

In Good Company

Gary T. Carrillo

Homelessness is an insane situation which many people try to escape through drinking and drugs. Once the feeling of hopelessness sets in, it's only a matter of time before a person seeks food or shelter on his own terms. This is why, for one reason or another, many homeless people end up in jail or prison.

The following stories deal with homeless people after they are taken off the street – after you can't see them anymore. I have told them with humor because I believe that laughter can heal many wounds. One wound I'd like to see healed is the disposal of promising lives, thrown away through laws such as Three Strikes.

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GOMER

When I first arrived on the psych unit of the San Diego County Jail, I noticed that the atmosphere was much quieter than in the mainline. . .

I remember one of my first breakfasts on the psych unit. A big, goofy looking dude, asked, "Hey, anybody want these eggs?"

"No", I said.

"Hey Gomer, want these eggs?" He was talking to a guy who looked a lot like Gargamel from the Smurfs.

"What it mean, dis 'Gomer'?", asked Gargamel.

"Well, it's a figure of speech", dude said in full Southern drawl. "It means pencil neck geek".

The whole table erupted in laughter. I guess it seemed funny because it was so unexpected.

That was the beginning of my journey through absurdity, tomfoolery, grab-ass shenanigans. I needed the comic relief because all I could think about was killing myself.

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BREAKFAST WITH A TWIST

Part of the thrill of suicide is brandishing it in other people's faces. The audience: yes, what every great drama needs. And it's a rush to perform.

Perhaps that's why a young man was now hanging by his neck from the second tier. Damn! He even had a plastic bag over his head just to be sure! The only problem was that the sheriff deputies were now cutting him down and roughing him up at the same time!

He looked like an astronaut from some other planet with his bubble-like breathing apparatus and the white cord connecting him to the mother ship. Who were these alienesque hostiles, trying to waylay this cuckoo cosmonaut?

For several days he had been walking around with a slipknot around his neck like a tie. And just last week we were lining up for breakfast and here comes cuckoo cosmonaut. He pauses at the top of the stairs, then without warning does a nose-dive – BAM BAM BANG! – down the entire flight. Then he stands up like nothing happened. "I'm OK", he says, and proceeds to eat his breakfast.

All he got was a black eye!

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MAKING THE CUT

I've made the cut. I am in the psych tank shower at the brand new Central Jail. I hope I've found a vein large enough to keep bleeding as long as I run hot water over the wound.

I am standing in that shower for half an hour. Damn! It isn't working. People in the day room are getting suspicious. I wrap the cut in toilet paper, and run the water for a few more minutes to wash the blood down the drain. Hell! I'll try again later. I am relieved that I am still alive, yet frustrated that my feeble attempt didn't work.

Light-headed, I make it down the stairs and across the dayroom to my cell. Feeling suspicious. Very suspicious. I'm thinking that everyone knows what I did, even the guard in the control tower.

I am feeling very ugly inside. And I am feeling relief that I took action. I know that I will do it again. I thought God wasn't supposed to give me more than I can handle. This is too much, way too much for me to handle. Now I know I have to die, and it will be good. Screw them. I am not going to serve their sentence. I did not do anything to deserve 39 to life. I would rather die than serve a life sentence I don't deserve.

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DISORDER IN THE COURT

I can't believe the probation officer just knocked over the water jug from the D.A.'s desk onto the floor! I'm not laughing, though. This is way too serious.

It's understandable that the probation officer should be flustered, after delivering that bipolar pre-sentence report. I'm looking at it now...Hmmm... "Mr. Carrillo claims to have been taken from his mother at an early age (8 or 9), and then moved around between 20 or 30 foster placements... drug and alcohol problems... none of this has been corroborated... Anyway, these mitigating circumstances will not be considered, as this is a three strikes case ... blah... blah... blah".

Then the little chipmunk D.A. chirps up, "Do the crime, do the time", in her best Mary Poppins meets Cathy Bates voice.

No wonder I'm going crazy.

The P.O. had the nerve to tell me that she sympathized with the nature of my upbringing, as she used to be a child social worker. But, it's now "her job" to sentence me to the maximum: 39 to life. Gee, thanks for your sympathy.

My third strike: assault with a deadly weapon. I cut a guy's hand in a fight at the homeless shelter. Yeah, the wound required stitches. He had threatened to kick my ass and have me shot. My right hand was broken and in a cast at the time. I guess that brought out the bravado in him.

Now the D.A. has her PowerPoint projector setup. Never at a loss for words, she says to the jury, "I have to admit this is probably my third time using PowerPoint... if the projector blows up, I'll try to aim it at the Public Defender!" She is gonna catch hell at the next D.A. / Parole Department. / Judge barbecue.

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SLASH

Instead of going to court, I decided to slash my wrist. My cellie threw up. Then he called for the sheriff's deputies over the intercom.

I received stitches along with a brace – which they then took from me – to keep the damaged tendons from snapping. I spent the night in a padded

safety cell with a grate in the floor for a bathroom. I was wearing a thick Fred Flintstone get-up.

The doctor came to talk to me in the morning, then released me to the acute care unit. There I met some interesting characters. “Cut Throat” had earned his name by cutting his throat from ear to ear with a razor blade. “Mogley” was a dead ringer for the jungle boy. “Spider Man” had slashed both arteries in his wrists and sprayed blood just like the super hero sprays webs.

Cuckoo Cosmonaut was also in the acute unit. This time he was wearing a massive cast which extended from his shoulder to his hand. He had jumped off the tier head first. Earlier that week someone else had died performing the same maneuver.

I asked Cuckoo Cosmonaut why he wanted to kill himself.

“Well, I don’t anymore, now that I see you and other people here looking at life sentences”.

“What are you facing?”, I asked him.

“Six months”.

“How else have you tried to kill yourself?”

“I tried to drown myself in the toilet – I thought the urine would kill me”.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Gary T. Carrillo, born in Escondido, is serving a 39-to-life under California’s Three Strikes and You’re Out law. He did not kill anyone. He asserts he cut someone on the hand. This is only his second time in prison. He won second prize in the PEN American Center’s memoir in 2004. “In Good Company” drew on his experiences in the Department of Mental Health in Vacaville State Prison in California. “I am doing better than I ever have while serving this sentence – still laughing at the absurdities of human nature,” he writes, “my own included”. A lifer now at New Folsom (California State Prison in Sacramento), he reports that these psych programs basically saved his life: “What matters is what’s in your heart. And if you can look into your heart and find something good, if you can find love—for life and all its creatures—then you can call that God. And you’ll be alright regardless of what hell you find yourself in”.