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Behind the Wall

THE TOWER OF CHRISTMAS

A lowly guard tower, smaller than this cell, is a peculiar solace. Officers sit there all day, day in and day out, soaking up summer's sun and winter's rain, sleet and snow. It is consoling because the men and women are there by choice, their choice. With arsenal at hand, they stare down at the cells watching cons drink hot coffee, listen to stereos, and gripe when the newspaper is late—all the luxuries imposed upon us against our will. In addition to the mundane misery of tower duty, a job few would trade for their prison release, there is the distress of watching the ornaments of Christmas spring up around them, out of our sight, out of their reach. Whereas we need only wonder if children still go door to door caroling, if Santas still ring bells on the streetcorner, and if families still gather at the tree-markets—huddled together in warm coats to pick out Christmas trees—the tower guard lives with their reality—or takes part. They hear all the little voices filled with giggling spirit. They might drop a piece of silver in Santa's bucket. And, worst of all, they must smell the sap of fresh-cut firs, shield their eyes from the brightness of tinsel and blinking lights, and taste the eggnog, ham, and pumpkin pie.

You might ask why Christmas might touch them from this lofty tower. It may not. But as much as some would hate to admit, they put their pants on one leg at a time, perform the same daily functions we do, and, most important, especially with a cannon at their side, they had better have good vision and a reliable amount of judgment. Working the west wall, they must see the convict gazing out the window at the visitor's parking lot, and if an innocent little boy waving to his daddy staring down from the fifth tier cannot touch a soft part in their heart, I wonder. If a convict's young daughter cries in the parking lot as she leaves her daddy, emotion only a heart can muster will fill the void in the most calloused guard's chest.

Their candidacy for sainthood may be doubtful, their halos tinged—although somewhat brighter than ours—and their credibility unquestioned, but I wonder if immunity and privilege negate visions of their sons and daughters in that parking lot waving at their dad's cell and asking mom why daddies go to prison for driving and drinking beer. Could it be they can remember long ago when, with temper out of control, they held another man by the nape of the neck, prepared to do great harm or, if prowess was lacking, snatched up arms to defend the territorial imperative inherent to every living creature. Unfortunately, any one of these actions is grounds for incarceration, applicable to all of society. With this in mind, knowing they, too, under the slightest variance of circumstance, might also be looking up to a tower, wondering if Christmas was still scheduled without them, I hope there is a place in their heart,

hidden behind a shield, that understands.

Of course, there are those men and women who don't allow for moments of weakness. They shun the thought, refusing to deal with it, hiding under the premises of piety and the privilege of rank. They worry me. They really do! A man not knowing his own strength is innocently dangerous. Men not knowing the strength of their own weaknesses are the most dangerous, spur-of-the-moments threats. Inside the walls, among ourselves, we deal with those weaknesses again. Some are camouflaged with rhetoric, others are contained by lengthy, self-imposed cell-time, and, in the yard, these weaknesses are reinforced with bulging sinews.

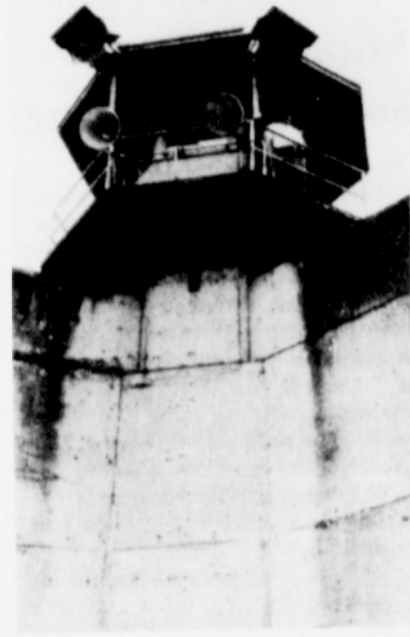
In the popular mind our institution has been labeled by these weaknesses. But defined, an institution is a pattern of behavior, or habit, in the form or mores, folkways, and laws that have clustered around particular human functions, durable because members of each generation face the same problems maintaining ties with the past and future through their parents and children. Institutions, in which jails and mental hospitals are included, are abstract concepts of organized habits and standardized ways of doing things given form by the behavior of individuals; however, institutions give form to the behavior of individuals also. But few people want to take responsibility for the public hostility toward our institution this Christmas. The man who complains the most often does the least to rectify the object of his disdain. We read of him in the newspapers and hear him on the radio and see him in the courtroom launching into a tirade for the benefit of defendants, spectators, and honorable justices. But like the queen in the play within the play Hamlet, he "doth protest too much, me thinks."

Macbeth, in the first act of another Shakespeare tragedy, said something that haunts me like a persistent ditty stuck in the mind and hummed over and over again until nothing less than a swift slap in the face can make rescue.

...Why do I yield to that suggestion
Whose horrid image doth unfix my hair
And make my seated heart knock at my ribs,
Against the use of nature? Present fears
Are less than horrible imaginings:
My thoughts, whose murder is yet fantastical,
Shakes so my single state of man that function
is smothered in surmise, and nothing is
But what is not.

Macbeth, who thinks of himself as strong, is really weak; he is the prisoner of his imagination. Shakespeare said so well "nothing is but what is not." Fear of strength is really terror in the sight of weakness; sorrow at wondering if Christmas will go as planned is really the lament of

knowing it will; our fear of possibly never getting out of here is really a fear of not knowing what to do if "they" ever decide to let us go. The reality of twenty-year parole dates gives the security of knowing social security checks will pay for our next Christmas as free men, but fear pervades that twenty-first-century security. We have nightmares of lunar modules circling the moon's surface spraying colors on the white terrain creating portraits of science-fiction reindeer to be viewed by



the people on earth, and, our incomes being fixed, having to wear blindfolds because we could neither pay for the view or the pill people take to create Christmas.

But Shakespeare was not the first to shine a dim light on the idiosyncracies of human nature that the convict fears. The ancient legends typify past and present fears—fears that have plagued society since time began. For instance, a Cyprian King, Pygmalion, so loved the ivory statue he sculptured that he adorned it with jewels, clothed it in fine silks, and treated it as he would have treated the fairest maiden. He loved it so much he asked the gods to give it life, and they did. Sociologists have coined the term "self-fulfilling prophecy" to exemplify occurrences similar to the legend of Pygmalion that occur today. The placebo effect, for instance, occurs when an ailing person believes he has been given a miracle drug and makes a miraculous recovery, never knowing he is the victim of modern medicine and a pill containing only sugar or powdered milk. Back in 1929 people believing the banks could no longer remain solvent withdrew millions of dollars in savings. This panic was a major factor in facilitating the collapse of the nation's economic system and was nothing more than an exaggerated belief, powerful enough to cause the very disaster they feared.

The self-fulfilling prophecy is at work in our state's institutions. The public, all too often, wants to believe that convicts are sub-human non-persons. The public sees no

justification for the desire of convicts to want a Christmas at home with their families, and an explanation why people feel such a desire is regarded as a foolish dream circumventing the purpose of our being here. A walk in the park, a moment to touch a real tree or see a puppy and children and home are all privileges we gave up when we came to prison and, furthermore, so the public thinks, we must have a lot of nerve even to think about such common things. The public grumbles at knowing there is a miniature golf course outside a prison window—a luxury certainly not earned. Maybe it's our just desert to peer out at the scoreboard painted on the big wall and dream about the real baseball games in Candlestick park with the real Giants, Reds and Pirates. The lock-em-up-and-throw-away-the-key citizen sees no reason for our anger when, in the chowhall on Christmas day, we bite into a cold turkey. "They ought to feed them beans," is the popular comment. Well, if the beans are hot, you have a deal!

Our constitution forbids the punishment of a criminal's family for his acts, yet as we watch our families come in, see the pain in their faces, hear of the inequities imposed upon them by members of society blaming them for our conduct, and we are punished again. We envision shriveled bigots churning their feet from their comfortable sofas, shaking clenched fists up and down, and, with an evil grin on their faces, telling us it's only half of what we deserve. And they locked us up for lack of respect for human life. The hostility of the outside world affects not just our lives, but the lives of all people who realize their own weaknesses and understand—although they do not condone—the deeds we are convicted of. One day I asked why—why are we responsible for those problems while confined within the impenetrable walls of prison. Using the dialectics of opposition, a little bit of hindsight, and thinking about the self-fulfilling prophecy, the reason came to me.

Crime is society's worst fear, and December, the time of Christmas spirit and brotherly love, is the time of year society faces the highest crime rate. The Oregon Crime-Statistics manual shows a graph depicting the sharp rise of crime during the holiday season and goes on to itemize the frequency of each index crime, the totals for each month, and the yearly totals. In 1977 there were a total of 295,997 crimes committed in the state of Oregon and almost eleven million crimes reported nationwide, but there are only fifteen

hundred men incarcerated in the Salem penitentiary. If every one of these men were released for a year and committed three crimes apiece in the state of Oregon only, the total crimes (by 1977 standards) would be a little more than 300,000, a barely detectable increase. But few of the convicts here are native Oregonians and would hardly confine their business merely to the state of Oregon. On a national level the total crimes would equal .045% of the total—a difference the most efficient statistician would have difficulty detecting. Yet with the odds or statistics being as slim as they are, the Corrections Division must bear the brunt of the responsibility for the crime rate, and the only things they have control over capable of affecting the crime rate are locked behind solid walls. And those are the foolish ones—the ones that got caught. Do the intelligent criminals roam free, mixing with that same society unable to understand why we have the nerve to even dream about Christmas with our families? Citizens say that we are the cause of their fear, the reason they cannot walk the streets, and that parole should be taboo, the key should be thrown away. This attitude is malignant revenge permeating society—a self-fulfilling prophecy, a placebo to tranquilize the vindictiveness. It is mere sugar contained in a capsule curing ills when parole dates stretch into the twenty-first century, and a Pygmalion's statue brought to life because people believe prison has become a revolving door where murderers walk out in seven years.

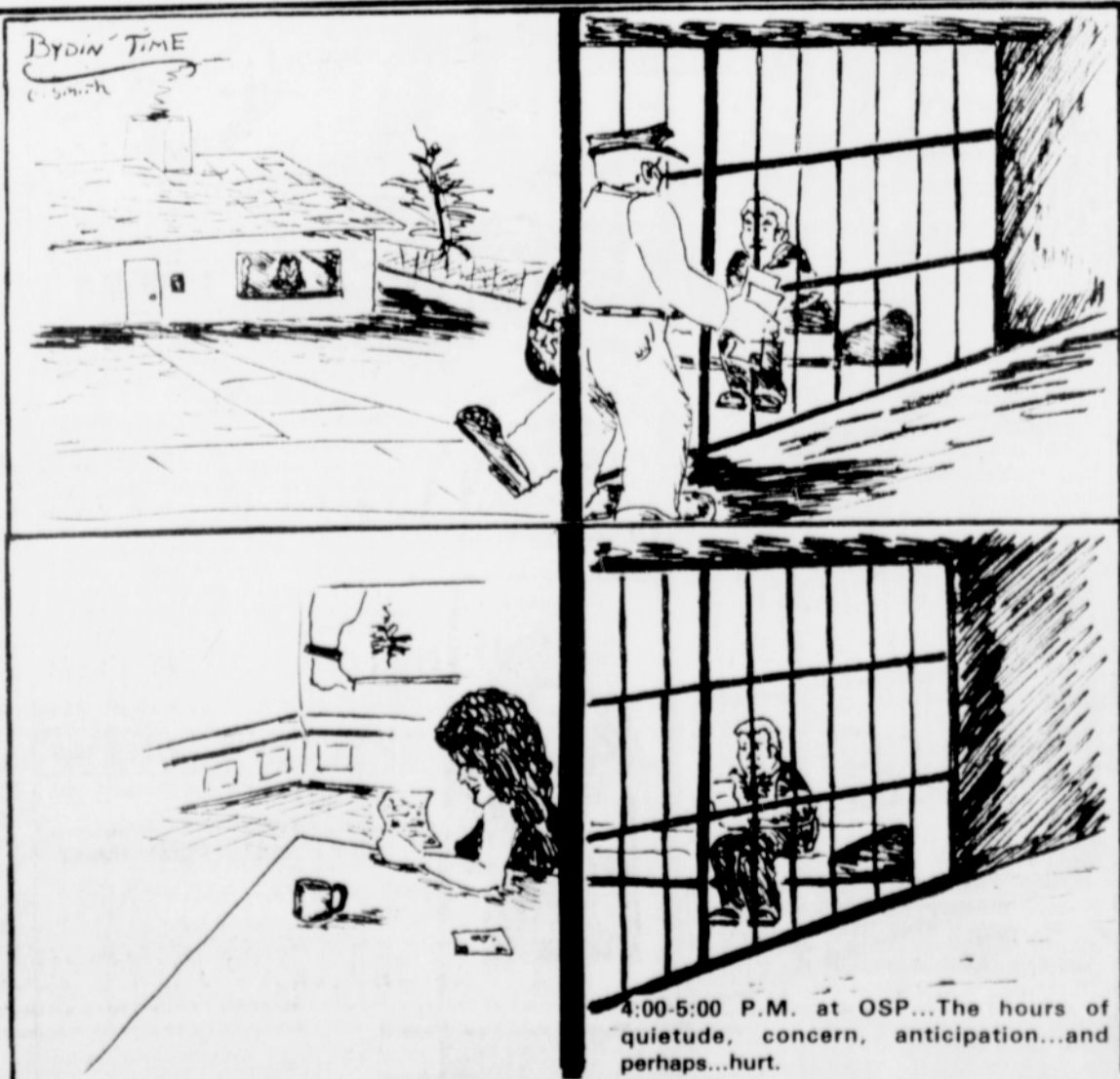
This is not a plea for pity. The plea is for understanding that we, too, put our pants on one leg at a time, we have hearts that feel emotion, and that we can look out our windows and see people with the same qualities driving through the streets on their way to the homes of loved ones when we can't and know why.

I wondered why Pygmalion created the perfect semblance of a beautiful maiden and chose to fall in love with the statue, just as I wonder why society has created prisons and fallen in love with the fantasy that convicts should be held strictly accountable for life's difficulties. The answer to Pygmalion's lust bears a striking resemblance to our own social patterns. Pygmalion detested the practices of his own people. Marriage was then, as it is now, a common desire, just as society's need for a scapegoat for their own difficulties is a strong desire. But in Pygmalion's time, before a woman was allowed to marry she had to perform certain rituals. They were obliged

by custom to prostitute themselves to strangers at the sanctuary of the goddess Aphrodite or Astarte. This was not an orgy of lust but a solemn religious duty performed in the service of the great Mother Goddess of Western Asia. The wages earned by this sanctified harlotry were dedicated to the goddess. Some women waited for years outside the temple to relinquish their bodies to the embraces of a stranger. It is believed that the custom was initiated by King Cinyras, and practiced by his daughters, the sisters of Adonis, who, having incurred the wrath of Aphrodite, the goddess of beauty and love, mated with strangers for the rest of their lives.

I cannot blame Pygmalion for his stern refusal to marry a prostitute and sculpting a statue of purity to later marry and bear him sons. Nor can I blame society for sculpting the image they have of convicts. Who can bear to face his or her own harlotry? However, inefficiency and the inability to exercise vested authority has made the remedy only a dream, and immoral practices have flourished. It took the charisma and strength of Constantine to abolish this custom. He destroyed the temples and built churches in their stead. Unfortunately, he must have been a simple man, for building a church takes so much more work than simply sculpting a statue and praying to a god asking life for a creation. But, then again, Constantine was a real man, Pygmalion is a legend—a fantasy created in the minds of real people. A fantasy created for what, though? I'm almost afraid to guess. Could it be for expedience? Would men and women stoop so low?

I must be a simpler matter today. Not enough people have sat in that guard tower day after day for eight hour shifts with nothing to do but fumble a bullet in their shirt pocket and think—think about anything but the problems of everyday life. They have not pondered the power of mass minds to create or aggravate an already existing situation. Nor have they seen the effects of incarceration on an inmate's family—people who did not commit a crime but are destined to suffer a Christmas without an important component. Innocent children come home crying every night because Johnny's daddy forbade him to associate with the children of a convicted felon—a shame he had no voice in but will have to bear the rest of his life. And just who will play with those children? Only the children of the few humanitarians who know their strengths and their weaknesses, and



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DECEMBER

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FROM EXODUS

Remember that in order to fully enjoy this holiday season your mind must be clear so that you will know in what manner you are presenting yourself to others, and in what manner you are receiving others.

Excessive use of alcohol and drugs distorts your ability to consistently present yourself to others respectfully, and to receive others respectfully in the true spirit of this joyous holiday season.

It is respect that is fundamental to peace on earth and good will to all human beings.