

Things Missed

One of the more subtle ways a prison punishes is by its neglect of a man's need for things, both the abstract (e.g., his freedom, his sanity) and the tangible (e.g., his personal property). From the very start, I began missing both. Just when I would get accustomed to doing without old things, I would start to miss new things. Once I had gotten accustomed to doing without things, I would start to miss different free-world things. It was a selfish, childish, material missing that somehow kept me rooted in my pre-incarceration past by having me constantly remember and mourn those lost objects and things that had once represented the liberty I'd lost. It was almost as if prison life had created a newfound desire in me to miss something all the time.

At first, I missed the obvious: sex, love, family, and friends. This left me feeling sorry for myself. But it wasn't long before I stopped missing these things and started focusing on the next wave of things I no longer had: privacy, quiet, and peace of mind—intangibles that I have never stopped missing to this day. At least these things I could try to find in prison, or some version of them.

There are no trees in the great walled fortress of Graterford and very few shrubs. In fact, there isn't much of anything green that hasn't been painted green. Also, the prison is designed so that you can never get an unobstructed view of anything. Walls keep getting in the way. Occasionally when I had to make trips outside the prison for court appearances or doctors' visits, I would sit in the prison van enraptured by the trees whizzing past. The brightness and the beautiful colors of everything around me made every outside trip an exciting experience. I know of several men who filed lawsuits or feigned illnesses just to get a moment, even so brief, out of the prison and see "some streets."

Well aware of this, the administration would try to make such trips as uncomfortable as possible. They would handcuff and shackle traveling inmates and strip-search every man coming and going, even though he never left the sight of an officer. They would make

certain that an inmate wore ill-fitting clothes that were dirty, torn, and extremely uncomfortable. In the winter they had only summer clothes available and only winter garments in the summer. For a while they even required a man to be locked in his cell the day before making such a trip.

But no amount of discouragement worked. Inmates loved these trips because they reminded them of all the things they missed. Personally, I always came back from each trip remembering the trees, the beautiful women, and all the joys of the outside world. Longing for these things made me take a lot of risks in my efforts to reclaim even the most insignificant of things that I once had taken for granted.

My first misconduct at Graterford resulted from missing one of life's simplest pleasures: a fresh-cooked, juicy hamburger. I had just started working the 12:00 to 8:00 pm shift as a clerk in the major of the guards' office, which was off the main corridor between E- and D-Block. One day a contraband sandwich merchant, or "swag man," walked into the office and offered me a ten-pound bag of frozen ground beef for a pack of cigarettes. I had no way of cooking it, but for another pack I could get a hot plate. I began to imagine myself biting into a hot, juicy burger grilled to perfection. I bought the contraband beef, which was a bargain considering that a pack of cigarettes at that time cost only fifty cents in the commissary.

A senior clerk helped me out by talking to an inmate kitchen worker, who quickly produced the heating element of an electric coffee urn and an aluminum cookie pan, both hidden in the lining of his oversized prison-issued coat. For only one more cigarette pack, he scrounged up hamburger buns, chopped onions, butter, sliced cheese, ketchup, mustard, and two bricks to hold the cookie pan over the heating element.

That evening when the meat had finally thawed, my co-conspirators and I set up a makeshift grill in the major's bathroom. We fashioned burger patties and started frying the hamburgers as soon as movement in the main corridor had ended.

It was the onions that did us in. The aroma of sautéed onions in butter was so strong that it attracted a guard stationed some three hundred feet away. He followed the aroma to its origin and asked us for a burger. We were more than happy to share with him, and he was eating it as he left the office, which made us all sigh with relief.

A few minutes later, a Search Team raided us and confiscated everything. They had been tipped off when the previous guard offered one of them a bite of his tasty burger. When they asked him where he had gotten it, he simply told them. Apparently the members of the Search Team were not as impressed with our resourcefulness.

In the early 1980s, Graterford introduced the Search Team, or "A Team," as a special two-man guard squad whose sole function was to conduct cell searches and pat downs. Not even the block officers knew who or when they would strike. Whenever a Search Team entered a block, an inmate would call out, "Search Team up!" Inmates at the end of the block would immediately hide their contraband. Because it took so long for the team to make it down the long block, contraband was moved constantly without detection.

Given that our hamburger caper took place in the major's office, however, we didn't have that advantage. We were all issued misconduct reports for the possession of contraband. Following a misconduct hearing, I was found guilty, removed from my job, and forced to pay for the food. I was also confined to my cell for sixty days, allowed out only two hours per day for recreation on the block.

My biggest mistake in this case was my naiveté. Until the Search Team had confiscated the burgers, I thought that such activity was merely business as usual at Graterford. I had only been in general population for about a month, and things developed with such effortless ease that I hadn't taken what I had done very seriously. For many years afterward, my prison handle became "Burger King," even though I had never gotten a chance to taste the object of my crime.

The foremost tangible things missed by inmates are their stolen personal possessions, particularly considering how little they're permitted to keep in their cells. At Graterford, there was always an epidemic of cell thefts. Fortunately for me, everybody on B-Block where I lived had jobs. This meant that most of them made enough money to shop at the commissary every week.

Some of them had manufacturing jobs in Correctional Industries, such as weaving, shoemaking, or tailoring, and could make well over a one hundred dollars a month if they worked overtime. By prison standards this was considered a small fortune. Total employment meant that there was not a major theft problem on B-Block at the time. This

was a great relief to me, not because I didn't expect to get some of my things stolen, but because I didn't want to deal with the inevitability of catching some thief in the act.

In the life of an inmate, if you catch someone stealing from you, you're compelled to deal with it physically. This is not because you want to or you think it's the right thing to do, but because you absolutely must. If someone steals from you and you decide to report him to the guards, all that will happen is that the thief will go to the Hole for a while. Soon he'll be back in population and ready to seek revenge.

Revenge in prison can take place years down the road. It generally occurs when you are vulnerable and the avenger happens to be around. This reality will leave you constantly looking over your shoulder. In addition, involving the guards will get you the reputation of a "snitch," which means you will be physically challenged by inmates seeking to make a reputation or pass their own "snitch" label onto you.

If you choose to ignore the theft, the man will steal from you again and tell his friends, who in turn will also steal from you. Eventually, you will be challenged for more than just minor belongings. This "Inmate's Dilemma" is precisely why most men in prison hope they never have to deal with a sloppy cell thief. Unfortunately, many men who were caught stealing on the streets will just as easily get caught stealing in prison.

In 1982, there was no way an inmate could lock his own cell at Graterford. Cells were all locked or opened simultaneously at given intervals by the pulling of a single lever. At 6:00 am, for example, all the cells on the block were levered open so each inmate could open and close his own cell during breakfast. Five minutes after last call for breakfast, the levers were pulled again to lock all the doors. If you returned late from breakfast, you would have to wait for all the cells to be levered open again before you could re-enter your cell. In case of an emergency, each guard had a key that could override the lever and let you in. But asking a guard to key you in was like asking for a key out of the prison.

This process of opening and closing all doors at once was repeated at 8:00 am for work lines and yard line; then again at 11:00 am for count; at noon for lunch; at 5:00 pm for count; at 6:00 pm for supper; at 6:30 pm for block out, yard out, or work lines; then finally at 9:00 pm for final count and lockdown. Every one of us religiously

followed this schedule because we always wanted to be at our cells when they opened up. Otherwise, we stood the chance of losing everything of value.

To combat theft, I arranged a neighborhood-watch system with my neighbors to look out for my cell when I wasn't there and vice versa. But for the most part it was every man for himself. From time to time I would return to my cell and discover things missing. Any theft was an intrusion into "my space" and made me angry. My few personal belongings constituted my total worldly possessions so they were of great (probably inflated) personal value to me. I was also left frightened by the threat implied by someone taking something of obvious value to me. Fortunately I have never had to face the Inmate's Dilemma, but many others have and the consequences were brutal.

There is no walking away in Graterford—the walls see to that—so either the intruder or the victim ends up seriously hurt. One example of a cell confrontation involved not a cell thief but a peeping Tom. One of my cellblock neighbors was Dip, a cocky bodybuilder with an imposing physique. He was convinced that the mere sight of his impressive frame would deter anyone from ever messing with him. While other inmates ran to their cells when the levers were thrown to protect their belongings, Dip never bothered.

Then one day Dip returned to his cell from a shower, wearing only a towel around his nakedness. To his shock, he found an inmate hiding under his bed with an exposed erection, trying to watch him undress. Dip was so caught off guard that the intruder simply walked out, blowing him a kiss as he turned to run off the block. Once he had recovered his senses, Dip got very mad. He dressed himself for combat and stormed down the block to find the man who had challenged his manhood. The jeers and heckles of neighboring inmates only served to deepen his rage.

But the moment Dip stepped into the main corridor, the kiss blower was waiting with some friends. Dip was stabbed several times with homemade knives. Lucky for him, his injuries were only "Graterford wounds," meaning that his vital parts were still intact. By the time guards had made it to the scene, the attackers were gone, one of their knives was left behind, and bleeding Dip was locked up—charged with possession of the weapon that had been used to stab him.

For the most part, the prison administration did nothing to curb cell thefts or invasion of cell privacy. Some guards also seemed to think that these thefts and intrusions were part of the punishment of prison. In due time, however, the administration's failure to provide adequate safety and security would have far-reaching consequences.

Throughout 1981 and 1982, inmates petitioned, begged, and even threatened in their efforts to convince the administration to provide some means by which inmates could lock their own cells. The administration rejected these requests, claiming that cells were secure enough. If the administration had conceded to such requests, it would have been a tacit admission that they did not have control over their own prison.

By 1982, Graterford's general population rose to over two thousand. Every cell in the general population blocks was occupied and in the classification block the new receptions were already being double-celled. There were not enough jobs to go around now, so many men sat idle on B-Block. This resulted in more theft, which in turn led to more fights and more stabbings.

As thievery increased, gangs flourished. Some gangs were formed to steal, others to defend against burglaries and robberies. Because B-Block comprised mostly working inmates, the fighting was not as frequent. But C- and D-Blocks were virtual war zones. There were so many fights and retaliations that guards were getting injured in the melees.

Only then did the administration take action. Holes were drilled in the cell-door tracks so that any cell could be locked from the outside with a padlock, even when the master lever was opened. The commissary began selling padlocks that could fit in the hole. There was a general feeling of relief because now we could secure our belongings. It seemed less likely now that we would ever have to deal with the Inmate's Dilemma—or so we thought.

Once gangs form in a prison, they're hard to break up. When a group of cell thieves join together, no lock can stop them. Their incentive had increased now as well, especially because this new sense of security encouraged inmates to keep more valuable goods in their cells.

To get around the new cell locks, thieves simply changed their techniques. The problem that remained was that when the master lever

was open and the inmate was inside his cell, he could not lock himself inside the cell. Instead of waiting until an inmate left his cell, a gang would simply rush into the cell while he was sleeping or using the commode. This resulted in even more fights and stabbings.

Burglary is one thing, but strong-armed robbery demands an immediate and violent response. As the number of robberies and assaults surged, the new jailhouse wisdom was that you should always be awake and ready to fight when cells were opened, and that you should use the commode only when your cell was locked.

Some prisoners began fashioning weapons that could withstand a shakedown. For example, they would keep wooden floor brushes in their cells. Made of solid oak, these heavy brushes could knock a man unconscious. Because they were prison issue, they weren't considered contraband. If a guard found one in your cell, all he could do was confiscate it or order you to return it to the block sergeant. Ironically, the heavy-duty combination locks sold in the commissary served as another shakedown-proof weapon. Placed in a sock, this weapon could be more effective than most homemade knives.

The ultimate defense against unwanted intruders was getting a hole drilled on the *inside* of your door. A bolt secured in this hole prevented the door from being opened, so you could now lock your cell from the inside as well as from the outside. The staff objected to this hole on the grounds that an inmate could barricade himself in his cell so it could only be opened with a cutting torch. If a guard saw a hole on the inside of your door, he might plug it up with metal solder, but it was easy enough to get another hole drilled.

A combination lock on the inside door-jamb hole rendered a man's cell fairly secure. The ability to keep more property without being restricted to their cells freed inmates from the routine of protecting their belongings. This meant more socialization, recreation, and work. It also meant the gangs would have to change their style of doing business once again. The treasures now accumulating in the cells were just too much to resist.

playing the Opposites

Shortly after I arrived at Graterford, I discovered that my fellow inmates made a point of "playing the opposites." This game involves reverse psychology, where prisoners state the opposite of their actual feelings when asked by someone in authority to voice a preference or an opinion. A common occasion for playing the opposites is when an inmate is being interviewed by a counselor or employment officer for a job assignment. Naturally, some work details are favored over others, so experienced inmates will do whatever they can to secure a desirable job.

Some inmates will state their real job preferences and then try to influence assignments by summarizing their qualifications. This approach occasionally succeeds, but only if the convict possesses some unique skill currently in demand. As a general rule, inmates don't receive the jobs that they request. Consequently, a more savvy convict won't hint at his preference; instead, he misleads the staff member into believing that he would hate being assigned to a work detail that he secretly desires.

The conversation between an experienced convict and an employment officer might sound like this:

OFFICER: Okay, where do you want to work?

INMATE: I worked as a clerk in the library the last time I was here and I got burned. The job was too demanding and I couldn't get enough free time.

OFFICER: So are you saying you don't want a clerk's job?

INMATE: Yeah, I guess so. I don't think I could take working as a clerk anymore. I need something easier—you know, a no-brain job—so I can work on my legal papers and stuff like that.

OFFICER: So where do you want to be assigned?

INMATE: How about the kitchen? That's a pretty simple job and I get to eat real good. I think I'd like to work in the kitchen this time 'round. I got a couple of friends who work in the kitchen who can show me the ropes.

In this example, the inmate does his best to convince the employment officer that he really wants to be assigned to the kitchen detail, which is one of the worst jobs in any prison. The deception includes an explanation of why the inmate prefers this work detail even though the inmate knows that the prison official would consider this explanation as a reason *not* to assign him to the kitchen. (The inmate makes himself seem lazy. Also, having friends who already work in the kitchen suggests a possible conspiracy to smuggle food out.) According to the strategy behind playing the opposites, if the inmate manages to convince the employment officer that he really wants a job in the kitchen, he will be assigned a clerk's job, if one is available.

You would think that the risk of backfire would limit the use of playing the opposites, but, in fact, the game is popular among inmates. As for those who choose not to play, you can be certain they are careful not to let anyone know their real desires. Prisons seem to reward playing the opposites by punishing honesty.

When I first arrived at Graterford, I questioned the wisdom of this strategy. As a young man, I had been taught to "say what I mean, and mean what I say." More experienced inmates would often try to explain to me how that philosophy simply doesn't work in prison and that the best way for a prisoner to get what he wanted was to play the opposites. Thoughtful inmates told me that prison staff were trained not to care about inmates' personal preferences and were actually told to make prisoners as uncomfortable as possible. So when a prison administrator discovers an inmate's true preference, this knowledge will be used against him. Others simply said, "Who cares; all you need to know is that it works."

It was difficult for me to accept this conventional wisdom because I believed that corrections staff didn't have time to play petty mind games. I assumed that prison managers would treat inmates impartially. Impartial treatment would consider an individual's likes and dislikes when balanced with particular job availability and other

situational factors. It made no sense to me that staff members would maliciously try to maximize the discomfort of inmates.

It was Clarence who convinced me there was more to playing the opposites than mere prison paranoia. Clarence was a drug dealer who was memorable for his razor-sharp wit and pungent sarcasm. One day, I found myself in a holding room seated next to him, as we waited to speak to the members of the Program Review Committee (PRC) to request a reduction in disciplinary sanctions for infractions we had committed. At the time, anyone who had received a disciplinary sanction could petition the PRC for a reduction of the punishment. The PRC required petitioning inmates to explain why they deserved a reduction in sanctions. Every Thursday, fifty or more inmates would be summoned to the holding room to **make a plea for mercy before a panel of three high-ranking prison administrators who called themselves the PRC.**

The disciplinary sanction I had received was cell restriction, so I was seated in the waiting room wearing my regular prison uniform. Clarence had been caught trying to smuggle drugs into the institution on a furlough return. Because he had received a disciplinary sanction of six months in the Hole, he was seated next to me in handcuffs, wearing standard dress for the Hole (a prison-stripes jumpsuit).

The PRC always took its time, so someone could expect to wait for hours to plead for mercy. The waiting room was small and unventilated, stuffed with many hot and sweaty men. Waiting in that room was extremely oppressive. I wondered if the PRC had intentionally designed the conditions in the room as a means to discourage men from seeking leniency. Several men left the waiting room in frustration, choosing to abandon their plans to address the PRC rather than to melt.

Clarence was prison-wise and determined to see the process through. He devised a plan to coax more of the men into leaving the room by complaining about the unpleasant conditions. He guessed this would shorten his waiting time.

"Watch this," he said to me, just before he spoke loudly to everyone in the room. "Man, these people must think we're real suckers. They got us all crowded in here sweating and smelling like plantation slaves waiting for their master to give them a neck bone or some other bullshit. Man, fuck the PRC."

This immediately caused some grumbling among the other men, and before long two or three of them left the waiting room. "That makes it a little bit easier to breathe in here," he whispered to me. No doubt, Clarence knew the angles, and that's why I was puzzled by his desire to see the PRC. Certainly, he didn't expect to get a reduction of his time in the Hole, considering the seriousness of his offense.

"What are you here for?" Clarence asked me.

"I'm on cell restriction for stupid stuff. My lock was broken and the guard couldn't unlock it with his key so he wrote me up," I explained.

"That's petty shit! That guard must not like you," he offered.

"I guess not. But tell me, do you really think the PRC is going to cut you any slack?" I asked.

"Sure, sure they will. I bet I get a break before you do!" he eagerly wagered.

"You've got to be kidding! I've got a meatball case and you're in the Hole for smuggling drugs and you think they'll give you a break? You'll be lucky if they don't give you a new street charge!" I scoffed in disbelief.

"Laugh if you want to. But I know how these people work and you don't. See, you'll probably go in there and tell them that you've been a good boy and that the guard was picking on you and that you'll never do it again. Man, they don't want to hear that shit! That's all they hear all day long. You better not tell them that sorry stuff," he warned.

"Yeah, well what do you plan on telling them?" I asked.

"I'm going to get on my hands and knees and beg them, I mean really beg them, to keep me in the damn Hole until they let me go home. That's what I'm going to do," he answered smartly.

"And that's your big plan? You think they'll feel sorry for you and just let you go? Why don't you ask for your drugs back while you're at it?" I asked sarcastically.

"Real funny. I can understand where you're coming from. You think these people care about you. You're really going to be shocked when you find out they don't give a shit about you or me. They couldn't care less about us waiting in this nasty room or you staying locked in your cell twenty-four hours a day because some guard has a hard-on for you. That's the bottom line. When you understand that, you'll stop doing hard time. See, I know they really want to put a foot up my ass, so when I go in there I'm going to let them do that. I'm going to tell those people

that I was bringing the drugs in for a big, mean motherfucker in population and that if they let me out of the Hole, I'm going to get my ass kicked because I can't pay the dude back for the shit that was confiscated. I'm going to beg them not to let me out of the Hole. In fact, I'm going to ask for a transfer," he said with an impressive air of confidence.

"And that's your plan?" I asked.

"Yep, and if I were you, I'd figure out some reason to tell those people why you like it on cell restriction," he suggested.

We spoke together a little longer before the PRC finally escorted Clarence into the hearing room. About ten or fifteen minutes later I saw Clarence being taken back to the Hole. I remember thinking to myself that he was a fool to think that his scheme would work.

Eventually, the PRC called for me and I made my plea. As Clarence had predicted, I explained to the Committee that my infraction was a minor one. I noted that I had a history of good behavior and that I intended to obey all prison rules and regulations in the future. The PRC wasn't impressed and returned me to my cell to serve out the remainder of my restriction. I left the room angry, not for being turned down, but for having spent needless hours suffering in that hot and smelly holding room.

The next day, as I was reading in my cell, I heard a knock on the metal door. I looked up to see Clarence staring down at me. I couldn't believe it. The PRC had released him to the general population. His plan had worked!

"So I see you didn't take my advice," he said with a big grin. I was too stunned to respond. "Maybe this will teach you something about this place. These people don't care nothing about you and the sooner you realize that the better off you'll be." With that, he slowly walked away, whistling like a free man.

Not long after did I witness this lack of care in an old convict's story, a dark portrait of indignity and suffering that unfolded against the mean-spirited ethos of playing the opposites. He was oblivious to prison reality as he slowly, methodically swung his misshaped crutches forward to pull his broken body closer toward the dining hall. His distorted silhouette had shadowed the prison walkways for many years. He had come to a point in his life of captivity when the thought of freedom frightened him more than excited him.

With a hand-rolled "buckhorn" cigarette dangling from his lips, he mumbled, "Them eggs gonna be cold...I hate cold eggs. They're always cold." He complained to himself the way men do when they are more bored than angry.

No one listened to his protests because he was completely alone. His fellow convicts had long shunned him because he no longer had anything worth taking. The prison staff avoided him because they feared his misery might be contagious. As he hobbled along, the other inmates whizzed by him on their way to breakfast.

The rain forced the cripple to swing his body forward in very small, cautious advances. In the past, his heavy wood crutches had slipped on the wet concrete, causing him to fall and suffer great pain. A prison study once found that wooden, rubber-tipped crutches were better suited for prison use; their solid core made them too cumbersome to use as a weapon, and the absence of hollows prevented the stashing of contraband. But he was a simple man who knew only that these crutches were bulky and unwieldy, leaving him with callused hands and chafed underarms.

"Damn, these crutches," he cursed. "They're gonna make me miss breakfast." A cigarette ash dropped and disappeared into his damp, gray coat collar, becoming an insignificant part of an even more insignificant man.

People did not die of starvation in American prisons, and the old man knew it. But many did die of obscurity and that worried him. The only person concerned with his living or dying was the staff member who counted him during meals, and that was just to make sure that he did not exceed his allotted three meals a day.

Suddenly, his crutches slipped out from under him. He fell face down on the wet concrete walk and spit out his wet cigarette. "Shit, I can't miss chow," he said as he mustered his strength to rise.

The suspicious eye of a tower guard focused on his activity, watching him like a vulture, as the old man struggled on his way to the chow hall. "Inmate on the walk," the guard shouted, "keep moving. No loitering on the walk."

The old man ignored him but hurried on to avoid missing breakfast. "He knew I fell down. Why do they do things like that?" he asked no one in particular. "Don't they know by now I'm gonna get mine? Three hots and a cot is what they owe me, and that's what I'm gonna get."

Breathless and hungry, he finally reached the indoor entrance of the dining hall just in time to have another guard slam the barred gate in his face. The scent of cafeteria food invaded the old man's senses.

"The kitchen is closed, return to your block," ordered the guard.

"It was raining, and I fell. Slipped with these damn crutches," replied the old man, so angry that he began to cry. "Please let me eat," he begged, fighting back tears. "Just some coffee or a piece of bread. I'm an old man and I'm soaking wet. Please!"

The guard did not answer right away, staring back at him. "I can't let you," he said finally. "Breakfast is over, you know the rules."

"The game," the old man muttered to himself. "They insist on playing the game. But I'll beat them. I'll get my three hots." Then he said to the guard in a sad voice, "Yeah, those are the rules. Thanks anyway."

He turned his crippled body and slowly shuffled away. After making two swings of his crutches, he heard the guard call out to him, which brought a smile to the old man's face. He swung himself around to face the guard, knowing that his sympathy ploy had worked again.

"Look, Pop," said the guard, "you never caused me any trouble, so I'll tell you what I'm going to do. You go ahead over to see the kitchen steward. He's the one who can help you out. I'll give him a call and put in a good word for you."

"Thank you," said the old man. *The game, they gotta play the game. He could have let me in,* he thought as he swung around in the direction of the kitchen steward's office.

"Watch the waxed floor, Pop," cautioned the guard. "We wouldn't want you to fall and hurt yourself."

The steward's office was located down a long, concrete corridor that had just been waxed, leaving a gray, treacherous film that even right-walking men slipped on. In the past, the old man never even knew it was there until he finally fell several times. In fact, it was the cumulative effects of all those occasional falls that had crippled his legs, bent his back, and broken his spirit.

"The damn game, the damn slippery floor, these damn crutches," he cursed in cadence with each swing of his crutches.

Surprisingly, he reached the steward's office without falling. A man sat at a desk, while inmate workers pushed large carts of cooked food back and forth through the kitchen.

"What do you need?" asked the desk man without looking up.

"The kitchen guard sent me. I missed breakfast."

"Yeah, he called a while ago. Sounds like you've been through a lot. You must be hungry."

"Yes, I am."

"You hurt? Need to go to the infirmary or something?"

"No, sir. I just need to eat, that's all."

"Yeah, I bet you do." There was a brief silence. "I'm going to have to get the steward. He's the man to see." The desk man rose and left the office.

"More games," mumbled the old man. "He should have told me he wasn't the steward."

Finally, a short, fat steward entered, still chewing his breakfast. "You missed breakfast?"

"Yes, sir, I did."

"The officer called and told me all about it."

"I've never been late before."

"No, you haven't. I would have recognized you. Look, I have no problem feeding you. God knows I have more than enough food. But first, you have to get permission from the major of the guards. He has the final say in these matters. I'll call and tell him you're coming. And," the steward added conspiratorially, "I'll tell him it's okay with me."

"Thank you, sir."

"No problem. You know where the major's office is?"

"Yes, sir, I do."

Another disappointment on this particularly trying day. Like a rat chasing a piece of cheese, the old cripple negotiated the long, slippery maze and ventured up two full flights of stairs. After a long ordeal, he eventually arrived at the major's office to find yet another desk man.

"Are you the major?"

"No," the desk clerk answered. "What is it you want?"

"I'm here to see the major."

"I kind of figured that. Now tell me why."

The old convict reluctantly recounted his tale, wondering if they all enjoyed hearing these bad-luck stories.

"You must be the one the steward called about," said the desk man. "The major's reading your file now. He's been expecting you." With that, he abruptly left the room.

The old man waited in silence, knowing that it was all part of the game to see how high he would jump or how low he would go. But he could not understand why he let himself be the main attraction in this dog-and-pony show.

The major finally arrived, a cup of coffee and an unfinished danish in his hands. He tossed both into a waste can close to the old man. The aroma of trashed coffee and pastry wafted its way up to the inmate's nose.

"I want you to know I'm a very busy man," said the major. "I don't really have the time to deal with matters like this. However, because the kitchen steward called me, I did read your file."

"Yes, sir, major, you can see I never did this before."

"Yes, I noticed that. It also tells me you never got caught before. You must be a very smooth operator."

The gambit had been played. The major was trying to provoke him.

"Sir, all I want is something to eat," countered the old man. "I really couldn't help falling."

"I'm sure you couldn't, and if it were up to me, I would certainly make sure you got your meal. It is bad policy to deny an inmate his food. Makes us appear cruel. But administrative directives require the warden to make such decisions."

The old man sighed. "I was only a few minutes late. That's all. These damn crutches, they're just no good in the rain."

"Don't blame your irresponsibility on your crutches. It always seems to be someone else's fault, never yours. Well, save your story for the warden. He'll want to know why you missed breakfast. Okay, you can go now."

The major disappeared from the room.

"All I want is a meal," mumbled the inmate, as he laboriously swung his crutches toward the warden's office. He endured yet another maze and two more upward flights of stairs, his mutterings echoing off the masonry walls.

"So it's come to this. They got me begging for a free meal. I've robbed, stolen, and done a lot of lousy things, but I never made a hungry man

beg for food. And they wonder why I hate them. They're the real criminals."

At long last, he entered the warden's spacious, well-furnished office. A large basket of fruit caught his eye, within arm's reach, mocking his hunger.

"May I help you?" asked a secretary behind the fruit.

"The major sent me to talk to the warden."

"We've been expecting you. The warden will be with you in a moment."

Another long silence ensued, as the inmate tried not to think about his hunger or his misery. No matter what the Warden said, he knew that he would have to travel back down four flights of stairs, any victory ultimately his loss.

A deep voice startled him out of his reverie. "So, you're the man who missed his breakfast," said the warden, the convict's file in his hand.

"Yes, I am."

"I've reviewed your file. Despite your disability, there is no reason for you not to get to your meals on time. You've been issued crutches to accommodate your condition." He paused to study the old man's appearance. "The major of the guard tells me you claim to have fallen on your way to breakfast. Something about your crutches slipping on the wet concrete. Is that correct?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, you know that is impossible. Those crutches are specially designed to resist slipping on wet surfaces. If you really did fall, it can only be because you were negligent in their use. Do you agree with that?"

During a moment that seemed a lifetime, the old man was forced to decide whether a meal was worth the humiliation of admitting to a wrong he had not committed. All he wanted was a meal. But if he did not agree with the warden, he knew he would not get his meal. If he did agree, he knew he would also be eating his own pride.

"Yes, sir," he said without hesitation.

"Good, good. I'm going to approve your request for a late breakfast. But rest assured, I will be closely monitoring your conduct in the future. I will not tolerate carelessness or lateness. You will eat with all the other inmates. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir."

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"Very good. You report to the steward's office. He'll give you a late pass to the dining hall."

The long, hazardous descent down four flights of stairs afforded the old man time to reflect on the events that had just transpired. He asked himself, "Why did I humiliate myself for that meal? They'll serve lunch in a few hours. I wouldn't have starved. Why did I do that?"

Suddenly, his crutches slipped and sent him tumbling down the final flight of stairs. He lay face down on the stairway, his crutches several feet below, knowing he would have to crawl down to get to his crutches and then to his pass. Then it struck him why he had agreed with the warden, who he was, and what he had become. He decided not to move. Not to eat. His needs didn't count.

These weren't the only incidents in my prison experience to convince me that there is merit to playing the opposites, but they certainly were among the most memorable. I've personally chosen not to play the game; when it comes to expressing my real preferences in prison, I generally remain silent. Still, because I recognize that playing the opposites is an effective tool for getting what you want from prison staff, I've advised inexperienced inmates of its benefits.

If it were simply a "prison thing," playing the opposites wouldn't be of much importance, other than reinforcing stereotypes of inmates as manipulative and dishonest. But the truth is that playing the opposites is an age-old strategy employed by all oppressed people.

I realized this after reading a collection of Uncle Remus stories, tales that were passed down orally by generations of black slaves in America. In one story, Br'er Fox (symbolizing the master) was trying to catch Br'er Rabbit (symbolizing the slave). Br'er Fox fashioned a trap for the rabbit by making a tarbaby (a doll covered with sticky tar) and leaving it out in a field. Br'er Rabbit, thinking the tarbaby was another animal, walked over to talk to it. Gradually, he became ensnared, hopelessly stuck to the doll. The gleeful fox ran out of hiding, gloating about the different ways he might choose to kill the rabbit. Playing along, Br'er Rabbit begged not to be thrown into a nearby brier-patch because, he explained, it would be unbearable to be torn to pieces in the thorns. Naturally, the malicious fox immediately tossed him into the briars. Waiting in the patch were Br'er Rabbit's friends, who freed him from

the tarbaby. Hopping away, the clever rabbit ridiculed the fox for being so gullible.

This story reminded me of Clarence in the PRC waiting room. Apparently, playing the opposites is not only an adjustment to prison life but also a survival tactic of the disadvantaged everywhere. It is a practice employed by all rabbits, slaves, and inmates to defend themselves against all foxes, masters, and prison staff. The most troubling aspect of this adjustment is that it encourages deceit as an acceptable means to an end and, in the old man's case, punishes honesty. In prison, it is hard to know when an inmate is being truthful or when he is playing the opposites. The longer a person remains in prison, the less likely it is that he will be able to share sincere feelings with anyone, a penalty of the ground rules of this game.

Staff are not exempt from the far-reaching effects of these lies. Some officials don't believe anything an inmate says, or they believe the opposite of whatever inmates tell them. In response, some inmates intentionally tell the truth in situations where they know they won't be trusted, perpetuating a cycle of deceit that makes communication almost impossible in prison.

So go the frustrating conversations between foxes and rabbits everywhere, trading an ounce of comic relief in the brier-patch for a pound of distrust, cynicism, and despair in the fields.