

## A ROOM OF ONE'S OWN

by Harold Moore

There is too much to say about prison. You can find people who swear that the American prison system in the United States is doing a fine job. That all the 300,000 inmates housed throughout state and federal correctional institutions are subjected to carefully designed and professional executed programs. That the system is responsive to the needs of the men and women incarcerated as well as to the citizens who desire to make criminals pay for their crimes.

Then there are the pundits of the left who say that society is so eager to protect itself from crime and its purveyors that it is doing nothing more than sweeping the problem under the rug by warehousing criminals. They are also the ones to point out that the United States has the highest per capita prison population in the world, and that beyond an ever increasing flood of paper and person-power the system has its obvious failures and that little is done to address the ever present reality of the waste of human lives.

Yet from here, inside a federal correction institution, the question of operational philosophy seems far removed from the day-to-day life of an inmate. Here, the question of what will appear on the steam table at lunch successfully competes with the operational decisions of the Bureau of Prisons. The mundane often reaches monumental proportions.

From my personal point of view, the prison experience has been and continues to be an eye opener.

At first I operated under the assumption that waving the red flag in front of the bull would at least let the bull know from the start that he was dealing with ME. Oh, you know, force people to adjust to what I am first, then let the individual decide to deal with me or reject me. At least then I could face various relationships with the knowledge that I wouldn't be fooled into thinking that I was doing well with everybody. My friends would at least be friends.

What I discovered though was that the quick witted, flamboyant self I chose to be, was hard to get rid of. That queen that lurked so slightly under the surface is indeed a part of me. I was just as much a victim of the stereotype as those I was so quick to point out were my "sisters."

When it came time for me to "be myself," I was put upon to define what "myself" was. So I grew my moustache back. It was a start. At least I could look like myself.

It was at this point I ran into C.D.

We, C.D. and me, live in a ten foot by eight foot room complete with toilet and sink. Bunk beds made-up with coarse-grey blankets and military style collared sheets.

Society is eager to protect itself from crime and its purveyors, but prison does nothing more than sweep the problem under the rug by warehousing criminals.



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Our two lockers are full of personal items and issued clothing. The remnants of life are shared and the stress of this environment carefully dealt with together. It's the together that makes this green-apple painted room our home.

Without sounding too self-righteous I want to convey to you the reality of being real in the

place where being real is not the accepted behavior.

Politically, I'm convinced that when I leave this place I will leave a legacy of respect and warmth.

Accepted correctional theory does not allow for a positive homosexual experience. Homosexual behavior is the source of vio-

lence and thus an interruption of the orderly operation of the individual institution. An inmate accused of engaging in a sexual act with another inmate is subject to disciplinary action and punishment by the institution's Disciplinary Committee. Proposing sexual behavior is also against the rules.

This course of action is in response to the threats of homosexual rapes and predator/prey relationships in which the strong prevail.

What the rules avoid is the ever increasing visibility of the gay population now flooding the prison system. At this institution, for instance, the gay population is a large and easily identified minority. Like gay communities everywhere the diverse individual parts make the total community a colorful and fascinating entity. Rules be damned, boys will be boys and the coupling process goes on.

Attracted by physical, emotional and matter of fact realities such as protection and economics, the gay population survives outside the law much like communities did all over the United State pre-Stonewall. The reality of our presence forces some adjustments in institution reaction, but the bottom line fact-of-life is that at the whim of any of the 200 or so employees in this U.S. Government facility an on going, perfectly honest and positive relationship can be declared quasi-criminal and punishment is forthcoming with no allowable defense. In this spirit being together can be a daring statement.

Historically, the gay male in prison has had to deal with his own sexuality in the context of the perceptions and stereotypes of the straight inmate population and the ever present correctional staff. Out of the closet gays were forced to assume the public images of surrogate women. Names like Lisa, Dee Dee and Candy are to this day common reminders of the accepted role of gay men in the arena of corrections. Shaved legs, plucked eyebrows and make-up made of every imaginable ingredient underscore the names and in effect, a new gender is created. Personal pronouns change as rapidly as the population around us becomes aware that Joe Jones becomes Joanna, who has very smooth legs and a very colorful facade. From he to she seems to be the shortest distance between strict gender identification and the sexual ambiguity of the open gay male in jail.

The structure is showing signs of breaking down, though. In 1984 it is easier to establish a person acceptable to the macho segment of the prison population free of the stereotypes. But the route to accurate portrayal is littered with the painted faces of men unable to muster the strength to carry their liberation to its fruition and are forced by fear and intimidation to return to the passive surrogate role. It becomes more and more acceptable, though, to be what you are and turn away from the trite and cliché.