

LIVE! From Texas Death Row

Christopher J. Best

I just got off work. I hate my job. I never want to go back, but it's not an option. I can't quit and I can't get fired. I'm a Texas prisoner and I work on death row.

I'm what Texas calls a Support Service Inmate (SSI). In plain talk, I'm a state-approved janitor. The guys on death row used to clean up their own place, but after an escape and a hostage-taking incident the condemned stay locked down. They bring in a few of us short-timers from GP, general population. I'm not proud to say I'm doing a few years for beating up my ex for cheating.

My first day on my death row job was hell, just like each day since. New canvas shoes, called "state shoes", had just come in to unit supply and my work partners and I passed them out. The three of us – me, Hallman and an older gay dude they call Cherry-Pop – each took a tier, going cell to cell with the shoes. Every last sensory-deprived inmate had something to say from inside his matchbox.

"Hey! White boy! Can a nigga get some shoes?!"

"Yo! What's for last chow?!"

"Look out, SSI! Tell that law they didn't gimme no shower yet!"

Cherry-Pop is especially popular. In prison lingo, "she" is a long-time "punk", as they call 'em. They used to call her Cherry, but then her teeth started falling out, which suits some of her death-row clients just fine. "Tell Cherry-Pop dat C-love wanna holla at her", insisted one. When a punk is the object of attention it's not something you'd want to pass your eyelids.

As we worked, I felt obligated to respond to everyone. For these guys, it seems every request is like their last. I quickly fell behind my co-workers on the rows above and below me. Each run is segmented by doors on hinges, which serve as traffic barriers in case some dude is "accidentally" let out of his cell or somehow pops his own cell door. All the cell doors on death row and in GP are on rails, and I wasn't used to dealing with a door on hinges. It's funny what we take for granted, things like forks, ballpoint pens that work, fresh fruit – all such things we do without in here – and doors on hinges.

As I was hurrying to catch up I put a little too much elbow into one of those doors. It flew closed, like a sideways guillotine. BAM! All the chatter instantly stopped. Silence. A fraction of a second later a voice bellowed out, "You motherfuckin' ho! Come slam that door again, you unstan' me?!"

I had just violated death row sanctity, peace and privacy – what little there is of it. Death row has its many rules, and making noise louder than them is a violation of one of them. My face burned with the realization, but only for a moment. It then occurred to me that every death row prisoner on C-Pod had just heard me get talked to like a little bitch. A different kind of burn came over me. I passed out a couple of more pairs of state shoes, until I came to the next door. Being the mature dude I am, I slammed it as hard as I could. *BAAMMM!!* C-Pod reverberated with my rage. Echoes descended into a second or two of utter silence.

The place exploded. Screaming. Banging. Whistling. Threats. My Momma was fondly remembered. There was end-of-the-world metal-on-metal grating and clanging, like an earthquake. The surge of instant unity and noise brought in a rush of guards. We dropped the boxes of state shoes and were escorted off C-Pod. It all happened so fast that the internees had no time to prepare their usual punishment: piss and shit bombs.

Word travels fast, even out of what is supposed to be one of the worlds most secure institutions. When I left the job and got back to my minimum-security cell on the other side of the prison, three known gang members approached me. Their spokesman didn't waste words. "What's your fuckin' problem, *guero*? You wanna die?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Oh, now you wanna play games? You slammin' doors on death row!"

Shit. This is fucked up, I thought. There was only one way to resolve this confrontation like a man. "I don't know what you're talking about". The look in his eyes, and undoubtedly the look in mine, said different.

"He got the message", maestro told his henchmen, his gaze still locked on me. It took three days for the ruckus to simmer down, both on death row and in GP. Not bad for my first day at work, huh? Only a handful of death threats. I stayed off C-Pod as much as possible from then on.

From my view in here, death out there now looks relatively easy. For freeworld folks, death is merely a passage, or a rite, or a transient thing among all the life-stuff. Most people have the freedom to push life's most sensitive and controversial issue out of their minds, or at least deal with it conventionally and on their own terms: family tradition, discussions, plans, a last will and testament, maybe an estate, or to hell with it all and let's watch the next game on TV.

In the penitentiary, especially on death row, Moloch calls all the shots. Looking at it every day, living with it every day, is a perpetual, real-life nightmare – the kind only men at their worst can foist on one another, call it Andersonville, the Hanoi Hilton, Abu Ghraib or the Texas pen.

You may know that, as governor, President Bush signed 147 death warrants, more than any American since the death penalty was reinstated by the Supreme Court in 1976. No one need wonder where the culture of depravity and love of death surrounding Abu Ghraib comes from. It was born in Texas, where O. Lane McCotter was once the state prison director.¹

Institutionalists argue which came first, the bad prisoner “eggs” or the bad guard “chickens”. It took both. No man goes to prison in Texas for singing too loud in church, at least not until the next round of expansion, which implies that good prisoners are made, not born. Bad guards don’t give men a chance to adjust to incarcerated life, which is critically important for the young demographic classified to Terrell. When the rule of law is meaningless to overseers, prisoners begin to think the system is unjust, including the Constitution. They turn to “family”.

The computer tracks every convict by code. When an prisoner dies in custody, by legal or illegal execution or by natural causes, his status is recorded as “DX”. He’s Dead, X-ed out, like flattened cartoon characters with Xs on their eyes. It’s the supreme “cross-out”, to use the convict term for elimination. X-it, stage left.

Code “DX” allows the prison system to “clear count”, conducted every two hours, assuring that all prisoners, dead or alive, are (supposedly) accounted for. The coding is a small cog in the sanitized machinery of death, distancing government employees from blood and its consequences in much the same, impersonal way a criminal shoots his victim and flees the scene. The mess and the tragedy are left for someone else.

This process of death-by-government is also distinctly American. It’s an odd mix of bureaucracy and market-based specialization. The system preserves itself by appealing to our baser instincts while employing the latest technology and carefully measured political trends. Thus, the Supreme Court keeps fine-tuning the mechanism of death, as the late justice Harry Blackmun once critiqued. Capitalism is neither moral nor immoral but proceeds according to its practitioners; the immoral version keeps revising the supposedly constitutional basis of the death penalty by extra-

constitutional opinion polls, tests borrowed from international law, and so on. It's a fraud, of course, not restricted to the death penalty question.

Every day I confront blood and its consequences. Every day I struggle to keep my own life-force contained and flowing, beating back, cajoling, and deceiving Moloch away from my doorposts. As I tell you about it, the names herein have been changed to protect the living, the dead and to keep my ass from getting shanked. As a worker on death row, I am a member of the death society. Each of us has our own way of dealing with death. Our society is nothing more than the human condition writ large and bold, condensed in time and drama, pressed by unrelenting dark forces, often relieved by the sweetest of human kindness, foibles and even the occasional angel in disguise.

My SSI job evolved from the old building tender job that existed for many years before the *Ruiz v. Estelle* court decrees of a quarter-century ago. BTs carried the big, brass keys, swept and mopped the corridors and dayrooms, and administered justice at the end of a broom or mop handle or with those keys – any which way they could. These days the SSIs are caught between the guard and the convicts but without the brutal leverage of the old BTs. Guards recruit the SSIs as snitches, often by coercion, and prisoners try to take advantage of the SSIs' freedom of movement. Peer pressure and ostracization and threats are common. These problems are magnified on death row.

Each morning when I arrive at work, I hand my ID card to a guard at the building entrance. I swear, lately I have come to smell and taste the death-row building even before I step inside. As I walk in, I *feel* the dread on my flesh, even in me. Next comes the strip search, the ubiquitous humiliation of prison life, also magnified on death row because it's conducted with much more detail. My co-workers and I remove every stitch of clothing. One guard carefully inspects each clothing item, turning socks, boxers, pants, and shirt inside-out, inspecting seams for hidden items, crinkling every square inch of fabric. Our shoes are bent, unlaced, pounded, and tossed, insoles left here and there on the floor.

Next, each of us spreads our legs, opens our butt cheeks, shows the bottoms of our feet, holds up our package of manhood, opens our mouth, and turns all about, arms held high. Next, each of us sits on a metal-detecting chair, which looks at our guts with some sort of high-tech imaging, to make sure we haven't swallowed a weapon or contraband. Finally, we place our

faces on a metal-detecting plate on the wall, first one side then the other, as a double-check on the mouth. From this point and all day long, a series of cameras bear down on us in all the hallways, and guards stationed at a series of gates check all movement and action.

My first chore is to pick up five or six buggies of clothes that have been wheeled in from the prison's laundry. I separate it all: boxers, socks, jumpsuits and towels, with sheets and pillowcases every Wednesday. A few years ago TDCJ prided itself on the fact that, for all its other troubles, the men got fresh, clean clothes every day. No more. The system is constantly cutting the budget as Texas goes broke supporting its criminal-justice apparatus. All prisoners receive "clean" clothes every other day – shirt and pants in GP, jumpsuits for death row and administrative prisoners (the bad actors). The clothes and linens are always dingy from infrequent washing, prisoner theft of bleach and soap, and from unsupervised machine operators who cut short washing cycles to get out of work. Staph infection is rampant. Guys who can afford it buy and wash their own socks, boxers, T-shirts and commissary detergent.

All day long we see death-row prisoners being escorted here and there, to medical appointments, or to see lawyers or other visitors. Each escort consists of two guards, and the prisoner is handcuffed behind his back. Each guard carries a baton and at least one of them has pepper gas. Some of the cons on death row hang their heads low when they walk. Their time draws near. Others seem almost chipper. They smile, perhaps on their way to visitation. Some guards respond well to the guys, joking and chatting if it seems appropriate, or quiet and all-business if the dude is sullen or dejected.

Like the head, the feet also tell the story on the row. Prisoners who can't afford the \$38 white Converse tennies wear state shoes or slippers. All state gear makes a lot more noise. You can tell the mood of the prisoner by the sound of his shuffle in state shoes or slippers. *Shh-shh-ssst*, goes the dragging feet of a downer. *Clip-clop-clap*, patters the buoyant man's prance in his plastic-shorn, high-steppin' feet. He's "trying to get somewhere", as they say in here, and today it's not the needle.

Our local death society is a building full of folks waiting to move onto the next stage of their lives: death. Methods of coping range from quiet meditation to anti-death penalty activism, from good and bad writ-writing to the other kinds of appeal to Higher Law. There is ministry. There is gang activity. There is every shade of selfish, and generous motivation and act.

Hector, for example, arrived on death row in 1999. The only things in his cell were a mattress and pillow, sheathed in hard, crinkly Texas Department of Criminal Justice mattress factory blue plastic, a couple of stained sheets and an even blacker pillowcase, a small and virtually useless cell towel, a partial roll of toilet paper and a prickly wool blanket. At that time, death row inhabitants worked the jobs. One of them was sweeping the run when he came to Hector's cell. "Whadda they call ya, new-boot?"

Hector told him and the worker stepped back from his cell door so he could be seen from all three tiers. He hollered to everyone, "New man here!" An hour later the worker returned, saying nothing this time but clandestinely sweeping a brown paper bag into Hector's cell. Hector guardedly opened the bag and peered in. He found stamps, envelopes, a notepad, pen, soap, shampoo, toothpaste, a toothbrush, a Dolly Madison pastry, a can of Big Red soda and a pack of Ramen noodles.

"That was the last thing I expected", Hector told me. "They did that for a stranger". He continued, "What did I find in that sack? I found care. I found kindness, love, compassion and humanity". Hector told me this story as he finished adding his small contribution to a new paper bag. He tossed it to the floor, to be swept into the house of the newest member of the death society.

One day an unfamiliar dude beckoned me again and again. I tried to ignore him but he was persistent. As I worked my way closer to his cell, trying to pass myself off as genuinely busy, he began a stammering whisper.

"H—h—hey, man. C—c—come 'ere. I, I g—got ten stamps". Stamps are a universal currency in the pen. He was offering me the standard fee on the row to have something moved. In GP, prisoners move items for little or nothing – maybe fifty cents. The intensive security of death row is a more risky and thus more lucrative market. I peered into his cell window and saw a short, bald guy, perhaps 60, with a round face and chubby, chipmunk cheeks. He put his face right up next to mine.

"H—h—hey. Can -- can you go get s-s—s . . . can you go get s—something for me? I got, I got ten stamps". He kept looking behind him, his eyes darting all around his empty cell. I liked this guy already. He was entertainment in a place where little is found.

I went to the cell he told me about. "Psst", out slides a brown sack with so little in it that it looked like trash. Good. Easy to move. I shuttled it under Chipmunk's door.

“You wanna, you wanna d—do s—something else?” More easy stamps. I got to thinking about this little adventure. What was this guy up to? From the other cell another sack shot out – it seemed empty. Curiosity won out. I picked it up and carefully looked inside. It was a little batch of clipped toenails or fingernails! I dropped it in disgust and angrily swept it along and slapshot it into Chipmunk’s house.

“You motherfucker!”, I charged.

“What the hell you got me into with this sick stuff?”

Chipmunk turns and retrieves three paper bags from under his bunk. He pours them out on his metal cell table. There’s a pile of what looks to be two or three pounds of fingernails and toenails. He looks me straight in the eye and smiles pleasantly and says, “S-s-smells like hot dogs”.

It turns out old Chipmunk was sending the nails out to his sister, who was packaging and selling them on the Internet as artifacts from mass murderers. The world is full of sickos and they’re not all in the penitentiary. I later learned the Texas Legislature was so disturbed over this kind of thing that they passed a new law forbidding death row prisoners from selling body hair, nails, fluids and what-ever else they could peel off themselves. Chipmunk was right about one thing. Those damn nails did smell like hot dogs.

Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ) guards are reluctant members of the death society. For most of them it’s just a job, they tell you. And later, they tell you again. There is a certain camaraderie among prison guards you’d expect, especially on violent farms where there’s a siege mentality. On death row that camaraderie is more close-knit, binding employees with support-group activities, on and off the job. They hold potluck lunches and suppers on the row – “spreads”, as any penitentiary potluck is called – breaking bread in solidarity. They have their own body language and terminology, mostly affirming, feel-good stuff. It’s homemade therapy to get them through “just a job”.

Most do a good job. A few do a “nothing” job. Fewer still are rotten to the core: haters. Administrators use them to stir things up and manipulate prison policy. One bum in gray has identified his mark, one of the death row guys with some property. The mulligan is trying to get next to the dude so maybe he will get a cut of the estate after the execution. He treats the rest of us like dirt. Speaking of dirt, most of the haters in gray claim to be law-and-order types, but they’re also the ones bringing in most of the contraband and breaking other rules.

Some guards do all they can to humanize death row and beat back death's descent with small favors. Maybe it takes the form of a piece of Texas pecan pie. Cigarettes were outlawed several years ago, but some of the guys who get real close to their dates have a last smoke or two. The best guards avoid the pettiness of the bureaucracy.

Most convicts on death row understand the guards have to make a living. A few men hate everything in gray, almost as a matter of revolutionary principle. It's a sick kind of hate that also extends to society and America as well as all the symbols of the West and freedom. The vast majority of these guys are guilty as sin and the vileness of their crimes continues in a bitterness toward everything human.

Some of the guys appreciate the guards as their only glimpse of free society: What did you watch on TV last night? Did Guns 'n Roses ever release that album? Did your kid pass his math test? What does that new low-carb beer taste like? Every answer or response plied from the keepers is an affirmation of everyone's humanity. It's reciprocal. It's vital.

The more I work here, the more my barriers toward America's forsaken come down. On days when I am the only human a death row prisoner interacts with, it affects me as well as him. He understands that my time with him is short, so he'll often cram as much conversation as possible into mere minutes. It's not that he's in a hurry to die; he's in a hurry to live to the fullest. He won't just tell you his life story, he'll plead it. He desperately seeks some understanding. If I give him that, then the whole world has done the same.

Forty-seven days before his execution date, Reece shares his being. "I've thought many a night about what happens after death", he begins, like many before him. "I can't help but feel there is consciousness after death, but I don't know exactly what's waiting for me. What you don't know can be scary. It's been giving me some wild dreams", I've heard this, too, I was thinking. Then Reece departed from the script. "You know, nothing compares to the fear, and the hurt, when I look in my Daddy's eyes". I look at Reece – something I normally avoid in these sessions. His bottom lip is shivering. His eyes are teary and he turns away from me.

"I got a peace about dying", he says. "I really do". It occurs to me that I am listening to Reece's last meaningful words. He turns to me again, eyes wiped. "My Daddy visits a lot more than he used to. We're close. Tight – is that what they say nowadays?" He laughs faintly. "This is my third date

they've set. Whenever it happens, I spend countless hours reliving that look in my Daddy's eyes".

There's an unseen force squeezing the life out of Reece, ironically when he is in his most intensely human condition. He's struggling, but the pain is overtaking him. He blurts out, "I'm so sorry I killed those people. I didn't even think about their own family, but if I did, I wouldn't o' done it!" Reece is overcome by remorse and grief. There is nothing I can do. He knows it. I walk away.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ In 1997, McCotter resigned his post with Utah's corrections system when a 29-year old schizophrenic prisoner died after being strapped naked to a restraint chair for 16 hours. In 2003, Attorney General John Ashcroft sent McCotter to Iraq to formulate a long term plan for Iraqi prisons, including Abu Ghraib.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Christopher Best is serving time at the Polunsky Unit in Livingston Texas. "LIVE! From Texas Death Row" won the PEN American Center's first prize for nonfiction in 2005. It was his first serious attempt at writing.