

THE LOW STABBING RATIO

Written by a prisoner from within The Honor Yard

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I was afraid, naturally. In the purgatory of county jail you wait months on end for the bus to prison and listen to talk of race riots, stabbings and the mayhem that waits in the penitentiary. Thanks to my 22 year 8 month sentence for multiple counts of 2nd degree robbery (no weapon), the State of California wants me in a Level IV prison, mostly reserved for lifers, murderers and those who are steadily in trouble no matter where they find themselves. Many Level IV convicts have been locked up for 20 years or more. I couldn't imagine what this had done to them. I couldn't imagine any of it. Every single thing I knew about prison, and myself, suggested nothing but disaster.

From county jail I went to Donovan State Prison's reception yard where the state and its minions evaluate criminal history and propensity for violence. During my four months on the reception yard, I saw a child molester get beaten up and the Southsiders (Southern Mexicans) stab a couple of their own; there was also a period of racial tension when the skinheads became unhinged because a Caucasian Crip celled up with one of his Black homies. We also had a sit-down strike over poor living conditions, and a fight between two men in the chow hall that caused 20 other guys to get inadvertently pepper sprayed. However, none of the grim prophecies concerning my physical safety was fulfilled. I realized, during those initial months of incarceration, that as long as one doesn't get into the mix (gambling, drugging, going into debt or trying to run things), prison is not nearly as dangerous as advertised by the life-long pessimists, here in force, who scared me by giving voice to their own morbid scenarios. Prison is relentlessly stressful for the kind of people who expect the worst, encourage it, and always find it - literally drawing violence and mishaps to themselves by the sheer force of their contrary wills and profoundly jinxed lives. It behooves you to keep your distance from these doomed characters.

Then there's the matter of respect - the sort of deferential respect usually associated with United States Senators and the Mafia - a careful, formal brand of respect. You take care not to insult or annoy anyone by word or deed. Unexpectedly, most experienced convicts are politer than your average free citizen, and unusually considerate of others' moods. It's judged foolish to be stabbed for bad manners. I am insanely polite; it has served me well in prison. While in county jail I had five fights in four months, all of them over nothing in particular, while I tried to figure out how to act. During five years on Level IV prison yards, I've had no fights, unless you want to count a couple of minor scuffles on the basketball court that ended with handshakes and expressions of deep respect. Everyone here craves respect whether they deserve it or not.

I was transferred from Donovan's reception yard to Tehachapi State Prison in the high desert about an hour and a half northeast of Los Angeles. My first week on the

mainline, a man six cells down from mine was stabbed to death because a group of white shot callers *thought* he was a rapist. It turned out to be bad information, and as a consequence, at least one of the killers was himself stabbed while he languished in the hole. How this can happen is beyond me and I hope to never find out. Because of the murder, all the Whites on the yard were locked down for two or three months; I can't remember how long really - time loses all meaning under such circumstances. This incident did bring home to me that men in prison die because of gossip.

Over the next two years there were approximately 15 stabbings on the yard (two of which resulted in fatalities) and at least a dozen serious fights. I was locked down a week here, a month there, at least seven months all together. The Blacks and the Mexicans went at each other for a while and ended up locked down for five months straight, in addition to the seven months the rest of us were locked down. In another incident, two drunken Southsiders attacked a guard for unknown, probably whimsical alcoholic reasons which resulted in all of us getting locked down for two months or so, the monotony only broken when angry correctional officers tore up our cells while searching them.

I am not affiliated, meaning that I'm not in a prison gang or criminal organization, and so avoid being personally involved in the major drama and violence. There is a segment of the prison population, not so euphemistically called knuckleheads, who orchestrate and encourage situations that often lead to a fight or a riot. Although not affiliated, as a White man I am expected to participate in any spontaneous riot that erupts around me and attack the Blacks or the Mexicans or whomever it is that we happen to be against. If I don't jump in, any number of things can happen. At best I'll be beaten; at worst I'll be stabbed. Through blind luck, the only riot that has had the bad grace to erupt around me was in county jail. I didn't participate but was given a pass (due to my ignorance and dope sickness) and a rigorous warning. Once you've graduated from county jail to prison, you're expected to know the rules. The learning curve is sharp and humorless. Though many of the convict rules are based on fear and questionable principles, they are easy to understand and follow.

I got through two years on a regular Level IV yard with little trouble except for the lockdowns caused by other people's propensity for trouble. The main problem is living day after day with the idea that something might go wrong at any time. I could be on the yard, playing cards, bearing no grudges against anyone, and if the White shot callers decide to jump-start a riot, I have to jump and could be easily killed over an issue unknown to me. Some convicts are reputed to have shanks on their person or within close reach at all times because they are always ready and always afraid. They exist in a fixed state of wary crankiness, perhaps with good reason. I am able to live under these tense circumstances, detached and aplomb, by combining Zen calmness with my well-developed powers of denial and a touch of careful fatalism. I hang out with the men on the yard who want to do their time by reading, educating themselves, playing chess, cards or softball. I stay away from the element that needs to tell the rest of us how to do our time; although, of course, if they single me out for instruction, I usually have to listen.

Though physically unharmed and relatively comfortable in a monkish way at Tehachapi, I was subjected to the constant lockdowns, trapped in a 12' x 8' x 10' cell 24-hours a day, 7-days a week except for a 15-minute shower every three days.

An accomplished reader of escapist fiction, I discovered I had a genius for finding and

collecting books under trying circumstances. So, though lockdowns are profoundly boring, designed to crush your spirit, readers bear them better than most. More than one study suggests that people eventually go crazy under the lockdown regime. Some prison yards go down for a year straight. The average yard has 1,000 people {five cell blocks holding 200 prisoners each) who can all be locked down thanks to the antics of two or three madcap convicts. I became used to the sporadic lockdowns and, because of severely diminished expectations, actually lived *in* an odd state of contentment, gratified that I hadn't been beaten or killed.

Then . . . for no reason I was ever given, they transferred me to another Level IV prison in the city of Lancaster at the edge of the high Mojave Desert. This is immediately disconcerting because every yard has different rules depending on the quota of knuckleheads and the degree of mayhem they choose to foster. I have to learn and to a certain extent obey these rules. On many Level IV yards local custom demands that the races mix as little as possible - no sports, no card games, no anything. The Whites share tables with the Blacks at chow because the guards force us to (nearly 100% of the White shot callers who make decisions for us are wholeheartedly racist). If a White convict has an argument or an issue with a Black or a Mexican, a fistfight is not allowed; it's either settled by discussion or with shanks. That's how it was at Tehachapi. Still, I was surviving, feared change, and felt the move a negative thing.

Whenever I arrive at a new prison, a week or so is spent in a cellblock optimistically called Orientation. Part of the process compels you to meet a committee of local correctional officers, counselors, doctors and administrators. At the committee I was told that I'd arrived on the Honor Yard and asked if I wanted to stay. I'd never heard of such a thing, and it sounded suspicious. Sensing my well-honed paranoia, one of the committee, my counselor it turned out, announced the salient fact, the deal maker: the stabbing ratio per inmate on Honor Yard is the lowest in the state and actually better than some small towns with a similar population. Any sane person anywhere in the world wants to live where the stabbing ratio is low. In return for this safest of yards, I had to sign a document swearing I wouldn't attack anyone and that I would submit to random drug tests. That's all - a fair trade I quickly figured, and signed their document. I went back to my single cell in Orientation and waited to be assigned to a regular cellblock.

That night, a couple of convicts, firmly in the knucklehead category, stopped by my cell to warn me that the Honor Yard was "no good" and that it would be in my best interests to refuse it. At breakfast the next morning I am told by my neighbor that the knucklehead faction of the California prison population looks darkly on the Honor program because 1) the races mix on the yard during recreational activities and generally get along, 2) inmates don't check each other's paperwork, policing out inmates with sex crimes, and 3) it's what's termed a "Soft Yard" meaning that the gangs don't run anything and 1 & 2 aren't enforced.

Regardless of what the knuckleheads think, I decide to stick with my decision and within days I am transferred to a cell I share with a 66-year-old Viet vet named JJ. I settle into the Honor Yard, and it doesn't seem bad at all. The first thing I notice is that no one takes notice of me. On a regular Level IV yard, within hours of my arriving, an assessment team of White guys stops by the cell to ask politely about my journey and my last yard. They also ask if I need a soup or a bar of soap, or maybe even a cigarette or a

recently brewed cup of wine. They eventually get to the crux of the matter and ask to see the paperwork which lists my charges and history of criminality. After surviving this ritual you're put on a vague probationary period that might not ever really end if you're unaffiliated. On the Honor Yard I am ignored, neither greeted nor interrogated, which is fine with me. I visit the library, walk the yard, read in my cell, and within a few days find a couple of people who play chess. As each day passes, I slowly relax, gradually losing the wariness I barely knew I'd built up over two years on a hard yard.

Over the next month I come to wonder how, in the midst of the worst years of my life, I got so lucky. Lancaster is brimming with activities and programs. One of the first skills a seasoned convict picks up, if he is to maintain some small degree of sanity, is the ability to program. This means setting up a schedule of activities every day to keep mind and body busy being alive, rather than focusing on the grim fact of time. Convicts cherish their programs which can include an exercise regimen, sports, religious studies, self-help groups, guitar lessons, even a daily card game - anything that is done routinely is better than doing empty time. Lancaster has peer to peer educational classes in music, art and philosophy; softball and basketball leagues; yoga; an Arts in Corrections facilitator who teaches painting, sculpture and whatever else the nascent artist cares to pursue; and a whole range of other activities that the prisoners in Tehachapi never heard of. Lancaster is programming heaven.

I also notice that the racial scene is far less virulent than any other jail or prison I've had the misfortune to know. There is still some division because at least half of the men on Honor Yard are LWOPs (life without parole) and have already done decades in some tough joints where they'd been trained all the way down to the cellular level that the races should be regarded as eternally separate; and yet, the sports teams and activities groups here are integrated. I came to discover that there hadn't been a racial incident or stabbing in over five years, which is an astonishing statistic, so I'll repeat it. On a Level IV Yard full of murderers, bank robbers and violent career criminals who are never going to get out of prison, there has been no violence in five years. I have about 13 years to go on my sentence, and this is where I want to do my time.

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After a month of decompressing and getting used to the lack of tension, I notice trouble. A group of guards of all ranks are actively against the Honor Program. I can't understand why anybody would be against a non-violent yard, especially correctional officers since they are as likely as anyone to get stabbed on an ordinary Level IV yard. Then one day I run into a couple of old acquaintances recently arrived from Tehachapi, Diesel and Big Jim. Diesel tells me they were kicked off the yard at Tehachapi for fighting. The committee claimed that only inmates who have had no trouble or write-ups in five years are supposed to be in the Honor Program. I hear that ad/seg kickouts (men who have finished their time in the hole for serious infractions) are being put on the Honor Yard, distinctly violating the alleged criteria. Every day brings more evidence that the administration at Lancaster is letting go of the Honor Program piece by piece. Rumors claim that the Warden and his committee are placing inmates more suited for the PC. yard (Protective Custody, where informers and other undesirables end up) in the Honor Program, undercover with fake paperwork. This is bad. If I leave this yard for whatever reason and go back to a hard yard, and the knuckleheads believe that I've been living in close proximity to PCs, I could be

dealt with harshly. As it stands, the Whites and the Blacks in other prisons throughout the state are ambivalent about people coming from the Honor Yard and deal with them on a case-by-case basis. I hear that the Southsiders have put the word out that their people cannot come here. If they do, they will be stabbed on other yards.

So, whoever is running the show here at Lancaster, they no longer care about us or endorse the program. More and more convicts arrive who do not come close to meeting the criteria. And yet. . . this is where an interesting phenomena is noted: not only are there dozens of unqualified convicts on the yard, but I also see the knuckleheads from Orientation who told me this yard was no good, and they are obviously enjoying the lack of violence and the endless opportunities for programming. A "when in Rome" syndrome is in effect. This is a phenomenon the California Department of Corrections should take notice of. It ties in with my belief that a very small percentage of the prison population constitutes the sociopaths responsible for making prison a hellish, dangerous place for both prisoners and staff. My limited experience in prison as an unaffiliated outcast of sorts has given me the ability to spot and categorize the cold blooded shot callers who turn the average yard into a war zone. I suggest that only 2-3% percent of the incarcerated population thrive on violence and, even while in prison, want to run criminal enterprises such as drug dealing, gambling, extortion and God knows what all, and are ready to kill convicts or correctional officers in order to keep their imprisoned kingdom under their sociopathic sway. I estimate that another 17% of the inmate population are lifelong born followers and criminals who go along with the 3%, which is understandable on one level since the head gangsters will kill you if you don't follow their lead. That leaves 80% of the convict population who prefer to keep a low profile, want to program and do their time with as little drama as possible. Most of the time this 80% aren't impacted by the minority of knuckleheads, except for the riots and lockdowns. As I noted, when the followers spend a short time on the Honor Yard, they finally do what they do best: follow the program that the shot callers on that particular yard eschew.

I contend that given the choice, 90% (or better) of the prisoners in the California Prison System would choose to live on a yard without all the violent bullshit that is currently the norm. And yet, Lancaster's Honor Program - called "One of the shining stars of the system," by State Senator Gloria Romero [Los Angeles Times, June 28, 2006, Section B] - appears to be under attack by correctional officers, their union and its advocates in the political machine which take every opportunity to sabotage the program. California state prison employees are responsible for placing convicts on the Honor yard who do not meet the criteria, which has already resulted in minor fights, and will eventually lead to major violence. I am relatively new to all of this and have no idea what political machinations are grinding on or what Department of Corrections agendas are in play. Still, I can see that it's preferable to run a yard where the inmates program peacefully and the staff is not in constant physical danger. Lockdowns that go on for months are not only stressful for the inmates, but for the staff who have to handcuff and escort inmates to showers and medical appointments, cell feed us, and do their regular jobs along with jobs the inmates usually do, like kitchen duty.

From my low position in the scheme of things, I've heard numerous theories as to why the correctional officers, most specifically the guards' union, are not in favor of the Honor Program and against spreading the concept throughout the state. I've culled some of these reasons from inmates and some from correctional officers who were nice enough to try and explain the position of their brother officers.

1. The guards make more money when there are riots and lockdowns because of hazard pay and overtime. *(This is what the inmates think; correctional officers deny it, but admit it's easier to get raises while their job is dangerous.)*

2. Thirty percent (30%) of the correctional officers hold the view that criminals deserve nothing but punishment, and no programs that make their time any easier. The contempt from this faction is palpable. *(This is simply human nature and can't be fixed or legislated. A whole other article could be written on why a penal system based on rehabilitation is better than one based on punishment.)*

3. A Level IV yard with the freedoms of an Honor Yard - longer dayrooms and recreations outside, unsupervised inmate educational activities - creates security problems. This assumes there is a physical threat to staff or inmates. *(Possibly an argument in 2000, but in 2006 after five years of no riots or violence . . . ?)*

4. The logistics of a separate yard: the administration says that it's difficult to move inmates around and place them while the state-wide penal system is overcrowded and our yard has special criteria. This is presented as the most reasonable of reasons why the Honor Yard is untenable. *(There are currently only 600 beds on the Honor Yard and there are thousands of inmates throughout the state who qualify for and would gladly take part in the program.)*

At least reasons three and four have a rational cast to them. Reasons one and two are just greed and human nature at its worst. It looks like the guards' union would rather have high pay and job security instead of a safe workplace and prison yards where inmates do their time quietly and productively. When the state and its spokespeople explain why things must remain the same - following the old punitive model - their favorite excuse is that the prisons are too crowded to fix. Even supposing that overcrowding can't be fixed, that is more reason to have yards where the prisoners are dedicated to non-violence, rehabilitation and programming.

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So, I arrived on the Honor Yard two years ago. I suffer because I miss my family, castigate myself daily because I'm not there for my children, miss not having a woman in my life or a satisfying career, and . . . well, there are lots of reasons one suffers in prison - hundreds of indignities large and small; however, I spend my time writing and thinking and trying to improve myself. I can do this because I'm not fighting and rioting and worrying about what the maniacs are up to on the yard, wondering what atrocity is planned and who might stab me in the neck.

During my two years on the Honor Yard, I can see it being deserted by the administration day-by-day, inch-by-inch. Lancaster has had four Wardens over the past five years (and numerous acting wardens), three of them unwilling to openly commit to the Honor Program, mainly because of the powerful guards' union. Not all correctional officers are against us, not by a long shot, but the element that is against us (they are openly against convicts if they are against the program) seems to have wrested control from the majority. I

can't help but compare them to the unreasonable convicts among us who believe in brute force as an answer to . . . everything. Even the Director of the California Department of Corrections can't seem to stand up to the guards' union. California has lost two Directors in the last year, and both of them openly stated that the guards' union and politics in general made the Director's job impossible.

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In the last year we have been locked down as often as not for one spurious reason after another. There have been sickouts and alleged training exercises undertaken by the guards that last anywhere from one day to two weeks. I have to suspect it is petulance on the part of the union which has been against the Honor Program from the start and succeeded in ending it a couple months ago, only to have their distant bosses in Sacramento insist that it be reinstated because Governor Schwarzenegger wants to fix the Department of Corrections and actually renamed it the Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation. The lockdowns are the guards' way, many feel, of breaking us. And yet, the inmates on our yard continue their non-violent ways, reacting to the example of long-term residents of the yard and, one would like to think, their own innate humanity - the sort of humanity that most every person alive is capable of if given the chance. I absolutely did wrong and accept my time. When it's done, I'd like to be a better person, not one acclimated to fear and violence. I'm thinking that every taxpayer would prefer that.

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(A month after I finished this article the administration put 16 men on the yard who had been transferred from a particularly hard yard. One of them stabbed someone within a week, the first stabbing on our yard within five years.)