

## **I'm Afraid I'm Afraid**

The steel door rolled sideways. It opened. I stepped through. The door slammed shut. I stopped. I stepped into a room buzzing like a bee with audible whispers. This sound hovered over the space I stood still listening and looking, surprised. The prisoner inmates in this the visiting room had on, not messy, but clean, newly laundered blue uniforms.

The prisoners all men, sat facing forward in five rows, ten benches to each row, each bench bolted to the floor so it could not be picked up and used as a weapon. Opposite the prisoner a visiting woman, some with children, sat on the bench facing the prisoner, about three feet away.

Conversations seemed close and intimate. The women, mothers, wives or girl friends had dressed up for the visit. Tattoos were evident. The visitors seemed comfortable with their prisoners.

I was still standing, when a women's voice, amplified, loud, and peremptory rang out "You sir go to bench #15 and sit down. Your prisoner will be here soon. " Her voice, with her finger pointed directly at me, came from her desk which was in the front of the room, raised six feet above the floor.

This wary eagle-eyed correction officer observed every moment, every movement, from her elevated position, always with a look of suspicion. I was there to visit Robert, not as his lawyer but just as a friend. He had been here in prison for just over a year, serving a two- year sentence for arson.

I had known Robert for almost twenty years. He was a good student at Western Hills High School. He was one of the few black varsity baseball players. He loved doing research.

Robert's life could have and should have been successful. But then, he was diagnosed as manic-depressive. He began to commit a series of misdemeanors. He had a girl friend. Together they had two children, both boys, three years apart. Then she moved to her own apartment.

On a Christmas morning Robert and the sons were at his mother's house for breakfast. The girl friend, the mother of the two boys, came into Robert's house, piled up paper on the dining room table then lit a match, starting a fire. Robert's house burned to the ground. She was arrested for arson. No lives were endangered. It was her first offense. She received probation.

About a year later Robert was arrested for setting fire to the apartment where he was living with his two sons. The girl friend was seen in the area. A gas can was found on the front steps, half full. Robert admitted that the gas can belonged to him. The fire had been started with gasoline. Conviction was possible or even probable. Upon advice of his court appointed lawyer Robert pled guilty to arson. The plea bargain called for two years in prison rather than the twenty years in prison which was the possible sentence because two other tenants in the house were endangered. Robert went first to the Hamilton County jail awaiting transfer to a Chillicothe prison. I received an anguished telephone call, "Mr. Santen, please

come to see me right away. I'm in serious trouble here in jail. Please come right away." I went.

Robert looked tired, fretful, and frightened, with a bruised face and a perceptible limp.

He told me he had just spent 8 days in solitary confinement with almost no light, little space and no available reading material. Alone. "Mr. Santen, almost 200 hours of stark silence and no medication the entire time to treat my manic depressive disease.

"Before the 8 day confinement I had asked for my medication often and often again. Without the medicine I told them my aggressiveness would be uncontrollable. It was. I got into a fight with a single guard, then five guards who used a club or two, then, of course this earned for me the 8 days of solitary." This non medicated manic depressive prisoner had been subdued.

I knew this was palpably unfair. In my mind I knew the system was wrong. I also knew prejudice was an ingredient. In my law office I prepared a description of the events. I threatened litigation. I hand delivered the letter to Sheriff Simon Leis. I didn't receive a reply. However, Robert received the medication that very evening and every day thereafter.

This story could not be worse nor it does it get any better not even as I read the final paragraph which could be its own story but which you will, I promise, enjoy.

Sitting on bench #15 waiting for Robert I heard the amplified voice again ring out toward a different bench. Bench# 20 you are beyond the rules. Cease immediately or your guest will be ushered out. . You will receive appropriate punishment. Read the rules mister, they are there on the wall. They are meant for the likes of you.” I followed her pointing finger and read words in large capital letters on the wall:

PLEASE KEEP YOUR CHILDREN CLOSE AND NEAR TO  
YOU. WE HAVE NUMEROUS PREDATORS HERE.  
ONE KISS WHEN YOUR GUEST ARRIVES AND ONE WHEN SHE LEAVES.  
BUT NOT A LINGERING KISS. NO PETTING, NO SEX, AND SHE MUST  
WEAR NON-REVEALING CLOTHES

Then, Robert came through the steel door. Her voice again rang out with that pointing finger "Go to bench #15, your visitor is there." She knew because I was wearing a tracker, electronic wristband which knew my location every place I went. My name was there and that of the prisoner. Robert sat opposite me. I told him I was glad to see him.

I showed him recent pictures of his two sons. He said, “The boys look fine, they are growing, but listen, Mr. Santen, listen to me. I do not want my boys to see me in prison. Please don’t take or show them pictures or even think about bringing the boys here. I don’t want them to have any kind of image of their father in jail.” I agreed.

I asked Robert why all of the inmates in this visitors room had on clean, blue uniforms. "Before they let me come here to the visitor's room to see you, a guard ordered me into a changing room. He ordered me to take off all of my clothes, everything, including my underpants, then to put on newly provided underpants, a clean shirt, and this clean blue uniform.

Don't think for a moment that the jail keepers want their prisoners to be clean for the visitors. That's not the case. When I return to the changing room I will be ordered to remove all of the clean clothes.

If I had concealed knives, blades, saws or whatever, the guard would know. I would get solitary confinement plus more time in jail."

I talked to Robert about his family. I showed him the pictures I had brought of the daffodils he had planted a year earlier at our farm. The flowers were bright, sunlit yellow, growing in bunches. This was a happy moment for both of us.

Robert asked if I had had any difficulty finding and getting into the prison. I told him I had spotted the red brick barrack-style windowless buildings, standing stark and grim, fence enclosed. I knew I had arrived.

I could see the prison layout surrounded by a forty-foot high fence, the equivalent of four stories. The second fence created the "no man's land," It was parallel to the first fence but ten feet beyond. Woven, tensile strength barbed wire topped both fences.

Robert said “You have undoubtedly seen those guardhouses at fifty foot intervals along the top of the fence. Every prisoner knows about the guard houses. They are occupied twenty- four seven. Two guards change shifts every four hours. We all know the guards have rifles with multi clips, always ready, always loaded, always cocked, always close and always prepared to fire. Climbing a fence is always a death sentence.

Every night the guards test their loud speakers ‘Stay away from the fence. Stay away from the fence’. Powerful searchlights turn night into day. If a prisoner attempts to climb the fence, warnings blast from the loud speakers. If the prisoner doesn’t freeze rifle bullets solve the infraction. Instructions for the guards read, ‘Shoot to kill.’ And they do.

Not many prisoners try to escape. Only death row inmates have made the attempt. Rifles spray bullets. Death comes earlier than planned. Fences, guards and rifle fire, they scare all of us. We know not to mess with fences.

Most inmates here know about the Lucasville Prison riots, which occurred just up the road from here. Those riots continued for several days. Those riots were deadly. They received a lot of national publicity because the prisoners had effectively overcome the guards. Many guards lost their lives, and many prisoners as well.

Because of the death of so many guards the training of guards dramatically changed. The new training provided that guards must be taught and trained that it has be 'Kill or be killed'. If a prisoner attacks a guard or disobeys or makes the wrong move, killing happens, not just permitted but, under the new training rules, recommended.”

I told Robert how I learned, how I had discovered, what it was like to be a prisoner. " Coming into the prison, whether one is an attorney in a dark blue suit, or even a priest with a Roman collar the instructions printed on the wall state ‘You must treat all of the visitors the same way, be wary, be alert. Trust no one.’”

When I arrived at the penitentiary a guard directed me to a room with numbered lockers. He asked me, no, he told me, or in fact he actually commanded me to put on a tray everything in all of my pockets, my wallet, my watch, my car keys, my cell phone. The tray went into locker 34. The guard kept the key. He attached on me my yellow tracker wristband with the number 34 on it. It would identify me as I proceeded through the prison.”

Robert said, “ I know you that you had to be careful, respectful and even polite." I said, "You are so right. Even simple comments from me like ‘why? Or is this necessary?’ would trigger a single command ‘Mister you’re out of here’, resulting in my being led peremptorily and immediately out the door.”

This initial treatment humbled me and probably everyone else that comes here. There is no trust No trust whatsoever. I felt confined and under minute

observation. I had been reduced to invisibility. I was not a person. I was part of the prison system, powerless, small, and diminished. “This Robert, is what you probably endure every day 24/7. You are not physically shackled but shackled in so many other ways.”

To get from the initial identity room into the penitentiary proper I passed through two separate steel doors. At each I announced my name then pressed the electronic button on my wristband. If all checked out, the steel door would slide open long enough to walk through, then ... clang shut. I had no control.

“Robert”, I said, “This is my first visit ever to a penitentiary. I would like to know more about the life here and what happens. I understand that 40% of prisoners come back for a second, third and even a fourth time.

It is fairly common knowledge that many inmates leave prison with more criminality than they came with. Stories are common about the horrors of prison life.” Robert said, “What you have read was probably only half - true. I’ve seen many terrible things here, and I know about many others from prisoner talk, all are bad, all are bad.

All guards, men and women are called Correction Officers.” Robert almost sneered, “a strange name indeed, for those who offer no corrections. Their demeanor is meant to shock and diminish us. They show all of the worst traits. They are for the most part mean, intolerant and cruel. Kill or be killed

There is no respect and none is expected. Trust no one.

The code for guards dictates that if you as a guard are weak or friendly or yielding, you lose. You will get hurt, and you will lose your job. Remember Lucasville.”

I asked “What do you with yourself all of the time, every day?” “I eat and sleep and run every day for exercise. It’s so important for me to stay in good physical shape. If I don’t there may be consequences. Will I survive here? I will try because one day I will leave here and I will never come back. I will never come back, because I am afraid, always in every moment, I’m afraid.

But, let me tell you about my research which I love to do, here on the library computer. I’m researching about prisons. Did you know that the United States has far and away more prisoners per 100,000 people than any other nation in the world? We have 2.3 million people incarcerated in juvenile, adult, local, city, county and federal prisons. We have in the United States 20% of the world’s prison population in our jails. So we, in our free country, in relationship to populations have four times more people in jail than any other country, more than Russia and China. What is going on here in our country?

The cost per prisoner in the United States is close to \$100 per day, \$36,000 per year. 2.3 million people in prison at \$36,000 per year that’s over 8 billion dollars a year. That is the cost of our prison system. Is it well spent when 40% of inmates come back so often.”

I told Robert I had heard that fights among prisoners are not rare. "Do fights happen often?"

"Do fights happen often? The guards are trained to let fights take their course. Black eyes, fists, broken teeth, blood, broken arms, broken ribs, kicks with prison boots. Fights are brutal but they happen again and again. The guards, they look away, they do nothing, or they encourage the fighting. Fights end with a whimper and a winner.

Prisoners through fighting learn where they fit, their own place, where they stand in the pecking order. They cross that line with extreme jeopardy. But this is a rough, total security prison. It is not rare when a winner later loses and becomes the one with the whimper. Strength and size and money and outright meanness rule the prison corridors. Guards keep order, but the gangs and strong prisoners also rule.

There are three or four very strong prisoners here who head up the gangs that dominate our prison life. Even the guards do not often cross the leader and his gang. If the gang leader says to the guard 'move this prisoner to a different cell, or you can trust this prisoner so get him a good prison job, or put this person in solitary' all of that will certainly happen. So, don't cross the guards but importantly don't cross the leader or members of his gang. I'm afraid, I'm afraid.

We do have 'death row' prisoners here but we are never with them. Their fragile life, and when will it end, and the fact that they will never get out makes them much more dangerous to other inmates. They have their own club, the Death Row Club,

which understandably shows respect for a life because it is precious until that final day arrives.

I believe, and pray and hope that I will not come back to this place. However I am aware that being out of here will not be easy. As a black driver I am 5 times more likely to be pulled over, ticketed, and arrested. I will need to be very careful, much more so than my white brethren.

I am 4 times more likely to be the subject of police force. Almost 1/3<sup>rd</sup> of all black men, like me, have been in jail once or several times in their lives. I'm afraid, Mr. Santen I'm afraid, I'm afraid."

Robert said that he lives in what is called a box. There are twenty- five prison cells on each side of a square, the box, two men to a cell, totaling two hundred prisoners in our box. With this number the guards see us often. We are always watched and watched and watched. They get to know us our habits and our behaviors. They know better how we inmates will act or react, who will cause trouble and who will not. Trust no none.

"You get the picture. This is a terrible place. Think for a moment what it's like to be under constant surveillance, in constant fear, fear of your cellmate, fear of the guards, fear of the strong boss inmates, fear of even the cooks and what they serve. Have you ever seen anyone smile that lives in fear? Smiles with fear? There are no smiles in prison. This is a dark scary place, a place that inside me breeds fear.

The warden knows, as do the inmates, that prison guards are handed money on the outside mostly from prisoner connections. Thus the guards can make things happen. That is why drugs are so available in prison

Security is tight for visitors and inmates but not for guards. If a guard brings in drugs, or a knife, will a fellow guard be an informer? I don't think so. The gang leader will find out. The informing guard will lose his protection. The motto is live and let live.

Prison life, if it is safe, is bad enough. But, if it isn't safe, danger and fear, they live together, they reside together, they are fractious roommates.

The weakest of the prisoners can and do become 'girl friends', watched over by a dominant male gang leader and his followers. Sex takes place, usually in the shower at night or in the darkness, perhaps observed by the guards or perhaps not, but never reported nor acted upon. Inmates know not to mess with or report about 'girl friends'. The guards, they stay aloof.

In the dark rapes happen. I'm afraid and nervous that I could be raped, then tagged with the 'girl friend' epithet. It hasn't happened. I am a pretty big guy. I can protect myself. The gang knows this and knows me. So far they have been relatively friendly. This is exactly why I run every day. I must stay in good shape. Still, I am afraid."

At the Chillicothe prison with Robert I had learned a great deal about prisons. Maybe more than I wanted to know.

Robert finished out his two years, scarred emotionally, and determined not to go back. His words still echo in my mind, “ I’m afraid. I’m afraid.”

He is now out of prison doing his best, when he can. About a year after Robert was out of prison, he called to tell me that his father had died. He wanted me to come to the funeral. I was honored to be asked.

Robert' s father, known as Sip, had been a black Baptist minister for many, many years. He was well known, liked and admired in the black community. I went to the funeral not knowing at all what to expect. There were five black ministers there to honor Sip.

After everyone was seated, drum brushes swept across three snare drums with increasing intensity, softly. softly brushing, then soft, soft, then soft to loud. Then silence, for the memorial to begin.

Here is that final paragraph I promised: The chosen minister said

" Sip, my friend, now gone, he lived a marvelous life, a fabled life, a wondrous life, but all was not well, not always well, with Sip. Sip felt like he always lived and walked in a wire cage which surrounded him and confined his life. He could see out, he could see out, but he could not get out. All of his life Sip imagined that he

was a caged bird, a bird walking back and forth with beautifully colored, purple, yellow, silver and gold iridescent feathers, but they could not unfold to display their beauty. But then Sip, he died. The cage door opened. Sip, he stepped slowly out. His feathers slowly opened, purples, yellows, silver and gold. Their magnificent splendor changed the brilliance of the sky itself. The feathers carried Sip up and up and up to his wanted paradise. He walks quietly now in the glow of the feathers, the yellows, the silver and gold.

His voice echoes, I am free, I am free, I am free. I am not afraid. I am not afraid.”

---

hhs 4-13-2021

