

THE CORONA CHRONICLE PART 4: LIGHT IN ADVERSITY

by Tracy Lee Kendall

7/1/20: Today's COVID infection tally in the US surpassed 50,000, 10,000 in California alone. On the Lynaugh Unit, I worry for my loved ones.

7/6/20: Worked with some prisoners about marriage and divorce.

7/7-9/20: After addressing corruption wherein a TDCJ chaplain has been allowing another prisoner to control prisoners' access to and credit for various treatment programs, things begin deteriorating. I intervened because the prisoner was also using the chaplain to control me in ways that effectively utilized me in the scheme that could have affected what prisoners get parole or not.

7/10/20: A raging chaplain visits me to throw thousands of dollars in materials at me in retaliation. These materials were paid for by my loved ones, and were used for the education and rehabilitation of other prisoners. The chaplain knows they will now be lost due to storage restrictions.

7/11/20: Everything is silent here concerning COVID--like the quiet before a storm. The chaplain calls me to her office to chastize me, perform a bizarre exorcism on me, and have her pet prisoner read a weaponized psalm.

7/13/20: Receive a bizarre letter from the chaplain indicating I could be killed, and ambiguously comparing homosexuals to pedophiles. She did this as another act of retaliation, and also due to her confusion that the main issue was her use of sex offenders in effective capacities that they are officially restricted from.

7/14/20: My world becomes increasingly smaller as drama continues to eclipse the pandemic. After the chaplain falsely portrays an attempt at an informal resolution as a threat, the wardens falsify a disciplinary case on me in retaliation for exposing corruption. I am then moved from the dorms to a building.

7/15-17/20: Served the case, went to court, found guilty. Their "evidence?" Portions of the informal resolution. Ironically, the wardens used the exact components which are illegal to use as evidence.

8/7/20: After a guard who tested positive for COVID-19 worked on my building, rumors begin circulating about sick prisoners neglecting to seek medical attention due to fears of being locked down. The top of my right thigh begins hurting.

8/8/20: I have a mild fever and can't sleep due to the pain in my leg. I hope it's not a blood clot from COVID-19.

8/9/20: Still unable to sleep. The pain causes me to alternate between standing and pacing constantly, day and night. Hives have broken out on me, and lights look neon green.

8/10/20: Another hellish day and night of tossing, turning, standing, and pacing.

8/12/20: Slept for the first time in days.

8/13/20: The mailroom reads one of my outgoing letters. This leads to the Major calling me into his office and asks if I think mentioning prisoners complaining of sickness will "alarm my people?" I wonder if administration on Lynaugh is trying to keep potential COVID-19 cases among prisoners on Lynaugh from becoming public knowledge. After signing a statement, I'm sent back to my cell.

8/14/20: After the Senior Warden responds to my Step 1 grievance appealing the bogus disciplinary case (including my willingness to submit to a polygraph examination), I am slammed into a transit cell on Lynaugh's worst wing.

8/15/20: Outside, desert lightning flashes in the night sky. Inside my cell, a flashing neon light never goes out.

8/16/20: Nurses come to evaluate quarantined prisoners across from my cell. Later, a screaming idiot burns sheets in front of his cell. Guards come, extinguish it with the contents of a water cooler, and leave.

8/17/20: A cricket crawls into my cell. I give her water and put her in the window to leave into the night. Then, a guard with a futuristic backpack and connected sprayer mists something in the cell.

8/19/20: Finally seen by medical about my symptoms. They take blood.

8/24/20: Prisoners next door tell me they were complaining about their COVID symptoms, but medical had refused to see them until their families intervened. More quarantined prisoners are being mixed into our wing with the non-quarantined. Nurses are taking our temperatures every day, and guards continue spraying disinfectant.

8/25/20: Five hours after submitting the Step 2 grievance appealing the bogus disciplinary case, I am moved to a cell with a prisoner having a history of falsely reporting that his cellies rape and/or assault him. He tells me he is gay and tries to embrace me. After he finds out I'm not gay, he tells me he's a Christian and gets his Bible out.

8/27/20: My cellie begins lying to the guards that I am trying to beat him up and all the neighbors are trying to extort him (although he has a lot of stolen property). Thankfully, the guards dismiss his claims due to his

history of false reports.

8/30/20: My life has become a mixture of studying, reading, listening to my cellie whine about people, guards spraying, and nurses evaluating. The only time I'm allowed outside of my cell, usually in handcuffs, is to shower.

9/11/20: The desert fills my window, and my cellie decides not to accept treatment for Hepatitis C.

9/15/20: My cellie is finally transferred to another prison.

9/16/20: Cats, hawks, yellow-bellied blackbirds, ground squirrels, doves, skunks, and buttes outside my window. Inside the cell, I study Sanskrit. On the wing, guards in blue protective gear, various nurses, rumors, fears, and lies about Corona.

9/28/20: A stressed-out neighbor burns his blanket.

9/29/20: A closed-custody prisoner in our minimum/medium custody section climbs up on a TV shelf in the dayroom and screams about various things until a response team comes in to spray him down.

10/4/20: What little recent news I've gotten about COVID seems redundant. Quarantined prisoners continue to be moved in, around, and traded out with non-quarantined prisoners. The daddy-long-legs outside the window continues to weave. Another cellie with a history of false rape and assault claims becomes my cellie.

10/20/20: After 76 days of being moved from transit cell to transit cell every week or two, I go on the chain to be transferred. I am placed on a bus with a mixture of prisoners from quarantined and non-quarantined areas. We all have face masks on, but few, if any of us were tested a short time prior to being placed on the bus, singly handcuffed, yet nowhere near six feet apart. And we begin our journey to various prisons, through the new face masked COVID world, past a Permian Basin of dusty towns, higher fuel credit prices, pro-Trump slogans on barns and signs, and cars I don't recognize. Our first overnight stop is the Robertson Unit near Abilene, where we are immediately mixed into a section of prisoners coming from and going to other prisons and even the freeworld.

10/21/20: We chain back out through Central Texas into East Texas, past more pro-Trump signs, and to the Walls (Huntsville Unit). After arriving to the chainlink cages, we are mixed in with other prisoners and allowed to go to chow.

10/22/20: We chain out, and eventually I watch the trees of the Woodlands

become the trees around Palestine. After stopping at Coffield (unchanged from the 16 years I spent there, except for the shades now over the upper windows), we arrive at the Michael Unit. We are processed in without tests or quarantine and I am assigned to a cell housing a prisoner I did over a decade with on Coffield. I also meet prisoners I know from Darrington and Lynaugh.

11/3/20: Voting began--and never ended--today. The outcome will determine whether people I love can walk down the street safely. I feel positive because I saw this coming years ago, when Harris grilled Sessions.

11/7/20: My loved ones will be safe, unity will thrive, and more effective measures against COVID-19 will be formulated.

11/16/20: Another suicide. These days, Michael is not short of those. Who was he?

12/4/20: Went on another COVID lockdown today, with minor access to showers and telephones.

12/16/20: My new cellie (yet another with a history of provoking other prisoners to fight, and then filing false rape and/or assault reports on them) tried to provoke me. After he failed to, he began screaming to leave him alone (so it would sound to those outside the cell as if he was being attacked), and lies to a guard that I was trying to determine if he is a child molester.

12/28/20: In a new cell with a new cellie, I wonder about rumors of prison staff here stealing stimulus checks and destroying our mail. Outside the cell, the prison population is reconfigured in various ways as outbreaks occur in various housing sections.

1/5/21: COVID testing on Michael has been implemented more. I've had two tests so far.

1/14/21: I worry about friends in LA County, where COVID kills one person every six seconds. Where is the vaccine?

1/18/21: Why are measures being taken to lift COVID travel bans when almost half a million US citizens have died and new, more contagious variants are arising in various countries?

1/20/21: Flags on the National Mall speak the hope of people, not agendas. Cell confinement obscures most of the Inauguration, but I catch Lady Gaga, Jennifer Lopez, and the young poet, Amanda Gorman, who will go on to change the world in extraordinary ways.

1/21/21: New prisoners arrive from the Stiles Unit. They carry rumors of US Marshals intervening there dur to violence, corruption, and poor COVID measures.

1/26/21: Two more suicides here. Stress and bad logistics relative to COVID are blamed by prisoners. I'm not sure.

1/27/21: The highest COVID-related US death toll for a single month has been reached. People here are more worried about a recent stabbing.

2/3/21: Another promising vaccine is announced on TV. Few staff and no prisoners here (to my knowledge) have been vaccinated here. So COVID-19 will continue to enter the prison, spread, and be carried back out by staff and transferred or released prisoners.

2/4/21: Receive a letter from a friend who was vaccinated in LA County.

2/5/21: I turn 47.

2/7/21: The face masks filling the sidelines and stands in the Super Bowl are emblematic of the New COVID World.

2/13-16/21: My world freezes as ice forms and icicles begin to grow down the metal plate two inches from where I sleep. Outside, the bigger world freezes as well. How will this affect the Corona Chronicle we are all living?

So I continue through this environment of hope, despondency, substance abuse, programs, corruption, education, ignorance, love, hate, unprofessionalism, integrity, sex, crime, oppression, liberation, and every other facet of this bipolarized prison in a bipolarized nation clothed in the worldwide pandemic. And I reflect upon the truth in a recent commercial for an online dating service wherein the Devil from the movie, 'Legend,' hooks up with a woman representing the year 2020. Indeed, my personal life, and the collective life of the world seems cursed under the 2020 conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn. Yet within the "curse," there have been immense blessings, such as family reunions after decades and priceless visits among other things. And crowning everything, 2020 culminated in fresh promises of unity, freedom, and progress for ALL people--and vaccines bringing the hope of the survival of those people--us.

I choose a contradiction wherein hope is a synthetic concept used to affirm dreams and desires. Yet I embrace hope when I look into the eyes and hearts of my loved ones, and when I look into the memory of the lights on the National Mall re-exalting human life. Through this, I see a world beginning to reach back through wars and riots and agendas--people reaching back to each other--no matter who tries to step in the way.

We are the legacy of those who the pandemic took, and the only way to give them meaning is to live that meaning out. How we come together in the face of what took those lives will define those lives. Do we come together to burn buildings and attack democracy, or to preserve life and ensure it

flourishes? Whether inside or outside of prison, we determine whether those
candles on the Mall remember dead bodies, or the triumph of life over adversity.