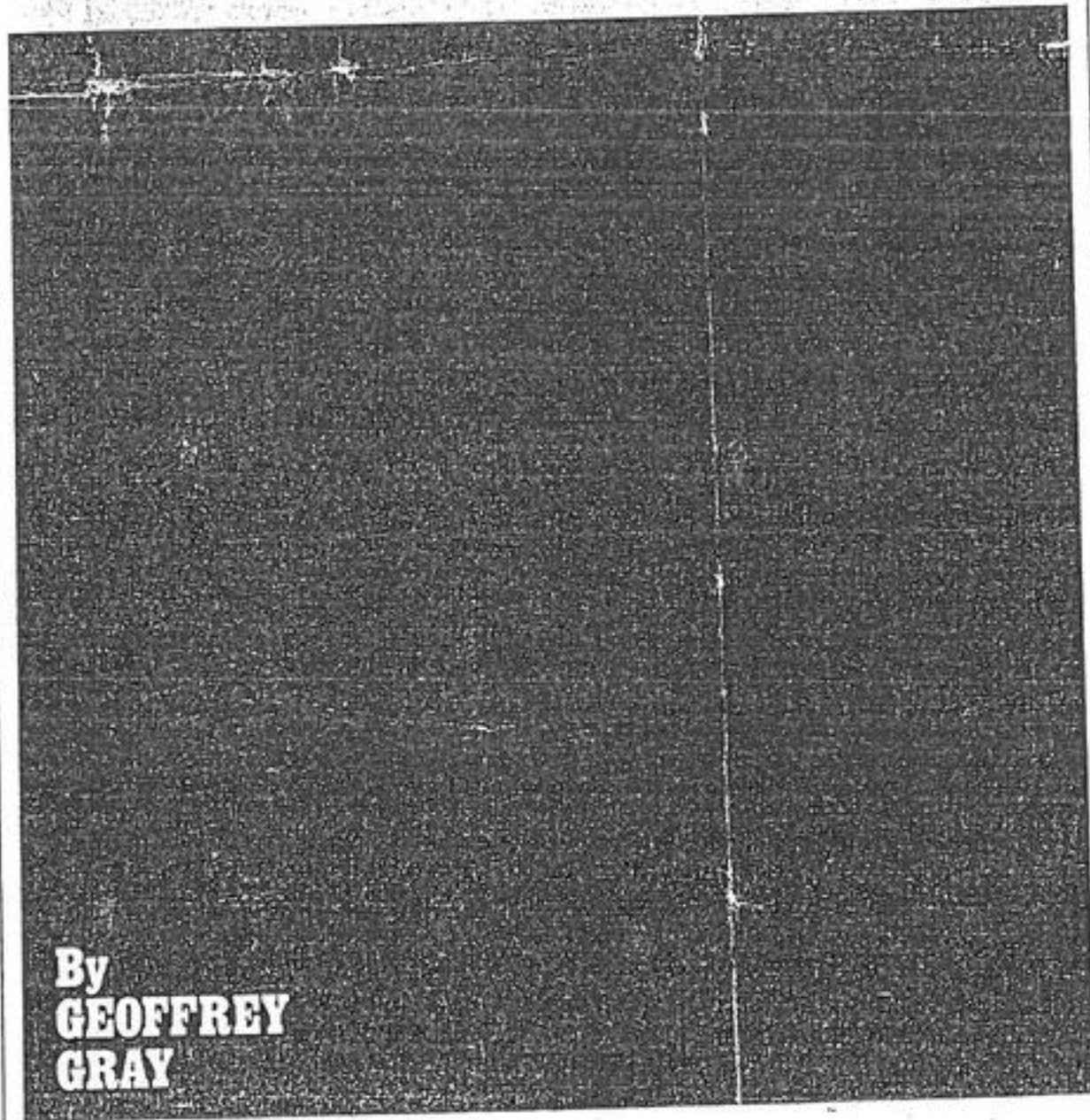


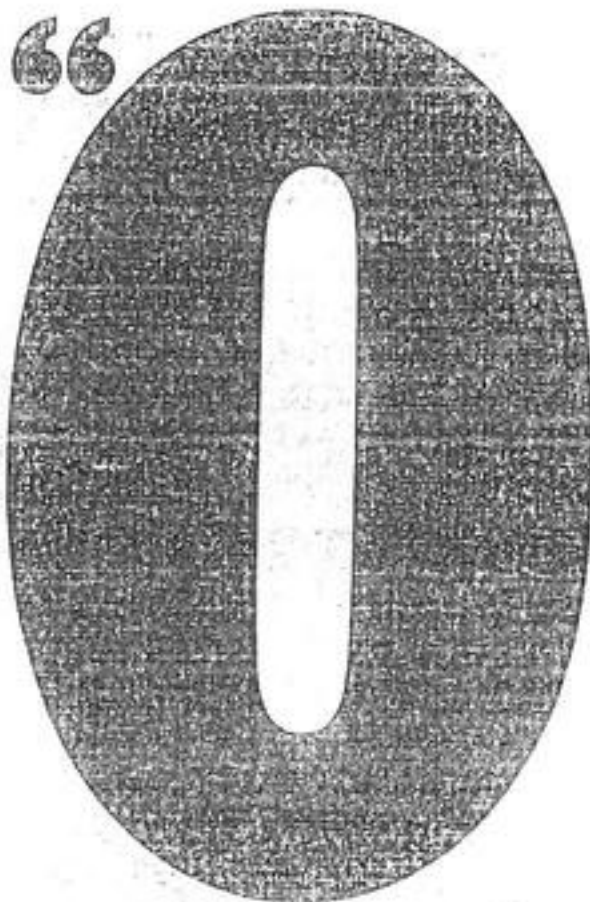
THE LORDS OF RIKERS



By
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The juvenile unit of the New York City jail is a survival-of-the-fittest finishing school for the roughest kids in New York. And an upcoming case alleges the guards run the show.

Illustration by Jeffrey Smit



sharpened into daggers, and send one another to the hospital. This juvenile jail is a gateway to the state prison system and also where the adult selves of these young people are being formed.

Recently, Rikers has been an especially explosive environment. Last year, the city reported 84 assaults overall against Correction officers, the highest number in the last decade. The Correction-officers union was dubious about that figure; using a different formula, it found the number of assaults against officers to be nearly double that amount. At RNDC, one captain nearly died in a fight and had his jaw broken in two places. In another facility, an officer had part of his thumb bitten off. "It's getting to the point that they're cutting staff and they're taking dangerous chances on the proverb of saving money," says one RNDC captain. "I got two decades on the shelf. I had a broken hand last year, and I got my nose fractured this year."

At Rikers, the uptick in violent incidents has created another problem: Inmates are not punished for breaking jail rules because the traditional discipline tool doesn't work; the cells in the Bing, the punitive-segregation building, are routinely filled. At RNDC, officers have found a rough-and-ready solution to this problem, which is, as they say, to separate the sheep from the wolves. The wolves are all sent to one unit: One Main.

No one, neither guard nor prisoner, wants to come here. The inmates are all high risk, and many have gang affiliations. With fewer staff monitoring the housing areas, among a host of other complicating factors, officers have been charged with deputizing violent teenagers to keep order

NE MAIN, House of Pain." ¶ That's what inmates have called the most dangerous wing of what is considered the most dangerous facility on Rikers, the juvenile-detention building known as the Robert N. Davoren Center, or RNDC. The place is a kind of sick mirror image of a freshman dorm in college. Everyone here is between the ages of 16 and 18, and instead of SAT scores and high-school transcripts, these teenagers have commissary accounts and public defenders. The vast majority are minorities from broken homes in public housing, awaiting robbery and murder charges. They have all the ordinary problems of youth: impaired judgment, poor impulse control, and invincibility complexes, distorted and amplified by hard life on the streets. Within the facility, the power dynamics are akin to those in *Lord of the Flies*, but, as these are teenagers, often even more perverse. They go to war over items like Pop-Tarts and cookies, arm themselves with toothbrushes

for them and falsifying documents to cover it up. This muddled relationship—"the devil's bargain," as former prison commissioner Marty Horn calls it—can easily get out of hand as the inmates take over the asylum. "There's nothing you can do, or anyone else, to make them stop fighting," says the captain. "They are kids, and they want to fight each other. That's what they do." And some are stronger than others. "Jail is like the ocean," says a deputy warden. "You got your bluefish, your barracudas, and your great whites."

CHRISTOPHER ROBINSON was like many of the teenagers who end up at One Main, a hard-luck kid from the roughest part of Brooklyn. He was not a high-risk inmate. He arrived in late August of 2008. He'd been sent because he'd violated his parole for, of all things, showing up at a new job as an overnight stock boy at Staples when he was supposed to be home. He'd been arrested a few months earlier for an alleged assault; before that, he'd served a stint at a juvenile facility upstate for stealing cell phones and a computer. Among the kids that Robinson hung around with in Brooklyn, Rikers is a kind of finishing school. A rough streetwise kid from the projects expects to be sent there, hears the stories, learns the jail's rituals from older boys. And for Robinson, Rikers ran in the family. Israel Rivera, his father, spent time there on the way upstate for a murder he'd committed at age 15, two months after Christopher was born.

"When I was growing up, when a dude went to jail, it was the thing to do," Rivera tells me. "You was a somebody. To be a man, you had to go to prison."

While Christopher's mother, Chanel, doted on him, there was little she could do to counteract the gravity of the streets. Some said her son was a Crip. "I knew Ice," a friend told Correction investigators, using Robinson's nickname. "We met at Crip meetings at a Brooklyn park." Robinson was a tough kid, but he was still partly a child, too. His mother told me that after he came home from the juvenile facility upstate, he would try to climb into her bed. When she told him he couldn't, he slept on the floor beside her bed.

By the time Robinson arrived at One Main, Michael McKie, a Correction officer, was desperate to get out. McKie hadn't planned on working in a jail. At six feet eight inches tall, McKie was a basketball star. "He was a dunking machine," says Eric Eisenberg, McKie's coach at Tilden High in Brooklyn. "He's blocking shots, running the floor, taking charges." When McKie's dream job with the NBA didn't work out, he joined Correction. Jail work was an odd fit. "You could not pick a more meek, genteel, kind kid in the whole world than Michael McKie," Eisenberg says.

Both McKie and Robinson have left One Main, but not under circumstances either of them would have chosen. On October 18, 2008, Robinson was beaten to death in his cell by fellow inmates. And months later, McKie and a partner were charged with running a criminal enterprise inside their housing area and outsourcing their duties to the teenagers who killed Robinson. The enterprise was so organized that it allegedly had a name—"the Program"—with inmates operating in "teams" to enforce order while

Once you are "with it," you enter a hierarchy. The lowest-ranking members of the team, investigators found, were referred to as "dayroom niggas"—peons who have no rights and don't even get to use the chairs and tables. Just above them are the "pop-off dummies."

"The pop-off dummy is the inmate that complies with anything the Team tells them to do," one jail report states.

Like fight. The call "P.O.D.'s" is like the opening bell in a prize fight. "They'll say, 'P.O.D.'s!' and then you see the two weakest guys in the dorm start fighting," says the RNDC captain. "You see these two little retards that weigh 80 pounds each trying to fight each other."

AT RIKERS, violence is a kind of currency, and whether people are afraid of you is inseparable from your status. The officers nominally run things, but they know that if the inmates aren't afraid of them, they may have problems. And while violent criminals are always dangerous, the type of officer guarding them has changed in recent years. Veterans now complain that seasoned old-timers like themselves have retired and that, because of budget cuts, their replacements no longer get the proper training they need. What's more, the city now requires Correction officers to have at least two years of college, a rule some say has weeded out many streetwise recruits. Now nearly half of all officers are women, who are sometimes outmatched physically.

Veterans also complain about the widespread use of video cameras throughout Rikers. The cameras are supposed to keep unruly officers from getting out of line, but they also prevent some officers from disciplining inmates. The cameras do not have audio tracks, and when disputes arise, it's impossible for investigators to determine who said what. "The inmates play to the cameras," the RNDC captain says. Officers fear suspensions, which has created an atmosphere in which officers might be inclined to have inmates keep order.

What's more, the seniority system is designed in such a way that the most inexperienced officers are assigned to work the most dangerous details. The new officers are also asked to control violent teenagers who have ever-shifting allegiances to gangs both inside and outside Rikers. An RNDC captain reels off gangs in the building like items on a shopping list: "You got your Latin Kings, your Netas, your Crips, your Bloods, your MS-13s, and your skin-heads. And then we mix them all up and you throw them together." Each gang has its own code, its own secret language and manuals. Walking down the corridors, officers hear inmates shout out "Eighty-

eight," a Blood code that means a captain is nearby, or "Forty-four," a Crip code that means the same thing.

The most powerful gang on Rikers are the Bloods, and the Bloods network is so vast it's hard to keep track of the various sects: Goon Bloods, Gorilla Stone Bloods, Brim Bloods, Desperado Bloods. Often, one Blood will approach another to confirm his Bloods status. "G-checking," it's called. The Blood will deliver the phrase "What that red be like?"

If the Bloods member is legit, he responds, "That red be like five-poppin', six-droppin', Crip-killin' to my casket, five alive, six must die, rest in peace to O.G. Tye, 50/50 Love, Fuck 50/50 Love, that's the old laws that go against Bloods ..."

Other factions have influence, too. The Trinitarios, a Dominican gang, are considered one of the fastest-growing in New York and are known for their weapon of choice—machetes. Another Rikers power base is the Nation of Islam, which has long offered protection to Muslim devotees throughout the state and federal prison system.

For a young Correction officer, learning the ropes can be punishing. Michael McKie was assaulted by inmates three times—once he was sent to the hospital. He put in for transfers out of RNDC, but the requests were repeatedly denied. He and his wife, Sharmaine, talked about moving away with their two young daughters if a transfer didn't come through. By the fall of 2008, he was desperate. His fifth anniversary at Correction was approaching, and with it a major bonus, bringing his salary to roughly \$84,000. But was the increase in pay worth it anymore? McKie's high-school basketball coach Eisenberg remembers getting panicked calls from him. "He'd be like, 'This place is crazy, I got to get out of here.'"

"He would open your cell when you were sleeping," an inmate claimed. "The team would then put you in a chicken-wing position and beat you."

"I GOT TO GET OUT OF HERE," Christopher Robinson told his mother when she visited him in Rikers shortly before his death. It was unclear when he was leaving. A hearing for his parole violation had been rescheduled several times, and a two-week stay at the end of the summer had turned into nearly two months in custody and now it's the fall. Violent incidents were reported nearly every day throughout the facility. One detainee was beaten over the head with a telephone receiver. Another had a finger severed. Four others suffered "orbital fractures" from being punched in the face. On September 19, 2008, a month before Robinson's death, a Legal Aid assistant faxed a letter to senior Correction officials to alert them to a 16-year-old housed in Modular 3 Upper North who "was asked

beaten so badly that a footprint could be seen on his chest. Meanwhile, detectives interviewed the detainees on One Main, many of whom were Bloods. If Robinson was a Crip, he had been housed in unfriendly territory. "The interviews," the police report states, "reveal that two days prior [Robinson] had stated that he 'would die before he would 'get with it.'"

AS THE commissioner of the billion-plus Department of Correction, Marty Horn's first task after Robinson's death was to summon his senior staff to his office and watch the entire movie *Lord of the Flies*. Horn wanted them to see the final scene in the film, in which, after warring among themselves on a remote island, the surviving boys see a boat from the Royal Navy.

"If we didn't play that role, the strong arm of the state being a protector of the weak, then these housing units would devolve into Hobbesian worlds," Horn says.

The irony, hard to be lost on anyone in the room, was that the devolution had already occurred.

Horn changed the name One Main to One Central, so it wouldn't rhyme with House of Pain. Among other things, investigators from the Correction intelligence unit undertook a massive internal investigation. In total, 341 detainees at RNDC were questioned. Nearly everyone confirmed the Program's existence.

"When I was in 2 Upper South, I was asked if I was 'wit' it. When I said no, I was hit in the face by a 'pop-off dummy' on the tier," one inmate said.

"I was housed on Mod 1 and broke my hand because I was not 'wit' it," another said.

"My cell just opened up. I was not with it."

"They tell another inmate they have to pay to live or even pay to sit at a table. Forget about a chair."

"I do not have a chair. I am just a day-room nigga."

Correction investigators also fielded allegations about other RNDC officers' complicity in the Program, so many that Horn claims he decided to plan his exit from Rikers.

"It horrified me," Horn says, "to think this was all going on under my nose."

Dora Schriro, Horn's replacement at Correction, has struggled to control the increasing number of violent incidents on Rikers. Last month, at a City Council oversight hearing, Schriro claimed the reason for the uptick was that staff were better reporting incidents, but she failed to articulate a comprehensive plan to combat

jail violence. In December, after clamoring from Sidney Schwartzbaum, the union leader for deputy wardens, Schriro initiated one reform by opening up a punitive-segregation unit within RNDC so inmates are punished there rather than herded together in units like One (Main) Central. So far, it's been working to quell violence, sources inside RNDC say.

Meanwhile, prosecutors are preparing to go to trial in Robinson's murder case. At the Bronx district attorney's office, the Program and jail violence is familiar territory. In February 2008, months before Robinson arrived on Rikers, prosecutors charged RNDC officer Lloyd Nicholson with running the Program, assaulting inmates and falsifying reports. In one instance, an inmate claimed, Nicholson "put the 'not with it niggaz' in the dayroom and extremely beat the shit out of the person, until they say 'wit' it." One inmate was beaten so badly he had a punctured lung. Last year, Nicholson was convicted and sentenced to six years in prison.

The crux of criminal cases against Correction officers often rest on the reliability of the witnesses. The problem for prosecutors is that in nearly all cases they are inmates, who are notoriously untrustworthy. What makes inmates even more unreliable on the stand is that they are often forced to admit to making deals with prosecutors in exchange for their testimony. But piecing together the case against McKie and Nelson, inmates told investigators similar things.

"Most of the problems started with the C.O.," one inmate said, according to an internal report. "They call him 'Mac.' He would open your cell while you were sleeping, and he would let the Team come into your cell. The team would then put you in a 'chicken-wing' position and beat you."

"C.O. Mack ask inmates if they are wit' it," another inmate stated. "They do not hit you in the face unless you try and defend yourself and start swinging." Another told investigators McKie tried to make him a "P.O.D., pop-off dummy." When he refused, the inmate was "assaulted by unknown inmates."

Prosecutors came to believe that all of this was consciously sanctioned and even directed by the guards. They ultimately charged McKie and Nelson under an enterprise-corruption statute, a state version of RICO. McKie and Nelson had essentially started their own prison gang, the indictment claims, and "recruited inmates to serve as subordinate managers, foot soldiers, and enforcers for the Program and directed them to maintain order within One Main."

"I JUST WANT people to know, my husband didn't do this," says Sharmaine

McKie, Michael McKie's wife. We're sitting in a diner in Brooklyn, and her eyes well up with tears. She reaches for a napkin. "Gangs is what he never wanted to get involved with. He's not supposed to be the one in jail."

After his arrest, a judge placed McKie's bail at \$400,000. He and his family couldn't afford a bond. His old basketball coach Eisenberg put up his house, but there wasn't enough equity in it to cover McKie's bail. McKie was sent to an upstate prison, waiting for trial to begin, only to have it postponed several times. Almost two years passed before he was released.

Sharmaine refused to tell her daughters where Daddy was. "He's at work," she'd say. The girls would cry and scream, and finally she told them; soon she was like Robinson's mother and other mothers and spouses who make those dreadful prison visits.

In a way, the gravity of Rikers had pulled them all down into its orbit. One day in court, Sharmaine approached Charnel Robinson. Trying to show compassion, Sharmaine told Charnel, "I know what it's like to lose your loved ones. I lost my husband for a year and a half [in prison]."

Charnel was not comforted. "Your husband may be away for a year or whatever, but you're visiting him, talking to him on the phone. I am never talking to my son again. And he's my only child."

After his death, Charnel learned that Christopher's girlfriend was having an abortion. Charnel begged her family to reconsider. Charnel offered to raise it. To bring up her boy's child would be a way of keeping Christopher with her. The girlfriend had the abortion anyway.

"Like two deaths at once," Charnel says.

She is sitting in her apartment in Bedford-Stuyvesant. She's preserved Christopher's bedroom as a kind of shrine. She's kept his first paycheck from his first real job—the one that got him in trouble with his parole officer and triggered his fatal trip to Rikers—sealed for two years before opening it. He earned \$279.39 as an overnight stock boy. She also has letters he sent her when he first went away to the juvenile facility upstate, letters she used to read in the bathroom with the door locked so others in the apartment wouldn't hear her sobbing.

I pick one up.

"Yo mom wats good wit you," he'd written. "I really miss you I getting in trouble up here but I'm gone change up cause I got to get home ... I wish I never got locked up and the first place and if I get home I am not coming back." ■

Additional reporting by Andre Tartar.