

When Enemies Become Allies

I first came to live in a private prison located in the state of Mississippi in mid-November last year. My cohort of nineteen inmates from Vermont arrived by bus around 4:00 PM, Central Time on a Thursday afternoon. We were not permitted to move into our designated cells until after midnight the following morning.

I was initially assigned to live with a <sup>Vermont</sup> inmate named Peter. He had already been residing out-of-state in various facilities for at least the past five years. Peter explained that he has family members in Texas and Kansas so he had long since dissociated himself from the state of Vermont. I was fresh of the bus and out-of-state for the first time. I was understandably scared, but I could not show it. Any sign of weakness exposes an inmate to potential exploitation.

One of the main differences between a public facility and a private prison is that inmates are expected to purchase their own personal property items, including clerical supplies and clothing, in a private prison. These items are provided to inmates free of charge at public institutions in Vermont. I had always maintained a limited complement of personal property, because I had developed a habit of switching cells frequently in Vermont. Everything I owned had been packed up in two cardboard boxes before I got on the bus. My property had been mailed separately from Springfield, Vermont. Therefore, I had to rely on Peter to lend me basic items, such

as a pen and paper, at first. Peter put a lot of arbitrary restrictions on the approved use of his personal property.

When I finally received my own personal property ten days after my arrival, I requested that Peter vacate our cell while I organized my stuff and put things away in their appropriate places. Peter declared, "You cannot ask me to leave my own cell!" He kicked my deodorant stick onto the floor, and he threatened me verbally before he walked out the cell doorway into the day room. One week later, I moved into a different cell six doors down with another inmate named Andrew.

I enrolled in a computer class, and Peter was already taking a carpentry class so we saw each other in passing in the P-Education Building. One afternoon earlier this spring, Peter taunted, "Hey Bruno, I heard your computer class is getting cancelled next month." I retorted, "Peter, you're full of shit!" Peter threatened, "I know where you live, Bruno!" Through a series of multiple cell moves, Peter had ended up living immediately next door to Andrew and me.

Instead of confronting me directly, Peter spread a rumour that I was a rat, because I had written the full names of multiple inmates in my personal journals. An inmate named Todd and two other conspirators took the bait. They fabricated a situation to get me out of the living unit while Andrew was taking a shower in the evening. I left our door unlocked in case Andrew returned to the cell before I did. When I got back from the main building, I quickly noticed that an extra pair of headphones, half a dozen packaged food items, and three mental

health Journals were missing from our room.

Unfortunately, I could not report this apparent theft to the prison authorities, because "dropping a slip" would confirm that I really am a rat. Then I would be forced to check in to the Protective Custody (PC) Unit, which is a very undesirable living situation. Instead, I chose to keep my mouth shut in order to maintain my relatively comfortable living situation with Andrew in the MB Pod.

On a recent Monday morning, I procured two empty cardboard boxes from the entrance corridor of the M-Building. One box was labeled, "Folgers Coffee," and the other was marked, "Suave Shampoo." I figured that these cartons had been left over from that morning's canteen delivery and were intended for the trash. I reckoned these boxes could be useful for sending out popsicle stick models that I planned to design and build to fit their dimensions.

After I had successfully returned to the MB living unit with the two cardboard boxes in my possession, I slid them both under Andrew's bottom bunk for safe-keeping. Within five minutes, Peter knocked on our unlocked cell door and expressed an interest in using my new cardboard boxes as a source of material for potential shelves in his room. I explained that I had intended to keep the boxes intact in order to use them for shipping my hobby craft projects out of this facility.

Later that same morning, Todd pulled me aside in the day room. He insinuated, "The unit manager saw you taking those cardboard boxes on the surveillance video. She said that you

are not allowed to keep them in your cell." I challenged him, "If that really is the case, then why isn't the unit manager speaking to me directly?" Todd was clearly bluffing in an attempt to convince me to surrender the boxes to him. Just in case the unit manager did come looking for those boxes in my cell, I slid them through Peter's open doorway next ~~door~~ <sup>to mine</sup>.

I eventually explained the situation to Peter, who was sitting on his bottom bunk and playing a video game at the time. "Someone told me that the unit manager was looking for my boxes," I stated. Peter asked, "Was the person who said that an inmate or a staff member?" I answered coyly, "As a matter of fact, he was an inmate, but I cannot tell you his name lest I be considered a rat."

In the end, I agreed to allow Peter to use my cardboard boxes for shelving material. Peter advised me to inform the unit manager that I had thrown away the boxes if she ever came into my cell looking for them. As it happened, the unit manager never expressed any interest in those boxes.

#### Afterword:

Peter and I subsequently collaborated on two in-cell hobby craft projects. I gave Peter fifty popsicle sticks, and he used them to make several beautiful dream catchers, one of which he gave to me in trade for the popsicle sticks. Peter showed me how to bend popsicle sticks on a peanut butter jar lid in order to fabricate wooden rings. These rings were integral to a ~~a~~ <sup>the</sup> design for a lazy Susan that I built for a Scrabble board.