even have a maxim for it: It's not snitchin', I'm just gettin' down for mine.

I suppose this might come as a shock to those in the free world who tend to think of prison as a Manichean-infused Hobbesian paradise where man is a snarling wolf to man in a brutal, if strictly and starkly delineated, moral pecking order. It's as if by the simple addition of bars and guard towers, we criminals suddenly transition-- in the mainstream public narrative, at least-- from immoral and uncivilized animals into ennobled, yet intractable, savages. As such, according to this meme-inflected and often co-conspiratorial world view, we reserve our greatest and most unmerciful wages for those denizens who once preyed upon society's most defenseless victims. In effect, we become the vengefel, blood-seeking Furies of Greek tragedy, the outsourced and shameless pluckers of eyes and pullers of teeth. In this way we give a sordid satisfaction and grim solace to the good people of the world, for we allow them, like Pontius Pilate, to legally wash their hands of the whole affair. Thus, with the passing of sentence, the illusion of justice is preserved without forfeiting anyone's personal belief in, or private thirst for, a more visceral and primal quid pro quo. All that's missing from this penitentiary payback phantasia is a mean-mugging Debo or a wild-eyed Mel Gibson stand-in.

And so it goes, or would, if the penitentiary of the public imagination matched the prison of my experience. While prison can be brutal and the weak can, indeed, be preyed upon, in my little corner of the Texas gulag archipelago, prison is more like a poorly

supervised and underfunded daddy day care, or maybe a high school in which the campus is always closed and the Napoleonic hall monitors never seem to know when to step in or stand down. Instead of living in the belly of the proverbial beast, we're kind of hanging out between the throat and tongue, surfing the acid-reflux seas and biding our time; not fully committed, but not yet ready to give up the game and go completely bile- and Zantac-free.

I must admit, however, that the advent of PREA (Prison Rape Elimination Act) and other Safe Prison reforms have caused the administrative-types to give serious lip service to chasing the Federal dollar-matching machine and lawsuit indemnification that comes along with these largely self-certifying and kickback-hungry organizations. I remember the days when an allegation of sexual assault, absent a black eye and a fresh pair of bloody boxers, was likely to warrant no more than elephant feet and a dismissive scowl. If something did happen, the accuser would go to lockup while the perpetrator probably wouldn't even merit a disciplinary case. Yet in today's brave new world, Trey's potential wolf-cry had generated an actual OIG investigation. Lip service or lipstick, the times, they are a-changing, otherwise, how do we explain someone like Steve managing to survive his hitch in stir with both his wig and orientation intact?

Following this new data stream to its logical getting-down-for-mine conclusion, if an offender really wanted to squeeze this

overripe Crimestopper lemon down to nothing but skin and seeds, he could use the Offender Telephone System (OTS) to call and ask his mother to call the OIG's state office and get the cell phone number of the investigating officer. Then she could bypass the unit switchboard and relay her son's message directly to the OIG investigator, stating, namely, that he had relevant background information concerning an alleged sexual assault, but that he would only give that information during a private interview, and certainly not while standing front and center for an ear-hustling audience of his snake-eyed and lynch-tongued convict compeers.

And what if the investigator actually followed up on this tip? Could the offender not only tell what he knew, but strike a deal? Probably not, because who, outside the PREA box-checking team, would actually care what became of Trey, a graying white-boy recently arrived from the 'Ham whose only access to free-world funds came via his grandmother's social security check? Or that it was a violation of classification rules and guidelines to put him in a cell with a man who outweighed him by over fifty pounds? And to whom would it matter that Pig was a known predator who liked his boys to look like boys? And would it really help to know that Trey was a K2-chasing dopefiend who had borrowed more than he could promise to pay on store day? Or that Pig wasn't just his ugly, shy-tie-ass cellie, but also one of his creditors? Or that on the first night after Trey had trudged back from commissary empty-handed and with

a sad-sack story about how the clerk had confiscated his ID card and closed down his Inmate Trust Fund account because his barcode had suddenly become illegible to the laser reader, that I'd overheard a pissed-off Pig tell Trey that if he couldn't "shit out six dollars" he was going to have to come off his radio? Would such information help Trey, or would it simply sow the seeds of incredulity and disgust?

What about the fact that the video surveillance footage would clearly show that an agitated and angry Pig had been stalking around the dayroom and trying to pick a fight with a family-connected Mexican on the night just prior to the alleged assault? Because I could certainly imagine an all too feasible scenario in which an already rancorous Pig would retire to his cell at rack-up and take out his dayroom frustrations on his cellie, especially since he already had a loan shark's animus toward Trey and the blood scent had been churned into a state of serious chum by Trey's many and myriad suitors. It would have not taken any great ethical leap for Pig to give up on unconsumated threats and to make Trey choose between having his Adam's apple cored or his sphincter circus put on pay-per-view. Then again, I could just as easily chalk up Trey's allegations to a dopefiend ho's tired and unsophisticated attempt at an ass-saving and debt-reneging subterfuge. It's the world I live in and the latter happens much, much more often than the former. So much so that it's actually a penitentiary cliché.

In the week before Trey's debt pimple had finally burst, Lo-Down and I had been comparing notes. While we both anticipated a catch-out move, I felt like Trey was in for a longer con. I thought Trey would pay off all his initial debts from the first round and then run up a bigger bill on the next--a bill he had no intention of paying--before pulling a stunt. Lo-Down, on the other hand, felt that come our next commissary day Trey was going to hide his radio and headphones under his jacket, go to breakfast, and never be seen on the pod again.

In a sense, we were both as right as we were wrong. To be fair, we can never truly know if Trey intended to catch out from the jump or not, because he was never given the chance to call his own play. Too many people were putting too much pressure from too many directions. It's like all the sharks in the pool were more interested in showing the other sharks just who, in fact, had the biggest, baddest, and most fearsome set of jaws; and thus, through their unintentionally synergetic efforts at pimping, primping, and perp-stroll posturing, they allowed their prey to escape unscathed. The question in such a predicament is always the same: Is it more important to get paid or to make a statement for the crowd? In my experience, the biggest swinging dick is usually the one that ends up in the vice.

Despite knowing all this, I couldn't leave the story alone, because a story isn't a story until someone is forced to make a

moral or ethical decision. So, if the witness follows through and reveals the truth, then what? In a typical melodrama the act of witnessing is usually punished as a breach of traditional mores, hence, snitches--in every whistle-blowing, stoolie, or undercover mob-rat form--are never, ever heroes. Instead, they are villains, traitors, outcasts, and scumbags; or, if they are very, very lucky, ambiguous martyrs to a cause they can never partake in.

But to take it further down the messianic rabbit hole, the witness could offer to wear a wire for the purpose of getting either Pig or Trey to confessing to the taking of Trey's cherry, or not, as the case may have been. (There was also a rumor floating about that Trey had not been above servicing Pig as a means of past debt cancellation, but that Pig had pulled a Kobe Bryant and taken things deeper and darker than Trey had originally agreed to go. Truth is never more slippery than when it's caught in the drift-net currents of a grease-splattered and gossip-churned sea.)

But why would a convict wear a wire except to save his own hide? Not for parole, because there is no deal that will get anyone out of prison early or change the terms of one's sentence, Hollywood bedamned. But what about a single-cell restriction? And an official letter of commendation sent to one's parole lawyer from the OIG? And a promise to be transferred to a unit of one's choice should the need arise? For although a snitch's life seems to be in no greater danger than any other cell warrior's, no one wants to wear such an

ugly jacket. It's the c-wire equivalent of Chicken Shit For the Convict Soul.

Of course none of this happened except for the still-born story of its potential. No one called home or otherwise contacted the OIG. No one went so far as to write an I-60 Request to an Official, and even if they had, it would have been torn up and flushed down the local toilet like so much gator-pit confetti. And anyway, two new guys were moved into forty-five cell by noon the same day of the OIG's visit, making all such mental machinations moot. The general consensus was that the OIG must have had some sort of real evidence against Pig, otherwise, why would they have locked up both Trey and Pig?

The very next week the Contraband Interdiction Team hit our section two days in a row. I was at the law library on both occasions, so I missed out on most of the festivities. The first day Steve got our house shook down when he violated an unposted but well-known unit rule by decamping to the dayroom without first taking down his drying line, thus leaving the cell out of compliance and drawing unnecessary heat to the house--an ass-kicking offense in many minds and locales. The second day they brought the drug dog and locked up five Mexicans. They say the dog alerted, but the Team didn't find any weed, hooch, or K2.

First, we heard ATX was giving up his TANGO* homeboys. Then a black guy came out of lockup and moved into one of the five's

recently vacated cells (11-Bldg, which houses transit, solitary, and PHD [Pre-Hearing Detention], is always so full that one whomp-a-mole fool merely replaces another in a never-ending game of knucklehead carousel) and said that the "whiteboy was back there telling it." Which was plausible when you consider that the local TANGO Blasters had been some of Trey's most toothsome frontmen, but this story lost some credibility when ATX got shipped and started calling Z-man's wife on three-way so that he could beg Z-man to reach out across time and space and put a shark-cage of protection around ATX's apparently chum-spattered ass. And so it goes, whiteboy or homeboy, can you trust anyone when time and money are involved?

There was no word on Pig, whether he was telling it, getting charged, or just getting down for his. That's how it usually goes when you're on the wrong side of the Sno-Globe's slippery walls. The Administration sees it in their best interests to keep the convict populace ignorant and ill-informed--call it the Tea Party Gambit--because information, in the form of unsalted facts and demystified figures--truth, if you will--is perhaps the rarest of razor-wire unicorns, on par with Christmas kickouts, going back to the one-quarter law, and hot-bunking with Leatherface while passing through The Walls unit.

Of course, all of this philosophical waxing and narrative dithering would seem like a lost and fruitless cause to the common convict, much less to the dumber-than-usual fat ass of merry old

Steve, the boy who would be Shrek if only he could steal the name. But now I think even Stoopid Steve just might understand and agree that the best statement is the one not given, and that it's never a good thing when the OIG knows your name. (Not even if she is kind of cowgirl cute and you think maybe you can make her smile.)

* TANGO [Together Against Negative Gang Organizations]: an ironically named prison gang originally formed in the late 80's/early 90's to counter the overbearing influence of the Mexican Mafia, and, to a lesser extent, other prison gangs. Though a hispanic "homeboy" can "blast" with any city, the TANGO has a heavy "Houstone" orientation just as the Mexican Mafia's base is in San Anto and the Barrio Azteca's draw their core membership from El Paso, and so on.

THE END.