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In March 2023, I spent nine days in a Dickinson County jail in Kansas, where I had a front-row seat to addiction maltreatment in the criminal justice system—and, oddly, its potential to change for the better. Why an elderly woman found herself hauled before a judge in handcuffs and leg irons is a story for another day; here, I'll examine the tell-tale stories of fragile mental health, the use of drugs in jail, and how one drives the other.

As I enter the women's dorm, I meet two young women, both in orange jumpsuits and crocks. They're wearing white socks, which I don't have. "I am diagnosed schizophrenic," the twenty-two-year-old tells me. "I can't be loved. I can't have a dog." She bounces around the room in ceaseless motion. Her mental-health issues may extend to others in her family, which makes me think of the times Mother said she'd die young like her mother, of cancer. And she did. In California as a young woman, I decided Mother must have been mentally ill, schizophrenic perhaps. Today I wonder if her fixation on death wasn't based on unresolved grief over the early loss of her mother. And my schizophrenic roomie, what mourning is driving her? How might she be helped to expand her viewpoint beyond what she can't have and can't do? One thing is certain, the pills our sheriffs bring at 6 AM won't do it. I know this from my dad's stepsister, whose psychiatrist prescribed pills without talk therapy.

My other roomie—I'll call her Christy—tells me she'll be twenty-one in a week. She is bipolar, she says, married and divorced, no children. She, too, is served pills every morning. Though restless like our schizophrenic roomie, Christy sits down to write while keeping an eye on disturbing "reality" shows.

The dorm we use was a men's dorm once. When the number of female inmates swelled, it was assigned to women though still bearing the name "Men's Dormitory." It is high-ceilinged and has an air-exchange system that keeps us chilled. During the day we use our blankets as wraparounds. We wear our jumpsuits day and night. Once a week we get freshly-laundered ones, but not always in the sizes we need. The one I'm handed is three times too large. I use it as an extra cover at night atop my thin blanket.

A paperback book of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* lies on the empty bunk above mine; bored, I pick it up and read.

"You like Shakespeare?" asks Christy.

"I prefer modern writers. But I was a TA once—a teaching assistant—to a prof who taught an entire semester of Shakespeare."

"Dude," she says. Our roomie looks on, saying nothing.

"That prof was a piece of work. An old-school misogynist."

What's that?"

"Someone who thinks males are superior to women. In Shakespeare, wives call their husbands 'My Lord.' In this story"—I point to the paperback—"Ophelia addresses her boyfriend with 'Good my Lord,' meaning 'My Gentle Lord,' though Hamlet was anything but."

"Dude." Christy turns to the TV and mutters, "My dad used to beat up on my mom. On me, too."

I'm at a loss for words. "That's awful," is all I can think to say.

"It's ok. He won't do it no more; he's too sick. Can't preach, even. Mom takes care of him after she gets home from work."

Her mother cleans houses, she told me earlier.

"So you're on your own." I phrase it as fact.

"I've been on my own like, forever. I got married to have a home."

"It didn't work out."

"It didn't work out," Christy repeats after me.

"Do you have any brothers or sisters?"

"Two brothers, much older than me, somewhere south. Not a pot to piss in, says my mom, but they got pride. They got the Proud Boys."

"Oh, man."

Two days after my arrival a middle-aged woman joins us. She is overweight, has asthma, and wheezes. At night she snores loudly. Our schizophrenic roomie gets so incensed, she asks for, and is granted, transfer to another dorm.

Christy makes nice with our jailer sheriffs, all of whom are male, and obtains pocket combs for us, a couple of plastic dishes, socks and T-shirts, plus two different packs of playing cards. "All these things have been left behind by previous inmates," she tells us. Snorer and I thank Christy profoundly and high-five each other over the socks and T-shirts. After we slip them on, the three of us play Uno. Snorer keeps track of everyone's points via some system she has memorized. The next day her son posts bail and she is discharged, leaving behind her socks for future roomies.

That day Christy and I have the dorm to ourselves. Between glances at the TV, Christy writes. She owns a book of scrambled-word puzzles. I ask her to turn off the TV and we sit down and unscramble. Christy is faster than I am, much faster.

“You have potential,” I tell her, and she glows. She’ll have to go to prison, she says, maybe for three years. She hopes for two years of probation, one of prison. When I ask what she did to deserve this, she has a hard time explaining herself. Stalking a friend of her mother’s, she mumbles. Stealing stuff that sounds like petty theft. Three years for something as trivial as that?

“Yeah well, I did drugs too. Sorta. On and off.”

I ask if I might see her writing and she beams with delight. She shows me her stuff and reads some of it out loud. She’s got an ear for puns; unfortunately, her inspirations are television shows and commercials. “You need to read,” I tell her.

“Sunday evening is library time,” she says. “The sheriffs come around with carts of books. We’re allowed three per person.”

“Poetry books? Books of essays? That’s what you should be reading.”

“I don’t think they have any of those.”

Indeed, when the carts arrive, I find they contain mostly religious tracts and crime novels. The one book of essays I turn up is *The Soul of Black Folk*, published in 1906.

“I was a troublesome child,” Christy tells me.

“So was I. But if you’re a troublesome child, that means your childhood was a troubled one. Have you heard of ACEs?” When she shakes her head, I explain, “Adverse Childhood Experiences.”

“Adverse Childhood Experiences, what’s that?”

“I’ll tell you about mine. When I was little, Mother used to scream, ‘You are the nail to my coffin.’ She’d grab me by my braids, shake me like a rabbit, and fling me against cupboard or stove. For Karl, two years younger than I, she used whatever came to hand. A frying pan, an electrical cord. Once, when the boy was five, she went after him with a piece of firewood. My little brother crawled under the table and screamed bloody murder while I just stood there, shaking with fear. I wanted to protect him but couldn’t do a thing. Other times Mother told us she’d die young, of cancer like her mother. When Dad came home from prisoner-of-war camp, they had two more kids, boys. They were eight and four when she died.

“That, Christy, is an adverse childhood.”

“Dude,” says Christy.

“Baby Helmut used to scream for hours. Mother left him outside in his carriage until school was out and I ran home to take care of him. Four years later, another baby boy arrived. And the carriage scenario repeated itself. Even before Mother died, I felt I had to keep my brothers alive.

They died young, all three, Karl like our mother of cancer, the youngest two by their own hands. As you can imagine, I myself was seriously suicidal.”

“Dude,” she says. “How did you get over it?”

I smile to myself. “I had a mentor. An extraordinary, outrageous-luck, wholly undeserved mentor. He was a psychiatrist. He lived in Vienna. He’d written several books, one that became so famous, it’s in print even today. I wrote him, in German of course, and he wrote back. We traded a handful of letters. They changed my life.” I add softly, “His name was Viktor Frankl.”

“I wish I had a mentor,” says Christy.

“There’s a place in Cheyenne. It’s called Recover Wyoming.”

“You work there?”

“I don’t, but they know me. I write opinion for an online news service and have written about Recover Wyoming. The group started out as a safe place for alcoholics in recovery but has expanded to people trying to stay away from opiates and people with mental health issues.”

“Recover Wyoming. I’m gonna write this down.” She licks her jail-issue pencil that’s no bigger than a darned needle.

“If you want to visit, take the bus to Cheyenne, but start doing your homework now. Go into yourself and think about your past. ‘The unexamined life is not worth living,’ someone said many years ago.”

“Let me write it down,” says Christy. “The unexamined life is not worth living.”

“Once I’m out I’ll send you a book with the poems and diaries of Rainer Maria Rilke. You think you had a shitty childhood? Wait until you read about Rilke’s!”

“Dude,” she says, turning on the TV.

“The book is in German with English translations.”

“Cool.”

“You’re addicted to television,” I tell her. She shrugs as if to say, what else is there.

Christy is addicted in more ways than one. She refuses to eat the boiled eggs on her breakfast tray and won’t use her carton of milk because “I only drink chocolate milk.” Before returning her tray, she scoops up the coco-puff cereal that came with the eggs and pops the puffs into her mouth one by one. The rejected milk and boiled eggs, do they end up in a landfill? Christy is glued to the screen.

That evening another woman joins us, and Christy happily embraces her; they've been together in this dorm before. "I violated my parole," says the newcomer. "When this is behind me, my fiancé and I'll get married."

Working Woman gets up at 4:30 AM to step into a room where she changes from orange overalls to street clothes. She takes the bus to work and returns at 3:30 PM. When I ask what kind of work she does, she says she takes apart transformers that have quit working. "Some are huge, some are small. I have three different workstations."

Every other day before dinner, Working Woman attends a meeting with her probation officer, who is joined by a drug counselor and a therapist; sometimes, the judge in her case drops in also. "It's a program financed by the state of Kansas," she says. Daily she writes an assignment in her diary, "My Sober Days."

That night Christy wails and calls out in her sleep. As they do every day, at six in the morning, two sheriffs (male) enter with a small paper cup of pills. Christy swallows them with a bit of water, sticks out her tongue so the sheriffs know she swallowed her meds. Then she goes back to sleep, never waking for breakfast. Before returning our trays through the slot in the door, I snatch her carton of milk as a snack for myself.

"You had a nightmare," I tell Christy when she wakes up.

"I don't remember."

"Since you like to write, keep a notebook by your side as you go to sleep. First thing when you wake up, jot down anything you remember. Anything that comes to mind, really."

"I don't think I can do that."

That evening a young woman joins us. She has gorgeous red hair, pale eyes, a pert figure beneath the jumpsuit, and an Irish surname. She sleeps and sleeps. "She's detoxing," says Working Woman. "When I was detoxing, I didn't eat for seven days. I slept most of the time, sometimes feeling hot, other times cold. The first three days were the worst. I wanted to die."

At night Irish has a tough time. While I sleep she leaves her bunk and vomits. When I get up to relieve myself, I find her sleeping on the bare floor next to my bunk.

I shake her awake. "You're ice cold. Let's get you back in bed." I pull on her and she half-crawls to her bunk and flops down on its pad. I cover her up. "What happened to you?"

"My boyfriend was driving too fast." They left Colorado, she says, wanting to head east. The boyfriend is ten years older than she is. Before she arrived at the jail, the cops took her to the hospital. "I was ill," she says. "In the hospital they told me I'm pregnant."

"Oh boy. You didn't know before?" She shakes her head.

“What sort of work did you do . . . before?”

“I cut hair.”

“You’re a beautician? You have a license?” She nods.

I don’t inquire about the boyfriend. Likely he deals drugs. “Did you use fentanyl? Heroin?”

Irish says she doesn’t know. She only knows she feels sick to death. I clean up her vomit with toilet paper and a washcloth.

At six AM the sheriffs arrive with paper cups of meds. Christy’s for bipolar, I imagine, Irish’s for detoxing.

The girls have a hard time waking up, Christy because she watched TV until it went off; Irish, because she can’t seem to rouse herself. I call to Christy to get herself up, shake Irish awake and bring her a cup of water. The sheriffs watch to make sure the girls swallow their meds. I can’t help think that, by the time the women are released, both will be hooked on prescription drugs so expensive, they won’t be able to buy them. They’ll turn to street drugs again. Get arrested again.

The demand for street drugs finances the cartels in Mexico, but the demand was created by drugs advertised as nonaddictive—Valium under Reagan, OxyContin before fentanyl hit the scene, both drugs ruthlessly promoted by the Sackler clan. Patrick Radden Keefe’s *Empire of Pain: The Secret History of the Sackler Dynasty* makes your blood boil for the destruction wreaked by a single family. When doctors refused to continue filling OxyContin prescriptions, their patients turned to heroin, too ashamed to admit their addiction.

That afternoon I ask Working Woman if her program will accept Irish to help her get sober.

“I don’t think so. It’s for Kansas residents,” she says.

The next day I am released. My eldest hired a lawyer who squashed the warrant. I embrace Christy while Irish sleeps and Working Woman is at her job. “Ask your working friend in what court her case was heard,” I urge her. “Tell your lawyer you want to appear there.”

“I have a public defender. A woman.”

“Ask her. She knows you did drugs. This is a drug-treatment court of some sort.” I give her the jailbird pencil I won’t need. “I hope we meet again, Christy.”

“I hope so, too.”

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