

Penitentiary Pool Boy

by Greg Stolze

I did not expect lifeguarding experience to help me get a job at Oak Center State Penitentiary, but it was a weird time in the incarceration industry. Everyone knows about the Cop Wars and how America tried to reform policing—more talking, more specialization, less escalation, fewer guns—but that trickled down. I was halfway through my training program as a correction officer when the whole thing got abruptly scrapped. There was a five month pause where we couldn't get our tuition money but there weren't classes either, and when we went back, most of the teachers were different, the course names had changed and the... ugh, there's a word for this. Like vibes, but smart. There's a guy in Block F, English professor in for forcible sodomy, he'd know what I meant.

Tenor! That's the word. The tenor of the instruction changed, a *lot*. Anyhow, I worried this would make it hard to find a job, since the old wardens would want old guards who did things the old way, and the reformers would want reform guards—or, as some started calling us, 'attendants'—while I was stuck between the two.

But it turned out I was a man of the time, kinda. The guy who interviewed me, Warden Crief, was taking early retirement and kinda bitter about it. Reading between the lines, he thought the whole thing, decarceration, reforming social order—he thought it was all just numbskull horseshit.

"Gus Anderson," he said, squinting at my application. "You were a lifeguard?"

"Yeah, so... um, first aid training, had to stay in pretty good shape you know, and probably more experience dealing with, um, danger and crisis than most folks whose high school jobs were at Waffle House or something."

"Spoken like a man who has never worked at a Waffle House," Crief muttered. "But you know your way around an actual swimming pool, that's a plus. The new guy is putting in a *pool*."

"...huh," I said. Then I remembered what my dad told me about interviewing and said, "Interesting! That's a real, what do you call it... when things match up? A synergy! A real synergy with my, um, actual work experiences."

He looked at my résumé and tapped it on the edge of his desk. I thought he was going to ask me why I wanted to be a corrections officer and I had a good answer all locked and loaded—public safety, etc., all that, nothing about being bad at school and wanting good pay and benefits—but he never asked.

"A new warden is starting soon," he said slowly. "Well, he won't be called a warden, he's going to be an 'executive' but it's the same thing really. I'm sticking around for a while to consult before my... retirement." He frowned, and this guy, when he frowned it took over his whole face. It was like his entire head was built for it and he'd spent his life practicing too. "The new guy, Weems, he went through all the job applications and threw out half of 'em. There's a hiring crisis in this field too, you know—there have never been a lot of people who *wanted* to

work this life, and with the changes a lot of the old staff are looking for new jobs. Never had this much turnover in my decades here, never once. But I guess it's a new era, now ain't it?"

He looked up, his frown shrank without going all the way away, and he met my eye. "You wouldn't have been my first choice, but at least you got *some* idea of what it's really like before the reformers switched everything up. Welcome aboard, Anderson."

He didn't sound very actually welcoming, but that was how I got hired on at Oak C.

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I got measured for my uniform and onboarded, got the HR stuff squared away and worked for two whole days before Weems began. I shadowed this other guy Cochrane while he oversaw the laundry shop one day and walked the wall another.

"This is where they start you," he said. "You gotta work your way up to lunch and yard duties, but those come along pretty fast. Night shifts too, not all that much happens overnight when the doors are locked, though you get some night screamers."

"When you say...?"

"Dudes with bad dreams, that's all. Usually their cell mate wakes them and everybody yells at 'em to shut up. If the cellie doesn't want to do it, walk over and give 'em a poke through the bars," he said, gesturing with his truncheon. "Though, shit, if the new guy takes truncheons away, I don't know. Always have the strap around your wrist, you know that, right?"

"Yeah, they said that a lot at the school."

"You don't want a con to yank it away from you, get tooled up," Cochrane said in an easy voice. "You *really* don't want to stick your arm in there, y'know?"

"Sure. Yeah. Makes sense."

He paused to gently suggest a couple convicts get back to their spots and fold. They said "Yes boss" with dropped eyes, and complied.

"They're gonna test you," he said. "New guy, they wanna see if you're flimsy or if you're steel, get me?"

"Steel," I said.

"You don't wanna be an asshole though," he said. "It's a balance. Don't over react and thrash out on them over nothing... that's easier in the short term, but then you get their eyes on you *all* the time, dig? Waiting for that slipup, so you gotta be the hard man 24/7 then, it's always..." He shook his head, then made a gesture like banging his fists together.

"Like, oppositional?"

"Exactly Gus. Oppositional. You ever heard of 'malicious compliance'? It means, someone does what you told them in the dumbest, most fucked-up way, so that it makes a ton of trouble but you can't say they didn't follow you to the letter? That's all you ever get as a too-hard guard. But if you're soft, they eat you alive."

"Sure. I'm not here to make friends."

"Hundred percent, youngblood."

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They broke ground the day Weems showed up, and he addressed the whole prison at once. All the inmates were in the yard, most of the guards around them or on the wall, just a few of the oldest old-timers skipping his speech to staff essential security functions.

It struck me, then, the numbers. I mean, we had guns—some of us, anyhow—but if the prisoners had swarmed us, it would have been over in minutes. One thing my early *and* late instructors drilled into us was that no prison can operate without some measure of cooperation from its inmates. Not every single one to go along, and they don't have to go along completely, but there's no feasible way to have as many on staff as there are locked up, so inmates do nearly everything for themselves. Sometimes, by themselves. Food, laundry, repairs, cleaning, mending... most, if not all of it, is done by the convicts.

"Control is present, of course it is," one of the later teachers said. "But total control is a fool's cruel dream. Not only would it inhibit rehabilitation and reflection, it wouldn't even work. Prisoners never, indeed *cannot* fully consent to being incarcerated, but you can make it easy to comply and difficult to resist. That is the core of *managing* a penitentiary. But to become something more than a warehouse for bodies... to become a true factor for reformation and against recidivism... we must also make it easier to confront their mistakes, and harder to gloss over them. Which is often, of course, antithetical to untroubled, efficient, low-cost 'convict storage.' This is the rub, people. This is the friction."

Weems looked a lot like that teacher—a tall, pale, stringbean guy with hair to his shoulders. Both examples of what a guest speaker called "grab-you hair" during my first weeks of training.

"Hello, Oak Center," he said, in a surprisingly deep voice. "I'm Dr. Charles Weems, and I'm going to be the new executive here. This is my first time administering a prison, so we're all going to learn some things together I'm sure," he said.

"Flimsy," Cochrane muttered under his breath.

"For the last fifteen years, I've been a professor at Ordell State University. I taught civic policy and behavioral psychology courses, with an emphasis on the effects of incarceration. I have been involved with the carceral reform movement since I was an undergraduate, and unlike most of the people working here, I have been jailed."

There was a murmur through the population at that—some scoffing, some laughs.

"I was arrested during the George Floyd protests. I was released the next morning without charge. But that's where I got this scar," he said, and pulled his hair back from his temple.

The murmuring changed again. Dr. Laufey, the English instructor I mentioned, he looked skeptical. Others did too, but more were confused. Most, of course, were just blank. Lots of cons develop that, faces that don't give anything away, like a piece of paper with nothing written on it.

"Under my guidance, I want Oak C to be a place where you can change. For too long, the purpose of places like this was the breaking of men—dehumanizing you until you couldn't disobey. I want to rehumanize you. I want you to leave here clean, smart, and equipped with the tools you need to make your way without crime. I want you to move beyond being victims and victimizing others. It's ambitious I know, but looking at how prisons have been for decades... well, do *you* think there's no room for improvement?"

He smiled, like he was hitting a punchline, but not many people laughed.

Crief was off on the side, and with that joke, his face shriveled up into one of those giant frowns.

“In that spirit, you’re going to hear construction on the west side of the building, and we’re going to have to restrict access to the recreation area on that side until the new structure is complete.”

The groans that arose from that took the frown off Crief’s face, which made me feel like I understood some things about how it was going between him and Weems.

Even after two days only, I understood the problem. There were two connected recreation areas, on the west and the south, and the physical spaces had been claimed by different groups. Closing the west, or part of it, would force its people to encroach elsewhere.

Prison being what it is, the gangs were race-based, and Weems had just screwed over the smallest one, the Aryan Brotherhood. They’d have to squish into the remainder of their old space, or take space from the larger Black group that occupied the prime space in the south, between them and the mainly Hispanic group.

“Typical liberal college professor,” said a convict with a swastika neck tattoo, “Selling out his own people.”

“I know this is an adjustment,” Weems said, “But putting up with it for a little while gets you an improvement for everyone, long term. I’ve developed a schedule such that every convict can, for a short period, have time alone in the swimming pool.”

That got the most murmuring.

“This is going to be an inflexible right,” Weems continued. “No matter what you do in here, or what you did outside, you get thirty minutes there, by yourself, every week. We’ll have lifeguards on duty, but for the most part, you’re going to be alone in there. I know what you’re going to ask,” he said with a small smile “And yes, it’s going to be heated.”

“What about solitary?” someone shouted, earning a threatening “Quiet!” from the nearest guard, but Weems answered it.

“Even prisoners being punished with solitary confinement are going to get access,” he said. “What I want to give you is one space and one time where you’re by yourself *on your own terms*. That’s all. But it’s something, isn’t it?”

With that, he wrapped up his speech and left the podium.

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Not long after that, I participated in my first press. If you don’t know, a ‘press’ is how you get someone out of their cell when they really don’t want to leave. The guy we pressed was known as ‘Moppy’ which, I found out later, was short for ‘Model Prisoner.’ I think that’s irony, but I’d have to check with Dr. Laufey from Block F to be sure.

The thing is, Moppy usually *was* a model prisoner. He had a janitorial job (so, another meaning for ‘Moppy’), went to the Christian services, didn’t make trouble. Except when he did.

When we got to his cell in Block B, he was screaming words that didn’t make any sense, like speaking in tongues. Everything had been thrown around—the pictures, the bed stuff, books, and clothing. At first I didn’t see his cellmate, but the guy was behind a mattress, battened down in a corner.

Pollard was the first guard on the scene, he'd been working at Oak C for a couple years and was yelling at Moppy to lie facedown. It was about as effective as yelling "Stop!" at a dive-bombing plane.

"What the hell?" I said, getting closer to the door, but he stopped me. Moppy lunged across the space and slammed his hand between the bars hard enough to scrape skin off his knuckles.

"Glove up!" he said. At least, I think that's what he said, I couldn't hear anything over the screaming, but he was holding out nitrile gloves from the little box on his belt.

"What do we do?" I yelled as I put them on and got out my truncheon. (Weems didn't like 'em, but all the old guards had squawked about giving them up.) After a half-second, I remembered to loop the strap around my wrist.

"Wait for Big Rick!"

This sounded like a great idea. Big Rick is maybe three hundred pounds of muscle and veins, and he popped up quick with two riot shields. He looked between me and Pollard and handed me one. "You know how to press?" he bellowed.

"Um, yeah?" It didn't seem like the right time to say "Well, I know in *theory*, we practiced in school but I've never really done it."

"Follow my lead."

So he got right by the seam where the door opens, shield up, and I got beside him with Pollard behind us as Moppy tried to claw our faces off through the bars and the shields. Then Pollard called in to get the door open and we started pushing.

Here's how a press works: Two guards with shields come in through the gap and push the prisoner against a wall, then lean in while the third guard gets a cuff on one wrist and tries to capture the other. Cuffing someone who's mid-freakout is really, *really* hard so the job of the two who are pushing is to squash the convict flat so that he can't move or, if it goes on, breathe.

Moppy is not a big guy, but when he charged Big Rick he stopped the guy cold. For a second they just vibrated in place, looking like two moose with locked horns, and then I came in from the side, putting my shield against Rick's so Moppy wouldn't get between us. I bumped him off balance and we got him up against some shelves. He actually bit the plastic, his bloody hand striking and shoving and leaving streaks on everything. With the ledge against the back of his knees he couldn't stand straight, and Pollard got one bracelet on him. But Moppy yanked the other end out of Pollard's hands. He also half-fell up onto the shelf, still punching at me and Big Rick. I put my shield sideways and pinned his legs while Big Rick took the top half. Moppy made some terrible noises as he screamed out and then couldn't breathe in. Pollard got around, grabbed his loose arm and finally managed to twist it behind Moppy's back—it took Pollard's whole body. Finally, he latched him into the handcuffs.

"Is it tight?" Big Rick yelled.

"It's tight, it's good!" Pollard yelled back, and Rick eased off a little. Moppy was screaming, frothing blood from his mouth and he tried to get loose but he couldn't break steel.

"Calm your ass down or it's leg irons!" Pollard shouted, but Moppy wasn't listening.

"He can't do nothin' when he's like this!" His cell mate had stuck his head up above the mattress edge. He had a huge bruise on his left cheek.

“Don’t you move!” Rick warned him, and he complied, just sitting with eyes wide. He’d have been stupid to try, two more guards had shown up. Pollard told one to get leg manacles, and we wound up having to carry a thrashing Moppy to the infirmary to get sedated.

“Look at this shit,” Pollard grouched, when we came out. He’d pulled off his glove, turning it inside-out to keep Moppy’s blood away from him. Two of his fingers were swelling and purple.

“What the hell was that?” I asked.

Pollard sighed. “If you go by his file, that was all an act.”

“*What?*”

“Yeah, an inquiry determined Moppy to be as sane as you and me. The whole hyperactive violent outburst? An ‘elaborate charade’ according to an accredited psychiatrist. Me? I think the poor bastard has psychotic breaks. One or two a year. Can’t ever predict ‘em. And when he’s not... in that fuckin’ state, he’s gentle as a lamb.”

“How’s he not in a hospital?”

“My guess is, the shrink who said he was sane? That’s who had to take him if he’d said he was crazy. Would you want to deal with that?”

“That’s fucked up,” I said.

“You ain’t wrong,” he replied.

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Executive Weems negotiated something between the three inmate gang leaders, which earned him some grudging respect from the old hands like Cochrane and Big Rick. The largest group got to keep most of their real estate, while the two small ones kind of switched places while the work was going on for the pool, with the understanding that they’d all renegotiate when things returned to normal. But the construction bugged everyone—the noise, the restricted movements, the increased guarding while there were tools and earth-moving equipment around. Which just makes sense, right? Everything they’d need for a mass breakout was *right there*, bulldozers and sawzalls and jackhammers, I thought for sure they’d just overwhelm us, grab that stuff and get the fuck out, but it never happened. We got the passive consent of the prisoners. We made not blowing up the path of least resistance.

Some hand tools and rebar went missing—there was discussion over whether we’d have to toss every cell in a mass search, which usually turned up fair amount of contraband, but only the most gung-ho hardasses thought that was a good idea. No one wants to say it out loud, but a lot of contraband is harmless and keeps the convicts, like, emotionally contained.

As guards we didn’t hear much. There were informants in the population, but only Crief and some of the senior guys knew who they were. Their news filtered down in the changing rooms though. Every group wanted to get at that construction gear and escape, but to do so, they’d have to trust *one another*, and they didn’t. Especially after the territory swap in the exercise yard—everyone seemed pissed, like they’d gotten ripped off or outmaneuvered. At least eight different guys wanted to be in charge of an uprising but none of them could take charge, and once the bulldozers pulled away, the air kind of went out of it. I still didn’t breathe easy until the grand opening though.

Each pool was in its own room. They were both round, four and a half feet deep, twenty across, lined in blue-green. Each had a shelf for towels, a shower in the corner, and a lot of mint and white tile—no windows. The lightbulbs were high up and were supposed to mimic sunlight. All the water was heated and pumped by solar panels on the roof.

Between the two swimming chambers was a guard hall where someone like me could sit and watch both pools at once. There was a one-way door out, and opening it to go rescue someone would sound an alarm and summon more guards immediately. On one hand, it was considered bad to have one guard watching only two prisoners. On the other hand, it was also bad that if one faked a drowning, the other would be unobserved, but you can't go full panopticon on every square inch 24/7. Weems hoped it would be worth it and, honestly, I did too.

Weems was very open about how random the assignment of swim times was—everyone saw their inmate number printed on a ping-pong ball and put in a big clear container. They were blown into a transparent pipe using air pumped by inmates. He made a real show of it, like a lottery drawing, and before he started, he repeated the rules. No swapping times. You didn't have to swim but if you didn't use your time, no one else got it. No loss of times, even if you were in disciplinary confinement or something. The only thing to keep you out of the pool time you were "owed" was being stuck in the infirmary.

I was on duty for the first pair of swimmers. It was... *so* quiet in there, but like an echoey kind of quiet? The construction noise had bothered everyone—you picked up the vibe of how people mean-mugged each other in the cafeteria line, moving right up to the line of disrespect before backing off, this complicated dance of threats and pull-backs... but then these two dudes got to go swimming.

One was this short, hairy guy from Block A, got caught using a tow truck to rip open an ATM machine. When I say he was hairy, it was like *furry*, chest, arms, back, just full shag carpet over his whole body. Weems had ordered swim trunks in jumpsuit orange for everyone, in a M through XXXL sizing scheme. (No one in prison wants to wear size S, it seems.) This guy was in his usual prisoner scrubs and he looked at the pool for a full minute before changing and slipping in. He just sat up to his neck on the steps for a bit.

The other guy was from Block D and had something like twenty-eight DUIs. I'd seen him in the yard slamming big weight. He got in, and stripped down, no hesitation, into the trunks and he started swimming laps. Really thrashing there, he was a *bad* swimmer. Terrible form, all froth, tons of wasted movement, but he was by God going to take the opportunity to get his laps in.

So I just watched 'em for their thirty minutes. ATM Sasquatch kinda floated around on his back, did a few lazy side-strokes around, then hung his arms on the edge and kicked his feet idly, staring at the wall away from me. DUI bodybuilder plowed back and forth, but I saw him slowing down until he threw his arms over the side and hung there, body and legs in the water, breathing hard. I wondered if he was OK, but he seemed to be. I mean, he was attached to the side, he wasn't going to drown.

Thirty minutes went fast, and instead of a grating harsh alarm like damn near everything else in the prison, there was just a meek little chime. ATM sighed, hauled himself out, took a shower and used about three towels to dry his fuzzy self. DUI stayed in the shower a long time and it was only when the water turned itself off automatically that I realized he was crying.

I didn't say anything.

Eventually we found some of the tools that got stolen during construction, and it was ugly. Someone had realized an interior wall was off-camera, away from foot traffic, and just tile over gypsum board or something—not the concrete of the exterior. They’d removed a nine-by-nine plate, such that they could slide it back into place and it looked OK. Inside the wall there was a narrow space between two pipes, and it was clear that they’d gotten inside, like rats in an attic, and were removing obstructions so they could get up to the roof and cut their way out there.

We probably wouldn’t have spotted it if not for the blood, but the *other* thing they used the tools for was killing Jesper Evanko, a Block C arsonist who was found shoved under a stairway with his head knocked in and defensive wounds all over his his arms. Couple body punctures too.

“So who you think did it?” I asked Big Rick while we were on wall duty. Big Rick didn’t usually pull wall duty, they liked him to be down on the ground ready to restrain anyone who got rambunctious, but he was in a walking cast after a skiing injury.

“I dunno,” was his considered reply.

“Well? Think it through. Um. Obviously, it’s whoever stole the tools.”

“Yeah, duh, OK, obviously.” He didn’t seem all that interested. He was watching the inmates, but it was an early, cold day so they were pretty slow.

“Jesper finds out they’re escaping. He wants in... maybe threatens to drop a dime.”

““Drop a dime?””

“You know. Squeal. Eat cheese. Put on the snitch cap.”

“You watch too much streaming TV,” Big Rick said with a smile.

“Well then, maybe Jesper was one of the tool thieves and started the escape plan, but his partner decided he could travel faster alone.”

“Are you sure you wanna be a screw and not a detective?”

“What do *you* wanna talk about, the Patriots?”

“God,” Big Rick said, shaking his head. “The Patriots fuckin’ suck this year.”

“Right? So anyhow. Maybe Jesper was acting alone and someone else decided to kill him, steal the tools... y’know, basically steal his escape.”

“Hm.”

“So whoever did it... our perp... he corners Evanko, does him, and hauls the tools back to the tile hole to hide ‘em.”

“We know this,” Rick said.

“I know, I’m just... I’m putting it in order in my mind, right? They woulda gotten away with it if the blood hadn’t dripped on that staircase, if Jonesy hadn’t seen the drip.”

“They wouldn’t have.”

“No?”

“Look, when one con kills another con, we figure that shit out. C’mon.”

“OK, then who did it?”

Big Rick gave me some mean eyes for that. “I didn’t say we get it instantly. But in time, we’re gonna know.” He turned back to the yard. “You know we got all the time.”

Evanko's death lit a firecracker under Crief, of course. He blamed the whole thing on Weems—if not for his nutty swim scheme, there wouldn't have been access to tools, and his soft attitude in general made the convicts want to test limits, on and on. Weems, for his part, terminated Crief's consulting contract, which didn't sit well with everyone who worked with him for years. Not just enforcement officers (or, as Weems renamed us, 'safety attendants') but the administration and secretarial staff. Or, at least the ones who *liked* Crief. I gotta figure that the ones who didn't like Crief had quit, transferred or gotten fired, but yeah, with Crief out a bunch of other people started taking their retirement options. Which meant that more new folks got hired in the non-contact parts (the paperwork people, switchboard, IT, that kinda thing). The sourpussed office manager Devora retired to spend more time with her grandkids and was replaced by Malia, who was about my age and nice. I mean, like, *nice*.

I tried, of course, to be in the break room when she was eating lunch.

"How you finding the work?" I asked.

"I used to be in an insurance office," she said, "But we got shuttered after a buyout. It's not all that different—different forms, same spreadsheet program." She shrugged.

"Not sure I could handle an office job," I said.

"Isn't guarding a lot of standing around?"

"Hey, *I* get to sit. At the pool, anyhow." I smiled to show I was joking a little.

"Yeah, how's that going?"

"The inmates seem to like it OK," I said. "Two cellies, Garret and Clay, they happened to get scheduled back to back and wanted to know if they could, like, double up—both being there both times."

"I bet Weems said no."

"He absolutely did."

"Too bad for those guys. Though, gee, don't you think they see enough of each other?"

She actually said 'gee,' I'm not kidding.

"Those two seem pretty tight," I said. "I have trouble remembering which one of them is the wire fraud guy and which one is the carjacker-with-assault."

"So do you think they're...?" She made a little gesture and raised an eyebrow.

"Gay for the stay?" I said. "I ain't gonna gossip, it's undignified."

That got a laugh. I went on. "Yeah, I remember one of my instructors in, like, 'guard college'—he was like, he said, 'No one wants to say that consensual sex between prisoners is good for discipline and morale but... well, it is.' So I mind my business."

The next day Garret and Clay had their day, each in order, while a rape-o and a drug guy were in the pool next door. Pretty typical. Garret did laps. Clay seemed to amuse himself with seeing how long he could stay underwater. The drug guy would get underwater and do handstands in the middle of the pool, feet sticking up. The rapist just did slow backstrokes until his head hit the wall, then rolled and did front crawl back across, then flipped onto his back again. Slow and regular the whole time. Good form too. Maybe he'd been on his high school swim team.

Once Big Rick was back on yard duty, I was doing wall stuff with Jonesy, the safety 'ten who spotted the blood on the staircase when Evanko got got. As you might expect, he was more

interested in figuring out who had spilled that blood he saw, even if officially that was above our pay grade. (“Safety Managers” were in charge of the investigation.)

“OK,” Jonesy said. “I figure it’s someone from Block C or Block B.”

“Yeah?”

“Consider where the people walk. Who’s going to even see that wall? Trusties, sure, they could go anywhere... but the tunnel was between B and C, and anyone from a different block who spent time there, they’d get noticed—even a trusty. Wouldn’t want to be caught with a stolen tool far from your cell...”

“Right,” I said, “Right.”

“Now Evanko was from B, so he could have been a tunneler.”

“Or the only one!” I said. “Someone figures out he’s doing it and kills him to take over the project.”

“Maybe,” Jonesy said. “Maybe. But you gotta consider your pool situation too. Anyone going to the pool would pass... I mean, not right by the wall, but not too far. They coulda said they were going to their pool time, then ducked there and claimed they didn’t feel like it.”

“Not many people skip, at least not on my watch.”

“They like the water?”

“Or the time alone.” I didn’t want to tell Jonesy how many of the inmates were indulging in a little self-gratification in the shower or the warm water. What’cha gonna do? People are gross and have needs.

“Can you make a list of people who’ve missed their pool times?”

“Sure, I guess. I’ll talk to the other guys who guard it... it oughta be a short list.”

“Compare that with prisoners who aren’t from B or C, find out if any patterns show up.”

“Yeah,” I said. “Will do.”

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But I didn’t get around to it because I nearly got drowned.

Moppy was not a great swimmer. At least, not that I ever saw. He liked the warm water, got in and floated. Pretty tranquil.

As promised, he was a model prisoner. Polite, quiet, obedient, slow-moving. Completely different from the maniac I had to press. It was... honestly, it was bizarre. I think the only reason he didn’t apologize to me was that he for real did not remember ever meeting me before.

Nonetheless, I kept my eye on him. His time matched with a guy in the other pool who’d hit-and-run, another drifter, but I was never at risk of nodding off, no matter how quiet the two of them were. I remembered Moppy’s freakout all too clearly, so I was paying attention when it happened again in the water.

“Get off. Get off. No, I don’t... I won’t... *get offa me!*”

As soon as he started muttering, I got out of my chair. When he started to twitch in the water, I grabbed my safety ring. He ramped up fast. He stood up and started thrashing, and then he slipped off his feet, flailing wildly.

I went through the door, starting the alarms, and I held out the ring. “Moppy! *Moppy!* Grab the ring!”

The answer was a howl of nonsense syllables as he rolled and splashed. I... hesitated.

You're supposed to just go straight in, as a lifeguard. You see someone in aquatic distress, you don't pause. Seconds count.

But prison guarding isn't lifeguarding. As a 'safety attendant,' you're not supposed to confront alone, you're supposed to warn, defend and wait for backup. Like Big Rick says, we have the time.

That's maybe not why I hesitated though, or not all of it. I was scared of Moppy. I'd seen him halt Big Rick in his tracks, I'd seen him try to bite through a riot shield, I knew how bad he hurt himself fighting last time and I didn't want to be on the receiving end of that.

Watching the video later, it was just a slow three-count before I jumped in, and I felt better, in some ways. It seemed a lot longer, in the situation. Like it was a cowardly degree of hesitation.

They'd given me a uniform sort of like a wetsuit, but not as thick or rubbery—something so if I did have to grab a prisoner, there wouldn't be so much naked skin exposed to their nails. Swim shoes too, the kind with the rubber soles for traction. I stood watching and then his head came out of the water, screaming. When he fell back I saw him suck in a big chlorinated lungful, and I jumped in.

They teach you that if someone's panicking and fighty, you dive under them, come up behind and get them by the arm and neck. But this water wasn't deep enough. I tried to get around or past him and his foot went right into my crotch. Not sure if it was intentional. Probably just dumb luck, there was no visibility. I got his bicep in a loop, got my head over the surface for a breath only to have his hand go straight in my face, fingers stiff, two in my mouth, one up my nose and one in my left eye. I flinched as he closed his fist, clawing. The pain was incredible. I shoved him away as hard as I could with both feet, which got me clear of him, but also drove the back of my skull right into the lip of the porcelain.

It felt like green electricity shot through my head and then I was slipping under. I tried to stay up, tried to stay conscious but... nope.

Next thing I knew, I was on my side, barfing out swallowed and inhaled water. In the moment, I had no idea how much time had gone by. Blakey, one of the other swim guards, was right on top of me, doing resuscitation.

"He's breathing!" Blakey shouted.

"Wha ha?" I asked.

"Don't worry about it," he said. "You're going in an ambulance. Just lie still."

I lolled to the side and saw the infirmary doctor hooking a defibrillator unit onto Moppy. "Get back from the goddamn water!" she shouted at two other guards. "Clear!"

I watched her try, go to CPR, and try again. Then a gurney showed up for me.

II II II II II II

I wound up on administrative leave with pay for two weeks, but I barely got to the hospital before the union rep called with a lawyer, so it wasn't any kind of vacation. Moppy's daughter and son were insisting they were going to sue, wrongful death, and so the hearing to judge if disciplinary action was merited was going to be run pretty tight.

I guess I was lucky I got to see the video before the hearing. I mean, it didn't feel lucky. It was part of 'discovery' or something? As a defendant, I had to have access to all the same evidence? I'm still not certain I get how it works.

The pools were video monitored because of course they were. You can see Moppy start to lose it, I come in and offer him the ring, which he ignores, then I jump in and it all goes down. I felt sick to my stomach, watching me knock myself out. It's all silent, no sound on the recording... You can see me sink into the water, and Moppy does the same. I stop moving before he does.

Then, just about five seconds later, Blakey runs in with two other guys right behind him. They immediately go about pulling me out and getting me in the recovery position while Moppy just lays there in the water, but it's less than a minute before they jump in and haul him out too. After that, it's pretty much what I remember. One of the other guards checks Moppy's pulse as soon as he's out, and on the video you can see him shake his head, wide-eyed, as the doctor comes in.

I'll spare you the suspense, I was found to have acted correctly. Not going to lie though, going through the hearing has maybe given me a little more understanding of what the convicts all went through with their trials. The uncertainty, that feeling like you're spinning your wheels in place, can't get anywhere, can't do anything, but can't think of anything else... it sucks.

One lawyer said I should sue the prison, and another said I should sue Moppy's kids, but my union guy said I should just stay chill and not sue anyone. When Malia visited me my second day in the hospital, she seemed to think all the suing was crazy, and I guess I agreed. I just wanted to get back to my job and forget about it.

But of course, it was a huge deal. It turned out that Moppy wasn't the only prisoner to die. While it was going on, someone got to Eduardo Rivas-Sanches in the laundry room and shivved him. That, in turn, blew up on Weems.

Crief led the charge, saying that Weems' inexperience, incompetence and lax discipline had let the prisoners go buck wild. (He didn't use that term, but I read between the lines.) Weems immediately agreed to step down, which felt like he decided to walk out before getting thrown out, but during the inquest he tore into Crief for passively accepting that Moppy was faking it. In hindsight, after drowning during his freakout, people were much more accepting of the idea that he'd actually been having real, genuine psychotic episodes. And I mean, yeah. I'm no clinical psychiatrist but that shit didn't seem fake to me.

So, when Weems left, Crief didn't return, but I guess someone with clout wanted an experienced warden. After two different interim wardens—one who took a hands-off chair-warmer approach, which just made the prisoners more squirrely, and one who was only there a week before getting a better offer—they settled on this guy named Peña.

He was Warden Peña and we were called corrections officers again. But he did re-open the pools, which was the thing the prisoners seemed to want most. (Well, OK, no, the thing they wanted most was better food, but that wasn't happening.)

Big Rick and some of the other old hands liked Peña OK. They said he invited them to a "get to know you" poker game at his house and he just ran the table. Completely inscrutable guy. Later on, he did the same things with some of the prisoners. Really! Played poker with the gang

leaders and high-status long-timers, gambling for privileges from him, and for concessions from them. That's how I heard it, anyhow. Maybe the older guards were pulling my leg.

In time, I found myself back in the chair, watching the swimmers. The first couple times were really eerie, because that scene with Moppy was traumatizing. But Malia was a sympathetic ear, paying me back for listening to her boyfriend beefs. She'd started seeing this guy right about the time Moppy died, but I was thinking it wouldn't go the distance.

The first shift I pulled watching pools was, coincidentally, the ATM grizzly bear and DUI bodybuilder again, just like the very first time. Maybe that helped. They did the same things—the hairy guy with his backstroke and floating, the big guy with his hard-charging front crawl. His form was improving. I wonder if someone was somehow coaching him.

I found out the new warden had made some changes though. Garret and Clay, the cellies from Block B, were allowed to double up in the pool as a reward for good behavior, but they only did it once because, let's be real, those pools were never built for two people. He also started taking people's time as a punishment, and reassigning it as a reward. Once he allowed people to trade times, it all got complicated—it was like a marketplace. The guys with shitty schedules would trade off their time for cigarettes or commissary stuff, usually to people who weren't wild about swimming but who were on the outs with some group or another and wanted just thirty minutes when they didn't have to have their head on a swivel. Plus, you started to see the good times—not too early, not close to meals—getting traded to the big bullies and the gang runners by convicts who didn't want to get their asses beat.

In short, for a lot of the convicts it turned into just another dimension of the ongoing hustle, everyone scared and manipulative and trying to get an advantage, even if it was only as thin as a piece of toilet paper. It made me sad, because people weren't coming in looking like they liked it, and they weren't leaving looking relaxed. I don't have an extensive analysis of outcomes, but that's my take on the feeling.

It was the day after my first pool-watch back that I was on duty with Jonesy and he could fill me in on what happened to Rivas-Sanches.

"We're still looking for the tool," he said. "Whatever it was, doctors say it was a little bit curved, no edge, just a tip. Like a sharpened metal scrap or something."

"Hm," I said.

"Warden Peña has been doing searches all the time. I mean, we tossed the cells as soon as we found the body, but of course it was well hidden. Now, every time there's the slightest justification, he turns over the whole prison. People are sick of it."

"I bet."

"I mean, even the hard-ass guards are starting to get tired of doing it. At first, they were like kids on Christmas, finding pills, finding cell phones, finding pruno, but... man it's getting to be like work, and the convicts are pissed. But Peña, he's told them he's going to keep it up until he finds the murder weapon."

"Yeah, everyone has seemed pretty on edge," I admitted.

"Sure, they're uneasy there's a killer at large!" He laughed.

When the weapon was found though, it wasn't in a cell. Someone had managed to wrench a gap in the frame of a dryer and wedge it inside, so it was found at the laundry where the murder occurred. The trusties who led guards to it swore it hadn't been like that before, but they didn't

know how long it had been there. For sure it hadn't been there when Rivas-Sanches died, so at some point between then and discovery, the killer got back to the laundry room, pried open the machine, and hid the shiv.

No fingerprints or DNA on it, of course. But as soon as I saw that it was a fragment of blue-green tile, I got a very bad feeling.

I asked Malia when I could talk to Warden Peña, and she cleared some time that very afternoon.

"I think that masonry knife that killed Rivas-Sanches came out of the pool," I said.

"Sure," he said, barely looking up from his paperwork. "Tell me something I don't know."

"I took a swim around and found where it came from, near one of the intakes," I said, "And I think I know who pried it out."

He looked up at that, for sure. But his face was still completely neutral.

"Oh yes?" His chair creaked as he leaned back in it. "Explain."

"All right, at first I thought it was Mike Halloran," I said, "Because he did headstands in the pool, right? But when I took the piece and looked, it was from the *other pool*—the one Halloran never used. Plus, where Mike did his thing, he wasn't near the vent."

"So you know who it wasn't," he said flatly.

"But then I remembered that Clay Thomas from Block B was also, like, underwater all the time. I mean, he said he was seeing how long he could hold his breath? He would have been right by the intake then."

He looked at me for a long moment. "Go on," he prompted, and I licked dry lips. Then I went for it.

"What if Clay and Garrett were the guys digging the tunnel? If they had a tool—a screwdriver or a trowel or whatever—they could have used that to get the tile started, and then Clay pries it off and sneaks it out."

"Past you. After sneaking in his trowel or screwdriver, past you."

"Yeah, yes, that... that would be on me, but it makes sense doesn't it? They're both trusties and they're on Block B near the dig."

"It's thin."

"Look, I don't know why they'd target either guy, but if they're killing our convicts we have to know, don't we?"

Peña just gave me a long, emotionless look.

"It's thin," he repeated, "But I'll get someone to check the videos and look into it."

II II II II II II

For a couple months, nothing happened. Then everything happened at once.

First off, Moppy's kids' lawsuit started up and they presented evidence that Moppy's tantrums happened before he was even locked up. Specifically, as a child he'd had a "hypermanic psychotic episode" after being prescribed a drug called Trigepherone.

Finding out who, if anyone, had a Trigepherone scrip in Oak C by just asking the infirmary was firmly out of bounds, but Peña tried it another way, asking the snitches to find out who was trading pills and trumping up another search. Of course no one has prescription drugs in their

cells, but he thought he might get lucky and find out who'd chipmunked one out of the infirmary for resale, even though Trigepherone doesn't have any kind of a recreational reputation. Keeping ears open to gossip and, yep, holding out pool time as a reward... hell, maybe gambling for it... eventually it paid off and he found out that it was the English professor from Block F who had the prescription.

When brought in for interrogation and threatened with solitary, or with being soft-framed for snitching, Dr. Laufey admitted he'd been coerced into giving Trigepherone doses to Garret the carjacker.

When Clay found out he was at risk of being upgraded to a murder trial, he flipped. Garret did it all, according to Clay—stole the tools, forced Clay to help him with the escape attempt, killed Evanko with the stolen hammer, then later killed Rivas-Sanches over, and I quote, 'some other thing, I don't know all his business.'

Once they went to Garret and let him know his buddy was singing, he flipped back on Clay, of course. Clay was the one who knew about Moppy's situation, he was the one who came up with the idea of drugging him and then doing stuff while everyone was distracted, Clay was the one who got the masonry shiv, and Clay was the one who killed Evanko and Rivas-Sanches.

Getting Clay and Garret for everything made everyone happy. (Except them, of course.) Moppy's kids had some closure, knowing that the guys responsible for their dad's death got caught. Peña got to look good to his bosses for finding the killers responsible for three deaths. It was good for discipline inside Oak C, too. The population had been pushing their luck, trying stuff, infractions, when they knew someone had (a) nearly dug a tunnel out, (b) killed at least one dude and (c) not gotten caught. Naturally, once more people are trying to get away with something, the guards responsible for preventing that get stretched, more stuff falls through the cracks and so people get *more* confident. Lather, rinse, repeat. Busting Clay and Garret reversed all of that. No one was getting away with anything anymore. Or so it seemed to us. Probably, it just went back to being the really sneaky, deniable, tolerable stuff.

Anyway, about a week after Garret and Clay got transferred to separate prisons and things felt like they were calming down, Malia said Warden Peña wanted to see me.

"Gus, I wanted to thank you for bringing your suspicions to me," he said, once the pleasantries were past. "It was thin, but you gotta pull every thread, even the thin ones."

"Well, we had time," I said.

He nodded. "Anyhow, I've put a commendation in your file. As far as anyone who matters is concerned, you did everything right with poor old Mel Prynne."

That was Moppy's real name. Almost no one ever used it.

"Thanks sir. That means a lot," I said, though I'm not sure it actually did.

For a moment, we were quiet, and I wasn't sure if I was supposed to leave or not. I mentioned that he had this really unexpressive face, right? Like a piece of paper with nothing printed on it.

"Was there something else?" he finally asked, and I replied. I hadn't even known I was going to. I hadn't planned some kind of speech, it just came out.

"Would you think about going back to how Weems was doing things?"

He blinked, slowly. "No."

"Oh. OK." I could feel my face getting red. "I just..."

“You’ve gone over to the post-carcerial reform side now, Anderson?”

“I don’t mean *everything* Weems did, but... I mean, the pool management. I think he was right about the pool, somehow.”

He folded his arms and looked at me and I knew I never ever wanted to play poker against him. “Explain.”

“I just... I never understood where Weems got the idea of a *pool*, but I was there, you know? Front and center and I saw his, like, policies taking place. I saw *them*. I could see people come in with that closed up convict posture and walk out a little taller—shoulders less hunched, necks not quite so huddled, eyes a little less squinty and suspicious. I could just be imagining it, because it was subtle, but I think it was real. I think it was. Would it be so bad to go back to that, at least?”

He didn’t say anything and I decided that by God he was going to speak first. I was sweating and trying not to shift from foot to foot, face burning, I swear my pits and nuts never itched with sweat so much in my whole life.

“As it happens,” he said at long last, “I’ve been thinking about doing a reorg. That pool thing, the whole program... it’s a pain in my ass. I could put you in charge of it, on paper. A promotion, if you like—no pay raise but a better title. You interested?”

So that’s how I wound up in charge of the penitentiary swimming pools and their administration.

I sent a letter to let Weems know his ideas were back in play. The whole rehumanizing thing. Haven’t heard back from him.

If changing the pool policies back bothered Peña, he never said anything. I don’t know. I can’t read that guy, it’s like trying to figure out what a brick is thinking. I can’t provide metrics or data or anything. But I still believe the men are better off when they’re done in the water. I really do.