

A Culture By Any Other Name



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Under a gray wool blanket, Biggun's breath is steady. He is not asleep, but will lay there in the dark for hours wishing he could just drift off and never wake up.

I, too, am a prisoner. I, too, have done time in seg, but now roam the prison grounds, classified as general population (GP). Certain qualifications permit a particular job assignment. One of my duties entails walking the seg tiers, and building relationships with men who are classified as dangerous (or protected due to certain vulnerabilities), while trying to offer something for the men to hope for. Texas prisoners do not get paid for their work. Altruistic service to others is an undertaking that pays great dividends.

My people fell off a long time ago. These men in seg help me much more than I could ever benefit them. They are my friends, they are my family. They filter the creeping death of despair which seeks to penetrate my own conscience. These men are the fresh air preventing the suffocating loneliness from entering my own sphere of existence. DK, GI Joe, Biggun, and others are as much counsel for me as I am supposed to be for them. But I am still just a visitor in their world. Someday I, too, might "fall off."

[All following stories will include a look into the hope I share with the men who are in administrative segregation.]

A CULTURE BY ANY OTHER NAME

The following is a true story set within a long and continuing saga. Names and nicknames have been changed in order to protect the reader, writer, subjects, and any possible victims of the subjects' crimes. Depending upon the amount of interest, more reports will follow.

Something was amiss. DK stood behind the bars and expanded metal (a.k.a. chicken wire), his eyes ping-ponging between my face and the wall to his right. On the other side of the three inches of reinforced concrete, his neighbor—a large lump—undulated beneath a worn wool blanket. Across the way, a sky, as gray and drab as the blanket, shaded the sun and was broken into bits by a multi-paned window. In the next cell, GI Joe sits on his bunk, resting his chin in a palm, eyes shifting between the potholed floor and pockmarked wall.

There are times when I can walk onto an administrative segregated cell-block and, even before words are spoken, know something is wrong. Like any other community, heartache, loneliness, and despair are shared among its citizens. Biggun, the man under the blanket, was suffering and his neighbors' sympathetic postures spoke loudly of their friend's melancholy.

Neither DK nor GI Joe rarely see the man (or one another) who sleeps, eats, and paces the small space between the bunk and the wall. But for the daily shower, or

weekly recreation offering, or maybe a rare trip up the hall to the medical department, these men are resigned to live out their existences in individual 5'x9' boxes. Sure, they share conversation but, from their perspective, speech communication is more akin to chattering to a friend on the telephone than by face to face connection. On days like this, the three inches of wall might as well be a thousand miles of telephone wire.

“What’s up buddy?” I ask DK, who calls me closer then whispers: “Biggun ain’t doin too good.” I shift my weight onto my left leg and peer in the adjacent cell. Even I know he’s a night owl, so the fact that the man is under his blanket at noon does not indicate a problem. Continuing the inquiry, “Is the COPD giving ‘em hell?” GI Joe hollers from his cell, “Hell no, it ain’t that bad, thank God.” I tuck my head as close to DK’s as the chicken wire will let me. Personal space bubbles are made non-existent by the impossible barrier. “Biggun is losin’ touch with the world,” he says while looking at nothing over my shoulder, fearing the bleakness likely in his own future.

One might think the man is accusing his friend of becoming mentally unbalanced. Sure, segregation does result in psychological dysfunction, and has likely contributed to Biggun’s degeneration, but DK isn’t “deep end” diagnosing the man. No, the problem here is something every human being experiences. People come into and out of our lives.

I’m relieved to know it's not the lung disease giving him fits. A few weeks prior to the present agitation, another denizen of seg, a few cells down, who certainly suffers grave mental illness, started a fire. After tenderizing his polyurethane mattress cover with a tub of hair grease, he tore it into manageable pieces, and then using a bottle of baby oil, tossed leafy strips into a combustible salad. Shoving the pile of oiled-up plastic under the door, the man stuck an inch of pencil lead into one side of the electric wall socket

population prisoners, contact visits are afforded. If friends and family members so desire, and can afford the trip, a hug, a kiss, or a handshake might be the touch of preserving the relationship. Sometimes physical touch is not possible, but relationships are more than simple human contact.

For the prisoner whose status has been relegated to administrative segregation, he or she will not enjoy the feel of a spouse's soft cheek, or rough 5 o'clock shadow. With a layer of thick glass separating the convict from the visitor, the calloused or a well manicured hand of a father or mother is impossible to experience. No matter how hard one tries, or how great the imagination, the wonderful scent of a new baby’s head is impossible to fathom through the double screen—a protective covering meant to channel the conversation while preventing the touch. The hug from a son or daughter, or handshake from a close friend are impossible challenges. The dirty visitation window is less appealing than the photographs taped to a convict's wall—at least he can touch the images.

Even if visits are not possible for the inmate's family, letters and phone calls keep the relationship from falling completely apart. When the time between letters grows to weeks, anxiety sets in. If a month passes, panic sets in. When the damning “return to sender/change of address” stamp adorns the original envelope, well...

“My people fell off,” is a common statement shared among long term prisoners. Time lessens the pain, but during the period of initial separation, a person may feel hopeless. The hopeless feeling is especially true for those whose time is lived out in complete physical detachment from all humanity. A bleak life, resigned to a 5'x9' cell, helplessly counting friends and family disintegrating, like bottles shot from fence-posts, is the unintentional and unimaginable consequence of a segger’s choices.

Simultaneously, DK and GI Joe reached over and knocked on the wall separating their own cells and the one in between. Having the Asatru religion in common, GI Joe was especially fond of Biggun. “Lookout fatso, are you a’ight or what.” DK is a Christian, but he and Biggun are 12 steppers: in their own way they, too, are brothers. DK knocks a little harder and yells, “Biggun, put down the cookies and check in.”

The sound of a body hitting the floor is almost indescribable but unmistakable to the ones who are in earshot. The expression, “dropped like a sack of potatoes,” can render an audible for the reader, but no Russet, or Idaho ever spewed its last wind when hitting into the ground. Biggun, disoriented by the smoke, never made it the five feet to his lifesaving toilet. All experience went out the window: well, if he’d had a window. Individually, COPD, asthma, and burning plastic are enemies to the lungs. United, they are a lethal sniper. His friends quickly recognized the trouble and fighting against their own instincts for self-preservation, they quickly shed their protective gear, crawled to the front of their cells and began the “Man Down” outcry.

During a life and death situation, counting on the overworked and underpaid prison guard, who has very little, if any, lifesaving education can add a layer of stress to an already stressful state of affairs. Biggun survived the ordeal but his current troubles make him wish he hadn’t. After a decade in prison, most of it spent in administrative segregation, Biggun’s family and friends are dwindling away. He is losing touch with the world. Loss of loved one, in all its forms, whether through rejection, or death, or just plain old, out of sight-out of mind forgetfulness, can be as suffocating as being trapped in a prison cell full of poisonous smoke.

For prisoners, physical separation might be the first and last step in perpetual detachment from those that mean the most. But, for those who are classified as general

and a blade from a disposable razor into the other. Next, he rolled two squares of toilet paper into two separate tiny sticks, fraying the ends of one to be used as tinder. For a handle, the undamaged stick of tissue was wrapped around another small shaft of lead; it resembled a gray and white crucifix. Another loose sheet of TP will act as kindling. No one needs matches in seg.

Pencil lead is not really lead, but graphite. Graphite retards the electrical current keeping the spark to a minimum: enough to get the job done without waking the sleeping bossman or trippin’ the breaker. Holding the crucifix by the toilet paper handle, he touches the crossbar to the lead, and simultaneously to the razor, short circuiting the outlet.

The arsonist was coming down off of his last K-2 high. Forgetting he’d eaten lunch an hour ago, his lagging mind figured the authorities had screwed him over again. He wanted his tray NOW! Before resorting to his fire-buggishness, the usual tantrum played out through a half hour of door rattling, locker slamming and screaming obscenities. Before a bogus suicide attempt, arson would be the next final demand for attention.

Poor reflexes are not conducive to the job at hand. A split second too long and the electrical current overrides the baffling graphite and the small spark becomes an explosion of white-hot-tedness. From outside the cell, it looks as if a dramatic spiritual experience might be overtaking the man. Quickly taking the tinder to the door, he pushes the burning TP through the chicken wire and grins with joker-like satisfaction as it ignites the pile of greased up plastic. The man called Southwest has struck again.

On this particular cellblock, there are three stacked rows of twenty-four single man cells. The fire is on the third row, the smoke cannot rise any further. Slowly the

thick black shadow collects on the inadequately ventilated ceiling. As the smoke builds to overflowing, a sinister creeping death begins to finger its way into the cells. Trapped. The inhabitants have nowhere to run.

Slamming lockers, rattling bars, and noisy voices are normal, day-to-day events, in seg. Intentional flooding and firestarting are not rare but there are times when a week will go by without the need to vehemently call for attention through these modes. DK, Biggun, and GI Joe are ol' hands and are well versed at building dams to divert flash-toilet water-floods, and draping blankets to turn, or at least filter encroaching smoke. Southwest's unusually ugly mixture burns and billows like a pile of smoldering tires. DK's cell is the first to give way to the intrusive madness. The blankets are not doing the job, so he places both of his 10" fans against the chicken wire and turns the pitiful defense weapons on high. Its knife vs. nuclear weapon. As smoke keeps coming, DK lowers himself to the floor and crawls on his knees to the back of his cell. There are no fire alarms in seg and bossman is still sleeping, or just ignoring the usual noise while doing paperwork in the ground-floor break area. DK yells, "Lookout boys, this is getting' serious." He's slithering around on the floor feeling for a towel or shirt to wet in the sink. Later on he tells me what was on his mind. "Roo, I was thinking about my sons. I was helpless. I thought that this was the end." From his position, the sink is too high, so he dunks the shirt into the toilet. Taking one last breath from the shrinking floor bordered air pocket, he rises to his knees, pulls the shirt from the water, sticks his head in the toilet, placing his face within inches of the water, and drapes the wet garment over his head and the mouth of the stool.

Prison toilets are notoriously powerful sucking devices. It's also worth noting, cell-block toilets are not just toilets. They have double, triple, and quadruple duties. The

privy is a prisoner's best friend. It can be a laundry machine, a bathing trough, and an occasional refrigerator. It goes without saying that there are a lot of irresponsible people in prison and this fact necessitates muscular, high-pressure, plumbing. Empty ramen noodle and cookie packages disappear in the blink of an eye. The heavier chili w/bean and mackerel parcels take a little prodding but go down easily. Just as a free world washer or dryer will eat a sock, one can imagine that somewhere, deep in the bowels of every prison sewer system, there are mountains of socks with an assortment of tee-shirts, boxers, washcloths, and shorts mixed in. With some encouragement, a full-sized bed sheet has been known to get flushed.

For those who smoke marijuana, K-2, or contraband cigarettes, the lavatory can be more than a friend. If the flush button is held while one blows his smoke into it, the reverse pressure will draw the reek into the sewer pipe. Although sober for five years, this tidbit of convict wisdom is the rationale for DK's actions. By putting his face in the orifice, covering his head and the rest of the toilet's opening with the wet towel, and holding the flush button down, the beastly draw of prison plumbing sucks out the trapped smoke.

After catching his breath, DK checks on his friends. "Hey, is it as bad in y'all's cells?" Though proud of his service, and like most combat vets, GI Joe never talks much about his military experiences. Never-the-less, every now and then, a situation like the one at hand would allow a listener to get a peep into some of the darkness this young man carries with him. "Hell yeah it's bad, now I know how them Afghani's felt when we used to smoke em out of the tunnels." From his own crapper, GI Joe was bobbing for air, too. Wrapping a wet towel and wet shirt around his face for some extra filtration, he'd one-upped DK.