



Behind the Walls

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Activity in the chow hall finally settled to a dull roar. The last tier stood against the East and West walls waiting to find a clean tray, hoping the salad would still be crisp. My tray empty, except for two slices of butter, I walked toward the deep room to deposit my tin cup and silverware. I snatched a piece of dry bread from an empty tray to cover the butter -- Smith was eyeing the trays again.

A crowd had gathered at the exit; men were standing on tiptoe to see from the rear -- someone had posted the latest gossip on the bulletin board. These boards are a part of the prison grapevine. I knew what it said -- just the latest conviction -- probably for rape or an undeserving soul who got a break. There is no need penetrating the crowd, though, when the hall will be lined with scutletbutts eager to pass the news. Here is journalism at its best -- no sensationalism, hards sell, or misquoted facts. The truth is clear: five years for manslaughter, five years for what was obviously a cold blooded murder. If one thought the San Francisco gay community was fit to be tied last summer, you should have seen the bulletin board crowd after the paper came out.

My suspicions were confirmed on the way to the cell. The details filled the air of D block for the next two hours while I tried to drift off and forget. I dismissed my prayers as I have for the last ten years and my last thought was of the courtroom two weeks ago and the verdict. As I fell into unconsciousness, the courtroom and jury became more vivid. The jurors filed past melodramatically, one at a time -- all twelve of my "peers". First, the housewife of thirteen years with three kids, thirty-five years old and wife of the local accountant, stopped, lowered her eyebrows and pointed her finger at my chest. "Guilty," her voice resounded as she walked off into the dimness.

Three businessmen followed her, stopped, and with deep, authoritative voices reassured the verdict and were consumed in a mist, shaking their fingers until only the glistening diamond rings remained and then, too, faded from sight.

Of my twelve "peers", five wore three piece suits, six women sported summer pant-suits, all but one had long since celebrated their thirtieth birthday and I understood each one was a parent, resided in their own home, and held steady employment. I had spent my twenty-one years in apartments wearing blue denims and tennis shoes. If I was a father, it had not caught up with me yet. The women came in on silver clouds, thrilled by Friday pay checks, and left me in a storm of Monday mornings. As the last jurist stopped by my face, I felt the low rumble of distant thunder; he pointed both hands, his lapels dug into his chin, and without a word he faded away, the whites of his eyes lingering as the room went completely dark.

I could still see his face when the chow bell rang and I woke up. I remembered his daughter having taken a seat directly behind me during the trial.

"I know Daddy doesn't really want to see you go to prison," she whispered to me as the jury marched from the room to decide.

"But, but . . . well, you know . . .," her voice trailed off.

"What else can . . ." I confirmed her thought in mid sentence with an affirmative nod and shrugged my shoulders. The feeling this morning was no different. I sat up looking for my pillow case; my tee-shirt had worked its way up into my armpits and smelled stale, the neckband stretched tight against my throat, and the Sears tag irritated my tender back. My hair was pasted to my forehead except for a persistent lock intent on blinding me. The will to get up was finally overpowered again by a light slumber.

Half consciously, the process of justice tumbled in my mind. The jury of peers appeared again -- more realistically this time. I imagined them sequestered in that back room, spending all of six hours to reach a decision. I saw their faces just as they were the day of court -- almost sad, but not sympathetic, stern, but not overbearing and vengeful. The decision was not unanimous. The judge called the foreman to attention, requested the verdict, and, like the rest of the courtroom, waited in silence, seeming to hold back breathing. The foreman stuttered twice, recovered by promptly clearing his throat, and said, "guilty,

your honor."

No one stood up and cheered. I looked around to see inquisitive eyes trying to detect my emotion and posthaste darting into space on contact with mine. Eyes always have a story to tell. In the courtroom they said grim. From the second-tier cell they spoke of anger.

I saw the fury in my neighbor's eyes when he returned from breakfast and tossed an orange on my bunk.

"Have you seen this?" he said, passing last night's paper through the bars.

I recognized the headline: PROBATION GIVEN MAN IN MANSLAUGHTER CASE.

"Someone finally got a break," I smiled, handing the paper back. A subsequent tirade of four letter dialogue told me he was not as satisfied as myself. A crowd gathered outside the cell to confess long harbored hate and vindictiveness. Probation! He must've been one of the Man's men.

I rolled over in disgust, shut my eyes, and ignored my associates' alternatives to probation. And I've heard war was cruel, full of torture and atrocities. Some adolescents, at their best, tied cats together over clothes-lines and pulled the wings from flies. But the convicts are humanitarians -- twenty years, they say, would not have hurt the guy a bit. Then I remembered the club meeting in the visiting room last week. With microphone in hand, the convict speaker denounced penal rehabilitation, public sentiment toward more time, and the alternative need. The audience cheered.

I slept the rest of the day. The thought of lunch was nauseating. I postponed dinner, settled for a Snickers bar, picked up a paperback -- Back's "Jonathan Livingston Seagull" -- and read this sentence by Jonathan:

... In casting you out (Fletcher Seagull) the other gulls have only hurt themselves, and one day they will know this, and they will see what you see.

Moments later the count cleared and the lights went out. Tonight I said a prayer before beginning another night's sleep:

Thank you, God, for a jury of my "peers" and not one of my equals.

CELL TALK

By Asmar Abdu Seifullah
aka Joe West #40404

Some weeks ago I attend a class sponsored by Uhuru, the Black culture organization in OSP. Also present at the class were three exchange students from Africa. To my surprise and delight, I found all three to be very earthly, warm, intelligent, soulful and thought provoking. It was a night that I shall remember, cherish and draw on for the rest of my life.

Picture if you can the meeting of a traditional ghetto brother whose goals, ideals and objectives have been predominately influenced by white society and its values. Take this same brother with all his frustrations, hang-ups and failures and place him in a maximum security institution, watch him moralize the immoral -- generalize the specific and neglect the unneglectable. See his struggle and understand that he struggles because it's his way: not necessarily because struggle brings about change. Change is still a distant light glowing on the horizon of his dreams. The brother that I'm trying to paint for you is a mixture of "SuperFly" - "Malcolm" - "Uncle Tom" - and "Flash Gordon!". He's a totally mixed up guy, which isn't a surprise if we understand what he's been through and what he's going through while being confined.

On the other side of the room we have the Africans, the uncut reversion of the American Black man. Here we have a Black man who's been allowed to develop under favorable Black influences. He knows his history like the American Black man knows his social security number; he speaks of the family as if it were first, not last. He's acutely aware of his position in terms of the world struggle for freedom, in terms of the political arena and its effect on Black people and in terms of the social temperament on his temporary home.

He has a goal and purpose in life that isn't over-shadowed by cultural

identity problems. He comes into an American prison for the first time in search of what he calls his lost heritage. He speaks in surprisingly unaccented English and instantly recognizes the ties between himself and his stolen brother. He radiates such warmth, simplicity and love that the convict brothers are instantly attentive but still slightly withdrawn.

The night progresses with each student expounding on his tribe, homeland and country. Two are from Ghana and are members of the Ashanti tribe which they take great pleasure in revealing. They claim to be the only unconquered tribe in Africa and feel themselves to be semi-superior to other tribes -- which only speaks of the national pride they hold for their tribe and not vanity. These two brothers, Jim and Kufi, aren't as well spoken as the third brother whose name is Oluybusie Sarr, which means "god gave more", but they're still genuine in their conversation and feelings.

Oluy, whose home is Gambia, the same place Kunta Kinte came from, claims no tribe because he's the descendent of slaves who migrated back to Africa and settled in Liberia. Oluy is a senior at Willamette University and majors in journalism. He is fairly tall with a perfect taper between chest, waist and hips; his skin is smooth and dark; his eyes are large and inquiring. They dart from face to face as if he's searching for a key -- something that will open and identify these people who look and act so much like brothers he knows back home.

Instantly a bond materialized between Oluy and the Blacks in the class, they sense a sameness about this particular Black man; he acknowledges them and they too understand that this Black man is linked -- tied to them through something unspoken. They face each other, both realizing that three hun-

dred years of slavery separates and unites them; they smile and make gestures that the untrained eye can't catch or recognize; the study each other like two young lions eager to test strengths and weaknesses. The language barrier is overcome by the spiritual tongue that speaks directly to the heart: This is Black on Black and the harmony is sweet!

The conversation ranges from food to colonization, from Islam to white girls, and all are deeply moved by the spiritual essence of the reunion. I can't fully express all that I felt as those three Black men from mother Africa spoke, but somehow my spirit moved -- my soul turned over and I felt that I had found apart of myself that had been lost -- hidden from sight. I saw myself in the faces, smiles and laughter of Oluy, Jim and Kufi. I felt the drums pounding in my head and the warm African sun shining on my back. I felt love so complete, so real, so alive that it seemed as though I hadn't lived until that moment. After all the years of being called "nigger" -- and calling others "nigger" -- I felt that I never wanted to hear or use the word again.

After encounter of such spiritual worth it's hard for me to conceive how I and other brothers could have viewed ourselves in such negative terms. It's very important that we begin as a people to view ourselves in positive terms. We've become so Americanized in our thinking that it's easy for us to take on that attitude and mentality of our oppression. It's easy for us to abuse each other because we think as the abusers think, we emulate the slave master in dress, conduct and even in the worship of God. If we're to ever be free -- if we're to realize the dream of equality -- we must find a balance for our Blackness in an all white world. We must act -- live -- think -- be Black everyday -- all day long!

The Lucid Walls of Time

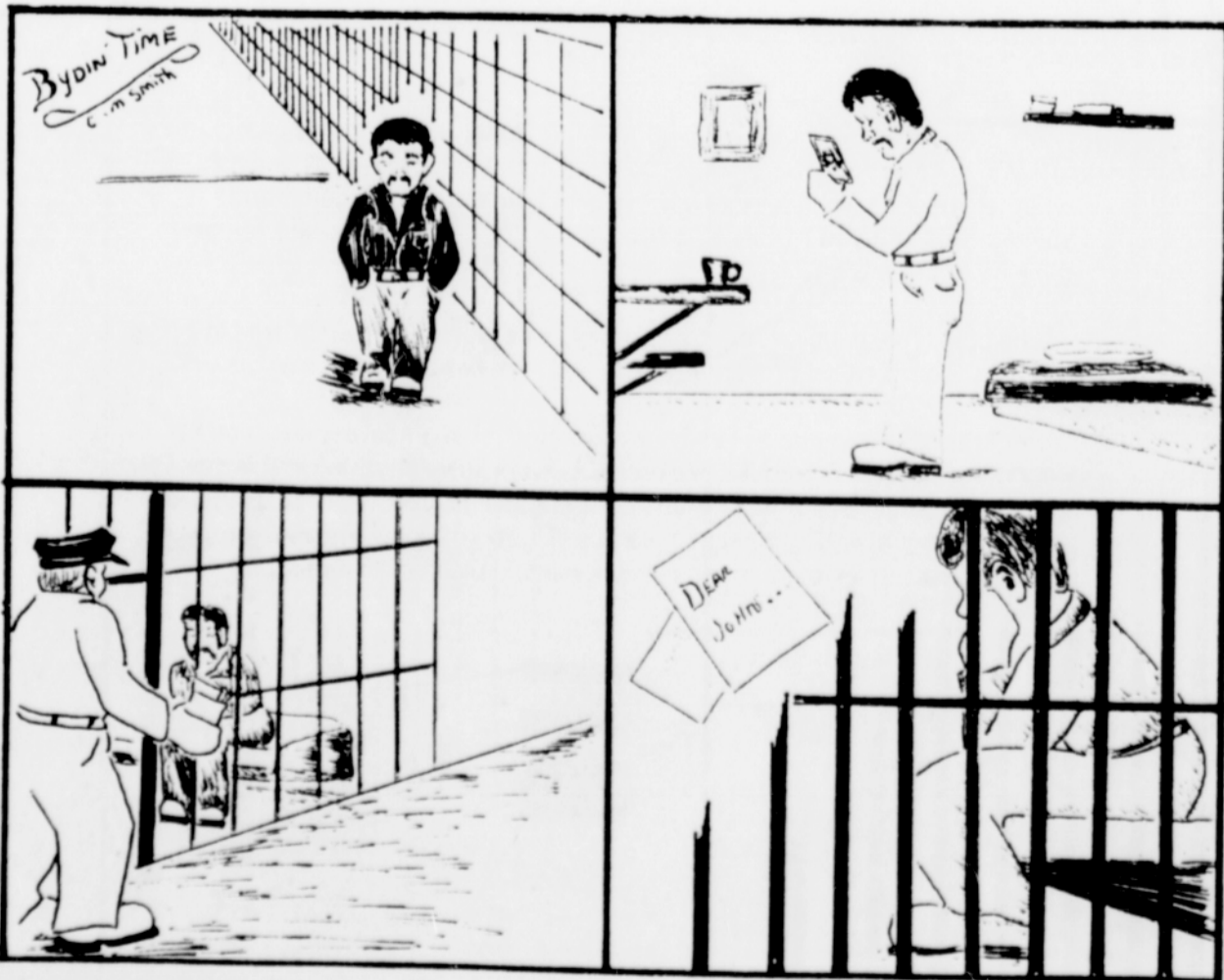
Editor: Julius Snowden

TWO THOUGHTS

A hummingbird played in a morning-glory vine -- it was afternoon - and the buds were open - like memory - a servant of fear or hope whom is called and dismissed as a passing of time

Innocence is like the greatness of man and man's greatness - unto him is born not but made as he seeks (strives) to understand truth.

Julius D. Snowden



How much more must I pay to a society that refuses to hear or understand???

The House Of EXODUS

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Standing agenda:

Answers to your questions, workable solutions to your problems and research for your enlightenment.

Subject:

Follow-Through as a practical concept to live by.

Conductor:

Thomas Boothe, author of Follow-Through concept.

Statement:

Bring your questions, problems and concerns to the Exodus Forums and we will find workable answers and solutions for you.