

The Thunder Dorm

It was so hot. The kind of hot that is oppressive. A firm dictator with a grip on everyone in the dorm around me, bending its will upon us. Nothing could be done without summoning all the effort one had left. So most of us laid on our bunks. A slave to our own sweat.

The July sun was still high, baking the walls of the dorm, warming the building hotter than the 105 degrees outside. 16 bunks to a dorm. 32 men in each ~50ft dorm. 38 dorms on the yard. All connected in the style of old army barracks from the 60s. The cinder blocks would get hot to the touch on the inside, effectively making our dorm into a hot stone sauna until it cooled off somewhere around 2am. My bedsheet was soaked with my sweat as more trickled down my back. It was hard to discern between the flies walking on my bare skin and the beads of sweat dripping down to my bed. Driving me to madness.

I was staring out of the dorm window towards the entrance of the prison yard. Across the yard, the guards let the first guy in through the gate. The lone man, dressed in a red jumpsuit made of paper, walked slowly towards a group of guards. The guards were surrounding an open door to a dorm half-filled with guys that had been let in earlier in the day. The guys already in the dorm were waiting in there to ask the new one a single question. Depending on his answer, they would either let him in or all jump in to beat him up.

“Oh yeah, he’s getting off.” Said another prisoner a few bunks down from me who was also watching this unfold.

I watched the man slowly make his way to the dorm. He fumbled with the paperwork in his hands as he looked around the yard at all the people watching him from their dorm windows.

“Nah,” I replied, “He doesn’t have that *je ne sais quoi*... that strut. He isn’t tough enough.”

“Cookies from lunch that he fights,” my friend said without taking his eyes off the guy outside, who had just reached the door of the dorm.

“Bet.” I said. The man walked in the open door and the guard holding the door closed it behind the man and watched through the window panels of the door. The familiar sound of meat hitting meat and bodies scuffling pounded beyond the door and we could see the fighting from our vantage point.

The guard waited a few seconds before screaming, “Get down!”

The other guards rushed the outside of the closed door, all reaching for their belts. The first burst of a pepper bomb thrown into the dorm sounded right before a loud alarm started blaring over the yard. All of the inmates unlucky enough to be outside still sat on the hot ground as we were all mandated to do when the alarm sounded.

The guards let the pepper settle for a few seconds and all rushed in, dragging the guy in the red jumpsuit out in handcuffs. His suit was torn and falling off of half his body. Two more guys were led out in handcuffs, only wearing their boxers. The burnt sierra color of the pepper spray streaked their chest and back. The remaining inmates were brought out and made to sit against

the wall to breathe better as a solitary inmate was made to mop up the pepper inside. After a few minutes, they'd be made to go back inside to start this process all over again. Another new guy in a red paper jumpsuit was waiting at the gate.

"I could have sworn he wasn't going to fight!" I exclaimed with exasperation as I threw a pack of cookies to my friend across the room.

"Hey man," he said with a mouthful of cookies, "If this is your first time at Jamestown, you have to fight."

Sweat poured down my face and back as I watched the two guys in boxers being led to medical. I thought about how poignantly true my friend's statement was in disgust. How was this perceived as okay behavior? I thought to myself. This was not only happening twice a week on this yard and the twin yard next to ours, but every single state prison in California.

For the past four years, the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) has been forcing virtually every prisoner to fight each other. It isn't some rogue guards doing this, it is *sanctioned* by CDCR. It was not only accepted, but expected of every prisoner to participate.

Prison is already hard. People have this picture of prison from movies, and although it is occasionally accurate, it's really the small things – the everyday details that one repeatedly has to go through and assimilate to – that make it really difficult.

How about this: have you ever truly thought about whether hell exists? If so, it's supposed to be for eternity, right? At first it might be horrible, but eventually you'd get used to it and start a routine: wake up early, brush your teeth before they are pulled out by rusty pliers. Breakfast. After some coffee, you have to let the bigger demons blow out your asshole with the bones of your ancestors. Then you tell the person who sleeps on the bunk next to you to wash his sheets because the smell is making it hard to sleep at night. After a rousing game of cribbage, you lose at duck-duck-behead, but it's okay because NFL season starts Sunday and you also get to call your sister later... You get the picture. Humans adapt well to even the worst situations. Which is basically the California prison system. For me, at least. Maybe it's different for others.

I had to sit on the back half of the bus on the way to This prison.

The back half was filled with the general population, and then there was a locked gate separating us from those in protective custody in front of us. I was dressed in the standard red jumpsuit and white boxers, both made from paper, and I was shackled at my wrists and ankles. I already knew the choice I'd have to make once we got there. Everyone on the bus knew: either I'd have to fight the men on the bus beyond that locked gate, or agree not to fight them and fight the very men sitting around me now. Some of these men I've known for months already as we lived together while waiting to be housed in reception. There were no other options but to fight since I wasn't allowed to opt out of this at reception. With this knowledge, I wondered how the guy next to me fell asleep so quickly. His breath fluttered past my beard as I shifted carefully so his head wouldn't slip off my shoulder.

We were headed to Sierra Conservation Center, which was pretty much the only prison left in the state that houses and trains lower level inmates trying to be a part of the Cal fire inmate

firefighter program. It's a privately owned prison located in the city of Jamestown, a small farming community about an hour outside of Merced. As I stared out the window of the moving bus, I noticed two things: one being that the bus driver did not have a premium Spotify account and their algorithm of playing two songs followed by four commercials was almost unbearable. I couldn't understand why he wouldn't shell out the \$9.95 a month not to be subjected to so many god-awful Capital One commercials. The second thing was how many huge rocks jetted from the ground like giant tombstones in disarray. They looked like crooked teeth that had been shoved up from underground by some long, dead Native American deity. I assume that with this many rocks, these must've been cattle farms rather than the miles and miles of agricultural ones we had already passed.

I watched the landscape roll by and I dwelt on how many times this bus had driven over these roads. How many men stared out of these very windows and longed for the freedom of these fields. The silhouette of the majestic Sierra Nevada mountains in the distance put in perspective how small we were, despite how big my sentence felt. I wondered how many men had seen all of this and had the very same thought I was having right at that moment, which was "what kind of a sadist has a job driving a bus and would rather listen to Kevin Hart explain the advantages of Capital One rather than just paying to listen to artists similar to Paula Abdul without commercials?!" I thought that maybe this was a part of my punishment! And furthermore, how on earth did Kevin Hart even record so many horrible and unfunny Capital One commercials?

"Kevin Hart here. You can get Capital One points for your work life or your twerk life."

"Kevin Hart here. Did you know that Capital One is accepted at over 200 trillion places? So, go ahead—consume!"

Anyway, I knew what was coming when I got to Jamestown. I've been prepped for it the entire time at reception. CDCR has been doing this thing they call "integrating the yards." Which is a way of saying that they are taking lower level inmates from the "special needs yard (SNY)" and mixing them together with the general population (GPs). The reasons are to: 1) Get rid of the racial gangs in the prison. Which didn't succeed as far as I can tell considering I've seen four or five new ones pop-up as well as most of the old ones still sticking around. 2) Save money. It was causing them too much money on personnel to keep the two types of prisoners separate. I was told of and shown how to prep for the upcoming fight by other inmates.

OK, I'm getting ahead of myself here. You may not quite understand why this fight even happens. Let me start over as if you were just arriving in the California penal system.

Whenever anyone is arrested for the first time, if it isn't for rape, any crime against children, high profile, crimes, or former cops, he is placed into what's called general population (GP). Once in GP, the other inmates of the same "car" or race will check out his charges. If any of these charges have anything "bad" on them like any of the charges above among others, then this person will be "removed." Which is a very polite way of saying, "beat up and left by the door so the COs will take him and put him in protective custody with people with the above mentioned charges." Even domestic violence is a wobbler, meaning that depending on the circumstances and how bad the violence towards the woman was, a person might be removed for it. The other ways to get into protective custody is if a person is found to be a snitch, or it gets into a hefty drug debt without a way to pay, or if a person decides to drop out of their gang.

Basically, those in protective custody are those that the general population has deemed someone they don't want to live with. This may seem harsh, but you have to remember that these men are being forced to live with each other, sleep on the same bunkbed, eat with each other, etc. So this is one small way of controlling their own environment. They basically tell those that run the jail, "we do not like the choices this person has made, so he can live with the others."

A sort of prison within the prison.

The undesirables, I suppose.

I didn't come to a California jail until I was 32 years old (addiction is a motherfucker). So when I first got here, I was just as unaware of this as most people who haven't been in jail. However, one basically has no choice but to become indoctrinated into it. It is the way one is taught how things are done in one's new temporary home. The inmates in protective custody (the PCs as they are called in county jail but are called SNYs in state prison. Both are the exact same thing) are known to be "really bad" people by the GPs. Most prisoners can accept the drug dealers or gang members since it's what a lot of them grew up surrounded by. Poor people or addicts desperate enough to rob a store or person is all too common in their environments. Even most murderers are accepted since most of them killed rival gang members, or had some reason (however insane that might sound). But a woman beater? Child abuser? Rapist? Those kinds of men are seen as really awful. Once you were made to live with the general population, you must adapt to survive and stay sane. This is something you grow to understand and accept.

The underlying hatred for PCs grows and becomes stronger the more stories one hears and scenes of violence one sees. The understanding is that if a GP sees and is capable of reaching a PC, then that person must go fight that person. Deliver another form of punishment to these men. This rule to fight a PC is called an on-sight (see a PC, fight a PC). If you were found not to have done this task if you could have, you'll receive an ass kicking yourself instead. With this sort of rules and rituals, it is quite easy to become indoctrinated in this sort of behavior.

At first it seems reasonable not to like these people. Combine that with the fear of what will happen to you if you do not fight them, and your resolve is steeled to learn to hate them. The only other choice you have is to "roll it up" by telling a CO that you don't feel safe and he'll bring you to the protective custody side, but by this time you have already formed an opinion of those on that side and it can seem like more of a punishment to do that.

Thus, one is indoctrinated early on to hate those on the SNY side. We are told over and over by everyone on the general population side that they are nothing but snitches and child molesters. We are told of their cowardice and decisions that they made that even us criminals wouldn't do. Some of it is trying to be "noble," I guess. Domestic violence, rape, child endangerment, etc. are frowned upon and "double punished" with violence. Nonetheless, whether it is misguided, wrong, or noble, it is a fact of life in prison, and we are told over and over again to hate anyone on the SNY side.

There are so many nuances to this, along with other psychological factors that I'm either not taking into account or not even aware of, but this is the main gist of the entire thing. This is why CDCR had to have separate yards for the SNYs and GPs. Why COs taking inmates around needed to make sure no other CO was taking inmates from the other side along the same path, lest a melee ensue once they met. So clearly, because of the separation of the inmates, CDCR is quite aware of

the animosity and violence between both sides. They knew what would happen if these two sides met. This separation has been happening for decades, but as the prison population skyrocketed as the US made their draconian drug laws even stricter, CDCR found its SNY population swelling as well. The logistics behind housing and transferring inmates based on their classification became unmanageable, not to mention the money spent on protecting the Special Needs inmates. The dollar figure quoted to house one prisoner in California is \$132,860 a year. Of that \$15,000 is for food, clothing and amenities, and \$117,860 is for the corrections officers and other employees alone. Being on the GP side, I watched how much of a struggle it was to keep us separate from the SNYs. An accidental gate left open or a CO not paying strict attention often did result in violence or even death. I saw how nightmarish this was.

So, armed with that knowledge, let me tell you how, over the past few years, California has been revamping its prison system. It's rather surprising how much has changed and how quickly, seeing as though prior to this CDCR rarely changed anything.

Change would only come when inmates either: (1) figure out a way to game a part of the system and this was spread to other inmates; (2) successfully bring a civil suit against CDCR; or (3) get hurt or killed so that a potential lawsuit was inevitable (that list is not exhaustive but are the major reasons anything ever changed).

Change always came slowly. All inmates have is time, so the powers that be use this to implement (begrudgingly, probably) any change. I read Edwards Bunker recently—his novels written about the inside of San Quentin Prison in the late 1980s—and it was practically identical, save a few select things, to how CDCR prisons were until about a decade ago. Change rarely happened in here before then.

Recently, though, there's been a lot of changes. For instance, electronic tablets are given to all inmates now. Everyone can make calls on their own device, access free educational videos and books, pay for a music or movie streaming services, etc. Another change is that they offer Suboxone to any inmate with a past drug addiction. Prior to this, if someone somehow got Suboxone through to the prison, one strip could be sold for up to \$200. Although it is an opiate blocker to help with cravings, some side effects include a slight euphoria. So, I do applaud CDCR for giving every inmate a portable TV and doping them up. I'm sure that this has brought violence among inmates down dramatically.

Cut to 2017–2018. CDCR hired someone to help attempt to alleviate this stress and financial drain. I heard it was a woman who successfully combined the 2 yards in Texas, but I haven't confirmed this. They were aware of the risk this posed. Aware of the violence and brutal pain that this would inflict on low-level inmates that would be forced to endure this money-saving tactic.

They were going to combine the yards.

The different gangs, races, and individuals who were against it made it known that if any person was brought to a yard that CDCR tried to integrate with SNY, that the person was ordered to fight until they were taken off that yard and put back onto a "good" yard. This was to be obeyed or that person who stayed on that yard would be considered SNY and now be greenlighted.

CDCR started the process.

Chaos ensued.

Many stories are posted online, and I've personally heard horror stories from both inmates and COs about how it was done at first. I didn't experience those myself, however, so I will leave it to you to research testimony on that. So they've been adapting to "less" chaotic methods. I can tell you what they do now, almost every day here at Jamestown prison:

A bus arrives, and the SNYs, whom are the ones separated upfront of the bus, are processed first. They are then led into the prison and into the empty intake dorm. This is the dorm I was watching guys being led into earlier. The COs and inmates call this the "Thunder Dorm." Mind you, by this point the entire yard has been recalled and all inmates put inside in preparation for the violence. This shows that the administration is aware of what is happening. So once the SNYs are in the dorm, CDCR has their intimidation factor. There's usually 8 to 15 of them that know the GPs are coming in behind them, and they have to be ready for any of them to fight. No one is allowed at reception to tell the placement counselors that they don't want to go to this sort of integrated yard. They *have to* prove it by fighting. CDCR *will not* let anyone not go through this. So once the SNYs are in place, the COs let the GPs in the gate one at a time. The inmate will pass two COs at the gate and then head towards the thunder dorm where five or 6 COs are waiting. Keep in mind, each inmate is wearing only paper boxers, a paper jumpsuit, socks, and shower flip-flops. Upon entering, one CO closes and locks the door. He then watches through the window to see what happens. The new guy is now facing the big group of SNYs who ask him if he is staying and programming or not. No matter this man's desire or decision prior to this, he's now facing a menacing group of men who have absolute immunity to beat him up. So his resolve could change. CDCR will not punish those that are staying and programming for fighting someone that isn't staying, but no matter what, if the GP guy decides not to stay but rather fight, he will be written up and given 90 more days on his sentence. This is how CDCR has guaranteed their money saving program.

If the new guy says he will stay and program, like I did, then he is expected to get into the intimidation crowd and fight those coming in. If the new guy even says that he doesn't want to stay, regardless if he also doesn't want to fight, he is still rushed by one or more of these SNYs and he is forced to fight them, suffering whatever pain followed by administrative consequences. The CO will then unlock the door and depending on their numbers and how many guys are fighting, will throw a pepper bomb or two inside, handcuff everyone fighting and pull them out. They are all brought to medical to check on the injuries and then the ones that are staying are brought back to the dorm. It sometimes gets so bad with the pepper that they will pull everyone out, sit them outside, coughing and gasping, while another inmate mops the pepper out. Then everyone is herded back in and the next guy is sent. I've seen days were nearly every GP decided to fight, making the programmers fight 10 to 15 times.

I decided long before the bus ride that I was going to stay. If I didn't stay, I wouldn't be allowed in the CalFire program, and despite the problems with that program, it is still the best one offered. It's one where I feel like I'm giving back to the community instead of just sitting around and paying for my crimes. It makes me feel proud of myself again, and I wasn't going to skip out on it. So I lied. I lied to all the guys prepping me for the fight. I told them I was fighting, because if I told them I was staying then they'd have removed me right then, and removal is a vicious beating.

I walked into the thunder dorm and was greeted by about 10 guys all staring at me.

"You stayin? Or are you gonna be removed?" One guy asked in a clearly deeper voice than he normally used.

"I don't give a fuck about all that shit." I responded and the guys relaxed and smiled and shook my hand. Then the door opened, and the guy that fell asleep with his head on my shoulder came in. "Knuckles" was his handle, and I didn't think that it was spelled "Nyukles" because he liked the Three Stooges. His eyes narrowed when he saw me. I had lied to him, and he trusted me. The other guys asked him the same questions they asked me.

"No, I'm not staying with you sick fucks." He said, his eyes never leaving mine. I rushed towards him and hit him twice before he backed up and swung and clipped the back of my head. As the CO screamed at us to get down, I threw one more punch that split his eyebrow. I got on the floor and felt the knee in my back as handcuffs were slapped on my wrists. Knuckles kept looking at me as we were led to medical. I didn't care. I made my choice and completed my forced combat. It was done.

They say if you lie with dogs you get fleas. It seems like CDCR has been lying with criminals for so long that they have it in their heads that making us fight each other is normal behavior. Low-level, mainly nonviolent men with relatively short sentences are subjected to this forced violence. Men who have made a decision that they don't want to live with men they deemed too deviant to live with have no other way to prove this conviction but to fight. Men who are just serving their sentences on the SNY side are forced into a room where they will come in contact with this fighting through no fault of their own. Some have found themselves with new charges for hurting someone too much during this fight, and yet others have permanent damage done to them: broken noses and bones, lost teeth, scars, etc. No one has been able to successfully pursue this civilly and I don't know why. I employ you to research this and hear other men's stories. You will find yourself appalled.

It is criminal in its own right.