

the writer development program I created at the prison where I live in Washington State to write about it, with each of them examining different aspects of the experience. Our narrative takes you chronologically from the moment of being taken away to solitary, to the slog of bearing the isolation itself, to the aftermath of seeking healing amid persistent trauma. All of the men who participated in this piece have spent portions of their lives, some short and some long-lasting, in solitary confinement, some as adolescents and others as young adults. All of them have experienced life-altering moments while trapped behind that thick steel door. The process of constructing these short stories left each of the men in a troubled state, forced to dredge up some of the bleakest moments of their lives—times where feelings of hope, belonging, and love were pushed deep down and walled up, while feelings of depression and loneliness reigned. But they wanted to write about it anyway. Only through sharing our stories and educating the public can we work to end the practice that caused us all this harm.

- Christopher Blackwell

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Before Solitary

Aaron Edward Olson

“Cuff up!” demanded a raspy baritone voice. The eight member goon squad of guards clad in riot gear, fit with shock shields and batons, crowded outside my cell door in battle formation. I sat up on the cold steel bunk, slid into state-issued foam sandals, and shuffled over to my new nemesis. “Name’s Parkinson,” growled the lead guard, “like the disease! This is a cell extraction!” he barked. A glob of chewing tobacco hung from a front tooth, one of the few yellow survivors

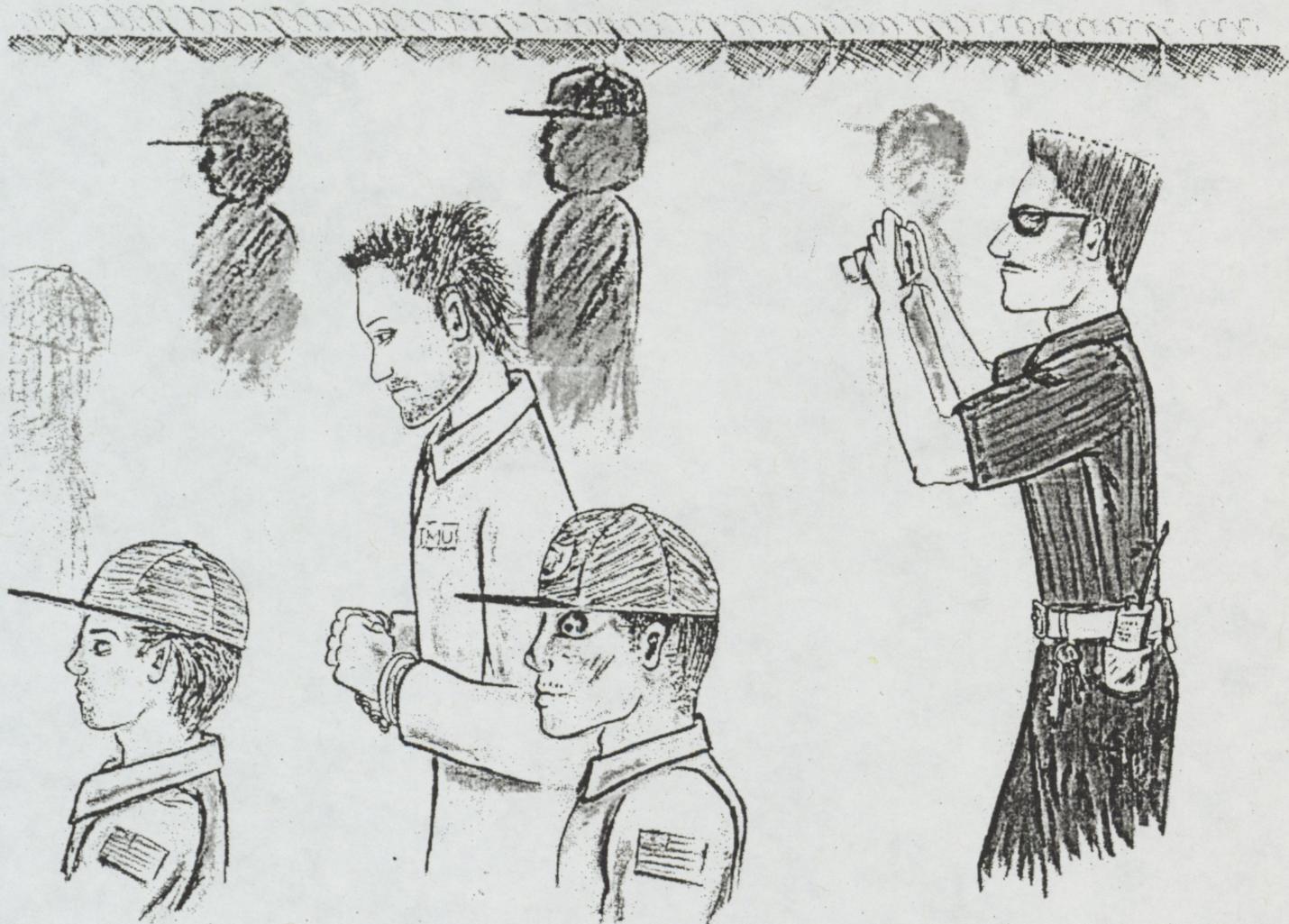
of a hard life.

Before this rude interruption, life at Stafford Creek Correctional Center in Washington State, where I had arrived 11 months earlier, seemed to be looking up after an awful start. I'd been attacked the day I arrived by another prisoner who had stopped taking his court ordered meds, and the brutal prison gossip mill had been passing around information on my criminal history, earning me derogatory nicknames. But now, my reputation was beginning to rebound, as more prisoners got to know me. Since the attack, I had been required to meet weekly with a mental health counselor—an elderly man with a long, silver beard whom I privately nicknamed Santa—and though he sometimes acted temperamental and angry with me for reasons I couldn't understand, we'd just had our best appointment yet. On Super Bowl Sunday, the prison hosted an event selling pizzas to fundraise for veterans—a rare perk in an otherwise gloomy place. I splurged and bought a soda and large pizza. I'd have savored it more had I known what lay ahead.

Being escorted from my cell in cuffs was humiliating. When I opened my cell door, the goon squad recoiled, all eight guards tensing into a slight crouch. "Face the wall, and stand for search!" barked the Disease. He leaned on my back with one forearm, his gut pushing against my waistline as he patted my side and legs. I could smell his body odor, a mix of stale tobacco, coffee, and tooth decay that he attempted to cover up with cheap aftershave. This was turning into a spectacle, with 120 men watching from the day room. Even though many of these men have endured similar cell extractions for various reasons, their faces said exactly what I would be thinking if the roles were reversed: *What did he do?* I was asking myself the same question, racking my memory for anything that made sense. As a prisoner, you are conditioned to believe you've done something wrong, but I could think of nothing. My routine was simple: work, school, exercise, and church. That was it.

It was a half-mile walk to solitary confinement, stretching almost the entire

length of the compound from my living unit. One guard led the parade, with another in the back, holding a video camera. I was flanked by six others, three on each side. They could have just asked me to report to solitary, and I would have complied, knowing that refusal would only get me pepper-sprayed, gang-tackled, and tased. But the message intended by my perp walk was clear: *We can crush you whenever we want.*



Hector Ortiz

Solitary confinement has many names: Officially it's the SHU (Segregated

Housing Unit) or IMU (Intensive Management Unit), but it's also called The Hole or Iso or Lock-Up, among other unsavory terms. At this prison, The Hole was an entirely separate unit, and housed over 200 prisoners. As if the prison's gun towers, razor wire, attack dogs, and army of guards is not enough, the process of entering the Hole involves passing through another set of sliding gates, and then half a dozen or more doors that must be buzzed open from some distant control booth.

I was placed in a holding cell, and told to strip naked as two guards I had never seen before stared at me, visibly irritated at my hesitation. First I had to open my mouth, swipe my gums, and wiggle my tongue, then hold my arms high, lift my testicles, spread my butt cheeks, and show the bottoms of my feet. I felt numb; it was hard to think. Only one thought kept piercing my delirium: *This is your life.*

The steel door slammed shut, and I entered my new home: a six-by-eight-foot concrete box, with none of my books, clothes, or basic personal items to soften the hard steel and concrete. The drab room, barely bigger than a closet, held a steel bunk on a bare concrete floor. The toilet was a hunk of metal, a hole, with no lid. The cell was musty, with wafts of mildew and urine.

I would wait there in suspense for the next ten days before I received a hearing. That day, I was ushered into the court by two guards; I wore a bright orange jumpsuit, belly chains, wrist cuffs, and leg irons, and a chain that swept the floor with every step. My attire could not hope to inspire an unbiased verdict. "Do you know why you are here?" asked the hearings officer. "No," I replied. He proceeded to read a report and formal accusation: "Inmate Olson has become fixated on a female staff member, and exhibited predatory behavior."

I was stunned. I scanned the room, seeing eyes of disgust and contempt. I was scum to them, and surely guilty of the accusation. I cleared my throat, and mustered a plea to every person present. "Please, investigate this. This is not true. I would never do this," I said. "That's not what your criminal history

suggests," smirked the case manager—the man appointed to advocate for my best interest.

When you've been guilty of something before, it's not hard to believe you've done it again. The accusation had come from "Santa," my mental health counselor, who now recommended I be referred for a six-month Intensive Management Unit (IMU) program, which included a facility separation requirement, meaning I had to serve the solitary time at a different prison and could never return to Stafford Creek. (I learned only much later, after I got legal help to investigate the charges, that Santa's animosity toward me appeared rooted in his disagreements with other staff members over how best to treat me; I was a casualty of longstanding office politics.) I had thought he was trying to help me. Instead, he acted as an agent of modern slavery, an administrator of the plantation where I was being kept. He punished me for my past, and crippled my hope for the future.

Though Santa's accusation was recorded in a note on my permanent record—meaning I am still dealing with the consequences over a decade later—I received no official infraction, and therefore no option to appeal. No accusation was ever made against me by any female staff member. Yet I was still sentenced to eight months in solitary confinement. So much for mental health treatment. The dark, cold, lonely concrete walls of isolation was my counselor's "prescription." With the judgment decreed, I was escorted back to my solitary cell, where I spent the next 50 days, until being transferred to another facility several hours away for another six months in the hole.

Day One of Solitary

Antoine Davis