

**From Prison To
Kennedy Center Stage:
Starting over at the top**

**By
Dennis Sobin**

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Front cover photo: Author Dennis Sobin incarcerated at the
Correctional Treatment Facility, Washington, DC (*photo by Carolyn
Cosmos*)

Back cover photo: Author Dennis Sobin performing on stage at the
John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, Washington, DC
(*photo by Donovan Berry*)

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Chapter One

A Producer in Prison

My friend and fellow convict Jim was the first to inform me that my date of expected release held special significance for the planet. It had nothing to do with the fact that I was returning to the so-called free world after ten and half years behind bars. It was that the day, January 6th, was the Day of the Epiphany—a widely celebrated church festival. It's when the three kings arrived in Bethlehem to bring gifts to the baby Jesus.

The word epiphany, of course, has a second, more generic meaning. The dictionary defines it as “a sudden striking understanding of something.” What would this forebode for my return? As I sat in a bus terminal on January 6, 2003 playing my new guitar, it started to come together.

The instrument was a welcome home gift from an outside friend. Too bad I didn't have a home to go to at the time. But I still had an automobile somewhere in Washington, DC, though I could not remember where I had parked it. No, it must have been towed, or rusted away, by now. Probably towed. Nothing rusts away in the nation's capital. People and things get melted down. That happens often. Recycling. Maybe the steel guitar strings I was playing had come from my car.

About the epiphany I was experiencing, it was the thought that freedom is not so much a place as a state of mind. During my time in prison I had learned to become happy; truly happy. I was limited in where I could go, but not in what I could think. Before my stay in prison, just the opposite was true.

My trial in a Bible Belt section of Florida in 1992 was a casebook example of injustice to the extreme. Without facts or evidence to convict me, the prosecutor told the jury to consider what was going through my mind when I produced a documentary for cable television. Its subject: clothes-optional beaches and resorts in the state known for oranges and political outrages. The video was done tastefully; it was wholesome. But the jury was asked to consider what if it fell into the wrong hands? What if children turned on a television or video player and watched?

In any other part of America, prosecuting someone for such a work of media art would be absurd. But not in Pasco County, Florida, where fundamentalist churches abounded and the resorts that I captured in my documentary are both a legal embarrassment and a closely guarded secret. The prosecutor himself, now in private

practice representing defendants, seemed miffed that an over-zealous vice cop had arrested me. But he was caught in a bind. He couldn't go against the police since they were on the same team. So he offered me a plea deal that my attorney said I'd be crazy not to accept. I could walk away with a small fine if I pleaded to a minor, mundane offense. Trespassing would do. I wouldn't, I didn't and today, if I had to do it over, I still wouldn't. In fact I was so outraged at the time that I spoke out boldly against the prosecutor, the police and local politicians in the press. I had taken my naïve notion of America as a free society to heart. But they were all twiddling their thumbs and reading their Bibles while they watched this travesty unfold. This was more than a town without pity. It was a place without common sense.

The prosecutor didn't like my words of criticism. So he moved forward on all counts. He even added a few as he went along. I would not only be charged in state court with producing a potentially hazardous video, but in federal court for not having all my financial ducks in a row. I'll be the first to admit that my bookkeeping was not the best. But my dealings with people were always honest. Even the prosecutor couldn't find anyone who could claim otherwise. But honesty and observing financial regulations are not always one and the same.

So I went through two trials. Acquitted of most counts, I was convicted of others. Throughout the ordeal, I felt as if I were being chased by an angry mob, each member with a Bible in one hand and a gun in the other. The barrage of bullets came at me like a hailstorm. Inevitably, some hit. When the smoke cleared, I found myself on my way to spending the next 10 years and 4 months of my life in state and federal prisons serving consecutive sentences.

One of the attorneys who wrote to me while I was in prison about the injustice of my situation, said I wasn't unique. "The criminal justice system in America is a cesspool." He said this after reflecting on some of his clients who had drowned in it. He had handled the cases of death row inmates, some of whom had been victims of mistaken identity. The government had made errors in condemning them but was not about to correct itself. Better to bury its mistakes.

By the time I had gotten the letter from this sympathetic attorney, I had heard from other people on the inside and the outside about mistakes. From fellow prisoners I got alarming tales, from outsiders I got facts and figures to show that what happened to me is common.

The United States is the world's largest jailer. We can afford to put millions in prison because of our great wealth. We do this because there is paranoia in a multi-ethnic, multi-idea culture. Diversity brings fear. Such fear can be overcome but the process is not easy. Sometimes it is easier to confine those we fear—people who look or act differently than the majority, who chose pot over booze, commercial sex over romantic coupling, and self defense over calling the cops. Because such individuals don't think like the majority, people often feel uncomfortable around them. Society puts them out of sight so they'll be out of mind. It's an expensive way to handle fear and prejudice. But a rich country can afford it.

Could it be worse? Certainly. We no longer have slavery, no longer have lynchings, never had a Holocaust as in Europe, didn't have a revolution where we beheaded and executed our leaders. Even the much despised George W. Bush was not harmed. Nor has his black successor to the White House, Barack Obama. Not bad for a country with a long history of violence, discrimination and hatred.

Still we send large numbers to jail. In one sense it's a way to vent our bigotries and frustrations. By having so many jails and prisons—more than 5,000 across the nation—we have constructed edifices telling citizens that we don't live in such a free society after all. We can't hurt others, not even their feelings. That's America; love it or leave it. You leave it when you go to prison.

Whose feelings did I hurt to deserve such expulsion? The answer, virtually everyone in a large swath of Florida who didn't want its shameful secrets revealed or its prosecutor, the elected keeper of those secrets, vilified.

My epiphany upon release from prison confirmed the insight I got during my decade there. America is a free society largely to the extent that people are free to get in trouble and be thrown in jail. Think of it in terms of living on a flat mountain top, a plateau. You're safe as long as you don't wander near the edges. If you do, you stand in danger of falling off.

In another country with a reputation for not being free, you have fences all around the perimeter of that plateau. Citizens are restricted in what they can read, what types of television they can watch, what movies they can see, what politics they can practice, and the rules go on. If you're not used to living in such a country, you feel intimidated, almost suffocated. That's how visitors react.

But the more one thinks about it, the rules there are clear, the fences are as obvious as they are imposing. To fall off the mountain, you're going to have to do some serious scaling of the barriers around you. In other words, unlike America, dropping off the side is not as easy as wandering to the edges.

My friend Ben brought this point home to me when we played music together in prison. He was my senior, a wise man who left a highly successful life behind him. He had operated successful businesses, making a comfortable living for himself and his family. Ben was one of the first entrepreneurs in America to recognize the enormous potential and profit of cell phones. He made his killing during the early days, and then knew enough to get out when the telephone giants entered and took over the field. It didn't matter at that point since Ben was able to bankroll other ventures in which he also excelled. If you met the man you would understand why. Kind and low-key in every way, people feel comfortable talking to him. They sense his honesty, his underlying energy, his drive to make friends and to make money.

I've met few people in my life who have embodied more of the American spirit than this hardworking, insightful, outgoing and dedicated businessman. Ben loved America with all its flags, traditions, history and affluence. And America loved Ben, bestowing wealth and pride in him that made his tall frame walk erect, his head held high. A strong influence on his children, they also excelled in the American dream. One boy brought particular honor to Ben by rising to major rank in the military. When Ben and I got out of prison, he would email me about his son's accomplishments. They weren't minor, as the military itself recognized. His officer son participated in public forums, a well-spoken man full of ideals and determination. Great at connecting with people, he was a significant asset to the goal of furthering the ideas and standing of his country. A chip off the old block in every way.

So how did such a model father and exemplary citizen as Ben end up in prison for years, losing his wife, much of his wealth, and nearly all of his sanity? His wife left him when she started and then stopped drinking, meeting her new soul mate and sex partner at an AA meeting. Ben's wealth dissipated because he wasn't able to manage it in prison where rules about "not conducting a business" are firmly enforced. His sanity slipped with the daily grind of prison life, turning Ben from a patient man into a short fuse. I remember when he yelled at a prison officer for no good reason. "I pay more in taxes on the outside than your entire salary!" he screamed.

What was Ben's criminal offense that required him to turn in his suit and tie for a shabby prison outfit? From being a taxpayer to becoming a tax burden? From occupying a spacious suburban home to living in a small barren bathroom, which best describes a prison cell with its toilet, sink and bunk bed compressed into a tiny space?

Ben had pressed the wrong key on his personal computer.

That was it. I know it's hard to fathom. If you believe that America is truly free as Ben did, you would think that a person can do as he wishes with his own computer. Even break it, as long as he doesn't do it over someone's head. Even if he presses a key that will destroy all of the data on his computer, what difference does it make if the data was his?

Ben in fact hit the save button on his computer so he didn't destroy anything. The prosecutor said he should have destroyed what he was looking at. Then he wouldn't have gone to prison.

What kind of double talk is that coming from the mouth of a powerful prosecutor? A person who can drag anyone into court. And whose authority is so scary that he or she can convince most people who are dragged there to plead guilty to something, anything, innocent or guilty. Or risk a sentence of double or triple what is being offered.

Who wouldn't plead guilty to avoid that? I am the exception. Not that I am completely alone in my stubbornness. But the percentage is small; in some regions of America as few as one in fifty defendants insist on their right to a trial. Can we blame Ben and others for pleading guilty even when they felt they weren't? I couldn't understand them for being so gutless. But in the summer of 2008, five and a half years after I exited prison, I followed their example. It pains me to admit it, that I stood in front of a judge and pleaded guilty when I knew I was innocent. But I was desperate to stay out of jail to be able to produce the second annual "From Prison to the Stage" program at the Kennedy Center. My sister had brought the action against me after I sought an accounting of my inheritance that she and my son had stolen from me when I was in prison. She was anxious to send me back.

So at the age of 64, I played the game for the first time in my life. Saying I was guilty, apologizing for my alleged crime, assuring the judge I knew I did wrong and that it would not be repeated. Then falling on the mercy of the court. Instead of years in prison, my sentence amounted to only days in jail; and I got time off for good behavior. Did I feel good a few days later when I was free again? Frankly, I was too busy preparing for the Kennedy Center to feel anything. I now know why innocent people plead guilty.

If what I did in communicating *by email* in a pleasant manner to my sister was a crime, Ben's action in pushing the save key on his computer wasn't anything but his own personal business. What did he save? He saved images that he found on the Internet that were considered to be "inappropriate." What were those images? I don't know since Ben didn't show them to me. He couldn't because when the police hauled him away they also took his computer. I suspect they involved pictures of over-aged or under-aged individuals in less than full clothing. Ben had been curious, so he looked at them. Can't a person in a free society do that? Even the prosecutor admitted that a person can. But he said that the line is drawn when it comes to saving such images, and Ben had crossed that line.

If that makes sense to you, you're a lot smarter than Ben and me. When looking at something on the Internet and you want to save it so you can see it later, why not push the save button as Ben did? Who would know this fine point of the law?

When a person pleads guilty as Ben did, the law is not questioned. All one does is stand before a judge, lower his head, and say he's sorry. Ben said to me in prison, "What's the good of living in a free country if it means you're only free to go to jail? Why don't politicians tell us how easy it is to wind up here? I love this country but we need to stop pretending that we're free. I'm not saying that I want freedom since I know it can lead to problems in the wrong hands. I just want to know what the score is up front. I want the government to level with us."

A truthful politician is like an honest con man. The term is an oxymoron. I once ran for mayor of Washington, DC on an honesty platform and was trounced severely. I could hardly get the truth out of my mouth about the absurdity of the drug war, the waste of using police for morality enforcement, and other issues before my opponents laughed at me. One of them was Marion Barry, the victor in that election. He supported the drug laws though he himself was using drugs at the time. When elected, he became careless and was caught in his hypocrisy. He got six months at the Federal Correctional Institution in Petersburg, Virginia. The same place that I would be headed a few years later.

I guess I was a hypocrite also in that election. While I opposed drug laws, I didn't personally use drugs. I had no problem with self control, with abstinence. So why would I care about the laws that force people to do what I did voluntarily? Laws that punish them if

they can't or won't abstain from drugs, commercial sex, questionable computer downloads or many other prohibited practices. Why wouldn't I, like other serious office seekers, want to keep these laws in effect? What right did I have to go against majority rule? If the bulk of the population wants a law, why speak out against it no matter how wasteful or selectively enforceable it is? Particularly if my behavior is not personally affected by it. Let the public have its fun by locking up millions of people who are different than they are. It's their money to run expensive prisons for their neighbors who they will be incarcerating.

Just like my coming around to pleading guilty to something I didn't do late in life, I learned my lesson on the campaign trail. When I run for office again—should that occur—I will not give the faintest hint of hypocrisy. If I again propose the decriminalization of drugs, I will use them boldly on the campaign trail. And if I don't use them, I will keep my mouth shut about proposing something to upset the majority.

When I arrived in prison after the election, I was asked by inmates who hadn't followed my campaign how I did. I said, "I got 2,000 votes and 10 years in prison." They were impressed, particularly the short timers.

No more mixing honesty and politics for me. It's too combustible a combination; the one ingredient is incompatible with the other.

In one sense, Barry went to prison for his being too honest also. He didn't hesitate during the election to tell people the truth in private, including novices in the political arena like me. "You can count on politicians to do just one thing," he said, "and that's lie." If I run again, I will not tell the truth. I have already spent enough time in prison, having spoken more truth than most people convey in 10 lifetimes. I hope that my constituents will forgive me this small exercise in survival.

Ben continued to love America when he got out of prison. He understood it better after his experience. Though not a free society, he considered it still a magnificent one. When politicians speak of the United States being the capital of the free world, he could now wink along with them. We are the wealthiest nation on the planet. Perhaps material abundance and personal freedom are not compatible with each other. How else to keep the poor and politically unconnected in check except to have many of them locked up. That means a multitude of pervasive, complex and often illogical laws.

Should individuals become troublemakers they will be accused of running afoul of them, and be removed from society. The wealthy and powerful don't have to worry. They rise above laws. It's one reason why people want to acquire riches, even if they don't value the trinkets money can buy. The person whom you are, rather than what you did, can keep you out of prison. That's why people strive for success in America. The autos and airplanes are nice, but the greasing of the system that money provides is better. Ted Kennedy didn't go to prison for drowning an extra-marital girlfriend. Richard Nixon didn't for burglarizing the Watergate, and Bill Clinton didn't for sexually exploiting an intern and then lying under oath about it.

Ben, on the outside, was soon back to his old entrepreneurial self. A sadder but wiser man, he could have argued with his military son about the shortcomings of America, as I did with my government lawyer son. But he didn't. As a result, Ben's son sent his father to glamorous places around the world. My son sent me to jail, albeit for relatively short stays. Once for entering City Hall to testify at a public hearing after he engineered a stay away order against me. I was impressed as I sat in jail, just as Hitler's father must have been impressed to see similar bold cunning and blind ambition in his offspring. In Hitler's case, the goal was genocide by gas; in my son's, patricide by law.

I was surprised that Ben didn't at least resent a relatively new development in America that restricted freedom. Statutes were suddenly being passed mandating that certain categories of law violators register with their local police departments, who would in turn put out their photo, name and address on the Internet. This would allow potential employers and landlords to reject them and for vigilantes full of hate to track them down and kill them. That's the way it played out in a number of instances. The yellow Star of David imposed by the Nazis on outer garments worn by Jews was in some ways more merciful. At least names and addresses were not printed in newspapers or scrawled on the walls of public buildings.

Affected by the new laws, Ben withheld judgment on them for a while. He wanted to know whether he had enough pull to get exempted from them. As it turned out, he had. So he remained silent. He let his lawyer do the talking, and then only to get his exemption. America worked after all. Why had he ever doubted it? You get what you pay for in a capitalist society, whether quality legal services or special exemptions. Ben was able to pay since he had set up a new and successful business with another son.

Don't think by the tone of this discussion that I am at odds with Ben in any way. Or even with his capitalist philosophy. What is

the alternative? Communism? We already know that it doesn't work. It's not just a matter of history but common sense. If everyone is going to be compensated the same despite unequal talent and effort, most people will not exert themselves. If new inventions or inventiveness go unrewarded, people will not think at all. They simply will do mundane, repetitive tasks needed to get by. To hell with motivation cuts and higher productivity. These things won't make a person any richer in a communist society.

You must understand that like Ben, I've had my share of special privileges. That short sentence I received in mid-2008, almost 16 years after being handed my 10-year sentence, was not solely because I pleaded guilty. It was because my standing and influence in the community was high. The judge knew about the annual extravaganza at the Kennedy Center that I produced, and also about the successful Prison Art Gallery I had created. He knew too about the classical guitar playing I learned in prison that got me publicity and appreciative audiences. And most of what I did, I donated without fee. I have never been materialistic, so this wasn't a big sacrifice. What can money achieve compared to the friends one makes when contributing to the public good?

In sentencing me to the few days in jail in 2008, the judge said "I'd sentence you to a period of community service, but you already do so much of that." I was relieved because court-ordered community service in Washington involves clearing trash from streets and sidewalks while you wear a brightly colored vest identifying you as a forced laborer. Its lettering tells the world that you are a criminal compelled by the court to do this. People look at you as if you are working on a chain gang, and the comparison is not farfetched.

Being on the same wavelength with Ben, more or less, I got along well with him during and after our time in prison together. He exited before me, which turned out to be a blessing. Shortly before Ben left, I completed the recording of 33 songs for a CD I was producing, *Prison Tracks*. It was done in secret at the prison with the cooperation of sympathetic staff. One officer in particular was a catalyst, providing a boom box for the project. The cassette player was normally used for exercise classes in the prison gym, which I attended. During one session of the class, I noticed that it had a recording capability. By then I had been in prison for eight years and never saw such a device on the inside. But here it was. An opportunity I didn't want to pass up.

I made arrangements with the amiable staffer to take the machine to another prison building where the music room was located. My prison job was to clean that room. For a few minutes each day I

cleaned, and then spent several hours playing the guitars there. It was a great job. Suddenly I would make it better by having not just a rehearsal space but a recording studio.

One of the things that inspired me to do the CD was the recent arrival on the compound of a master guitarist named Steve Andrew. He'd won awards for his playing on the outside. Hearing him play, I wasn't surprised. Steve didn't know it, but in listening, I was auditioning him. Before I told him about the recording project I was planning, I wanted to see whether he would fit in. We played some songs together. I concluded that we performed well as a duet.

I wanted the planned album to consist of instrumentals for a few reasons. First, I knew that it would have universal appeal. Without words, people of any language and culture could enjoy it. We even included Christian and Jewish religious songs. Who's going to take exception since not even the word God is used? No words are used since there is no singing. Also, no one can criticize the quality of a voice since we kept it purely instrumental.

In addition to artistic reasons for making it an instrumental CD, there were practical production ones. The recorder I was given to use was not high quality, to say the least. It could minimally do the job in recording the guitars, but couldn't handle a voice with any reproductive authenticity. It simply wasn't good enough. I was reminded of the early days of recording more than 100 years ago when piano pieces were performed on guitar because the six strings of a guitar, when plucked, rang clearly. Recording a piano with early equipment produced a muffled sound. A voice recorded in the same disappointing way.

A final reason for using two guitars—one played by Steve and the other by me—was that we had only two recording tracks available on the boom box and just two microphones that we were able to dig up in the prison so we would use one for each track. Steve and I positioned our guitars close to the mics. We first did a few tests to find an appropriate sound level. That meant moving various distances from the mics until there was good balance. Then we proceeded to do the recording. If we didn't like one of the takes, we erased it and did it over. Here was the ultimate in live recording.

One of the reasons we erased rather than saved inferior tracks was that we didn't have a lot of tape to spare. Finding recording tape in prison proved as difficult as locating the recorder and microphones. Ben was vital in helping us acquire tape, using all his entrepreneurial skills for the search. He located a supply of religious tapes in the chapel, befriending the inmate aide there who catalogued and kept an eye on the chapel tapes. Ben told him the importance of the project

for which tape was needed, without going into detail. Inmates know not to be too curious. It's a sign of disrespect as well as a way of putting oneself at risk if a project turns out to be problematic. In our case, we were trampling over rules that said "no recording" in prison.

A tape was located, one rarely used in the chapel. It would not be missed. I scratched the incriminating religious label off it. Steve and I were now ready to record over the sermon it contained, replacing the religious message with our guitar duets.

The recording of the 33 songs was done over a three-day period. Considering that we only had the mornings available, that was a lot of music to record. The afternoons were not feasible because an unfriendly officer who sometimes entered the music room started his shift at noon. We couldn't take a chance of the project being aborted. If that happened we would never have another opportunity to do it.

We accomplished the three-day miracle because we were well rehearsed. Steve and I had spent an entire month going over the music. We must have played the songs we intended to record dozens of times. When we finally got the boom box, the mics and the tape for the recording sessions, we were ready to breeze through the tunes. It helped that I could read music. I'm not talking about merely knowing guitar chords. More than that, I can read individual notes. If you put a piece of music in front of me, I can play the melody on the spot, despite never having heard the song before.

Steve was impressed. With all his guitar awards and competitive wins, he couldn't do it. I realize now that very few people can play the guitar that way. Had I known that when I set out to learn how to sight read in prison, I might not have tried. Sometimes it's best to approach a difficult task with blind optimism. I decided to teach myself how to read music when I was sent to the hole for a few months. How I got there is a long story which I have covered in other writing. Most people wind up in the hole for hurting someone. I was there for hurting the pride of the warden who tried to impose an unfair rule on all of us, a rule I ignored.

While in the hole, I had books and writing materials. So it wasn't a big hardship. I had a catalog of music books from which to order anything, thanks to the support of outside friends. I thought, what good is sheet music if I can only read chords? There's no guitar to use in the hole. In looking over the instructional books, I tried to find one that would teach me how to sight read notes to play with a guitar. But the catalog contained none. I thought this was odd. Perhaps sight reading for guitar was such an easy task that no one felt the need to write an instructional book on how to do it. Or maybe it

was so difficult that few people attempted it. After all, the guitar is not a concert orchestra instrument like the violin or woodwinds. Players of those instruments have to sight read so that they can play their parts precisely in ensembles. Guitar playing in bands on the other hand is simply a lot of chords and lead riffs, which are largely improvised. If the music has to be repeated for performances, it's generally done through rote memory. Even classical guitarists often can't sight-read. That doesn't mean they can't read notes, since most of them can. But if they can't relate the notes automatically and instantly to the guitar neck, they can't sight-read.

Constructing a paper guitar in the hole with a complete fret board, I worked out my own system for sight-reading. I even wrote a manual on how to do it, which I have since shared with others. When I got out of the hole, I put my plan into practice. Indeed, practice is the means to all music accomplishment. By the time I sat down with Steve to record a year later, I was ready. Steve played chords while I played melodies. For the "breaks" or interludes within each song, I played chords while Steve did terrific improvisation on the melody. Not able to read music, he was as creative as he wished.

Ben's assistance in the production of the *Prison Tracks* CD did not stop after he supplied the vital tape. Equally important was getting the completed cassette off the compound and in the hands of Lee Amirault. I approached Ben about handling this difficult matter. He was in an ideal position to do it since he was leaving prison shortly. His sentence was finally coming to an end.

Lee had completed his own term of imprisonment the previous year; I would be leaving the following year. In fact, Lee and I had been set to exit together, but good fortune came his way. He won a victory when his lawyer appealed his case. The bulk of his conviction was thrown out. The appeals court said that, as Lee had been telling us all along, he was truly innocent. At least for the most part. The higher court allowed a minor charge to stand, equivalent to trespassing. We guessed that the appeals court had to give a small concession to the trial judge. After all, these guys were in bed together, and when out of bed they were on the golf course comparing their putting and the positions of their balls.

When Lee found out about the appellate victory, he had cause to celebrate big time. It almost certainly meant that he would leave prison immediately. The final decision would be up to his original judge who had to re-sentence Lee on the minor charge. We all

congratulated Lee, very pleased that he had triumphed in his appeal; happy that one of us had gotten justice. Unfortunately, his judge did not share that view.

You've heard the expression, you give someone an inch and they take a mile? Or, there's more than one way to skin a cat? Or the term, sore loser? All of these applied to Lee's judge. He didn't let Lee go home for "time served," which in itself would have been excessive considering he had already spent years in prison for something that warranted only a few months, if any, time. Instead, the judge in his resentencing issued an unusually harsh sentence that would keep Lee in prison longer. In his retaliation, the judge still had to follow the law. So he could go just so far. That meant Lee would leave prison earlier than if he hadn't won his appeal but not much.

We stayed in touch when he got out. I was excited to learn that he had followed through with his plans to set up a recording studio in his home. He was waiting for the tape that Steve and I had recorded. He would mix it and do the post-production work so that we'd have a finished CD.

But I had to get the tape to him first. Mailing it to him was not an option. Feeling the bulkiness of the cassette tape in an envelope, the prison mailroom staff would almost certainly inspect and seize it. We needed a surer way, and Ben was the answer.

When you spend years in prison you tend to accumulate a number of things. Books, letters, legal papers and personal projects ranging from art to prose writing. As a result, you usually carry a box or two out the front gate upon departure. Ben could easily take the tape with him when he left. There would be a brief examination of his boxes, but so superficial that it would not be detected. I have no idea what they look for in the possessions of departing prisoners. What could possibly be taken out that is of any importance to the prison? Another inmate concealed in one of the small boxes?

Ben agreed to do it. When he got home he sent the tape to Lee. Lee's modern studio, combined with his talent as a sound engineer, led to a good quality CD, despite its humble origin.

Later in this story, both Ben and Lee show up again prominently. They were important in making the Kennedy Center show a success—Ben in the first season and Lee in the second.

In Ben's case, he became a patron and helped fund the program. I admired him for doing that. It occurred to me, however, that it was nothing new for him, or for that matter, other successful business

people. It's a long-standing American tradition. Everyone from Hearst to Carnegie to Rockefeller have donated money to the arts. Carnegie Hall was named after the famous industrialist for that reason.

What had Ben's patronage been before the Kennedy Center show? Quite a bit. He couldn't give money in prison for support of the CD production or the concerts that Lee, others and I gave with our prison band. There is no cash in prison; the only purchase an inmate can make is with his commissary card. Functioning as a debit card it automatically takes funds out of an inmate's bank account. The account can be replenished with money orders sent by people on the outside.

Ben's money wasn't needed in prison where everything is free, including food and entertainment. Band members are not paid to rehearse or perform. And rehearsals can be intensive. Since the band is not just playing for friends but for neighbors, the quality of their music tends to be high. If not, they will be disappointing the people closest to them, in essence, everyone in prison. You've never really lived in a small town unless you spend time in prison. If you're good at something there, such as music, everyone knows about it. And if you're not, they know about that too. Word spreads faster than you can say, "guess who escaped today?"

Ben helped the band in various ways, including attending rehearsals where his comments and suggestions were helpful. They led to better shows. The fact that Ben played some harmonica, one of his prison accomplishments, gave him a feel for what we were doing.

He really shone, however, in the production of the *Prison Tracks* CD. The tape he contributed was better than a pot of gold. Even Carnegie could not have been more valuable to an arts project. When Ben agreed to get the tape to Lee on the outside, he showed patronage above and beyond the call of duty. Would Rockefeller have done it, an individual by all accounts who might have ended up in prison if not for his money to protect him? I'd like to think that he would.

Lee figured prominently in the second season of the "From Prison to the Stage" show I produced at the Kennedy Center after prison. We had written several musicals on the inside together, sometimes with the help of other theater-minded inmates. We intended to produce the last one together when we got out. Not only did we consider it our best work, but it was the only one still in our

possession. The others had gone AWOL. Literally, they had flown the coop with an inmate we had trusted. The inmate, Robert “Bo” Ayers, was released from prison before Lee, Ben and me. His sentence was only a few months. Of all of us, he had actually done something to land him there.

Bo had fallen on hard times in Washington, DC, and couldn’t figure out a way to rise to his former heights without resorting to illegal means. In the prime of his career as a musician he had been on the road in the backup bands of such icons as Elvis and Liberace. “Liberace was very generous,” he told me. “Elvis was very dedicated and took rehearsals seriously.” Bo proved his pedigree in two ways. He knew his facts about the stars he claimed to work with, and he played music so well that I could see why he was such an asset to legendary showmen. A piano player and organist of the first rank, he was unstoppable in the few months he spent with us. Also, unstoppable. There wasn’t a song he couldn’t play. Mention a tune and Bo would pick it right up. And if it was an obscure song, all you had to do was hum a little and he’d play it.

After Elvis fatally OD’d and Liberace contracted a terminal case of AIDS, Bo became small potatoes, though his big talent remained in place. He joined a successful regional group in DC called the Capitol Steps. They trusted his musical ability implicitly, and Bo never let them down. They also trusted his personal integrity; but that proved a big mistake. Bo wormed his way into the finances of the group, and then robbed them blind. He told me in prison that the devil made him do it, in this case the devil being his ex-wife. She had wanted more than he could give her with his reduced earnings. So he decided to supplement his income with embezzlement. Getting caught with his hand in the cookie jar, it didn’t get slapped too badly. Because Bo had a tangible victim whose limited damage could be measured, the judge felt compelled to mete out minor punishment. In the case of Ben, Lee and me, we had no victim except the conservatism and sensibility of society. Our judges went overboard to appease mass prejudice. In handing out punishment, the sky was the limit.

Lee, fellow playwrights and I at FCI Petersburg had finished writing our first three musicals when Bo arrived. These plays featured original songs and dealt in some way with the prison experience. The first was about contemporary prisons, the second about past prisons and the third about prisons of the future. We had fine-tuned these plays by doing readings of them to our fellow inmates and then performing the songs we wrote for them. The feedback we received allowed us to make improvements. Bo also

proved helpful in that regard. He told us that he wanted to help because he'd once written a musical himself. It didn't go anywhere but Bo did, unfortunately. Shortly after his play's rejection, he decided to give up efforts in legitimate theater and go for illegitimate income.

Did his prison term help him straighten up and fly right? Had he become a different person due to his months away from society? Can anyone benefit from an absence of normalcy?

If anything, Bo left in worse shape than when he came in. Sometimes when you lose your momentum on the outside, it's hard to get back into the groove. That's a factor that helps create the revolving prison door. A person who had problems on the outside before coming to jail will have more when he or she leaves. The very status of being an ex-prisoner is a problem. There's also the chip on one's shoulder, the desire to strike back. I'm sorry to say that the prison playwrights that Bo left behind, including me, were the people he found most convenient to hurt. I guess he viewed us as powerless since we were still stuck in prison.

Just as Bo had gained the trust of colleagues on the outside, so had he secured our trust on the inside. He set us up and we fell for it.

Did he believe in the concept of honor among thieves? Whether or not he did, he knew by the end of his sentence that he was unique in our theatrical clique for being the only thief among us. As a result he felt no loyalty. He stole from us just as he had taken from Capitol Steps.

Perhaps even his modus operandi was the same. I'm not sure how he got into a position to betray Capitol Steps but I surmise he volunteered to help keep their finances in order. The group didn't look a gift horse in the mouth, but it should have. It might have detected that there was a dishonest person lurking inside that animal.

When the same gift horse arrived in our prison, we too should have scrutinized it. But in prison one tends not to question, much less reject acts of kindness. There aren't that many that come your way. Bo said to us, "I'll be released from prison next week. Let me take your three plays and prepare them for production so you'll have them in a neat and presentable form. I'll even musically notate all the songs. That way you'll have the sheet music; then your plays will be complete."

We knew that Bo could do all he promised. He was a good typist and a great notater of music. It seemed like a dream come true for us. Our only hesitation was that we didn't want to impose on him. "Are you sure," I said, "that you're going to have the time to do it

when you get out? There are three full-length plays here and some 40 songs.”

“I’ll definitely have the time. What else am I going to do when I get out? I don’t have anything to go back to.”

We never found out if he had the time or not. Or if he did what he promised. That’s because we never heard from Bo again. It was tragic since we didn’t have a copy of our work that he took with him. It just wasn’t possible to make a copy in the week that we had before Bo left. The material was too voluminous and our copier connections weren’t up to the task.

So our hard work walked away with him. When Lee got out, he tried to find Bo, but the man had disappeared. I made the same effort when I exited prison. By then his trail was even colder.

In the years I’ve been out of prison, I’ve kept an eye out for Bo, and an ear open for our musicals. I fully expect to hear word that at least of one of them is being produced, perhaps in a small theater. That would be flattering; someone likes your material and thinks its potential is great enough to steal it.

That in fact happened to me once before my prison days. I had struck it rich in the pay-per-call phone industry, making over two million dollars in a single year. I was one of the first to introduce social chat lines where callers paid a modest amount per minute to join in conversations. The key to success was in promoting these lines. I did that through a newspaper I published called *Met Personals*, which not only featured personal classified ads but alternative articles like those in the *Village Voice*. I also produced a radio show which promoted the chat lines. But my most creative idea was to launch a TV series. I pitched it to a businessman in Philadelphia to see if he wanted to be my partner. I didn’t have the experience in this kind of production to do it alone.

When he didn’t get back to me I assumed he wasn’t interested. It wasn’t a big disappointment since I already had a full plate in my life. I guessed the idea wasn’t good enough to fly on TV, in his opinion. What did I know about that medium?

One day I ran into a TV cameraman whom I knew. He had just been hired to shoot a TV show, *my* TV show. He congratulated me for having such a great idea that would now be seen by millions. Stunned, I kept my silence. I wanted to pry more information from him. “You’re going to be at the shooting aren’t you?” he said. I assured him that I would and he told me where it was. I said I’d see him there. On the day of the shoot I entered the set nonchalantly. The man who’d stolen my idea was there in all his glory. He did a double-take when he saw me, but only a small one. Being in show

business he was obviously prepared for anything and he knew how to put on an act.

There was no reason to confront him since my being there spoke for itself. It would have been foolhardy of me to start a ruckus. I had designed a boat that could carry us to an island of riches. To do anything to cause the boat to capsize as the trip progressed would have been self-defeating. Let the boat arrive at its destination. Then we could argue about how to divide the treasure.

It never made it. The idea for the show—my idea—proved a flop. The thief had done me a favor by taking it off my hands and running with it. He ran right into a stone wall. Putting both his time and money into the project, he saved me from wasting both. Sometimes even our enemies can be helpful.

Had Bo done me and my incarcerated collaborators a favor? I believe that he had. Even if he did not produce the plays we wrote—which I assume he didn't—we benefited. Perhaps he threw them in the garbage. As a thief, Bo would not have done that if he felt the plays had value. He apparently did not think they did; and to this day, I trust his judgment.

At the same time it was flattering that he stole them in the first place. After all, theft is the sincerest form of flattery. I would have felt worse had he returned them. Or even sent us a note saying that he had no time to type or musically notate them, as he had promised to do. What interpretation would we have given such a note? That our plays weren't good enough to take up his time? That there were higher priorities he had? What priorities could a newly released inmate have who by his own admission had no plans or commitments?

In assuming our plays were so good that a person of Bo's competence and connections would steal them, we felt more motivated than ever to continue writing. That would not have happened had we started to doubt the quality of our writing rather than the content of Bo's character. The next play Lee and I wrote was our best, by all admissions. Eventually it would get its debut at the Kennedy Center.

Maybe playwright Arthur Miller traveled the same stony path before his work achieved great heights. *The Crucible* by Miller could not have been written in a single draft. It's too powerful and too carefully crafted. It also happens to be one of my favorite plays. One of the reasons is that it dealt with events similar to what I had

experienced in Pasco County, Florida, when I was falsely accused of an imaginary crime there.

The Crucible dealt with the bogus offense of witchcraft. It covered the trial of 21 people who were convicted and executed for such an offense in Salem, Massachusetts, a town in a relatively enlightened region of the country that should have known better.

When you are dealing with a victimless crime, anything can happen. People's fears get exaggerated, particularly when families and the protection of minors are involved. Sometimes, such protection derives from guilt. Because people don't do as much as they feel they should for their families, they want to demonstrate their commitment to them by hurting others. It's like a brother who is not kind to his sister but will punch anyone who looks at her the "wrong" way.

My trial took place in 1992, exactly three hundred years after the 1692 Salem witchcraft trials. Even though I've been exonerated since then, I have yet to receive an apology from those who attacked and prosecuted me. It took the town of Salem a long time to admit and apologize for its mistake—in fact more than 20 years—for killing 21 innocent and harmless people.

I assume that will hold true for me. But first I have to die. If not dead, I'd be able to sue for the injustice. How great would the amount be? And did I really suffer?

Not according to my estranged son and sister who said in correspondence to me when I was in prison that I wasn't taking my sentence seriously. Maybe they felt this way since I wrote to them in ink, just as they used, not blood. Or perhaps they believed that families left behind by the incarcerated suffer more than those who go to jail. They could be correct about that as the next chapter will argue. But why take that out on me? True, I didn't take the misdemeanor plea deal that would have allowed me to walk away. All I had to do was plead guilty to something I didn't do. I know that most people would have gone that route to avoid being locked up. Maybe my sister and son would have done that. But in the end, I knew I had to live with myself no matter where I lay my head at night. I couldn't do it.

The resentment by them could have come from thinking I was showing off. Trying to put myself in the role of a hero. Maybe they were dumping on me as a chance to topple the king. A son can easily see his father that way. The same with a younger sister. Whatever it was, it brought the two of them closer to each other. They then cemented their bond by joining together to steal my inheritance and savings.

I wonder what became of the possessions of the witches who were tried and executed in Salem. Did those who condemned them share in the loot? A new play ought to be written on that subject, perhaps called *The Crucible Revisited*. That would be something that I'd like to produce now that I've made my reputation as a producer at the Kennedy Center.

Chapter 2

The Truth about Prison Life

People are generally surprised to learn that a person in prison is less likely to be assaulted or murdered than someone who lives in a typical American city. It's even more surprising when you consider all the idleness in prison. Inmates have the time to commit mayhem. What they lack is motive and opportunity.

Most murders and attacks on the outside take place during robberies or when illegal business deals go awry. In prison, there isn't much motivation to rob someone because inmates generally have little to take. Even for the wealthy who go to prison, there's a limit on how much money they can have sent to them monthly. And it all must go to their canteen account. With no cash to take, what can a robber steal? Inmates carry the equivalent of a debit card, which also doubles as their prison ID. The only place to use it is at the canteen which is a tiny variety store with the barest of items. And prisoners can go there just once a week depending on the living quarters where they reside. Moreover, the debit ID contains the inmate's photo. If a prisoner tries to present one and doesn't look like the person shown, he will be escorted to the hole by the officers assigned to safeguard the canteen. In the hole he will sit for a week or so until a sergeant or lieutenant comes by to ask questions. Unconvincing answers will keep the person in the hole longer. The extended stay is called "being under investigation."

There is also "home invasion" in prison. The burglar is usually looking for the one possession that's of some value and that most prisons allow: portable personal radios. But these invasions, though more common than robberies, are also rare. For one thing, a cell is not easy to break into. Consider how difficult it is to break out of one. Lockers are used in dormitory-style housing units. They are generally secured by padlocks. To be burglarized in prison one normally has to be careless, forgetting to secure a locker or close a cell.

How does an inmate lock his own cell? In some prisons he has the key to it, though that's rare. Usually he slides it shut when he leaves and then asks the cellblock officer to open it—electronically or by key—upon his return. In fact, prisoners spend most of their time outside their cells in dayrooms, work details, recreation and other activities. Only during lockdowns is occupying a cell a constant.

Even when radios are stolen, there's a good chance they'll be returned. It's the practice of canteens to engrave each radio with the

name and number of the inmate who purchased it. When periodic searches by officers are made of inmate's cells for contraband, radios are one of the first things examined for proper ownership. Here the police are doing their job well, for which inmates who have been robbed are grateful.

Robbery is rare in prison because thieves, like other professionals, need a reason to practice their craft. Aside from the adrenaline rush, there isn't much reward in doing it in prison. On the outside, a thief accumulates possessions that can be fenced, the money then used to support a higher lifestyle. But in prison there isn't much difference in lifestyle between the rich and poor. All wear the same uniform and have the same recreational and entertainment options. One can't get a car or a better apartment. Such options don't exist in prison. New furniture or wardrobe? The same.

There's another factor that limits motivation to steal in prison. Prisons are segregated by sex. Male prisons predominate since over 90 percent of prisoners in America are men. In such places, there are no women that men seek to impress by accumulating possessions. Call it male liberation, albeit forced upon them. In the free world, men often use their ill-gotten money and material items to attract women. In a society where men are still expected to be the providers of entertainment and to cover other expenses in the seduction process, the cost can be high. It also depends on the caliber of women being sought. In the case of Jackie Kennedy, when Greek tycoon Aristotle Onassis sought her for his marriage bed, he had to come up with several million dollars.

This is not intended to be a criticism of women. If anything, our culture is responsible for it. Even in an age when women often make more than men, the tradition of men shouldering the financial cost of dating persists. Does this explain the higher number of men in prison? It's one of the factors.

Once incarcerated, there is no one to impress. There are only prisoners of the same sex relating to each other. Sex stereotypes still may exist when effeminate inmates are in their midst, but that doesn't lead to the same degree of role playing that takes place on the outside. Gay sex, for the most part consensual, is generally engaged in among equals in and out of prison. More extensive in prison because of the unavailability of the opposite sex, it's usually *situational homosexuality*. For many men it's satisfying since the cultural baggage of one partner being the financial giver and the other the taker doesn't exist. As a result, the need to rob Peter to pay Paula is nonexistent.

Also, motivation for committing murder or an assault in prison to enforce a business deal where a party reneges is rare. Let's follow one business prone prisoner from the outside to the inside to understand why he was no longer motivated to continue his violent ways. At least until he got back on the outside.

Robbie had lived in a neighborhood where there were plenty of liquor stores but no drug store. But there were numerous drug sellers. The better cars and nicer apartment furnishings in the area were theirs due to their enterprising spirit. They brought money into the community because affluent people from "better" sections of the city and the suburbs came there to purchase drugs.

If not for their illegal wares, these drug merchants would probably have been praised by the community. After all, the owners of the liquor stores were mostly outsiders. When they sold their legal but arguably no less harmful products, the buyers were local residents. The money these residents paid for booze departed the community, further impoverishing it. No wonder that the drug merchants who caused the opposite to happen were often looked upon as heroes. Young people like Robbie growing up in such a community were particularly impressed by them. They had nice clothes, flashy cars, and fine women. And like the heroes on TV and in the movies, they also had guns.

The only downside to their existence was its tenuousness. Retirement occurred at an early age due to police intervention. Since the business of these merchants was not legal, it was subject to closure by the police at any time. Most drug merchants went to prison while they were still in their twenties. Others died at the hands of those who wanted their money, their merchandise or their market. An illegal drug business is ripe for such predators. Here's where the heroic side of their image comes into play. To beat the bad guys who would take their cash or their customers, they have to be tougher than them. They have to assume that the predators will be armed to the teeth. For protection, they need the same level of firepower, if not more. And a finger always ready to pull the trigger even when there might be room for alternative action. Better safe than sorry; better to kill than be killed.

With so many police in the community seeking to entrap, compromise or otherwise apprehend drug dealers, one would think that there would be a measure of safety there. But that isn't the case. Unfortunately, the image that police have in such an area—whether justified or not—is that they are worse than useless.

Picture yourself selling something on a street corner when someone snatches it from you and takes off running. You see a police

car and wave it down, asking for help to catch the thief. The police will want to know what was stolen from you. When you tell them, they will make an arrest, but not of the robber. The cops will arrest you. They will be too busy doing that to even *try* to catch the thief. And if for some reason he is caught, his punishment will likely be less than yours.

A drug dealer must rely on himself to enforce honesty in those with whom he comes in contact. The same goes for business ethics. If a supplier proves to be dishonest, the drug merchant doesn't have many choices in what to do. He can't sue the suppliers since no court of law will entertain such a case. The police will be called to take action against the person who sues. Courts are always anxious to clear their caseloads. What better way to do it than cart away the person who brought a legal action?

Robbie had an understanding of all this while growing up. It made the drug merchants he saw seem like action figures of the first order. Not only did they have to finance their own operations, but they had to protect them. Other than guns and violence, there was no way. It was a dangerous career path but an exciting one. And it was lucrative. Anyone could see that by the money being made and the things that the merchants were buying. Robbie imagined them having huge savings accounts, perhaps equal to what Bill Gates had. He didn't know that most drug merchants have little beyond their cars, clothes and female companions. These businessmen don't save much because they know that their businesses might not survive long and that they themselves might not outlast them. Besides, any savings can be confiscated and used against them by prosecutors as evidence of their illegal gains. Better to spend everything one makes.

Still there was an attraction for youngsters like Robbie to follow in their footsteps. The alternative was sticking with school, which wasn't thrilling. Even there violence existed as students emulated their elders. If you were going to take a chance being someplace where you could get hurt, you might as well as get paid well for it. Nobody lives forever. And few people live as well as the drug merchants in a neighborhood known for poverty and unemployment.

Jobs that carry high risks have long held an appeal for young men. During the First World War, pilots fighting in combat in the newly introduced aircraft were dying in droves. Their life expectancy was measured in weeks and months rather than years. They weren't even equipped with parachutes. But there was no shortage of men applying to become pilots. The attraction of living well though dying young was strong. The job could be a once in a lifetime chance to do

something significant and dramatic, albeit dangerous. War creates such opportunities. Just as the drug war does.

In Robbie's neighborhood, some of the money pouring into the community, thanks to the drug trade, found its way directly into his pocket. He ran errands for the merchants, such as fetching coffee. They tipped well. All the while he was observing and learning the ropes. He also saw some of the violence and the bodies being hauled away. It didn't turn him off to the trade because it was what he expected. Knowing that the merchant-warriors were armed, he reasoned that violence and death were inevitable. That's what you expect in any war. It would not deter him from becoming a soldier in it, just as risk for one's life doesn't discourage volunteers from enlisting in the Army. The United States no longer has the need for a draft even in wartime. Young men seeking adventure and a steady paycheck readily sign up for combat.

Becoming a participant in the drug war provides more than adventure. It is extremely lucrative, even as one starts off as the mercenary or "soldier" of a merchant. Such a combatant is paid well, paid daily, and paid in cash. It's combat pay and, even in the absence of GI health care and educational reimbursement, it's very generous. Another advantage of wartime soldiering is that there are good advancement opportunities. They come about in a number of ways. First, it happens through recognition that's possible for demonstrating bravery and good decision-making under fire. Heroes aren't created in peacetime, only in the heat of battle. Also leading to advancement are openings that come when combat leaders die or are captured and become prisoners of war.

Robbie, a smart and brave boy, moved up rapidly. By the age of 20, he had his own operation. He saw plenty of action, both of the financial and gun playing kind. During his two years on active duty, he never had to kill anyone. But he came close. Once he caught a thief who had found his stash. Robbie chased him and pinned him to the ground. It turned out to be the same guy who had attempted to steal from him before. What could Robbie do to prevent it from happening again? He couldn't put the man in jail for a cooling off period. So he decided to kill him, his mood at the moment unforgiving.

Then something happened that Robbie later regarded as a miracle. His gun jammed, so that the murder could not go forward. Shortly thereafter, Robbie was busted on a drug charge and was sent to prison. He told friends he made there how lucky he was. "I could have killed somebody. I could have taken a life when it wasn't necessary."

Although he continued to sell drugs in prison, he never came close to fatally injuring another person there. The motivation to commit serious harm on the inside doesn't exist. For one thing, there is a strong presence of officers. Unlike cops on the outside who often solicit crime so they can entrap people, prison officers are focused on preventing violence. They are peace officers in the truest sense of the word. Their priority is saving life and preventing injury, not racking up statistics on how many people they can collar, dangerous or not.

It's not the outside cops fault since police departments are run by politicians. The more people a political leader locks up, the harder he or she seems on crime. Prison officers don't even engage in undercover operations. If they are on duty, they proudly and conspicuously wear their uniform. There's no guessing of who the police are in prison. You know them on sight, just as you know what their function is. Is it any wonder that prisons are safer than cities given the primary duty of cops there to protect?

It doesn't mean they ignore prison rules, including the prohibition of drugs. But enforcement is done sensibly, never losing sight of the cop's role of safeguarding everyone, drug users and nonusers alike. Unlike the outside, never is a prisoner charged with a drug crime based on the word of an informer. A search may be undertaken of the inmate's belongings based on a tip, but unless an illegal substance is found there, no further action is pursued. This has an important two-fold result for inmate safety. Officers do not waste time looking into past rule infractions or relatively harmless ones. They are there to prevent people from hurting each other. In prison there is less motivation for a drug merchant to kill informants since the damage they can do is very limited.

There's another reason for the low murder rate in prison. There aren't any guns there. Of course inmates can have them smuggled in if they wish, just as they can drugs, cigarettes and other contraband. But there's no need. The officers do not carry guns. As the gunless police force in Great Britain knows, if you give guns to cops, some citizens will feel compelled to have them as well. After all, police are human beings who can make mistakes. Allowing them to be the only ones with deadly firepower is an encouragement for them to become tyrants, or to support tyrants. Confiscating guns of citizens and putting them in the hands of loyal police is one of the first acts of dictators.

With a strong uniformed police presence in prison and no guns needed for self defense or the enforcement of business agreements, violence is low and usually non-lethal. In making this discovery, Robbie, while continuing his drug trade there, felt he

would likely survive his prison stay. That's when he came to see that the outside war was over for him, at least temporarily. He was now a POW and would make the best of his time until release.

Outsiders often have inaccurate views of prison. On the one hand they have movie myths in their minds. Through the Hollywood lens, prisons are seen as being full of mayhem and treachery with ample doses of sexual assault. The fact is that when violence occurs in prison, it is usually a fist-fight or wrestling match, and almost always non-lethal; and when sex takes place it is even less traumatic in all but the rarest cases. There are enough horny men available so no one has to be forced. In my 10 years in prison at some of the highest security places, I never saw or heard of a sexual assault. Not one. But I came across many liars in prison who would say anything to get attention or special consideration. I became one of them myself when I faked an illness that I knew would get me off an unwanted work detail.

It happened at FCI Petersburg when I was assigned to an undesirable food handling job. New men were given duties that others didn't want. Established inmates had contacts to pull strings, but not me. I knew I could make such contacts but I needed time. The first day I reported for kitchen work I told the staffer in charge that I was recovering from hepatitis. It was a lie, and he suspected it to be, but he couldn't take a chance. He ordered me to get tested and to come back after the prison clinic cleared me. That took two weeks to accomplish. By then I had made contacts among sympathetic staff and influential inmates to get the do-nothing job I wanted.

Film depictions of prison rarely go into the politics of their operations. If they did, it would not make for lively entertainment. Who wants to sit through two hours of gesticulating inmates jockeying for special privileges and minor amenities? Perhaps if the sexual component were included, a film would make for an explicitly entertaining and educational gay movie. Even so, it wouldn't have a lot of class or variety. Prison surroundings are drab and the copulators unimaginative, often first-time experimenters. At least such a film would destroy the myth of extensive rape in prison.

While outsiders who think that prisons are exceptionally dangerous places are in the dark, those who take the opposite view are equally incorrect. Just because there's little physical hardship doesn't mean there isn't enormous psychological strain.

The statement is often made by prisoners who tout their toughness that, "You can cage my body but you can never capture my mind." In fact there is little caging in prison. Inmates assigned to cells are out of them most of the time. They are on work details,

usually of their own choosing and almost always very light. Or they are engaged in recreation. Or participating in activities in a prison school, library, chapel, cafeteria or elsewhere.

Prison work details vary. They cannot be accurately described as jobs because they don't come close to requiring the time or energy of conventional employment. Because wardens are under political pressure to make sure that everyone works, all kinds of "jobs" are created. If prisons are inventive at all, here is the area where creativity shines.

A newly arriving inmate asks seasoned prisoners about the different work details in the prison. Few work details will involve much effort; just avoid the kitchen or the laundry where there is real work to do. But even there, attractions exist. In food service, you can cook gourmet meals for yourself and your friends. It's the equivalent of operating your own restaurant, take-out and catering business. You can make money in prison doing this, and of course eat well. You'll still have to cook for the chow hall, but once you get the bland and basic institutional fare out of the way, you're on your own. Other inmates will help you. It's not unusual to hear a prisoner returning from work in the kitchen announcing all the delicacies in his possession available to his cellblock or dorm mates. The kitchen also prepares food for the staff dining room. Whatever they eat—from shrimp to steak—is available to inmates who work there and to their friends. Since there's no cash in prison, it's all done by bartering. What an inmate has gotten or will get from the canteen will be traded for the special food he either ordered or is being suddenly offered by kitchen workers.

Another opportunity to prosper in a prison job involves working in the laundry. Inmates there have access to the best uniforms, jackets, shoes and more. For prisoners who want to look fashionable—within the constraints of prison garb—it's a virtual haberdashery. There's even tailoring so that clothing can be altered to fit. Get yourself assigned to the laundry and you can do well for yourself, bartering clothing services for the best food and anything from the canteen.

There are two other categories of jobs for inmates who really want to work. One is in prison industries, such as Unicor in federal prisons and Pride in Florida state prison. A prison industry manufactures items that are purchased by government agencies, such as office furniture, printing and of course that old standard, license plates. Because of the influence of labor unions that don't want cheap prison labor to compete with free world workers, laws restrict what prison industries can offer. For the most part, they can make items

only for government agencies to purchase. Still, there is controversy and a perennial movement to make prison labor laws more restrictive, or to eliminate prison industries altogether. Supporters of prison industries say that they are a good rehabilitative tool. They point out that there is lower recidivism among such workers when they leave prison. But this is misleading since prison industry workers are the cream of inmates. Not only are they the ones who want to work, but they are hand selected by managers from among the prison pool. Payment can be as much as a dollar or more per hour, not bad since there are no living expenses for inmate workers.

Another option for real work at better than pennies per hour exists in private enterprises that have set up operations in some prisons. There aren't many but a few prisons have them. These manufacturing and service businesses range from airline reservation phone banks to limousine conversion shops to clothing manufacturers. They sell to the general public and have been accepted by labor unions because they pay "prevailing wages" for equivalent work on the outside. As a result, the pay can be high, as much as \$10 or more per hour. But the inmates don't get to keep much of it. A large portion goes to the prison for room and board, and another substantial amount goes into a victim fund, whether or not the prisoner actually had any victims. Of the amount remaining, most of it is put into a savings account that the inmate gets on release. The small balance goes to the inmate to spend at the canteen or for mail-order books.

Even such "real work" in prison is not necessarily difficult. During a year I spent working in a Unicor printing plant where we churned out government reports, the 80 or so men there were mostly idle. The general manager, who made almost a hundred thousand a year in his government position, was incompetent. He ordered incorrect paper, created poor production schedules and failed to motivate and properly train staff. When the inmate workers saw him scurrying around the plant trying to fix problems he had created, we nicknamed this slight, sometimes verbally abusive man "the squirrel." Still, our pay was good, and for little work. Plus we had a chance to get our own writing copied and printed. I slipped a small book I'd written into a production run. It included an attractive cover, binder and my own notice indicating that I was the owner of the copyright. The manager didn't see it, or he didn't care. When he wasn't flustered with problems in the plant—such as having to dispose of stacks of improperly printed government reports—he sedately sat in his office surfing the Internet. The lingering odor of marijuana there indicated that surfing wasn't all he was doing.

It was government work at its worst. Unlike outside government operations where there is some degree of accountability, this evaporated in prison. Just as prisons keep inmates from getting out, they also prevent the noisy public and their political representatives from getting in. You couldn't ask for a better formula for waste and idleness. Though I was rarely idle. Assigned to the plant's office, I spent most of my time doing personal projects with the old but adequate computer that sat on my desk.

A friend of mine who worked at a Pride factory in a Florida state prison had a telephone on his desk. While he couldn't make outgoing calls, he fielded incoming ones. A female customer struck up a romantic friendship with him and called him often. There was little else for him to do but talk to her until his next call came in. In another part of the same factory—shipping and receiving—inmates were also taking advantage of the lax oversight. Some were mailing goods stolen from the factory to outside contacts. In exchange, drugs were mailed to them, hidden inside incoming packages which they opened at the factory.

We're talking about the same inmates that the general public perceives as going through hell as they sit in their barren cells day and night. Such cell sitting is rare.

It's true that most prisoners don't have jobs where they can cause much mischief, but those are not real jobs in any sense of the word. An inmate might get assigned to a painting squad. He'll spend most of his days sitting around a paint shop with 20 other inmates in the same squad. A staffer assigned to supervise them will rest in a glass enclosed office, often fast asleep. One or two days each month for a few hours each day, the men and their supervisor will venture out on the compound to paint *something*. Perhaps a room or a hallway. Requests for their services are rare. There are just too many inmates in the squad to do a good job. They aren't motivated and they receive little or no pay for their efforts. Plus they're not anxious to improve the appearance of the prison, particularly staff offices. A common expression used after viewing a wall that's been sloppily covered by them, "Not bad for government work."

Job assignments aren't the only thing to take inmates out of their housing quarters for most of the day. There are educational programs that all prisons offer. Mention a vocation and there's a prison somewhere offering training in it. If an inmate wants a certain type of training not offered by his or her prison, a request can be made for a transfer to a prison providing it. Once, there was a wide array of academic classes—from biology to accounting—but these have largely been eliminated. Wiping them out came as a result of

politicians' get-tough-on-prisoners policy. It started when prisoners were eliminated from a government-funded program that allowed colleges and universities to be reimbursed for the cost of providing books and professors inside prisons. What remained were classes to earn a GED high school diploma and vocational training.

Prisoners who sign up for a GED or vocational program are exempted from even the most minor prison jobs. Attending these classes is a good way to pass the time. Sitting in a sunny classroom is more pleasant than hanging around a smelly paint shop, even after you get used to sleeping in such a place. The classes are normally not well monitored, and for good reason. Some of the teachers are fearful of pushing the inmates too far. Others are compassionate and don't want to cause prisoners more stress than they already have. Let them come and sit in the classrooms for as long as they like. If they're not disruptive, why rock the boat by challenging them to learn? Here is the same type of thinking by teachers in many inner city schools. This is not necessarily a criticism of either since the barriers they face are great. In both settings, you're dealing with severely bruised students.

Sometimes an inmate can sit in a prison school for years before getting his GED, if he ever gets it. There are far less pleasant ways to spend one's time in prison. School is a good place to write letters home, read novels, and make contacts with inmates in sections of the prison that one would not normally encounter; a place to meet old friends and co-defendants. That happens when they sign up for school too.

Come the evenings and weekends and there's more to do. Spending time in the library, chapel or recreation yard are among the choices. Any of them offers a diversion. A library has books, of course. But there's more there. CDs and DVDs are often among the offerings. Like the books, they usually come from donated sources, so the choices are limited. In some prisons where there is money budgeted for library acquisitions, there are materials on hand highly relevant to inmates. These include books about prison escapes and movies that deal with the tyranny of political leaders such as Hitler, Mussolini, Stalin and others.

Libraries in prison serve a function beyond a place to read books and view movies. They are social gathering places for inmates. They resemble a typical community library. In appearance, they could even pass for a small branch library. The stacks are well maintained by the inmates assigned to work there. The interior tends to be clean and well lit. The only downside is that they can get crowded. But even that can be an advantage in that conversation and

exchange of bartered items can be made by inmates without close observation by officers who might look in.

Part of the pleasantness of the prison libraries is that they are almost always air conditioned, even in prisons where such is a rarity. It's hard to believe that prisons in the deep South, including many of the newest ones, lack this modern convenience. But it's true. As a result, the quality and temperature of the air can be brutal. Keep in mind that you're dealing with buildings that are crammed with people, where windows are small and rarely open. There are air vents but the air pushed through them is often as hot as the air already in the cells. When a prisoner can't step outside to cool off at night, it amounts to near torture.

In one prison that made the news, a vocational training program was discontinued during the summer because of the heat. It was a program that taught prisoners to train seeing eye dogs for the blind. The dogs used in the program were affected by the heat. Word reached the ASPCA about the plight of the canines. As a result, the animal protection group declared the place unfit for dogs. The inmates left behind lamented that there wasn't an equivalent organization for two-legged animals called the ASPCH: American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Humans.

Before the nighttime count, often at 9pm, inmates can escape the heat in the coolness of the library before returning to their housing quarters. On those evenings, it's less important what one does in the library than to get there to cool off. On weekend nights when the library is closed, the only option for reducing one's body heat is to take frequent cold showers. I remember taking five of them in the course of a day. Once you cool off your body—or in the winter heat it up with hot showers—it takes about two hours for the surrounding air temperature to penetrate you. Utilizing cold showers during heat waves is not just a matter of being comfortable. It helps avoid heat strokes.

The ambiance of a prison library is set by the staff person who is there to oversee it. I'll describe the librarians in four prisons where I lived for at least a year during my 10-year prison odyssey.

The librarian at Lorton Reformatory, Washington, DC's now closed prison located about 15 miles from downtown, DC, was a most amiable man. Put him in a prison uniform and he would blend in with inmates. He talked, looked and acted like most of us; which was a good thing. It allowed him to relate, to communicate. There wasn't much that inmates could put over on this perceptive man.

To say he was well liked would be an understatement. The men revered him. He was the father that many of them never had. He

gave them advice, motivated them, placed books in their hands to read. When the men received letters from home, they put them on his desk. Then it was his turn to do the reading. After absorbing each letter, hopeful words would come from his mouth. There was no such thing as a bad letter from home in his opinion. Even when the news was bad, there was a silver lining. "At least you haven't been forgotten," he would say. "Your family's attitude and situation may leave something to be desired, but at least they're alive. And where there's life, there's hope." You rarely found this worldly librarian failing to listen and respond to anyone who sought his advice. There was a chair next to his desk at all times. Inmates took turns sitting in it, and no one was ever rushed out of it.

His standard means of connecting: "If I hadn't gotten a good paying job in the government when I was young, I'm sure I'd be sitting exactly where you're sitting now. In fact, I might still end up there if I ever lose this job." It wasn't idle talk since news had come of the possibility of closing down Lorton. I don't know what became of this man when that happened. Did he embark on a life of crime to make up for lost income? One thing I can say for certain: if he is engaged in crime and you run into him on the street, you have nothing to fear. He would never do anything to harm someone. His offense would strictly be of the victimless kind. He told us so.

If a movie were made about this engaging and charismatic figure, he could play himself. He had a natural way of being lively and colorful. When I met another prison librarian a thousand miles away at Hamilton Correctional Institution in Florida, I was reminded of that Lorton stalwart. The Hamilton librarian had the opposite qualities. The Lorton man treated prisoners as peers and spoke respectfully to them. The Hamilton librarian treated us as if we were devils sent to hell. Her role: to be Satan's helper and keep the fires beneath us hot. Her behavior was so extreme that it was often comical. In short, she was a character. Picture a melodramatic silent movie with a villain in it. She was that villain. Or the bad witch in the Wizard of Oz, with additional poundage. This viperous librarian provided enough entertainment to be her own sideshow in a circus.

She insisted that the library be quiet at all times, even when packed with inmates. In maintaining this rule, she did not set a good example. She didn't just talk loudly but often yelled. It didn't take much to set her off. An inmate might be slouching in a chair or he didn't put a book back on the shelf neatly. "This isn't a barnyard!" she'd scream at the offender. "It's a library!" No question that she ran a tight ship; much more so than was necessary. Always assuming

the worst in prisoners, she went out of her way to criticize and denigrate us.

Each day the prison library opened at 9 am sharp. By then, there were a half dozen or so inmates waiting to get in. A bureaucrat of the first order, she timed the opening to the second. She had a ritual for the men to follow while they waited. A white line had been painted about 20 feet from the door of the library. Behind this line the men had to wait. No one ever asked her the reason for this line. Why invite further abuse by inquiring? The only thing I could think of was that she didn't want the front door crowded when she arrived to work in the morning. Bad enough that she had to be in close proximity to us devils all day long. She intended to keep us away as she prepared to open the door.

One morning we stood behind the line with a threatening sky above us. We hoped that the rain would not come before the 9 am opening. You don't get umbrellas in prison; presumably they can be used as weapons. The hour came and the librarian peeked out from her slightly opened door. She then looked upward and seemed disappointed that the rain had not yet begun. We inched forward. Then came the torrent. Not the rain but her harsh words. "Not so fast, inmates! I didn't give the signal to come in yet!" We suddenly realized she hadn't. We had failed to play the game by her ridiculous rules, and we were now all in trouble.

"Behind the line!" she yelled. In our haste to avoid the bad weather we had started toward the entrance before she had sullenly waved her hand for us to come in, as she did each morning. Like a high priestess sending a message to her obedient congregants, she took pleasure in the act. She was like a dog trainer using a hand gesture to get her animals to perform in unison. We had failed to obey and were now in trouble.

But being in trouble in prison does not mean great hardship. There's no corporal punishment and you can't be denied a bed to sleep in, or three meals daily to eat. You might be prevented from making calls home for awhile, but that's about it. You can't be denied sending or receiving letters. They're part of your constitutional guarantees. Here's one reason why wardens don't want to remove TVs and other entertainment options from prison. These "extras" are the only things that can be denied to prisoners who fail to obey the rules.

Of course if the violation is severe enough—such as punching an officer—new criminal charges can be brought against an inmate. But this isn't an easy thing to do. Even if a prosecution is successful, what will be the deterrent result for prisoners? More jail time? It's

hardly a punishment to give someone something he's already used to. What can you do to lifers? The answer is not much. In view of this, it's no wonder that prisons are run mostly by inmates who do largely what they wish.

Prosecutions aren't easy because whoever is prosecuted has a right to put on a defense. Jurors often side with prisoners when they hear about the life-threatening conditions and daily beatings that guards inflict on them. It isn't true, but it's what jurors will hear. Defense attorneys are as wily and manipulative as prosecutors. They will not only present the myths that prisons are dangerous, but will build on them.

Prisoners may not have much in terms of material possessions. But they have their health and their minds. They also have a lot of friends, an inevitable and unexpectedly pleasant consequence of the prison experience. That's not to say that most people aren't miserable being in prison. But misery loves company, and friends on the inside are in abundance. If one of them is put on trial for assault against an officer, the others will all come forward to testify on his behalf. And they will say whatever it takes to convince a jury that the defendant hit the prison officer in self-defense. Then paint a broader picture of prison being full of violently sadistic "guards." There's no reason for inmates not to lie. They get a free trip out of prison to the courthouse to testify. And no retaliation can be brought against them for testifying. That's one good thing about courts in America; you can speak your mind. A person can even libel and slander someone on the stand and no defamation action can be brought. It's called witness immunity.

We knew we were in trouble as we stood behind the white demarcation line when the librarian yelled at us. I didn't like the prospect of what our punishment would be. The Hamilton librarian didn't have many choices of what to do with us. Our act of crossing the line did not rise to the level of "writing us up" in a disciplinary report, which could result in time in the hole. Even if it had, she would have preferred to inflict more immediate harm. She therefore slammed the door shut and left us outside waiting.

The wait wouldn't be long, we knew, but then neither would the rain in coming. She had to open quickly or she'd be in violation of rules. The delay was an attempt to sweat us out, or more precisely, rain us out. We saw her look out the window at the sky with disappointment that it had not yet opened. Why was God favoring

these fallen angels turned devils? The wait finally ended and she opened the door. But before she could give her all-important signal, the unexpected happened. The inmate at the front of the line stumbled over the white marking. His face was full of amazement. He hadn't expected to do what he did. The act wasn't voluntary; he had been pushed by a mischievous inmate behind him.

The prank proved contagious and we all burst out laughing. Her reaction was to scowl, then give another tirade. "What do you inmates think you're doing? You're in prison and you need to act like it! You're here to be punished, not to have a good time!"

Says who? Not the U.S. Supreme Court which in a landmark case about prison abuse declared, "People go to prison as punishment, *not* to be punished." The high court stated that it's up to judges to punish by jailing people, not the domain of prison bureaucrats whose role is to help inmates get through the experience, and make sure they don't leave before their sentence is up. The acerbic but ultimately comical librarian had apparently not read that decision.

Though perhaps her civilian assistant had. This was the only prison library I came across that had too many librarians. One is more than enough since inmates are usually assigned to prison libraries to help as their work detail. They perform the necessary tasks of checking books in and out and cataloging new ones. Unnecessary functions, such as befriending inmates in Lorton or befuddling them in Hamilton, are handled by the librarians. What did the woman's assistant do? Not much. He usually followed the librarian around, looking meek and ineptly handling small tasks. The man never yelled. In fact, he rarely opened his mouth. We speculated that he probably couldn't get a job anywhere else, that a politician had put him there to do the man's family a favor.

The only excitement he generated was the day he was rushed to a hospital amid speculation that an inmate had hit him. It looked that way to observers since he had dropped to the floor as he stood by the door of the library at closing time as inmates filtered out. Had one of them fatally stabbed him? Aside from the rarity of prison knife attacks, and that such wounds are usually superficial, why would anyone kill this inert individual? To do so would be redundant. We wondered if he would come back to his job, whether or not he had been hurt seriously. Clearly prison did not agree with him.

But he showed up the very next day as his identical lethargic self. The truth was revealed by one of the inmates assigned to the library. "When the medics came, they knew what was up. Still they took him to the hospital to make sure he didn't break anything in the

fall. They knew what happened when they smelled booze on his breath. The guy's a fall-down drunk!"

Where else can such a person be employed? Here was the perfect place for him to "earn" a paycheck and hide his condition. He was hibernating from the world of genuine work.

Further north, in the library at FCI Petersburg in Virginia, a different woman held forth. Another harmless character, she could have passed as a cross between a new age guru and a streetwalker. She spoke like the former and dressed like the latter. Her looks were stunning, her makeup flawless, her movements painful to watch for us sex-deprived men; poetry in erotic motion. Inmates went to the library to have a glance at this woman, take in her perfume, and perhaps be favored with a word or smile. It was a sad admission of how love starved we were. Imagine 1,000 guys sharing the same girlfriend, and accepting it gleefully! I'm sure that psychologists have a term for such a sick state of mind. Fortunately, there were no mirrors in the prison, a common absence since glass can be broken and become a danger. Had there been mirrors I think the men suffering from this mass mania would have had difficulty looking themselves in the eyes. I know I would have.

The well-educated woman was as smart as she was beautiful. She knew the affect she had on men and how to handle it. Acting like a glamorous movie star who had decided to run for public office, she put herself on display, spoke when spoken to, and was quiet when silence was more effective. Long ago she had figured out that a male prison was one of the safest places for an attractive show-off like her to work. There might have been a few dangerous ones in the mix, but they were greatly outnumbered by the others. How does that differ from the outside? Quite a bit. If a woman is being brutalized in the free world, people who might be aware of it will normally not get involved. They will call the police but then it might be too late. For such onlookers, the woman is merely a stranger. Plus, they often think that she might have brought the ordeal on herself. They could also be fearful. The attacker might turn out to be violent to them.

In prison, none of these reservations apply. If any inmates had seen her assaulted, they would have jumped into the fray without reservation. After all, she was their girlfriend, irreplaceable in more than one sense. Just as love is blind, so is fear when a loved one is threatened. The attacker might be dangerous, but so is everyone in prison, at least potentially. It comes with the territory.

Still the goddess librarian knew enough to avoid being with an inmate where she might be cornered. She usually made sure there were several prisoners in her presence. That happened naturally as no man wanted to be left out. Who could tell when she might dismiss the others and ask a lucky inmate to remain? But you needed to be there for that to happen. For her part, she'd dismiss everyone at once, leading them all to an exit. They followed obediently, as if she were beckoning. Instead of waving at them with her hand, she used the wiggle of her rear, always tightly encased in a snug dress or undersized pants.

The inevitable finally happened. She got pregnant. Men stayed up into the early hours of mornings speculating on who the father might be. I remember Ben's crestfallen comment: "Poor kid! How will it ever know who the father is?" Everyone seemed embarrassed over this prospect except the librarian herself. She continued in her job as if nothing had happened, even as her stomach grew. Did she know something we didn't? Was there a possibility that she had been impregnated by none other than her own husband?

He was senior-rank officer working in the same prison. We liked him almost as much as her, though in a different way. They had similar traits: pleasant, hardworking, good-looking and professional. We rarely saw them together, which was a sign of their admirable independence and professionalism. But when they did cross paths, we could see how devoted they were to each other.

What kind of library did she operate? Though I was there often, I didn't pay much attention to the books. Before you think ill of me for being overly fixated on this female, I will explain.

I received many books mailed to me from the outside. They were superior to the ones in the library because they were newer. Yet there was something in the library that attracted me there besides my girlfriend. It was a bank of typewriters on a long counter for inmates to use, available on a first-come, first-serve basis. A prisoner who wanted to use one went to the inmate clerk on duty and presented his picture ID issued by the prison. It boldly stated one's status as a federal inmate, name and, most prominently featured on the card, prisoner number. The final feature, almost as an afterthought in a corner, was a photo taken of the inmate upon entry to the prison. Most men are seen smiling. You'd understand why if you shared their experience of arriving at FCI Petersburg after sitting for weeks or months in a jail. The prison is spacious compared to a cramped jail, and there are food choices—including a salad bar—as well as activity choices not available in a jail.

