

17 NORTH

A Restorative Drama

Based on the trial transcripts and oral history of Glenn Cox, recounting his 17-year incarceration after a wrongful conviction of murder in Bronx Supreme Court in 1992 and his subsequent experiences in Attica, Otisville, Orleans and Hudson Correctional Facilities.

By Glenn Cox & E. Merwin

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Glenncox0903@gmail.com

Emerwin77@gmail.com

www.emerwin.com

SETTING

NYC March 2020 in the early days of the pandemic—when fewer and fewer people commute, a subway singer and a restaurant worker heading home from her job cross paths on an empty platform.

There are two benches on either side of the stage. Between them is an MTA “litter stops here” trashcan overflowing with trash. From this receptacle the SHADOWMEN will be taking out and disposing of their props. Behind the platform is the grimy, white tiled wall of the station.

**Characters:****O.T.**

subway singer in his mid-60s, OT's dreads have thinned since he began growing them as an act of resistance in Attica in 1992. He is dressed in black leather jacket, black jeans and black sneakers.

AVI

a New Yorker, mid-30s; due to impending lockdown, she has just been laid off from her job as assistant manager from a midtown restaurant

SHADOWMEN

2 grey-clad actors who appear on the subway platform, at times checking their watch or iPhone, looking down the tracks. As O.T. tells prison stories, the SHADOWMEN will engage with him and AVI in dialog to act out scenes from prison.

Ghosts of Hudson will appear as spirits on the tiled wall of the station. These are former inmates,

girls and young women, incarcerated at the Hudson Correctional Facility from 1887 to the 1970s. Their story is integral to this play as Hudson is where O.T. spent the final years of his bid.

Historical Note: Before Hudson Correctional Facility incarcerated men, it had a long and violent history of incarcerating and abusing women and girls 12-20. In this drama, Cox tells their history as he learned it while an inmate—having found and read the logbooks that documented their abuse, cleaned out the attic where their prison dresses were still stored and the basement rooms where they were brutalized. From the window of his cell, he could see the grounds where the girls are buried and “the baby cemetery.”

According to investigative journalist Nina Bernstein, “The institution of Hudson near Albany, had opened in 1887 as The House of Refuge for Women... discipline meant solitary confinement on bread and water, shackles and beatings.” (Bernstein, Ward of the State)

From the accounts of many of the Hudson staff whose families had lived and worked at the facility for generations, Glenn Cox learned of the routine rapes that resulted in abortions and the death of the girls who were buried on the grounds. As documented in the Bernstein book, a former resident of Hudson Training School for Girls had reported stumbling over the cemetery when she attempted to escape: “there were weathered markers, and no epitaphs, only girls’ names fading from bare limestone. Lizzie French. Nellie McGovern. Anna Schabesberger. Julia Coon. Mary O’Brien. Jennie Fuller. Barbara Decker. `Annie Whitney. Helen Peer.” (Bernstein, *The Lost Children of Wilder: The Epic Struggle of Foster Care*, 2001) The abuse was further documented by Bernstein in an article revealing the incarceration of Ella Fitzgerald who at age 16 was held

and abused in the reformatory for one year before running away. "The unwritten story survives in the recollections of former employees of the New York State Training School for Girls at Hudson, N.Y., and in the records of a government investigation undertaken there in 1936, about two years after Miss Fitzgerald left. State investigators reported that black girls, then 88 of 460 residents, were segregated in the two most crowded and dilapidated of the reformatory's 17 "cottages," and were routinely beaten by male staff" (1996).

17 North also makes reference to the Attica riot of 1971, as verified by sources listed in Bibliography which we urge producers of the play to distribute to the audience with their play bill. It is to the forgotten girls of Hudson and the inmates murdered and buried unknown on the grounds of these upstate prisons that this play is dedicated, so that

they may rest and be remembered.

At Rise:



Empty subway platform: bench and the grimy white wall on which images are projected throughout the play. Projection 1: Glenn Cox & his acapella group *Made Over* performing on Chambers Street.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ajhw-Vw-a0c>

Enter AVI, carrying two bulging shopping bags of groceries and household items purchased at Jack's, the midtown dollar store emporium.

She glances at the singers with annoyance as tired New Yorkers sometimes do. She crosses to the edge of the stage and peers stage right. She sets down the bags, taking her cellphone from her pocket and checks the MTA alerts. The image of the singers is replaced by the screen of Avi's iphone, showing the current time, 11:15 and then the MTA Alert app.

Projection 2:

MTA ALERT Southbound trains are delayed due to of an investigation at 59th Street.

AVI

Really? Unbelievable.

(AVI crosses to the bench stage right where she places her bags and sits, frustrated.

Enter SHADOWMEN 1 & 2 who take a seat on the bench stage left—one with his arms draped over the back of the bench, the other with his legs spread wide and leaning forward, so when O.T. enters, there is no space to sit. He crosses toward AVI's bench. He is wearing headphones which he removes and places around his neck.)

O.T.

Excuse me, mam, mind if I sit down?

AVI

Mam? Please. You look old enough to be my grandfather.

(Sucks her teeth and looks away, tense and inwardly seething—not at the stranger, just her own frustration.)

O.T.

Tough day on the job?

AVI

Job. What job? First I get laid off, then I get a call from daughter's daycare and I'm supposed to be picking her by noon, and here I am stranded and it's already eleven fifteen.

(moving her bags)

Go ahead. Sit.

O.T.

(sitting down)

Always respect a person's space. That's one good habit I got from upstate.

AVI

(in a less angry tone to make up for her initial rudeness)

You from upstate?

O.T.

From? No. I'm from New Rochelle. Worked upstate, though. Seventeen years. Sorry to hear you got laid off.

AVI

Three years I been assistant manager. And time comes to lay people off, and I'm the first to go. I got kids, I got bills to pay. And they say, sorry, we gotta work with a skeleton crew. Really? Skeleton crew. Well, that's gonna be me and my kids if can't put food on the table. A skeleton crew.

O.T.

Sorry, mam.

AVI

Will you stop mamming me?

O.T.

No offense, mam.

AVI

(AVI glares at him, then laughs.)

No offense taken. (pause) I know you from some place. (nods) From the B train. You came through singing that Coney Island song.

O.T.

That be us. *Under the Boardwalk* as first sung by the Drifters 1964.

AVI

Most days, I don't appreciate all these "performers" coming through disturbing my peace. Please. I'm minding my own business, just trying to get to work in the morning or get home at night. And here they come blasting a boom box, doing back flips down the aisle. But your group? You sounded good.

O.T.

And good money. Up until the city decided to roll over and

play dead.

AVI

You got that right. It's like a ghost town, up there and down here. Used to have to fight for a seat, now coming and going I got a whole car to myself. I heard they might even shut down the whole system.

O.T.

Might be time to come up with a new hustle.

AVI

So, you think it's not going to go back to being the same?

O.T.

Trust me. Nothing goes back to being the same. Whatever New York City was? That's done, that's over. It's a wrap. And so say the powers that be.

AVI

You really think so?

O.T.

Whatever way this thing plays out, you better be resourceful.

AVI

Yeah, well, not the first time I had to figure it out on my own.

O.T.

(stops himself before articulating mam)
I'm sure you have, ma...

AVI

(pause as their eyes meet)
Avi. And you are?

O.T.

Down here they call me O.T.

AVI

I thought it was O.G. As in old gangsta.

O.T.

Nah, not in my case, I'm just an old timer. Don't know how I came to be that, but yeah, I'm O.T.

AVI

So how long you been down here singing?

O.T.

Eight years. Eight years ago last Christmas eve. I was on my way, grudgingly, to my job in Chinatown--the only job I could get at the time at a McDonald's where I was working my ass off for \$225 a week. Shit. Sixty years old and I'm hauling sixty-pound bags of trash out of a subbasement, twenty, thirty bags a night--and that's after eight, ten hours of mopping and scrubbing that joint.

AVI

I don't mean to be rude, but couldn't you find something better?

O.T.

Let's just say I had to deal with some restrictions. Which was why on that night, on that particular R train, I seized my chance. I was about to get off at Canal Street when four brothers come through singing *Silent Night*, as sung by the Temps. You have heard of the Temptations?

AVI

Yeah, sure. I'm into old school.

O.T.

Old school. Yeah, you right, old school. So, naturally, I join in with my old school baritone. Now these men are professionals. They're down here to make a living, not have

some jive ass turkey mess up their money. But I know where to come in and how not to step on another man's note—and we sound good. In fact, passengers start applauding, reaching into their pockets and purses and peeling bills out of their wallets. That's when the lead singer comes up to me and gives me his card. And I been down here ever since.

AVI

Good move. You probably make more down here than I make working two jobs up there. Well, used to make.

OT

Man, please, on a good day? We'd break down on 42nd Street and head home eighty, ninety dollars a man. For two hours work? For singing? But today? Six dollars and seventy-five cents.

(They laugh.)

How'm I going to pay my rent with six dollars and seventy five cents? By the time I get back, Miss Lorna's gonna be standing at my door with her hands all out, toe tapping. Already owe her for last week. And what am I gonna give her? Six dollars and seventy-five cents?

AVI

So, what do you rent, a room?

O.T.

A hundred eighty-five a week for a room the size of a cell, no kitchen and a rusty pipe for a shower that I gotta get up and use at four in the morning so I don't have to knock out some jabroni comes banging on the door. Throw in another twenty for a/c might as well be eight hundred for the honor of having a roof over my head.

AVI

Yeah, New York rent. I been fighting with my landlord—he doubles my rent and you think I seen a repair in the last five years? Cracks in the ceiling. No handles on the faucets. Gotta turn on the shower with a wrench. Can you believe that? A wrench.

O.T.

Man, a guy like that? Just needs someone to put it to him, straighten his ass out.

AVI

So, what do you do? Double rent, double jobs. So now no jobs, no rent? I don't think so. I got three kids, one up in SUNY Purchase. How do I feed the two at home and send money up for my oldest? And what am I supposed to do if I can't provide for them—runaway and join a circus?

O.T.

Did plenty of circus acts in my time. Got shot out of cannons, slept on nails, swallowed razor blades. Damn. Put my head more than once into a lion's mouth.

AVI

Seriously?

O.T.

No, not a circus. At least not the kind with a tent. But I am resourceful. And wherever I am, in whatever condition, I thrive. Upstate I did welding, plumbing, metalwork, blueprints, even milked cows in Orleans. But any real money I made in prison was from my artwork.

AVI

Prison?

O.T.

I wasn't staying at no Sheraton for seventeen years.

AVI

Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to...

O.T.

You didn't offend me. I'm not ashamed of my life, my life's an open book. It's all on the record. Sent me up to Attica

with a life bid. Took me four years in the law library to get that shit reversed.

AVI

Can't imagine being locked up for a day, let alone all those years. I really am sorry.

O.T.

What are you sorry for? You weren't on that jury. Every one of them was a cop, c.o. or a parole officer. You a cop, c.o. or a parole officer?

AVI

Me? No. I wouldn't have it in me. Besides, I have a hard enough time trying to keep my own girls in line.

O.T.

Alright then, you couldn't have been on that jury. Jury foreman was a superintendent of parole. Then they pick a couple of correction officers, policemen. I'm sitting there at the *voir dire*, watching how this thing is playing out.

AVI

For deer?

O.T.

Voir dire. That's when they pick the jury. It means speak the truth.

AVI

Never heard of a *voire dire*.

O.T.

Neither had I. No arrests, no record, only had this naïve belief that if I went to trial and spoke the truth, that nightmare would be over. And for fifteen months on Rikers Island, I held tight to that illusion.

(The lighting flickers and dims, casting an eeriness over the platform which begins to take on an otherworldly atmosphere. AS O.T. speaks Shadowman 1 rises and walks toward the bench.)

Only now I'm sitting there watching this jury get picked, and this white guy on his way out taps me on the shoulder. Never forget him. He was wearing a leather jacket, nice leather with an American flag across the front. Came right to me and leaned in close.

SHADOWMAN 1

Hey, man, good luck. You're gonna need it.

(Pause as O.T. nods and Shadowman 1 crosses to edge of the platform to peer down the tracks.)

O.T.

That's when I knew. That jury was handpicked to send me upstate. Prosecutor, judge, and not least of all my get-what-you-pay-for-attorney, nothing for nothing--knew they were gonna get my ass upstate before I walked into that courtroom.

AVI

(looking from O.T. to the Shadowman)

Uh, excuse me. Do you know this man?

O.T. & SHADOWMAN 1 & 2

(speak simultaneously then laugh)

Yes, we do.

O.T.

Got a few Shadowmen that never leave my side. In there and out here.

AVI

Shadowmen. As in figments of your imagination?

O.T.

I conjure them up from time to time. To remember, to honor the past. Just like I conjured you up to listen.

AVI

You conjured me up? And this is why I teach my girls never to speak to strangers. Especially on the subway. So if you'll excuse me.

O.T.

Wait.

AVI

And why would I wait? To sit here and listen to some nonsense about Shadowmen?

COX

We're all shadows in somebody's life. Passing through, hurting, helping. Sometimes shadows cross for a reason. Maybe you need to hear my story as much I need to tell it.

AVI

Yes, story, exactly. Every poor soul finds themselves locked up will tell you the same. I was railroaded. It was the DA, it was the judge, it was the jury. If you locked up, you're probably locked up for a reason. And whoever goes and gets himself locked up, just passed a sentence on whoever's left out here to fend for themselves. Yeah, right. You were railroaded.

O.T.

You don't have to believe me because five New York State appellate judges agreed that defending myself against a white man who kicked in my bedroom door and attacked me with two weapons was not murder.

AVI

Well, if five appellate judges agreed you were innocent, I guess they would've had to let you out.

O.T.

It's a lot of theater. A lot of game to make you feel you got a chance. Everybody thought I was going home, inmates,

c.o.s, civilians. Gave my shit away—T.V., radio.

SHADOWMAN 2

(Calls to O.T. from where he sits on the other bench.)

Yo, O.T., how about them headphones? Those are some nice headphones.

(O.T. takes the headphones from around his neck and tosses them to SHADOWMAN 1. AVI looks on in disbelief.)

Thanks, man. And good luck.

AVI

You did not just give that man your headphones.

O.T.

Came in with nothing, and I was leaving with nothing. No one thought I'd be back. Came down to the Tombs for resentencing, then come to find out the judge whose decision got reversed is going to do the resentencing.

SHADOWMAN 1

(SHADOWMAN 1 crosses to trash can, tosses out some trash to find a gavel. They stride the stage in a campy, imperious stride in front of AVI who narrows her eyes and looks away as subway riders do to avoid further contact with one deemed potentially a problem.)

O.T.

Back down to Rikers to wait three months for her to get her ass back from Russia. Same judge who hit me with a life bid, furious to see me back. Same judge staring down at me from the bench.

SHADOWMAN 1

(Striding back to the empty bench. They strike the bench with the gavel before leaping up and glaring at O.T. as they

Eight and a quarter to twenty-five. Had to call my father, tell him a second time, Pop, I'm not coming home. Man, caused a lot of people a lot of pain.

AVI

Yes, I know. I know how hard it can be on a family. All those years with you gone.

O.T.

Seventeen years behind a lie. It was crazy, man. Officers were shocked to see me back at Attica. They even showed me the paperwork that said I was supposed to be released from court. Ain't that a bitch? Officers in Attica showing me my own paperwork that I was supposed to be released from court. Asking me what I'm doing back here, like I'd come back to this hellhole of my own free will.

AVI

You should have fought it.

O.T.

Should've? I appealed twice. Kept going before the parole board every two years. Nothing mattered. Even got a citation from the warden for saving a civilian's life during a riot in the mess hall. Didn't matter. Got to the point I didn't even open the envelope.

AVI

What's it like?

O.T.

What's what like?

AVI

Being there. You know, there.

O.T.

Prison? Like no place you been and no place you want to be. Why?

AVI

It's just that someone I know someone... I'm related to was there. And I guess since I was a kid, I always wondered what it was like.

O.T.

And who is this relation?

AVI

I guess my dad.

O.T.

You guess?

AVI

It's just that growing up I had a dad. My stepdad. And so yeah, to me? He was more like something that was always missing. I mean, I was a baby, I barely remember him. Just little things, like playing with his hair. And one time at Coney Island, him holding me and this big wave washing over us. I cried and he laughed. He had a big laugh. That I remember. And how he carried me back to the blanket wrapped me in a towel and gave me the rest of his cold fries. They were kind of crunchy with the sand. But I ate 'em. Funny what you remember.

O.T.

Back in my hometown, I used to do construction and drive my cab at night. Pops bought it for me, and I was paying him back. Yeah, Pops. (pause) So, plenty of nights I'd get home two, three in the morning and I'd bring hot chocolate for the girls. And those Chessmen cookies come in a bag. They liked those. But their mother? She'd be mad as hell at me for waking them up.

AVI

I can imagine. I'd be furious. Gotta get those girls up for school in the morning. And here comes you filling them with sugar in the middle of the night.

O.T.

Yeah, well, I'm glad I did. Cause, like your daddy, I was there, and then I wasn't.

AVI

One time when I was little my mom was taking me somewhere to see him. It was late and it was snowing hard when we got to where we were supposed to get on a bus. But we didn't go.

O.T.

That's the way it is. You get on a bus seven, eight o'clock the night before, get to Attica maybe eight, nine the next morning. Plenty of visits get shutdown because roads are closed. Snow up to your chest and the plows can't get through.

AVI

Well, we never did go back. And then one night I overheard my uncles talking about going to see him. About renting a car and driving up to Attica. Attica. Somehow it just sounded far. Like some dark forest faraway. Ruled by some evil witch. (laughs at herself) Kids, right?

O.T.

You want to see Attica? Go ahead. Google it up. Attica State Prison.

AVI

(AVI googles on her phone and the image on her screen appears on the tile wall.
Projection 3: the exterior of Attica State Prison at night: the wall, the guard tower and a tree.)

Then when I was like ten, I heard from my cousin he was out. Yeah, he was out, but he never came looking for me. (pause) Maybe it was my mom being with my stepdad. I don't know, I can't blame him. Life goes on. And then when I was sixteen, surprise! I had my own daughter to take care of. And I did. Been working two, three jobs a week ever since. So, who has time to think about the past? You know, what coulda, woulda, didn't happen.

(AVI rises and approaches the screen to study the image.)

So that's prison.

O.T.

There's no one place that's prison. You've got your maxes, your mediums. They're all plantations, but just like out here—you move around—even borough to borough. Bronx isn't Brooklyn and Brooklyn's not the Bronx. And life in any of 'em depends on the person living it.



(The lights grow dimmer and the stage takes on a silvery glow as O.T.'s stories draw AVI into another dimension.)

<https://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/01/nyregion/attica-prison-infamous-for-bloodshed-faces-a-reckoning-as-guards-go-on-trial.html>

AVI

It looks so... so ominous. Can't imagine being on the other side of that wall.

O.T.

(O.T. crossing toward the screen)

That's the guard tower. And that wall? Thirty foot high. And that tree? Never saw that tree. Ask anybody who's been there. When the van pulls away from Attica, you don't look back.

(Shadowman 2 crosses from bench to the trash and rummages through the litter to find a pair of mismatched leather work gloves, a small metal box and a set of tongs. He peers down the tracks and appears to be waiting for the next train.)

AVI

Must have been hard being there. And so far from your kids

for the first time.

O.T.

Wasn't at Attica at first. After I blew trial, I got sent to Fishkill, another plantation to get processed. And when I got there after fifteen months on Rikers, I was clean, gained my weight back. I got my face back, my body back, everything. Like I was lifeguarding again. But then I got transferred to Fishkill and that's where they give you the shots.

AVI

Shots? What kind of shots?

O.T.

It was a jet gun like in the military, and it's loaded with all these concoctions so when you go into these other facilities you don't get nothing, you don't give nothing. Now after two, three days, I'm losing mad weight. I'm racing, breathing hard. What? I'm an athlete, what the hell's going on here? Now they got me in observation, and I mean I was out, I was out... of... it. I'm so out of it that they had to bring me, honest to God, a wheelchair to get a shower cause the hot water makes me lose my breath, weakens me.

AVI

So, what's in them?

O.T.

That's what I'm asking myself. Never was sick like this in my life, dropped forty pounds quick. What the fuck was that y'all put in me? Now I been in the hospital a couple a weeks and this doctor, salt and pepper hair, old nice guy, comes into my room.

SHADOWMAN 1

(crosses to the trash where SHADOWMAN 2 reaches in and hands them a clipboard)

Mr. Cox?

O.T.

Yo, doc, what's going on with me? I can't hardly stand up.

SHADOWMAN 1

Well, your tests have come back, Mr. Cox, and you have Graves Disease.

O.T.

Graves Disease. Am I dying?

SHADOWMAN 1

No, Mr. Cox. You're not going to die. It's treatable.

O.T.

Fuck.

SHADOWMAN 1

(There is a pause as the heads of SHADOWMEN and AVI tilt, conveying confusion.)

Mr. Cox. I would have thought the fact that your illness is treatable would be good news.

O.T.

Good news? Only good news would be I'm getting up out of here. (to AVI) Go to prison behind a lie. And they might keep me the rest of my life, might never see my kids again. For defending myself? This world ain't for me, and I'd just as soon be up out of it.

AVI

It's sad to think of anyone... anyone getting to that point. Just wanting to give up.

O.T

I'm exhausted, can't eat. I'm giving my meals to the brother in the bed across from me. After about six, eight weeks, they take me outside to a specialist. Dude comes in the room carrying a box, metal box. Had on suede gloves, and he's holding a clamp, long metal clamp.

(Shadowman 2 crosses the stage carrying the metal box with the same campy, imperious stride. They approach the

bench where O.T. sits and set down the metal box beside him.)

(to Shadowman 2) Man, you look like you're going to do welding or some shit. All you need's the helmet.

Shadowman 2

Yes, Mr. Cox, I am a workman. And I'm going to work on you.

(Shadowman 2 opens the metal box and with the clamps takes out a glass jar which contains a large green and white pill which they roll around in the jar.)

AVI

What the hell kind of horse pill is that?

(Shadowman 2 unscrews the lid of the glass jar and with the tongs takes out the pill.)

Shadowman 2

Radiation.

O.T.

(to both AVI and Shadowman 2)

Radiation? Listen. I'm not the sharpest knife in the cabinet, but I'm not that dull to where I don't understand that radiation don't belong in humans. (laughs) Unless you wanna turn me into the Hulk.

SHADOWMAN 2

(Both Shadowmen laugh, then stop abruptly.)

No, Mr. Cox, we don't want to turn you into a superhero.

SHADOWMAN 1

Quite the opposite.

AVI

Quite the opposite? So, what are you trying to do, weaken the man or just straight out kill him?

SHADOWMEN

Take the pill, Mr. Cox.

AVI

(grabs the jar from Shadowman 2 and holds it in her bare hands)

Don't take the pill, Mr. Cox.

O.T.

I know, crazy right? Now I'm a stranger in a strange land. Like I'm on another planet. And I don't have no say-so cause if I wanna stay alive, I gotta believe in these demons, okay? And the reason why I believe in these demons that can't even cure a common cold is because I know they want to keep me alive to do that bid. So, no they ain't gonna kill me. And if they try, they gonna say wait a minute, we want to see that cat suffer. Bring him back. (laughs) Whatever you gotta do, heal him!

AVI

(crosses to receptable to dispose of bottle)

So you did take it.

O.T.

And soon as I did, I start to feel this heat all through me. I'm racing now, and I'm having these headaches.

Shadowman 2

You'd better sit down, Mr. Cox.

(Shakily O.T. sits and appears disturbed and in pain.)

What you are now experiencing, Mr. Cox, is called a thyroid storm. You may be experiencing this for several weeks.

O.T

(to AVI) All my senses are awakening, and my brain feels like it's swelling.

(Concerned, AVI sits beside him and takes his hand in two of hers.)

SHADOWMAN 2

(to AVI) Keep this patient under observation.

AVI

Will you just go away and leave this poor man alone!

(Shadowman 2 smiles and steps aside.)

O.T.

(O.T. appears to revive.)

Yeah, man, it was crazy.

AVI

I would not have taken it. No way. They can't just go around forcing people to take medications and you don't even know what's in them.

O.T.

In there, you take it. You're their property, and they just do what they do. They say here's your blood pressure medication. And you say, I don't need no medication. Last time I looked my blood pressure's perfect. And you don't take the pill? You might be in the box until you do. Now you're on that shit for life. But it's profitable. And that's what prison's really about. Profit. And you're just a means to the money.

AVI

Alone and sick like that. I'd have been terrified.

O.T.

I'm not gonna front. Afraid? Yeah, I was afraid when I hit Rikers. First time in prison? And then when I stepped out of the van at Attica and heard all this wailing and screaming like a psychiatric ward. (pause) Man, they're

doing my intake and I put my head down and I cried.

(Pause while AVI bites her lips, holds back her own tears and squeezes his hand more tightly)

My whole life. Whatever pain I had, I held it down. (pause) But yeah, I cried. Officer processing me kept his eyes down and stepped outside to give me a minute. (pause) So yeah, I was afraid. Until I got used to it. But locked up, you learn fast. You can be it, but you can't show it.

AVI

Out here, too. Especially you got kids and they're looking up to you. Watching to see how you gonna react. You gonna lose it? You gonna fall apart? Or you gonna deal with it? Like you said, you can be it, but you can't show it.

O.T.

Yeah, you right. We all get tested.

SHADOWMAN 1

(to AVI as he jots down notes on his clipboard)

This man is not going to be able to work for a while. Keep him in his cell and monitor him.

AVI

You monitor him. And stop talking to me.

SHADOWMAN 2

And be sure the patient takes his medication.

(Handing AVI a bottle of pills before crossing to trash where he and SHADOWMAN 1 dispose of their props both in the can and on the ground.)

AVI

What? More radiation?

O.T.

It's a steroid, and it's putting fluid in my head. And if I don't take it within a certain time, the fluid goes out of my brain, and it hurts like holy hell... It's something like somebody is twisting and squeezing the fluid out of my brain like it's a wet rag. Used to be in my cell under my pillow over my mouth, screaming and crying so nobody would hear me and think I couldn't handle the bid.

AVI

How long's it gonna take before you get well?

O.T.

As in feeling no pain? To this day I still race, get headaches. My vision goes in and out. But a couple weeks go by and I'm back in the yard, working out. And I'm skinny. But once they give me that medication, two weeks after? That shit blew me up.

SHADOW MAN 1

Yo, check out, O.T.

SHADOW MAN 2

He came in here skinny, man. How'd he blow up so fast?

SHADOWMAN 1

Yo, Frankenstein, go get the weights ready for us.

O.T.

(laughs to AVI) Came in, I was the understudy. Now I'm bigger than all of 'em. (to SHADOWMEN) Got it, see y'all in the yard.

AVI

(nodding toward SHADOWMEN) So, they're your friends?

O.T.

Just like out here, you pull people to you. Every facility I went to. Closer to me than my own family out here.

AVI

So how many people are in... like share... your area?



O.T.

A cell? In the mediums you've got dorms, maybe ninety men in a dorm. But in a max you're in your own cell. Some of them have bars and some doors. C block has doors. Now the door's the thing—you got some privacy. You can do what you gotta do. Sometimes you move in a cell and you see the knife sharpening grooves on the floor. People was in there before you, sharpening their knives, getting ready for battle. Yeah. And in D block, you go into the yard, you can see the shotgun shell holes in the wall from when they had the riot back in the 70s. Prisoners and officers died in that yard. We used to play ball there. I used to sit there and play chess in that yard. Used to go out and hit the heavy bag. Middle of winter, by myself. Snow this deep and I'm trudging across the yard with that thing on my shoulder. And that's the same ground that all that blood went into.

(pause) Go ahead, go on and google that too. Attica riot. See for yourself I'm not making this shit up. That's history. Same history they want you sleepwalkers to forget.

(AVI types in Attica Riot on her iPhone. Projection 4: image of inmates being herded in the yard appears from a NY Post article. Shadowmen read the text aloud from his phone.)

<https://nypost.com/2016/08/20/the-true-story-of-the-attica-prison-riot/>

SHADOWMAN 1

"Police herd the subdued inmates into a yard before

stripping and searching them after a prison riot at the Attica State Prison."

O.T.

Yeah, man, these bullshit phones are good for something if you put 'em to good use. Go ahead keep reading.

SHADOWMAN 2

"When a helicopter flew over the yard at Attica Correctional Facility on Sept. 13, 1971, five days into a takeover of the prison by its 1,300 inmates, some of the prisoners thought it held New York Gov. Nelson Rockefeller, come to help negotiate an end to the standoff. They realized their error when the gas dropped.

The combination of CS and CN gas created a "thick, powdery fog" in the yard "that quickly enveloped, sickened and felled every man it touched."

SHADOWMAN 1

"But while the gas subdued the prisoners, it was merely the opening salvo in a full-on sadistic assault that set the stage for days of death and bloodshed, weeks of torture, years of pain and decades of lawsuits, investigations and recriminations." (Getlen, 2016)

O.T.

A lot of blood was shed in that yard. A lot of blood shed all through there. You get sent up north, your life is in God's hands. Officers, inmates there's a lot of demons upstate'll kill you, but they kill you quick in Attica.

(O.T. nods toward the image of Attica on the tiled wall.)

Yeah, same ground soaked up all that blood. It's crazy. You can feel the energy all through Attica. In D block yard, you can feel the heaviness of it, the spiritual weight. Even on the tiers you can feel it. You even see it moving by.

(The image of Attica on the tiled wall fades and as the shadow of cell bars appear and

the dim lights now verge on darkness barely illuminated by fluorescent light. Shadowmen are seated side by side on the other bench, leaning against one another as they fall asleep. A thin mist rolls across the platform.)

You can be in a deep sleep and wake up, say two three in the morning. You wake up and you see something going by your cell. And you say, oh shit. And you get up real quietly, keep your shoes off, so your feet be on the stone floor. Stone be cold as shit. Put your mirror on the gate. What the fuck was that? Not who. What the fuck was that? You staring into your mirror on the gate. No reflection. Everybody's locked in. Ain't like the mediums getting up and goin' down the hall to the bathroom. This is a max. And when you locked in at ten o'clock at night, those doors don't open until five in the morning to go to chow. And that's how that go. Two three four in the morning. You put your mirror out. Ain't no c.o. walkin', ain't no keys jingling.

AVI

(clings to O.T.'s arm and whispers)

Glenn, what is that?

O.T.

Just energy going by. Looks like somebody blowing out smoke rings, only they move by real slow. And they're dark. Don't mean they're evil, just means they're troubled. (pause) Moving from place to place, trying to find their way out.

(The churning mist dissolves and AVI lets go of O.T.)

AVI

Now that was just weird. Can you not remember that again please?

O.T.

Don't you think I want to put it out of my mind. But the shadows have a life of their own. Like a loop that just

keeps replaying.

AVI

What I really, really don't understand is how you got through all that.

O.T.

I kept to myself. Didn't mess with no drugs, didn't mess with no gangs. It helped I was in shape. My whole life, I was an athlete, in the Marines, trained on Paris Island. I was a lifeguard. Nobody preyed on me in there. I respected myself, and people respected me. And how'd I keep sane in there. I'd be in my cell, painting, talking to myself, laughing, singing.

SHADOWMAN 1

Yo, Cox, you alright in there?

O.T.

Yeah, man, I'm good.

SHADOWMAN 2

(Calling from stage right.)

Yo, who got a store?

SHADOWMAN 1

(Responding from stage left.)

I got one.

AVI

A store?

O.T.

Yeah. You making twenty five cent an hour, you better be resourceful. Dude goes to commissary, buys an overload. Cigarettes, Little Debbie cakes. He know people gonna get hungry through the night.

SHADOWMAN 2

Yo, gimme two cookies.

(SHADOWMAN 1 crosses behind AVI and before she can react, he snatches two small bags of cookies)

and a can of beans from her shopping bag.)

AVI

Hey. You are going to pay me for those!

(SHADOWMAN 1 ignores her while he crosses to the trash to take out a net bag in which he places the cookies and can of beans.)

O.T.

Cat's got a net bag he ties a string to, long string, about the length of this platform. And in the net bag he has a can a beans. And the can a beans is for the net bag to have velocity and travel.

SHADOWMAN 1

(wrapping the string around it)

What cell you in?

SHADOWMAN 2

Thirty-seven.

O.T.

(pointing toward the SHADOWMEN 1 who swings and tosses the bag that lands at O.T.s feet)

He could be on one end of the gallery, and he could be way down the other end, or maybe on another tier. Put your mirror out on the gate, you can see an arm swinging this net bag with that can a beans in it. Then as far as he could throw it, fwoosh, you'll see it traveling.

(O.T. makes a whistling sound to replicate the sound of the string unfurling from the net bag.)

Su, su, su, su, su. Then BADAP, bowp, bowp. It hits the ground and rolls with that can a beans in it, maybe in front of your cell. (to SHADOWMEN) Yo, who's cell this come from?

SHADOWMAN 1

Cell 2. I'm trying to get it to 37 cell. Do me a favor, throw it down the gallery.

O.T.

I got you, bro. (TO AVI) And that's how it go. It's like family. And whether you want to or not, you could be reading a good book. Good book. And all of a sudden this shit lands in front of your cell.

(O.T. rises, swings and tosses the net bag toward SHADOWMAN 2 who reels it in.)

You gotta come outta that, cause you gonna want help too sometime. Might be you fishing, and some other guy getting your net bag to where it got to go. Yeah. You be working out, eating that fake food from the mess hall, an hour later you be hungry as shit, waiting for them to call chow at five and march down the corridor through Times Square.

AVI

Times square?



O.T.

Go ahead, Google that too. Times Square Attica.

(On the tiled wall appears Projection 4: Times Square.)

<https://pbase.com/kjosker/image/25165280>

Yeah, that's it. Right in the middle of Attica. They got a four-way hallway and a big sign that says Time Square. And Times Square leads you to the law library, the yard, to the Chaplin's office and to two mess halls. Each mess hall holds 700 people, and each one's like a cathedral only it just ain't got no altar in it.



AVI

(AVI shows O.T. the phone to confirm the as it image appears on the wall. Projection 6: the mess hall.

<https://pbase.com/kjosker/image/25165274>

Is that it?

O.T.

That's the mess hall. So now we go in two by two and you find a seat. And when you look up, you see the owls.

AVI

Owls in Attica?

(As O.T. describes the scene, SHADOWMEN act out the part of the owls and black birds. When they "fly" to close to AVI she swats them away.)

O.T.

Mostly these black-grey birds with long beaks. And then you got the sparrows and the owls, barn owls and hooting owls. All of them flying and nesting overhead. Some of them lined up along the windows and across the beams looking down. Then all of a sudden when the prisoners are ordered to get up and stand on-line for food, then you can see the birds flying down, hundreds at a time swooping down in waves. And over there in the corners, you can see those owls turning their heads, watching them, trying to decide which one he's gonna grab up. Eventually you see an owl coming down, and he'll run one, two maybe three birds right out the window. Sometimes you see him fly back in with feet hanging out of his beak. Go right back up on the rafter to

perch and stare down at the prisoners. Sometimes an owl'll fly down, land right there in front of you, and you see the small feathers fly off onto the table. Big old bird size of a pit bull. Yeah, man. Owls in Attica.

AVI

So, you're all there, trying to eat with these crazy birds and buzzards flying around?

(SHADOWMAN 2 pretending to be a "big old bird size of a pit bull" lands on the bench next to AVI and nudges her with its beak. AVI with effort shoves him off the bench.)

Will you.. get off.. me?

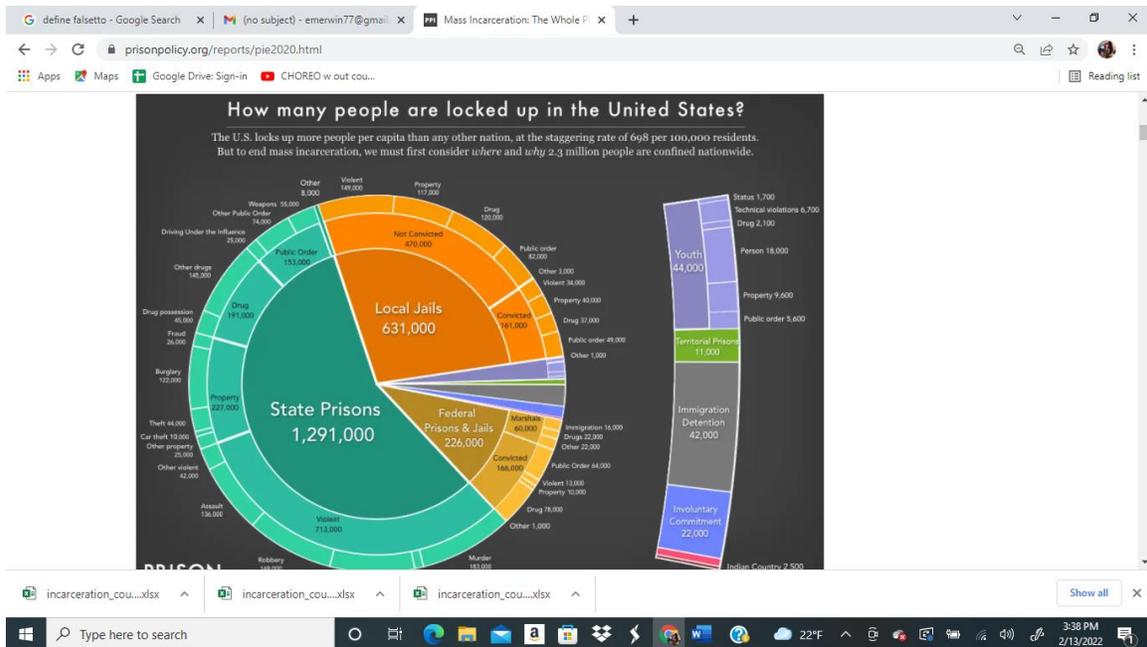
O.T.

Not all of us. Back then, you got something like twenty-seven hundred men in there. That's a small town, only it's in one big ass building. Think about it. That's a lot of beds to fill and a lot of mouths to feed. And money's being made on meals and lodging.

(AVI is tapping on her iPhone and Projection 6: graph of U.S. incarceration published by prisonpolicy.org appears as Shadowman 1 reads from the screen.)

Shadowman 1

"The U.S. locks up more people per capita than any other nation, at the staggering rate of 698 per 100,000 residents. But to end mass incarceration, we must first consider where and why 2.3 million people are confined nationwide."



O.T.

Yeah, man, biggest hotel chain in the history of the world. And all those guests, guest as they like to say out here—next guest. They gotta be fed. So like I said, we got over two thousand guests, so we'd be up by four to go work in the mess hall.

(SHADOWMAN 2 crosses to the trash where he removes the packets of cookies from the net bag and returns to the bench.)

AVI

That's a lot of mouths to feed every day, and I know what it takes just to put out three meals a day for my girls.

O.T.

At first I was working as a lineman, serving on the counter. Then I got moved up to the kitchen. That was after the riot in the mess hall.

AVI

Another riot? I thought those happened out here and then they locked people up.

(SHADOWMAN 1 & 2 are seated on the bench SHADOWM 2 offers 1 a bag of cookies. They both tear them open and snack on them. AVI hearing the crunch, gets up crosses to the SHADOWMEN and snatches the bags out of their hands.)

AVI

Give me those. You ain't paying for 'em, you ain't eating 'em.

(AVI crosses to the trashcan to dispose of the bags. SHADOWMEN respond childishly. As AVI returns to the bench next to O.T.)

Now pay attention. You might learn something. (to O.T.) Go ahead.

AVI

Riot in the messhall.

O.T.

Yeah. So, what goes on out here, goes on in there. If there's beef out here and they couldn't solve it? It carries on into there. So one morning, they're coming in. One group of forty men, another group of forty men. And I'm serving the oatmeal. Bow, brother say hit me off. No problem, bam. And next thing you know there's commotion. And everybody turns around, and I'm looking over everybody, whole tables get up. And I can see where they're stabbing this guy, bum-rushed him. Ran him under the table, and they go right down under there with him, stabbing him. Now in the booth up on the wall where the owls are, you got these glass booths. And in them you got officers with binoculars and one with a telescope, and they press the gas. Now in Attica you can see 'em in the ceiling over each of the aisles. They look like shot gun shells. One's yellow, one's green, one's red.

AVI

Shot gun shells?

O.T.

They're like nozzles for when they release the gas. Now remember this mess hall holds 700 men. Man, there was yelling and screaming and then the gas dropped. You can see this powdery dust coming down, but when it hits that ground, bow. All of a sudden, whole mess hall is cloudy. You can't barely see faces right in front of you. And everybody's coughing, taking off their shirt, wrapping it around their fists, trying to punch these windows out. Bam. You can hear glass breaking, and you see people kicking and blood flying and people punching out these windows cause they can't breathe. And everybody rushing to one little hole trying to get fresh air. Big men, powerful men, and we are broken down.

AVI

So where are you?

O.T.

I'm still behind the counter, me and a Muslim guy and another dude that's with us. He runs off, but the Muslim guy stays with me, and Raymond, little guy, Black civilian, say like five feet. He's scared. All you see are his eyes like he seen a ghost. Officers, civilians they got themselves to safety, left him in. And he's cowering behind the counter because now it's pandemonium.

(Shadowman 2 is standing, staring out terrified from behind the other bench.)

Yo, Ray, get down. Get down close to the floor. Get under that shit so you can breathe. (to AVI) So I take off my shirt, my mess hall shirt, and I wrap it around his face, cause this stuff burns like somebody threw hot sauce in your eyes. Your eyes be tearing, burning and you can't see nothing. And they said this is the mild, but we're all rendered helpless.

SHADOWMAN 2

(Crossing to trashcan, coughing)

Cox, where's Raymond?

O.T.

Where you been at? Y'all left him here to die, man. Get him outta here!

SHADOWMAN 2

C'mon, Ray, we gotta get outta here quick.

O.T.

(to AVI) So he hurries him out and slams the door again. Bam. Now they're herding us outside to the yard in back of the hospital. And I am incapacitated. Everybody is. Yo, soon as you run out there, you're flopping on the ground. Coughing, gagging. You think you gonna die. Middle of November, cold as shit. And all I have on is a t-shirt cause I gave my kitchen shirt to Raymond. Freezing. And we get out there and we see officers they lined up, and they beating people on the way out. (laughs) Like we're not in enough pain already! Man. So, now I'm outside and I fall to the ground. I'm gagging, I'm choking, and everything is coming out of me.

SHADOWMAN 1

Yo, Cox! O.T., over here. We got water.

O.T.

(to AVI) Brothers get me to my feet. The water's from where the snow melted. Everybody's trying to clean their faces off and their eyes. After about forty-five minutes I start to get myself together. I was fucked up, man. Everybody was just fucked up. And I look up, and I see the officers on the wall with AK-47s pointing down at us.

SHADOWMAN 2

(SHADOWMAN 2 grabs a toy rifle from the trash, leaps onto bench and aims it downward)

Nobody make a move.

O.T.

I'm looking up at these rifles drawn on us. Thinking am I gonna die in this yard? (pause) So I say a quick prayer, I say, please let me get home to my kids. Please.

AVI

Yeah, I woulda been praying. I woulda been praying the whole time. Seventeen years. Jesus, get me home to my

girls.

O.T.

And he did. Took his sweet time, but yes he did.

AVI

How long they keep you out there in the cold like that?

O.T.

Say, five, six hours. Freezing. Everybody grouped together, you know, hugging each other, trying to stay warm. Finally started letting us in one at a time. And so we come in and they have us strip down.

SHADOWMAN 2

(still carrying rifle)

Come on. C block, mess hall workers. Strip down to ass.

O.T.

Take our shirts off, our boots off, socks off. We had to take our pants off, underwear off, it was dick and ass.

SHADOWMAN 2

Alright, back to your block.

O.T.

So, you got like forty naked slaves. (laughs) Black slaves and white slaves. And we're butt naked. And we're this close. And we go back to our house.

SHADOWMAN 2

Get in your cells.

O.T.

Then they started running the showers cause we're covered in that white tear gas residue. In your hair, in your nose, on your eyelashes. That shit'll fuck you up. It's cancerous. So we get washed off, and they give us fresh towels and back to your cells. They lock us in for like, shit, what was it? Like two, three days. Locked inside our cells till they ran an investigation, and then we go back to work.

SHADOWMAN 1

Yo, where's Cox? Where's Cox at?

O.T.

Why. What's it to you?

SHADOWMAN 1

Yo, they love you down here, man.

O.T.

(to AVI) And I'm thinking to myself what the hell's going on?

SHADOWMAN 1

They feeling you, man. They heard about what you did.

O.T.

Did? (to AVI) What'd I do? Now an officer takes me to the back where the civilians are at, police and all that. Big civilian steps in. Big dude, I think his name was Frank. Puts his arm around me. And I'm freaking the fuck out. These motherfuckers don't like Blacks, and they don't like convicts. And I'm Black and I'm a convict, and you got your arm around me?

SHADOWMAN 2

(laughs) Come on in the back, Cox.

O.T.

(to AVI) This here is a set up. They trying to kill me.

SHADOWMAN 2

Go ahead, Cox, sit down.

O.T.

No, sir, I'll stand. (to AVI) I'd rather stand because I'm surveilling the area to see if I got to fight, who I can get first, who's a threat, who ain't a threat? Who's gonna lead, who's gonna follow, who ain't gonna do nothin.

SHADOWMAN 2

Inmate Cox, we heard good things about you. What you did

for Raymond.

COX

It wasn't nothin.' You know, natural, you're supposed to do that for people.

SHADOWMAN 2

Well, in here we really appreciate that. Now I don't ever say this, but anything you ever want in that freezer, you can come get it and take it back to your house. Chicken, roast beef.

AVI

Free food, cool. I'd have stocked up my freezer.

O.T.

Nah, that's not my style. You supposed to do that. Man, I was a lifeguard. I'm trained to save people. Hell, even after Don attacked me, cracked my head open, came after me with a sword and a knife. I beat him down, and even then I gave him CPR.

AVI

Man tried to kill you and you're administering CPR?

O.T.

That's who I am. That's what I was trained to do. And at my trial, the detectives testified to that. I was on the floor giving him CPR. Had him breathing until they told me let him go. Didn't do nothing. Just left him lying there and locked me up.

SHADOWMAN 1

Thanks, Cox. You saved my life.

O.T.

(For a moment O.T. is disoriented, then looks toward Shadowman 1)

Raymond?

SHADOWMAN 1

Yeah, it's me. Told my family and they really appreciate what you did for me.

O.T.

(to AVI) Now this is the funny part. Check this out. It's Thanksgiving and Raymond's family come up from the south. So he tells them and they can't believe there's humanity like that in prison. From convicts? So they write to the Superintendent. And I get a letter of commendation. (Pause) Which didn't mean shit at the parole board.

AVI

Did you think it might?

O.T.

Yeah, sure I did. This was a situation where there was a riot. I could've left him there. You ain't a prisoner, you ain't a convict, you a civilian, you against us, you one a them. You know, so fuck y'all. But I didn't do that. But my character came out, naturally. So yeah, that was before I went down for resentencing. And it didn't mean shit.

AVI

So you were there for, what, thirteen more years?

O.T.

Not at Attica. Now they downgrade me from a max to a medium. Plantation. And that's all it was, another plantation. Served the next four years at Orleans.

AVI

As in N'orleans? That's my hometown.

O.T.

Nah, this Orleans is way up north, even further than Attica, say maybe twenty miles to Canada. Wake up with snow piled up above your window. Used to be out before dawn to go milk the cows and that snow'd be (with emphasis) comin' down.

AVI

Cows?

(On all fours, SHADOWMEN become bovine.)

O.T.

Yeah, they'd wake us up around four. We had a crew, say nine guys and they'd transport us over to the farm. You got like 37 cows on this side, and 37 cows on the other. Our job was to put the hay down, clean the area, then hook the hoses up to the utters

(O.T. stands and with the SHADOWMEN pantomime the scene.)

Now those cows sway, and if you get caught in the sway, guys get crushed. So I used to come in, turn the on the overhead barn lights, and I'd say, come on, ladies, let's go. It's soul train time. And I'd dance down the aisle, stall to stall, and do my job. And those cows they loved me, never gave me a problem. And that was for three, four years before I transferred to Otisville.

SHADOWMAN 1

Yo, Pop.

O.T.

Yo, Pop? (O.T. peers at Shadowman 1.) Shawn?

SHADOWMAN 1

Yeah, Pop. They showing movies down the hill. We goin'?

O.T.

Yeah, sure we goin'. Get Stretch. (to AVI) In Otisville they used to call us the family. Never forget it. Me, Stretch and Shawn. First night I got there from Orleans, didn't even have my shower shoes. And you know I don't stand on nothing barefooted. (to SHADOWMAN 1.) Hey man, didn't get my commissary yet. Can y'get me a pair of shower shoes?

SHADOWMAN 1

Only got something like twenty on my commissary sheet. (hesitates) But, yeah O.T. Yeah, I'll do it for you.

O.T.

It was something like four dollars, and he did it. He stood out on faith. Went to commissary, came back with the shower shoes, nice ones. (to AVI) Then when I got my sheet, had something like twenty thousand on it at the time.

AVI

As in twenty thousand dollars?

O.T.

I wasn't broke out here, and I wasn't broke in there. Had two good jobs, counselor for the city and construction crew. And when Pop died, and they sold the house, I was straight. And I made sure the people who were close to me had what they needed too. My kids out here, and my kids in there. (to Shadowman 1) Yo, Shawn, what you need?

SHADOWMAN 1

Two cans a tobacco?

O.T.

Bet. (to AVI) It came in a can. Bugle. With the rolling papers inside. So I got him two cans, and I do like he did. I brought to his bed, and I said, thank you, young brother for what you did for me.

SHADOWMAN 1

I got you, Pop.

O.T.

(to AVI) Then that Saturday morning, I'm just getting familiar with the place. Sitting in the dayroom. I was in the back, playing the wall. Now, I don't have to deal with mess hall because my food is stacked. Cans of jack mack, bags of rice, beans, black beans. Tuna, onions. Got it all in my wall locker. You got a big ass locker. Mine was stacked. Boxes of pancake mix. I got syrup. (to Shadowman 1) You know how to cook?

SHADOWMAN 1

Yeah, I can cook.

O.T.

You wanna eat breakfast?

SHADOWMAN 1

Yeah. But...

O.T.

I'll tell you what. You clean the mack, make the pancakes.

SHADOWMAN 1

Okay, but can my friend get down?

O.T.

What's up with your friend?

SHADOWMAN 1

Yo, he's a good dude. Stretch. He from Queens, he's quiet. He aint't got nobody. He was cooking with some dudes and when his money ran out, they kicked him to the curb.

O.T.

Oh, yeah? You tell him to come talk to me. (to AVI) And now he comes in. Nice kid, a little taller than me. Pleasant smile. Now they don't know what I got in my account. But I know. And we gonna eat. Pancakes, jack mack, fried onions. We sat there around that table. Saturday morning. Everybody came out. Knew them. Didn't know me.

SHADOWMAN 2

Well, look here. Y'all eatin' lovely.

O.T.

Yes, we are, brother. Yes, we are. (to AVI) People respected us. And when they showed movies down the hill, we would go as a family. And they used to sell bean pies. Bags of mixed popcorn, cheese doodles. Chips, pretzels. A bag, say, thirty cents. I would buy each of us a bag, you sign the disbursement form and they go in your account and get later. (to Shadowman 3) Yo, how much for those bean pies?

SHADOWMAN 2

Fifty cents. How many you want?

O.T.

How much for the whole box? (to AVI) So these brothers, they get in a huddle. (Laughs as SHADOWMEN move together to confer.) This is the biggest sale they had in their whole history of prison bean pie baking.

SHADOWMAN 2

Thirty dollars.

O.T.

Okay, give me the disbursement form. (to AVI) And they looking around like they not sure I'm for real.

SHADOWMAN 1

Yo, I'm telling you. This man is good for it.

O.T.

(to AVI) So I they keep it back there until the movie's over. It's got something like thirty, forty pies. Big old box. So, Shawn and Stretch take it back to the house, put it in fridge. And I said, y'all can go down and get 'em whenever y'want. And you know they were watching that fridge make sure nobody else was getting into those bean pies. (laughs) But I didn't care.

AVI

So it sounds like you found yourself a family in there. How long were you together?

O.T.

Years, man, something like five years. It was a give and take sort of thing. Cause after my grandfather passed, I didn't have nobody. No visits, no packages coming in. So Shawn's mother starts writing to me, and his sister. That was the reward for me. Never forget him. Chinese and Black. Taught how him how to read in there. Same way my grandmother taght Pop. She broke it down in syllables. Like she taught me. Shawn read his first book through me.

(O.T. pauses the way an older person often takes a moment to recollect a name or title.)

It was by... Chancellor Williams. Uh, huh. It was the Destruction of Black Civilization. It was about uplifting the mindset. Out here I never was much into school. But in there, if you looked in my cell, and I wasn't painting, I was reading.

AVI

Really? They let you paint in prison?

O.T.

Let me? Please. I had officers coming to me for my art. In Otisville there was a kid that taught me how to do my portraits on t-shirts. Once I mastered that, people were coming to me to do rappers, their Bentleys, their Ducati motorcycles. Wherever I went, my art sustained me. Then when I got to Hudson they gave me a job in the woodcraft department, and I met this guy, white guy, good dude, in maintenance, and he used to stretch my canvasses for me. I'd hit him off with a pack of cigarettes, and he'd make me four good size canvasses from one bedsheet. Used to paint in my cube. Eight by nine. Bed, stool, wall locker. But yeah, that's where'd I paint. Sometimes straight through the day, and sometime straight through the night. That was my peace, man. I'd put on my headphones, and I'd be in a whole other dimension.

(O.T walks over to the trashcan where Shadowmen hand him a sketch pad and pencil and begins to draw. Behind him on the white tiled wall appears Projection 7: a video of a night sky, pitch dark and alive with stars. Behind him on the white tiled wall appears SHADOWMAN crosses to the trash takes out a sketech book and pencil.)

Thanks, man. (to AVI) Mind if I draw you?

AVI

I don't mind, go ahead.

O.T.

Yeah, man. Sometimes images would come to my mind. I would draw them out first and paint whatever it was right there. One time—now check this out, I did this woman on stage, and she was playing acoustic guitar. Yeah, man. She had a gown on and she was barefooted. Had hair like yours. And on the stage, I did the slats of wood, everything, wood grain, nails. There were curtains, but in the back, it was dark, pitch dark, and all you could see was stars. Yeah. You dig what I'm saying? You get it though, right? (pause) What you get out of that?

AVI

That it's eternity?

O.T.

People would come to my cell and watch me paint. They'd say, "What's that mean?" Or "Mr. Cox, what you trying to get across?" And I'd break it down to them. This woman is playing this guitar very softly and in back that's nothing but the universe, that's the mind, the infinite mind, and she's the intuitive part of us that plays softly and tries to get our attention. You know that, right?

AVI

I do now.

(Throughout this scene he continues to sketch AVI, putting down his pencil and addressing the audience directly when moved by the urgency of his words.)

O.T

I meditated one time so deeply, I was so deep that I actually saw that image. It was dark and I saw little white lights shooting across space. And I was traveling, I was traveling deeper into this. Just darkness and stars, tiny pinpoints of light shooting by. Never forget that. Just like I'll never forget the girls.

AVI

Girls? What girls?

O.T.

Years before Hudson was a men's prison, it was a prison for girls, girls younger than you. They called it a training school. But it wasn't nothing but a school of torture and torment. Yeah, man. I know because I worked for maintenance and we found the logbooks from the 20s and 30s downstairs in the basement. And I know because underneath our cottage, one time we went downstairs to fix a leaky drainpipe, the main drainpipe, and I saw these shelves. Old, you know how wood gets when it ages, real dark and moldy. And I ask the civilian who's the head of maintenance, (to Shadowman) Yo, man, what are these shelves for?

SHADOWMAN 1

Cox, you didn't know? This used t'be the morgue, downstairs here for the babies. When the girls got pregnant, had a miscarriage or whatever, they put 'em here.

AVI

(stares intently at O.T.)

Or whatever?

O.T.

I'm like what? I was stuck. But now I'm remembering in the mess hall, downstairs was the operating room. Before it became a mess hall dorm, it used to be a hospital. (to Shadowman 1) Yo, so down in the basement was the operating room?

SHADOWMAN 1

Yeah, Cox, And down in the basement is where they used to operate on these girls.

O.T.

(to AVI) Now watch how this plays out. When these girls came to Hudson—from way back in the 1800s. Either they were girls down on their luck, or sick when they had the tuberculosis epidemic, or up until the 70s, they were kids on the street cause they had no place else to go that got picked up, hauled in front of a judge and sent upstate.



AVI

(As she does a GOOGLE search, her cellphone screen appears on the white tiled wall: Projection 8: Hudson New York Prison for Girls.

Images of the Victorian brick buildings of the institution appear. AVI scrolls down the images and stops on this image of female inmates in the laundry room then reads. <https://www.columbiapaper.com/2019/04/records-restore-history-of-hudsons-prison/>)

"The prison opened in Hudson in 1887 as the House of Refuge for Women, the state's first reformatory for women and, according to some historians, America's first "gender-specific" women's penal institution."

O.T.

Yeah, well, wasn't no kind of refuge in it. Man, kids. Should've still been with their mamas, and some judge railroaded them to Hudson.

AVI

More like kidnapped. Just like today. Snatching kids up out of their mama's arms, sending them god knows where to do god knows what!

O.T.

You right. Same story.

(AVI continues to search and read from her phone.)

"The institution at Hudson near Albany had opened in 1887 as the House of Refuge for women. In the home-like brick cottages, discipline meant solitary confinement on bread and water, shackles and beatings.

O.T.

And rape and murder. I don't have to Google that shit. I'm a living witness to that history. I saw those cemeteries with my own eyes. Right outside my window. Foul deeds were done to those girls in Hudson. Officers, civilians, they told me, and I'm telling you.

AVI

(On the tiled wall appears the cover of an ebook, *The Children of Wild* by Nina Bernstein. Then AVI scrolls over the publication page, the table of content, then clicks and reads the text that appears on the wall.)

"The road to Hudson institution cut through woods of sumac, poplar and locust and climbed up to the remnants of a massive stone and iron gate."

O.T.

(Listening, O.T. interjects in a soft voice.)

Yeah. Yeah, I know that road.

AVI

(AVI continues to read as O.T. listens and nod.)

"Behind an eight-foot fence, on a hundred and sixty-acre bluff overlooking the Hudson River between the Catskill and the Berkshire Mountains stood the red brick buildings of the State Training School for Girls."

O.T.

Yeah. The van drives up through woods, and the dirt road turns into black top. And on the right-hand side as you get near the gate, you see the bunker.

AVI

Bunker? You mean like a building?

O.T

Not a building, jut a mound of dirt built into the ground. Used to be the makeshift morgue for the girls who still had family somewhere to come and claim the bodies. Officers told me. Funeral director would come from town and pick up the bodies up at nine, ten o'clock so the girls wouldn't see the hearse coming up the road. He'd pick them up and take them back into town.

AVI

(As AVI continues to read from the screen of her phone, the text remains on the wall.)

"The fourteen cottages, imposing two-story brick buildings housed twenty-five to thirty girls each had barely changed since the oldest ones were built in the 1880s... Peeling paint, cracked plaster and gaping holes marked the walls... In the dark hours before the six thirty a.m. wake up call, sleep was broken by the sound of urgent knocking as girls who had to use the toilet tried to draw the staff's attention."

O.T.

There's two bathrooms in each cottage, right next to each other. Sometime, watch this. Sometime you go to the bathroom and everybody either be out in the yard or everybody asleep or at mess hall, and you go into the bathroom and you hear somebody knocking. And so, "Yo, I'm in here, man" Knocking, knocking, knocking. And you catch 'em knocking, and get off the toilet and pull the door right open. And nobody's there. (pause) It's the ghost of them girls. They can't rest.

AVI

(In the search box that appears on the wall, AVI types *cemetery* and this passage appears.)

"It was a small cemetery. The old gravestones had been so tilted by spring frosts and winter thaws that they looked

almost scattered. There were no dates on the weathered markers, and no epitaphs—only girls' names, fading from bare limestone. Lizzie French. Nellie McGovern. Anna Schabesberger. Julia Coon. Mary O'Brien. Louella Roarack. Lydia Althouser. Jennie Fuller. Barbara Decker. Anne Withey. Helen Peer."

O.T.

I saw it. Two cemeteries from out my window. Headstones are gone, but those bodies are still in the ground.

AVI

(Continues to skim and read.)

"Years ago, dead babies born to inmates were buried there... and girls caught trying to escape who later died inside the institution."

O.T.

What'd I tell you? See. They tried to escape cause they were being raped, and they killed 'em.

AVI

"Other bodies were sent home to their folks for burial, but even after death, runaways were punished. This was their solitary confinement: a cold dark grave, lost in the woods forever."

O.T.

We could see the graveyards. Civilians'll tell you. I had a window. Look out my window you could see the yard, and look to the left, further out, you could see the baby graveyard and the adult girl graveyard. Right there. Yard, graveyard, graveyard, road, pinewoods. Trees on each side, and once the cars go over that little hill, you don't see 'em no more.

AVI

So it's all true.

O.T.

I lived it, but I'm glad you checked that out so you can see for yourself.

AVI

I never doubted you. Makes me furious—and to think those girls and their babies have never been acknowledged. Never been known, like what they suffered did not matter.

O.T.

Now, in my cottage, A cottage, they got a hole in the ceiling, a trap door where you go in the attic. Nobody's in the attic. There's a Yale lock been on there for decades. Officers and prisoners are hearing something rustling around up there, so maybe there's squirrels or something running around up there, so head of maintenance goes up there with a bolt cutter, breaks that lock. What do we find up there? Old pocketbooks like from the 20s, piles of them, and we start throwing them out. And these green dresses, these long prison dresses the girls in Hudson used to wear and these kind of black shoes they wore back in their day. So long story short, a new lock goes on the trapdoor, and nobody goes up into the attic. Nobody. But we still hear it, only it's clearer now, the walking up and down, back and forth, back and forth. And the inmates that been there for a while, like myself, we already know it's haunted. But a new inmate, coming in from another facility? He don't.

SHADOWMAN 1

What the fuck is that? What's up there? This only a two-floor cottage.

O.T.

Yeah, we know that.

SHADOWMAN 1

But there's a big ass lock on that door.

O.T.

Yeah, we know that too. (to AVI) You can take your little cell broom and go like this.

(O.T. jabs upward with his pencil as if hitting the ceiling)

And it doesn't stop. It's that energy, man.

AVI

Anbody ever seem them?

O.T.

Russ'll tell you. One night he goes down to the bathroom three, four in the morning. And there's this fire door exit. And next to it, there's these red fire stairs at the end of the cottage. He goes in the bathroom, comes out to go back to his cell, turns around and sees two girls sitting on the stairs. One is looking up like she's trying to figure something out or maybe praying, and the other one's like this here.

(O.T. bends over on the bench to let his head rest on his arm that he spreads across his lap.)

He was rubbing his eyes at the slop sink, trying to see if maybe he's dreaming. Goes back to his cell and locks in. He said, yo, he was scared to death. Goes back to the bathroom, comes out again and they're still there.

(On the home screen of AVI's cell phone, which is projected on the wall, it is visible that she has selected an app to record O.T. The app image looks like an old fashion tape recorder. As she records O.T. the "tape" spins.)

AVI

How about you, you ever seen them?

O.T.

One time I was sweeping my room. And I had draped the extension cord for my radio and lamp over the back of the bedpost so I could get up under the bed and near the window. Rick came in, and I said, "Rick, get me the mop." And I'm reaching over to grab it and all of sudden that wire comes up over the bedpost and whap! it's on the floor. Now that's not supposed to happen because the bedpost is a good four, five inches high. Alright, no problem. I take the dag-gone wire and drape it back over the bedpost. Now there's no way that's coming off unless I take it off. And then whap, its whips over the bedpost and hits the ground a second time.

SHADOWMAN 1

Yo, the girls don't want you to put that there because they can't see out the window.

O.T.

I'm looking at Rick and I'm buggin' the fuck out. Now Rick is my man, a white guy from Jersey. And I say, Rick, come on now, you only been down like two years, you going home next year and you mean to tell me you're talking to the girls.

SHADOWMAN 1

Glenn, I'm telling you. The girls don't want you to put the cord there because they can't look out the window.

O.T.

Now I'm starting to think maybe it's the current running through the cord. Maybe being that they're spirits, they can't deal with the current. So I said, okay, and I left it on the floor and just mopped around it.

(On the tile wall where the image of the recorder app still appears, silhouettes of the girls appear. They're various weights and sizes, but all wear the same calf-length dress. As they appear, some linger, some float off. Some stand still by the image of the app, they seem curious and study the image.)

AVI

So what did you do?

O.T.

Let me tell you what I didn't do. For three months I didn't sleep. We had spring mattresses up there on a metal frame. And I'm lying there at night, still, and my bed starts vibrating like this.

(O.T. grabs the edge of the bench as if he

is shaking it. One of the silhouettes whose profile is seen from the side, covers her mouth and seems to be giggling.)

Young Spanish brother across the hall from me, good kid, man, sensible kid, all he do is work out, eat, keep to himself.

SHADOWMAN 2

Yo, Mr Cox.

O.T.

What's up, man?

SHADOWMAN 2

At night, my rack's been shaking. Like every night.

O.T.

Yeah, I know man. Mine too (to AVI) Your rack's your bed. Started staying up at night painting until four in the morning. They call chow at five, and I had to get up to go to work. I told the civilians I worked with in maintenance what was going on, and they say they been hearing it too. Dudes been there for years, they been working there twenty, thirty years, their families worked there when the girls were there. And they're affirming this?

(Image on screen is still of the recorder app and around the screen as the curious shadows huddle and converse and seem to be aware now of the actors and audience as they point and gesture.)

Civilians I worked with took me to this cottage that's been abandoned for decades. They use it for a storage shed—been mad sightings in there by officers and prisoners. So, I go and get this bed. Didn't feel right, but I had to get it. They helped me bring it upstairs, put it in, gave me extra shelves for my closet, everything's good. And then it starts vibrating again.

AVI

There's no way I would've slept in there. One squeak, and I'd a been gone.

O.T.

What could I do? I'm locked the fuck in. Knew inmates who transferred out of the facility, grown ass men couldn't deal with it. My face is getting drawn, I'm losing mad weight.

SHADOWMAN 1

Cox, you don't look so good. You wanna go outside to the hospital?

O.T.

Nah, man. (to AVI) I don't want these officers fucking with me. They used to go in my cell, knock my stuff around, try to get me to react. Jamesy was the one who told me the day he was going home. He called me into the day room.

SHADOWMAN 1

(motions for O.T. to join him, O.T. rises and crosses to him)

Yo, Cox.

O.T.

You're out a here today, Jamesy. God bless you, man.

SHADOWMAN 1

Don't worry, Cox, you'll be out in eight months. Hold your head up.

(Pulls him in for a hug and says sotto voce)

Be cool, man. They're trying to take your CR to keep you here.

O.T.

Oh, really, thank you, Jamesy.

(returns to bench)

So I went back to my cell, and I locked in. After he told me that I stopped being in the day room so much because they got inmates in there who work for them. For a packet

or a carton of cigarettes they'll create some shit. I went right upstairs and locked in my room and start getting my paint on. One time they even came and tore up my room, then sent two officers come to my job to take me back to my cell. Man, they had thrown all my shit on the floor, emptied out my locker. Motherfuckers stole my paints. (pause) But I remembered what Jamesy had told me, and I sat down on my bed, and I didn't react.

(When AVI turns off internet on her phone, the image on the tiled wall reverts to a moving image of the cosmos.)

AVI

Takes a lot of restraint not to react in a situation like that. Day in and day out? A lot of restraint.

O.T.

Took me some time to see it, but he was looking out for me the whole time through there. And when officers were trying to get me to react, do things to me, God gave me the humility, self-control—don't react, don't react. They'd come at me, two, three at a time. Don't react. Just keep your eye out. I got these guys. And he would get them. Next thing I know, officer so and so, he transferred out. I didn't do that. Where's officer so and so? Oh, he transferred out yesterday. Thank you, god. I didn't pray for it, but he got rid of them because they were a thorn in my side, trying to keep me locked up. He had an appointed time for me to be there and an appointed time for me to leave. When he closes door, nobody can open it, and when he opens it, nobody, no matter how much money and power they think they have, nobody can keep it shut.

***** End of excerpt (see bibliography below)

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