

Taking Calls

Ding-a-goddamned-ling. Everybody has to be someplace and I'm right here, in my office on a someday morning, earning my daily as a paralegal assigned to a class-action on behalf of the losing class, the inmates at the local county jail. Losing, hell, they're lost, gone without redemption, the living dead giving the lie to any hallucinations regarding the reformatory properties of incarceration. The only thing these losers, these chronic criminals petty and grand, these burglars and dealers and gangsters, killers and rapists and drunks and junkies, check kitters and embezzlers, crack-whores and Wal-Mart shoplifters, beaters of wives and children but never of the ultimate rap, haven't lost is my telephone number. Lucky me, the only number they can call for free is the number that rings through to the telephone on my old, beat-up desk.

There it goes. Multiple ringy-dingies, and I pick up. Is it my mom? Is it my girlfriend? Is it the President of the United States? No, it's who it always is, the names and voices changing but it's pretty much all the same person, all the same meta-individual, an inmate wanting to tell me about the conditions in the jail, tell me how jail sucks. I know how jail sucks, and I didn't have to be stupid enough to get arrested to figure it out. To begin with, it's jail. The very idea sucks. That's all I've ever needed to know. But these days, these long days that pay for my economy car and the rent on my one-bedroom and provide me with the health insurance that changes plans and doctors every six months, these endless days it's my job to hear the details, to take the notes and make the calls and see if I can fix the problems that are every bit as perennially irreparable as are the inmates themselves.

For instance, the food. Sometimes there's not enough. This is usually because there are too many inmates, so the food runs out before all the inmates get fed. When this happens, moldy baloney sandwiches and soft brown apples are brought in from the slag heaps behind some supermarket somewhere to feed the extra inmates. And no matter how much food there is or isn't, and whatever degrees of edibility the portions may possess, usually the trays are maybe not completely clean. Hot water and soap cost money, you know.

It's jail. It sucks.

Other things about the jail. The inmates get locked down. They get locked down because they're overgrown unruly children, undisciplined sociopaths or murderous psychopaths, or simply because there are never enough COs—"Corrections

Officers,” the nicest way the bureaucrats have come up with for saying “Jail Guards”—and there are never enough of them, no matter what you call them, because who wants to work in a fucking jail? So there will be like one CO for seventy-five inmates, so the COs just lock ‘em down, all the inmates locked into their cells, no access to the common areas with the televisions and the pay phones. And much better to do that, my friend, to lock them securely away, than to be trapped in a pod with seventy-five instances of the dregs who just might decide to gather themselves all together in one massive instance of a murderous *lèse-majesté*.

The locked-down inmates get let out for one hour or less out of every twenty-four, and not all at the same time. The ones who get let out for their one hour or less outside of regular business hours, Monday through Friday excepting holidays, can’t call me. I’m not there. I’m driving my economy car to the bargain store, or tending the withery garden in the tiny yard out front of my one-bedroom, or fucking my girlfriend, or blowing my brains out with dope and wine and television.

In the daytime, the ones who can call me do. They call me to tell me about the lockdowns.

“Man,” they say, “we been locked down in here for twenty-seven days, man. The COs won’t tell us why. Somebody said it was because of that guy that got murdered.”

“That’s probably it,” I say. There are well over two thousand inmates in this jail built for half that number, and it seems not a month goes by that some poor fool doesn’t get murdered in there. The COs can’t be everywhere, you know, and even when they’re there, they’re not always watching real close.

The inmates call me and want me to call their girlfriends, their moms, their people. They haven’t heard from their people.

“Hey, man,” they say, “can you call my people? I don’t got no money on my books, so all I can make is collect calls except when I call you. But I can’t call my people, they got blocks on their lines.”

I never ask them, And why do you think this is?

“No, man, I can’t call your people,” I tell them. “I’m sorry, I’m not allowed to do that. All I can do is take down what you’re telling me. So tell me—what’s up?”

They tell me.

“Man, last night?” they say, always with that question mark. “Last night the sewers backed up and all this raw sewage starts coming up out of the floor, out of the floor drains, you know? And the COs won’t do nothing about it. They got us on lockdown and here we are in our cells and all this sewage, it’s got like, you know, human waste”—the inmates are always more polite than they really are—“it’s got human waste floating in it and it’s coming into our cells and the COs won’t let us clean it up until day shift and so we’re locked in here with all this stuff—*raw sewage*,

man—and it’s floating around and they bring us breakfast and we’re supposed to eat with all this stuff on the floor, and some of the guys, their mattresses are on the floor, you know? Cuz they ain’t got enough bunks so they got to sleep on the floor. So this stuff, it’s getting, it’s like, it’s soaking into the mattresses and we got to sleep in this stuff. And man—it stinks in here! *There ain’t no amount of deodorant can make it smell good!* Not even if we stuck it up our noses, man.”

“Okay, I’ll write it up, see what I can do,” I tell them. I don’t tell them, There’s not a goddamn thing I can do—you’re in jail.

Some of these guys, they’ll tell me something that starts with, “Last time I was in jail . . .”

“You were in jail before?” I say, like I never heard of anyone going to jail more than once and I can’t believe anyone would end up there even just twice. And I can’t, but the truth is, some of these guys, it’s all they can do to stay *out* of jail. On their own, they’re their own worst enemies. There’s no place in the world that will take better care of them than the stinking, over-crowded, under-staffed county jail with its raw sewage, its thin mattresses on cold concrete floors, and its rotten food. No place.

Most of the calls I get are from men, since most inmates are men, but I do hear from the women, too. Most of them are whores and/or addicts, in for hooking, simple possession, or misdemeanor shoplifting. Maybe sometimes disturbing the peace or conspiracy. I see them when I visit the jail—it’s not enough I get paid to take the calls, I also am desired by the higher-ups to make what for my part are far too many visits to the place, given that once is way more than enough—I see the women inmates and they all have a look, a hard, lean look with extra lines etched into their faces, even when they’re young, which most of them are, and even if they’re fat, which most of them are not. Female or male, very few inmates are truly fat. Takes a certain minimal level of stability and accomplishment to pack on the poundage. And very few of them are old. By the time they get into their forties, they’ve either wised up or grown up or settled down and cut the crap and they don’t go to jail anymore, or they’ve graduated to the state or federal prison system and don’t come around to the county jail so often, or they didn’t get into their forties and they’re buried someplace.

The women—possessors, petty thieves, crack-whores, speed freaks, snowballs and junkies—they call me when they’re coming down, when they’re pissing out of themselves the bio-processed remnants of their coke or their crystal, or when their methadone has been cut off, or their Valium or their Percocet or God only knows what they’ve been on, sometimes even they don’t, and they always refer to whatever it may be as their “meds.” They tell me about it with voices strained to taut breaking, voices that have been stretched that way sometimes for so many years filled with infinite moments of pain and fear and longing that they no longer have any other way of making speech. They need their meds, they tell me, they’ll do anything, *anything*.

Once they get out, they'll make it up to me. I could have every wasted trick in the city falling down on my lap. Every day could be my lucky day.

"Please, you got to help us," they say. "People are going crazy in here. We're not getting our meds. And we can't get a hold of our PDs. The PDs won't take our calls."

"I'll see what I can do," I tell them, but it's easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than it is for me or anyone else below the rank of district court judge to get a hold of anyone at the Public Defender's office. A PD's caseload averages out so that each indigent inmate gets about one one-hundredth of an attorney. This is supposed to be better than no attorney at all.

But even when the inmates can't get a hold of their people or their meds or their PDs, they still have me, their last and very slender hope. More slender than they realize, and more slender than I want them to know.

"I'm not supposed to be in here, man," they tell me. "There's been a mistake." Got that right.

"Tell me about it," I say. Story is there's been a screwup, paperwork got lost, someone was supposed to be released already, time served. I make some calls. Who knows what went wrong? No one, nowhere.

Or maybe there's a problem with the bond.

"I got money on the outside, man," they tell me. "If I could just get to it, I could make my bail."

But you can't get to it, I don't tell them. It's out here, with the cars and the stash and the girls and the movies and the hot juicy burgers and Saturday nights and Sunday games, and the children and the dogs and the cats and the trees and the grass and the sky and the clouds and the sun and me. And you're in *there*.

It's noisy in there. I get the calls, and I can hear the noise, the great, empty, clanging cold echo. No carpeting in jail. No wood to speak of. It's all concrete, steel, and heavy-duty plastic. It's all one-piece jumpsuits and bad BO. It's all Shut your motherfucking face, and, Your ass is mine. It's mace and pepper-spray and five-point restraints, truncheons and boots and shackles. It's the cold day in hell that changes nothing.

It's the call from the guy who was fine on the outside until his medication ran out and then he just sort of lost it a little, he's not sure what he did but they've told him about it. It's the call from the woman who swears she was only going to turn that one trick to get the money to get her car out of the shop and she's never done this kind of thing before and how was she supposed to know the john was an undercover working a sting? It's the call from the guy who was running his nice little organization on the outside though he's sure as hell not going to be telling me that over a jail telephone, but he's the sort of fellow who's used to being able to get other people to do things for him and now they won't. It's the call from the guy who was shot four times

shortly before incarceration and now the county won't give him the medical attention he tells me he needs, the multiple surgeries so that he can walk again, so that his hand can be fixed so that maybe he can get a decent job once he gets out but him and me both know there is neither scalpel nor bullet that will ever land him in whatever it is he may imagine a decent job to be. It's the call from the guy who has the worst stutter ever inflicted on a human, I can't believe it when I first hear it, at first I want to laugh but after a minute or two of being very patient while he tells me his story I find that I'm in danger of losing it the other way.

"Ah-ah-ah-ah-I," he's telling me, "wuh-wuh-wuh-was j-j-j-j-jumped by-ah-ah-ah, ah-ah ph-ph-ph-four guh-guh-guh-guys. They-they-they-the-the-they buh-buh-broke muh-muh-muh-muh-my j-j-j-j, j-j-j, j-j-jaw ih-ih-ih-ih-ih-in thuh-thuh-three puh-puh-p-p-p-puh-puh-places. N-n-n-n-now-now-ow-ow muh-muh-muh-my t-t-t-t-teeth ah-ah-are-are ph-ph-ph-falling ah-ah-ah-out. Ah-ah-ah-ah-I'm s-s-suh-suh-sorry, ah-ah-ah-I d-d-d-donnn't, t-t-t-t-t-talk t-t-too g-g-g-g-g-good."

"It's okay," I say. "Take your time. Did you fill out any med slips or grievance forms?"

"N-n-nuh-nuh-nuh-nuh-n-no," he says. "Ah-ah-ah-ah-ah, ah-ah-ah-I c-c-c-c-c-cannnn't ruh-r-r-rruh-r-read oh-oh-oh-or ruh-ruh-ruh-ruh-ruh-ruh-write."

I tell him I'll see what I can do. I will see and I will see and I will see, and I will go blind from looking so hard into the muddy haze of incompetence and carelessness and the infinite darkness of the nothing that can be done.

Good days will come. Or different days, a change of pace. I'll be in my office and the telephone on my beat-up old desk will not ring with calls from the inmates. Every pod will be locked down, a jailbreak was attempted or drugs or another body were found. The drugs may have been found in the possession of a CO, or the body may bear upon its bloody bruises the battery of marks from official batons, fists and feet. Whatever the case may be, the telephone will be silent for a while and the higher-ups will assign me to work on something else in the interim. Maybe I'll draft a graphic presentation, a series of trial exhibits that attempt to demonstrate that the accused could not possibly have pulled the trigger if the gun was over here and he was over there. Or a real challenge will be thrown my way, I'll get to review the videotapes that our latest client, the sexual predator, made while he had his way with his victims, my task being to help try to find a way to deflect the damage this damning evidence does to the client's defense, doing my para-professional duty as best I always do, even though the heart of my soul desires nothing more out of this case than the privilege of cutting off the client's balls and stuffing them down his throat. Justice for a change.

But I will return to my regular duties after not too long, taking calls, and even making the visits to the jail where I will interview as many inmates as I can as quickly

as I can, trying to make some small slice of time for each of them. There are so many and they cannot heal themselves. And I cannot heal them. Most of them I will speak with at tables in the common areas. Most of the time the COs will stand back so the inmates can speak frankly and confidentially while I listen and take notes, and I will remember that my instructions are that in a hostage situation I am to attempt no heroics. When I interview the schizophrenic inmate who tells me he doesn't want to take his meds because he doesn't like the way they make him feel, but when he's off them he hears the voices and he doesn't like them, either, a CO will stand close enough to intervene if the voices instruct sudden mayhem. I will gently attempt to coax the inmate to take the meds, thinking all the while as to how I have an undergraduate liberal arts degree and no training in what to do here, and this is the best, the very best that can be done for this man.

When I interview the psychopaths, and there are a few, and they are the genuine article, I speak to them through the narrow food slots in their locked cell doors. They always smile, just like psychopaths do in the movies, only this isn't a movie, and the smiles aren't actors' smiles, and the COs stand right behind me so they can grab me quick and pull me away if the psychopaths try to get their hands or even their fingers through the food slots and grab my neck to choke me, or try to break my nose or tear my ears off or poke my eyes out.

And I meet the stuttering man. In a general population pod while I'm making a routine inspection of conditions, I meet him. I recognize him instantly, the moment he begins to speak. I even remember his name.

"Ah-ah-ah-ah-ah-I c-c-c-c-called y-y-y-y-y-you ah-ah-ah-about m-m-muh-muh-my t-t-t-t-teeth," he says.

"Yes," I say, "Randy Smithers, I remember. How are you doing now?"

"B-b-buh-buh-buh-better," he says.

"Did Medical come see you?" I say.

"N-n-n-no," he says. "B-b-buh-buh-buh-but, l-l-l-look," he says, and he holds up a plastic sandwich bag. "Ah-ah-ah-I s-s-s-s-saved th-th-the-them. Ah-ah-ah-all, uh-uh-of the-the-them."

The bag holds at least a dozen yellow and grey teeth, mostly molars.

"D-d-d-d-d-do y-y-y-yo-you th-th-th-thuh-think they-they-they-they c-c-c-c-c-c-c-can p-p-p-p-p-puh-puh-put the-the-the-them ba-ba-ba-ba-ba-back ih-ih-ih-ih-ih-ih-in?"

"I don't know, Randy," I say. "I'll look into it, see what I can do."

"Th-th-th-th-thank y-y-y-y-y-you," he says. "Th-th-tha-tha-th-thank y-y-y-y-you."

"It's okay, don't mention it," I say, looking around, wanting, like anybody would, to be almost anyplace else. And lucky me, once my duties are done for the

day, almost anyplace else is where I'll get to be. I'll go home and work in my garden before supper, then call my mom after I eat, chat with her a bit, see how she's doing. A little while later, my girlfriend will come over. She and I will maybe watch some television, share a couple glasses of wine, maybe a joint, then go to bed. She'll tell me about her day and I'll tell her about mine, then we'll slip into sleep, our arms around each other, rocking, gently rocking.