

Our digital clocks are now contraband. But if your old digital clock has a radio in it, then it's not contraband. The new replacement clocks the canteen now sells are digital. But they don't feature radios. Makes no sense? That's the point.

Of course, all the clocks to which I refer were or are sold in the prison canteen. So we purchase things then are told to get rid of these things and buy other things that are suspiciously like the very things we were forced to discard. This happens all the time.

Body powder, like Shower to Shower, is now contraband, but baby powder is not. Colored pencils bought in the canteen are contraband, but colored pencils bought through a craft order are not. Same pencils. Same brand. But not the same in the eyes of the powers-that-be. Better keep your receipt. Contraband items are still sold at the canteen. A lady who lives down my hall bought a headphone extension cord on Monday and was ordered to discard it on Wednesday.

Rumor has it that we will soon have to send out all our red or blue clothing because those are gang-related colors. I'm sitting here in a red turtleneck pullover. You know the kind. All middle-aged women have one. It's a classic style, comfortable, wears well, serves for a host of occasions – and I guarantee, I do not look like any kind of gang member. Unless we're referring to the over-the-hill gang. But if the scuttlebutt is true, I will be forced to get rid of this and pay for a new one in a less dangerous color – like green. But is Greenpeace considered a gang? What color is safe? If you wear pink or baby blue, could it mean you've pledged a gang but aren't a full member yet? Does purple signify you're straddling the fence?

In the mid '90s we had to get rid of all our black clothing because it was feared we would dress in black and pass for officers. Even black yarn became contraband, just in case we decide to crochet a baggy uniform. The E-Squad, a.k.a. Goon Squad, wears all black when they kick in on us for a shakedown.

Around that same time, we had to get rid of denim trousers and shorts. No reason was given for that decision. We can still possess denim shirts and jackets...just no denim below the waist. I remember in 1990 when we could still wear jeans, the rule was the jeans had to be dark indigo, not stonewashed, not acid-washed, no colors. The policy stated "blue jeans", and that description was taken quite literally.

It took some tall talking to explain that my indigo 501s could not sustain that dark color through repeated washings. An officer accused me of owning a pair of the dreaded contraband stonewashed jeans – when in truth, the poor Levis had started life dark blue but were just old and faded. I can relate.

Over many years of incarceration, I have spent a small fortune – remember that fortunes are relative – on items that were legal, only to find that they have been declared illegal. I have bought scissors, mirrors, tweezers, toenail clippers, Vicks VapoRub, can openers, highlighters, bed comforters, sheets, extension cords, stingers, crockpots, art and craft supplies, crochet hooks, reading lamps, clocks, oatmeal and honey facial scrub, key rings, dental floss, and more, in good faith only to find out I was holding contraband and could get in big trouble. Having purchased items through the proper channels is no defense in prison.

Most people think of prison contraband in terms of weapons or drugs – homemade knives, guns, and other harmful things. In our prison, contraband can be an extra pair of panties. We are allowed only seven. Guards frisk us in search of hard candy. A peppermint is contraband if found in a pocket.

I could write a book about prison contraband and never once mention a shank or tattoo gun – mainly because I’ve never even seen either in person. Only in movies. Come to think of it, I’ve never watched a prison movie where the convict was warned that his oatmeal and honey facial scrub had better be disposed of... or else.

Yesterday certain hours were set aside for us hapless prisoners to go to the Property Department to dispose of contraband. A huge line quickly formed of law-abiding ladies clutching body powder, digital clocks, colored pencils, and other questionable, although canteen-purchased items. An officer ordered all but five to return to their housing units, “There can only be five in the line at one time”.

So the mob dispersed and trudged back. Once on the wing, this announcement was heard over the loud speaker, “Anyone wanting to send out contraband is to report to Property immediately!” Everyone gathered up her odds and ends and headed back to Property.

Once reassembled, the same officer again advised them of the five-in-the-line rule, so grudgingly they grumbled their way back to their quarters still in possession of the newly deemed contraband – only upon arrival to hear, “Last chance to send out contraband. Report to Property now!”

Handmade items are also problems. We are allowed one completed craft item and one in-progress craft item. In other words, I can have my completed afghan plus I can have one project on which I currently work. But as soon as I finish the last stitch on a crocheted teddy bear and clip the yarn, the innocent bear changes from “in-progress” to “completed” in a split second. Bam! Just that quickly I am in possession of one more completed craft item than I am allowed. One minute, I’m lawful. The next minute, I’m just begging for a contraband ticket. When we first arrived here at the new prison, cigarette lighters were contraband. Of course, no one is supposed to smoke in the buildings, so when smoke breaks were called the women had to beg lights from the officers outside the doors. In-wall lighters had been installed in the siding of the buildings, but these cheap appliances had ceased to function almost immediately.

Smokers, as all addicts, are ingenious and driven. The girls were actually rigging the inside electrical outlets to light their own cigarettes. Scary. Those with the proper skills traded sexual favors for lighters. The administration considered their options and relented. The girls can now buy lighters at the canteen.

Not only are certain items contraband, but where we put our stuff can make the stuff contraband. For instance, if I place my Bible on my locker, the Good Book becomes contraband. An innocent wet towel turns into contraband if draped over the locker door to dry. We are constantly on guard – ignore the pun – for infractions that so naturally occur when a person inhabits a space.

The inclination to set a plastic cup of instant coffee and a handful of chips on the locker near my bunk while I read a book is only natural. But if I let my guard down –there’s that pun again – I can be in violation of the housing unit rule: “Two picture frames, one radio, and one locker scarf only allowed on top of the standing locker”.

Even this rambling essay may very well be considered contraband. One of the definitions of the word contraband in our rule book states that it is anything that threatens the safety and security of the institution. Gosh. Maybe I should discard this.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

After rejecting plea bargain offers, *Patricia Prewitt* was convicted and sentenced to Life With No Parole for 50 years for the 1984 murder of her

husband. She and her children insist on her innocence. Now in her 60's with ten grandchildren, she is about halfway through the mandatory minimum of her sentence. She is housed at the Women's Eastern Reception, Diagnostic, and Correctional Center in Vandalia, Missouri, where she writes software and is one of only a handful of female prisoners who has earned Aerobics and Fitness Association of America certification as Personal Fitness Trainer, Griyp Exercise Instructor, and Step Aerobics. Through Prison Performing Arts program, she has performed as Lady Macbeth, Malvolio, and Bottom. "Contraband" took the PEN American Center's first prize for nonfiction in 2006. Her poems are posted on her Facebook page. For an interview with her see <http://www.pen.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/1789/prmID/1644>.