

## PRISON BLUE

by Marianne O'Connor

As I walked the sidewalk encircling the stadium-sized maximum-security prison yard, I squinted against the fiery rays of the morning sun and felt the scorch of Santa Ana winds blowing in across brown hills barely visible over the immense gray walls crowned with razor wire. For those few minutes, I was the sole prison staffer, a female psychologist out on the yard among the 400 primarily black or brown inmates, many of whom were shirtless in the heat, blue pants sagging to display inches of prison-issue white underwear. Most of the men were used to me by now and no longer called out their "Hey, sweet momma, how you doin' nows?" or swaggered up to ask what time I had; the testing period seemed over. But I could still feel multiple pairs of hungry, curious eyes on me as they milled about aimlessly in their distinct racial groups, paused in their play of handball against the immense walls at either end, shot hoops or exercised around the few stationary pieces of equipment left them after a legislative decision eliminated the weights and other movable components.

Sometimes, if I suspended my sense of reality for a minute, I could imagine myself as a faculty member on my way to class at a men's college campus. In these moments, it all seemed so peaceful. But underneath my fantasy was the knowledge that, in an instant, the surface serenity could explode into terrible tension and violence. All it would take was one false move, one aggressive response from any of these men and the tower guards would punch their siren alarm buttons, multiple doors of the perimeter buildings would fly open and the yard would be ringed by armed correctional officers in full riot gear. Whether or not shots were fired or tear gas canisters thrown, I would have to hit the ground, face down, along with all the convicts until the "Resume normal activity" announcement boomed out from giant speakers.

Pushing a cart loaded with inmate files, I continued on my daily journey from the mental health office to one of the several Administrative Segregation buildings, the "jails-within-a-prison," housing the most "incurable" inmates who either were suspected of gang affiliation, were considered in need of protection due to histories of child molestation or snitching or had been charged with offenses while incarcerated. After several years on the job as a clinical psychologist, I had mastered the fine art of making just enough eye contact with the inmates to appear friendly but not enough to seem threatening or inviting of further interaction. I answered the occasional polite greetings with a pleasant nod and looked away as I passed the outside urinals constantly in use. The men strolling the walk counterclockwise casually broke ranks to let me pass, with only a few scattered under-the-breath comments of resentment or sexual innuendo. As I glanced up at one of the four uniformed gunners stationed in what resembled tall wooden water towers with bulletproof glass windows hovering above the crimson "NO WARNING SHOTS FIRED" signs, I began a mental preview of the day ahead: which convicts I had on my list, what problems I anticipated.

I reached the massive rectangular building, one of twenty on the grounds, rang the bell and waited for the inside gunner to look out his overhead window, recognize me, check

for the prison ID suspended on a cord around my neck and push his control button, allowing me to enter the outer steel door. Inside I stood in the “sally-port” facing another imposing door, this one formed by two large sections of thick iron bars which allowed another corrections officer to see me up close before he pressed his button, causing the sections to slide grindingly apart and then crash together again behind me with that ominous slam punctuating every prison movie. I was immediately bombarded by the jarring cacophony of baritone shouts, police whistles and metallic clanging that reverberated off the concrete walls from dawn to midnight; the sounds of inmates communicating with their homies, cursing and threatening their enemies (including selective unit staff) and screaming their frustration and rage to anyone within earshot.

Turning left as I entered the kidney-shaped interior, I continued around past the four free-standing therapy “cages” (the realistic euphemism for what only the administration referred to as holding cells) positioned behind portable partitions to shield them from the view of most of the cell occupants and piled the files on a table. Pulling my bag from my shoulder, I reflexively looked up and caught inmate Walker’s sorrowful brown eyes as he watched me, gazing down over the second-tier rail through his foot-square cell window, 30 feet from where I stood. As always, he grinned and waved to me, and as always, I smiled and gave a little wave back. I knew his morning routine well, just as he knew mine. Most likely he had already finished his early set of 200-push-ups – he would do another set after dinner. I knew that after grabbing his blue head rag from his steel bunk and wiping the sweat from his face, he would reach under the thin pallet and find the slit where he kept his contraband Bugler tobacco and rolling papers. He would sprinkle a pinch of tobacco in a paper and twist it tightly with two deft moves of his long, slender fingers. Pulling a paper clip from his shoe, he would stick it in the wall outlet and light his cigarette from the surge of streaming sparks.

After replacing all his stash, he would move back to the window, carefully turning away while inhaling, and begin his daily watch for my arrival.

Mindful not to look up again, I consulted my list of today’s inmate clients and arranged the files in the same order. As I walked over to hand the list to the “escort” correctional officer on duty, I thought back to the time six months ago when I first met Walker. The day before our initial contact, after refusing a yard cop’s orders to remove his prison-issued cap under which he had secreted his forbidden lighter, Walker was booked for insolence, refusing a direct order and possession of contraband. After the “incident,” two uniformed COs cuffed his wrists, chained his arms and legs and deposited him, kicking and cursing, in the Ad Seg “hole.”

The next morning the guards half-dragged him, arms again cuffed behind his back, into a large windowless room on the Ad Seg unit. He was pissed off and resentful about being summoned to “The Committee” even before the beefy CO slammed him down onto a metal chair turned backwards against a long wooden table cluttered with files, notebooks and coffee cups. With an angry scowl, he checked us out: ten department representatives seated there. I felt saddened and dismayed at how young and fragile he appeared in contrast to most of the older, more hardened convicts brought before the Ad Seg disciplinary committee. I assumed he had been using crack prior to his initial

confinement and had not eaten much of the unappetizing food available in the county jail and prison since that time. In inmate terms, he was “sucked up.”

Although I was well schooled in the necessity to keep strict boundaries with the prisoners for all the obvious reasons, I was surprisingly touched by his obvious determination to disguise his fear behind an abrasive toughness. I had yet to see any sign of the slick manipulation or deep mean streak exhibited by so many of the men who sat in that chair. I felt a rush of warm maternal tenderness I had only known when my four daughters were adolescents. As I sat there watching him, his brown face grimacing, wild hair uncombed and froed out, somehow without him even knowing it, he reached right in and grabbed my heart. I knew the correctional staff would have an opposite response to his bravado and felt a sudden and dangerous urge to protect him, to intervene for him. I tried to stifle the feeling immediately since we prison shrinks knew better than to display any empathy for the Ad Seg convicts in front of the hardened correctional staff. They initially viewed us all as hopeless bleeding hearts, easy prey to what they termed the convicts' attempts to “work” us by claiming special privileges as mental health clients. Sometimes they were right on. We had to prove ourselves, over time, by being stoic in their presence. So far, like Walker, I had been rather good at this knowing how to appear tough when I didn't feel it. Most of the therapy clients understood the game and didn't react to my apparent public callousness. I chose my battles with the cops carefully. I didn't want to squander my hard-earned capital.

Later, Walker told me it seemed to him that the assistant warden, the unit captain and sergeant and the representatives from the various prison departments either scowled right back or looked through him. That I was the only one who looked at him with what he thought was a friendly expression and the only one who didn't make him feel like a chained animal held captive for their inspection.

“Well, Mr. Walker,” the AW had addressed him dryly, “Welcome to the Administrative Committee of the California Department of Corrections. You are here today so that we can determine where you will be housed, your length of stay, any privileges due you and what services you will need while you are here.”

Much later, Walker offered me a replay of the monologue running through his head that morning. “Like I didn't already know that. Do these friggin' squares think I'm that lame? The Ad Seg cons know the prison rules better than most of the staff, with nothin' to do all day but study up on the CDC Rules and Procedures manuals we're supposed to get the first day they bring us here. My cracker tier CO took three days to bring my book and then only after I'd yelled myself hoarse for hours, disin' them all and calling them every kind of sick pigs and punks. I was still mad about that. The only rules they wanted enforced were for the cons - forget about staff rules. But I was gonna be sure I got all the rights I had comin' - even if I had to raise hell every day. I know what time it is. I might be only 19, but I'd been out on the streets, runnin' with the Long Beach Crips for four years before I got busted on that bunk robbery charge.”

I discovered from reading his file a few days later that Walker had been given the option of returning to the Youth Authority because he was only 18 at the time of his sentencing. If he had made that choice, he likely would have done only 16 months of his two-year sentence. According to his records, he had always done well, with only several slight disciplinary infractions. Even though his mother frantically urged him not to choose prison, he confided later, he was tired of hanging with the “youngsters,” and picked the real joint, home to so many of his older crime partners. After only a few weeks, he knew he’d made a big mistake. He’d had no idea it would be so hard here, especially now that he had landed in Ad Seg and there would be no “good time” early release. Even though he felt a little flash of nervousness run through his body that day in the committee meeting, he said he checked it, hiding it behind his best “mad-dog” expression. “Not gonna let these pigs see they scared me any. No way!”

As the Assistant Warden continued his detailed litany that morning, describing the conditions of Walker’s immediate Ad Seg term, the young inmate’s face went slack. He seemed lost in his own inner world. He reported later that he was concentrating on the heightening clamor of male voices seeping through the door from the unit, testing his ability to distinguish the ones he knew — an important skill in 23/7 lockdown- anything to take himself out of that room and away from those hatin’ faces.

The AW reached the part of his spiel where he mentioned mental health treatment and nodded at me to step in. I sat up a bit, leaned towards Walker and asked him if he wanted to talk with anyone about our services. I had to repeat myself to get his attention, and then he looked at me uncertainly, like a child looked awakening from sleep, and finally replied in a barely audible voice, “Yeah, I’ve been depressed some lately.” I knew he hated admitting that, especially in front of the officers. Confessing to any weakness is considered taboo among inmates. Many of the most disturbed try to tough it out for long periods even when suffering hallucinations or delusions rather than admit they need contact with a psych. Requesting help sets them up as targets of stigma and ridicule by both the more macho correctional staff and convicts. They might as well curl up in a ball and cry for momma. For me, proselytizing for an understanding of the benefits of inmate treatment and cooperation by the prison staff was the toughest part of the job. Many of them undermined our efforts mercilessly.

That morning I hoped to be encouraging, to reach him before the normal prison-setting anxiety and defensive denial set in and caused him to change his mind. I smiled with the genuine warmth flowing from my concern for him and told him I would come by his cell later that day. He looked a little startled; but before he could respond, the AW signaled to the guards, who yanked him up from his chair and out the door. I took advantage of a short meeting break to watch as he was led back to his cell. Flanked by two officers, each with a hand on one of his re-chained arms, he deliberately alternated between walking so rapidly they had to jerk him back towards them and inching forward in slow, sliding lurches, pulling both COs off balance. As they tightened their holds and cursed him, he grinned in satisfaction. Walker obviously claimed a victory for himself every time he irritated the guards and made their jobs tougher. He knew most of them weren’t so different from him – they just had all the keys and power behind the razor wire.

I showed up at his cell front later that day, just like I'd promised. When I looked in his window, he was lying on his bunk with one foot on the floor, his other foot flat on the bed, thigh drawn up closely against his frame and one of his arms thrown across his face. If he had tried to stage a picture of downright dejection, he couldn't have done better. I hesitated a minute, taking in his mood, almost deciding to come back later, but he must have sensed me standing there. He rose quickly off his bunk and came toward me, a quizzical little smile on his lips replacing the tightness I had just witnessed. When I told him I wanted to start our sessions that day, a brief frown clouded his face, but he shrugged almost imperceptibly and nodded. I wondered if he was already having second thoughts.

I called an escort officer to take him down to one of the ground floor cages and lock him in so we could speak through the steel mesh. I was supposed to wear a thick bullet-proof vest and a spit shield - a large helmet resembling a Martian costume piece with a plastic face guard - required precautions for anyone interacting with a prisoner. I already felt awkward attempting therapeutic interactions with someone in a cage and usually managed to avoid the ridiculous impediment of the helmet by just ignoring the rule. It was hard enough seeing my clients through the mesh; the plastic made them a hazy blur. How could the convicts be expected to take me or the therapy seriously if I looked like I was expecting a riot at any minute? The regular AD Seg cops were used to working with me and looked the other way if none of the hard cores were on duty. Fortunately, that afternoon they were on another unit conducting searches. When I looked around without seeing any of them, my shoulders lowered several inches. I was surprised at my relief and knew I must be more invested in the outcome of my time with Walker than I had let myself realize.

Seated on the cage's steel shelf, he peered out at me through the screen with a questioning expression. I saw a sudden glint of tears before he quickly blinked them away. He straightened his shoulders and looked at me more boldly. He seemed to be making a determined effort to not only control himself in front of a stranger, but also to impress me as dejected enough to need help while strong enough to keep my respect. If that's what he was doing, it was working thus far. When I pulled up a chair and took out my notebook and pen, he relaxed and quit trying so hard. I was trying to make it clear I planned to spend some real time with him.

When I began by asking what he was feeling at that moment, he jerked back on the steel bench at what I imagine he experienced as my intrusiveness. He immediately sought to cover his reaction with the charm I suspect he used routinely with women when unsure of himself.

"Hey, I'm doin' okay," he said smoothly, flashing symmetrical white teeth behind a wide smile which, even in his emaciated condition, likely swayed the ladies. "How you doin'? You're lookin' fine."

“Pretty well, thank you,” I replied easily, with an answering smile, ignoring his automatic attempt at flirtation, so normal in that prison world devoid of female companionship and healthy communication styles.

Walker took a deep breath; he seemed to be considering if I was for real, if maybe he could get to trust me. I wondered if my face betrayed how much I wanted that trust. That alone would be a big step for him. Finally came his reply, “Yeah ... maybe. What kinds of stuff do you want to talk about?”

I was pleased, and I knew he saw it. Objectivity was going to be difficult here.