

AMERICAN GULAG

Lockdown, Day 25:

There was an extremely violent brawl along racial lines here, "Blacks vs. Mexicans," because men have been forced to live on the bare fringes of existence for years on end. Imprisoned for the most part on minor drug crimes and immigration - violations, I have over the last two years watched this environment degenerate into something that quite frankly, scares me. In this latest wave of violence, which only made a blip in the local newspaper, hints a larger truth: Discontent from overcrowding and excessive sentencing practice's is growing, prisons are becoming unmanageable. Exacerbated by racial tensions, pent up aggression, and intolerance that was once unthinkable here. The fuse is already burning again and the next explosion is inevitable.

While the more moderate prisoners, those who, more than anything, just want to do they're "time," and go home, are trapped squarely in the middle, "between the rock and the hard place," with no refuge.

The Gift and the Curse!

Sometimes when we think that circumstances can't get worse, they do! Let me explain, when this situation began, I happened to be living in a two-man cell by myself. My normal cellmate Oliver, had returned to court in order to resolve some outstanding legal issues at the end of April. So I'd been able to enjoy a rare, refreshing, opportunity of space and solitude. Originally the cell that we share was designed to house one person, but

As the incarceration levels in Federal Prison have drastically risen over the years, a second bunk and then a third was added. Under normal circumstances there are rarely three people assigned to a cell unless it's voluntary. However, when events here reach critical mass, then it happens and we're jammed in cells 7ft wide, 12ft long, with a toilet, sink, three 2ft high footlocker's, and three 7ft bunks, one on the wall, 2 in bunkbed fashion on the opposite wall. It's a tight fit to say the least.

On day 15, I was greeted to a new face peering through the re-enforced glass in the door of this cell. I was instructed to turn around and extend my wrists through the front slot of the door, "This is called cutting-up or to cuff-up," during lockdowns we are not allowed to leave the cell, nor is the door opened unless your cuffed.

The new guy's name is Steve, he's 60 years old from Washington D.C. he's serving a parole violation sentence and will be released in a few months. Steve is difficult to live with, he is a career crack addict, with all the obsessive-compulsive behaviors that I've come to associate with hardcore drug addicts. He cannot stay still or silent for longer than 3 minutes, "Believe me, I've timed him repeatedly!" He's exchanged his crack addiction for that of coffee, and when he can't get coffee he's miserable, in turn he makes me miserable. I had been rationing him spoons of coffee so that I can have a measure of peace, but at 25 days with no access to the prison commissary except for batteries and soap, I have almost none left. I had an extra radio that I've allowed him to use until this is over, I ^{can't} decide if that was a mistake or not, he's been singing off-key gospel for days now and I can't help but think that (No good deed goes unpunished,) everytime he cranks up.

On day 17, we were greeted with yet another person being placed in here, this guy "Slim" is from North Carolina and he's served 19 years of a 30 year sentence for the possession with the intent to distribute 176 grams of crack cocaine. I have known Slim for about six years now and actually his name is "Radio Slim," because he is an absolute genius at repairing electronics.

Any time someone here breaks their radio, or screws up their headphones, he's the guy to see. Slim is now a refugee from his normally assigned housing unit. What this means, ~~or~~ the reason for this is that what is normally the "Hole, but called special housing unit or SHU," is filled past capacity. It normally holds 128 people, but since the brawl involved at least 500 people of the 1400 assigned here, a housing unit has also been made into a SHU. So everyone normally living there has been moved to other units.

Over the years Slim has repaired several of my "accidents" and so we know each other very well, especially since the last time we had a disturbance like this, "early 2010," Slim was moved into a cell with Oliver and myself. We got along so well, that when he was moved to this unit, he asked to cell with me. The only thing is... Slim is a coffee hound too! So now between Steve and Slim, I've learned 2 rather ingenious ways to heat water for coffee. The 1st involved making a "doughnut out toilet paper," squirting babyoil on it, and setting it alight! This was Steve's way and as crude as it is, it does heat the half-soda^{can} filled with water, hot enough to have a decent cup. Slim on the other

hand has made an electric water-boiler by uncapping the wall socket and "fiddling" with the wires inside, needless to say, "I won't be doing that!" but it too, does heat water.

Now I'll leave you to decide which is the gift and which is the curse...

