

## **Rage, Criminal Justice, and Corrections** *William Steed Kelley*

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A walloping THUMP startled me. It felt like a sledge hammer crashing against the wall – my bunk was bolted to. I fumbled my book and leapt to my feet, my heart racing and pounding in my throat.

“You ready to rock?” a deep voice rumbled.

I grabbed my shaving mirror and poked it through the front of my cell, making eye contact with Hitman – the massive, muscular, and certifiably mad East Texas Good Ol’ Boy in the next cell.

“You asked me to hang onto your radio. You didn’t say anything about having to rock and roll!” Hitman laughed.

The Aryan Brotherhood (AB) was out three hundred dollars and half an ounce of weed on his watch. By the law of the jungle, Hitman had to produce either the money, or the blood – and blood came much easier to him than money, especially these days. He’d just the week before gotten a Dear John letter from his gorgeous wife – a blond Redneck Girl – who strongly resembled Lorrie Morgan, the country and western singer. We all knew Hitman would go berserk, we just didn’t know when.

On Friday, a black Special Operations Response Team guard named Fontenot had “jacked” the AB’s mule for his pack and given it to the Building Tender – a “trustee” who happened to be “MW”, a Mandingo Warrior. When their shift reported for duty again the next rotation, Hitman and The Brotherhood were ready for them. Hitman had gotten his hands on some weaponry – a mop and long-handled, wooden “shitter brush” – fished from the nearby mop closet with a weighted strip of bedsheet.

“He’s passin’ out shitpaper – headed this way. I’m fixin’ to gig the shit outta this fuckin’ toad”, he said, glee ringing in his voice.

When the Building Tender – called a “BT” – had feigned ignorance to the whereabouts of the AB’s contraband, Hitman had secretly unscrewed the mophead, straightened the three-sixteenths diameter retainer loop into a two-foot-long spear, sharpened the tip and lashed it to the mopstick. It was now an oversized frog-gig. The shitter brush he’d soaked in wet towels over the weekend – after tearing all the bristles out. That was the sledgehammer which had bowled me out of bed all the way through the four inch-thick concrete wall between us. It had an eighteen inch-long oak handle as thick as a closet pole and was now a war hammer worthy of Thor.

The BT working his way down the cellblock passing out toilet paper to us had made a terrible mistake in accepting Fontenot’s gifts “compliments

of the Aryan Brotherhood”. And with his blatant favoritism toward black prisoners when it came to serving portions at meal times and quality of clothing necessities, the whites and Hispanics already resented him – Hitman especially so. Now he was about to pay the price.

My pulse quickened with his approach. He was alone, dragging a large box of toilet tissue, bending over and stuffing it into the low feeding chutes in our cell doors.

Warning him was out of the question. As a “Newboot” – and general prison survival policy – I wanted *no* part of this coming conflict. It was already bad enough that I’d been duped into holding Hitman’s radio.

When he got to Hitman’s cell, I watched in silence as he prattled inanities to someone on the tier above, heedless of the stone-cold killer lurking only a few feet away. When he bent to stuff a roll into Hitman’s cell, there was a “Heeyah!” and the rattle of wooden mophandle against steel bars.

The spear shot out, went completely through his abdomen and out his back, then retracted with a grunt from both of them, and shot out once more to again impale him with another, “Heeyah!”

Blood speckled the back of his starched white uniform shirt, but curiously, none came out the front. I saw the shock in his eyes as his mind belatedly registered that he might already be dead.

He wheeled backward, turned, and ran to the crash gate, screaming in pain and terror. Blood – apparently coming from his anus – began to stain his inner thighs and buttocks quite heavily.

“He stabbed me!”, he hollered. “He speared me!”

Hitman cackled as pandemonium broke wide throughout the cellblock. Guards yelled and barked orders. Heavy brass keys on thick rings jangled and rattled into locks. Steel doors slammed, the loud echoes reverberating everywhere. Finally, the electronically controlled crash-gate popped open with a loud clang and the BT scurried off to the infirmary, slumping to hold his guts.

“How you like that, nigger?”, Hitman shouted after him. “I’ll kill all you bitches! You Dingleberry Warriors suck my honky dick, howbout? Huh?”, Hitman chortled, then tossed the spear out onto the catwalk, where it rattled in deadly commentary on his deed.

“You a ho-ass white boy!”, someone shouted from the tier above. Others – black, white and Hispanic – joined in the verbal fracas of mutual hate and death threats.

I turned my mirror back around to look at Hitman. He was breathing hard, and smiling, eyes ablaze. He turned and busied himself with a blanket, erecting a blind in preparation for Phase Two.

A moment later, the shift supervisor – a muscular black guard named Hightower – strode onto the scene, cautiously approaching Hitman’s cell. He kicked the spear farther away.

“What the fuck, Bonner?”, he asked.

Hitman gave only a hearty, full-throated laugh.

“Take that blanket down, Bonner”.

“Suck my cock—*Sarge* . . . ”

Hightower looked as if he couldn’t believe what he’d heard. “Oh yeah?”, he said. “That blanket’s *coming* down. You gonna cop that pussy, or fight my team, white boy?”

“I’m gonna *kill* your goddamn team”.

Hightower shook his head. “No, we’re gonna smash your stupid, peckerwood ass”.

“That’s Mr. Peckerwood to you, nigger”. Again, Hitman’s insane laugh.

Hightower’s face was a violent storm. “Don’t go anywhere, Bonner”, he quipped, “‘cause it’s about to be Mr. Nigger, to you”.

With that, Hightower laughed nervously and stalked off to suit up his react team.

Hitman disappeared behind his blanket, making last-minute arrangements. In preparation, he’d collected several weeks’ worth of newspaper from others, crumpled the individual sheets, and doused the knee-high, wall-to-wall pile with two large bottles of baby oil. He’d also coated the floor with petroleum jelly and rigged a trip-line low on the cell entranceway.

He knocked the war club against my wall again as he climbed atop the upper bunk, gaining high-ground advantage.

Within a few minutes, the react team came stomping in formation through the crash gate, Fontenot – as expected – wielding the steel shield in front of them like a battering ram. A female video camera operator trailed several yards behind, taping the Use-of-Force extraction.

When they reached Hitman’s cell, Fontenot slammed the shield against the front of it, employing the unnerving impact to full psychological effect. Startled yet again, my heart leaped back into my throat.

Hightower shouted, “Inmate Bonner, I’m giving you a direct order to submit to a strip-search and hand restraints”.

“Suck it, niggerrr”, Hitman drawled from behind his blind. He made loud meowing sounds and laughed at himself.

“The inmate has refused the first command”, Hightower said, dictating into the record.

“Inmate Bonner, this is your second and final order to submit to a strip-search and hand restraints”.

“Gonna kill you whore dogs . . .”, Hitman growled.

“At this time the inmate has refused my second command to submit to a strip-search and restraints. Force will be utilized to gain his compliance”.

When they realized action was imminent, the prisoners in the cellblock began to chant and hoot, “HooHa! HooHa! HooHa!”, banging in rhythm on their cell bars. Hightower now had to shout at the top of his lungs to be heard.

“Team, ready positions!”

Fear was evident in the wide-eyed looks of the five strong men – three black and two white – dressed in full riot gear. They shook as they bunched-up in close, single-file formation, their hands trembling on the shoulders of the one in front and Fontenot nervously throttling the steel handles of the battering shield.

“On my signal”, Hightower shouted.

The cacophony in the cellblock redoubled. “Hoo! Hoo! Hoo!” Bang! Bang! Bang!”

The security pin popped from its slot with a loud clang in the gearworks of Hitman’s cell door. The team shifted their feet, trying for better traction. Hightower lifted a hand into the air and circled it. “Roll it!”, he shouted.

The cellblock exploded in cheers of bloodlust, the prisoners shouting and shaking their cell doors in proxy participation. The heavy door on Hitman’s cell ground in complaint as it made its slow concourse.

“Yaaarghhh!”, Hitman let fly a barbarian warcry from somewhere so deep within it made my hair stand on end. The team answered with their own cries, but I could sense fear in theirs. There was no fear in Hitman – none.

Just as suddenly, they rushed in, boots digging and stomping like a cattle stampede.

Boom! The very first crash was clearly Hitman’s warclub against one of the retrofitted motorcycle helmets. It sounded like Barry Bonds smashing a coconut with his Louisville.

“Heeyah! Heeyah! Heeyah!” Each expulsion of effort was followed by a crushing, devastating blow from the club.

The battering shield smashed into the commode in the back of the cell, shattering it and sounding like an avalanche of boulders tumbling around inside a cement mixer.

Someone screamed, “Aaahhh! Fire! Fire!”

Hightower was outside his cell, hopping around on the balls of his feet, trying to get a view into the melee.

“Oh shit! Retreat! Retreat! Retreat!”, he shouted. The flames were flaring up.

The team scrambled out, going backward faster than they had gone in, and Hitman chased them with his club, leaving Fontenot lying in the roiling fire, unconscious.

Hitman roared, swinging the club with both hands. To prevent from being disarmed, he had it lanyarded around his right wrist through a hole in the end of the handle.

The four remaining team members panicked, scattering in every direction. Hitman chased one and then the other here and there. When he went after Hightower, he too scrambled.

Hitman’s eyes fell on the camera operator. He charged.

She didn’t have the camera’s safety strap around her neck, and when she realized her danger, dropped it with a scream and ran up the stairs.

Canned goods, cups, boots and light bulbs began raining down from the tiers above, pelting the guards and Hitman alike.

Hitman stopped when he got to the camera and stomped it to a million pieces, then turned to hunt the closest team member. He backed one into a corner and behind a fifty-five-gallon trash barrel. The guard tried to take cover using the lid as a shield, but one blow from the club knocked it away.

Hitman continued flailing at odd angles, but was unable to land any solid blows.

Hightower ran into the blazing cell and pulled Fontenot out by the boots. Blood streamed from his face where Hitman had knocked his face-shield away entirely.

With Fontenot out of the flames, Hightower rushed Hitman from behind, tackling him over the trash barrel. Together, they rolled to the right.

Hitman twisted around and overpowered Hightower, getting his right arm around his neck and pushing the handle of the club into this throat,

choking him. He then bit a large chunk of Hightower's scalp and shook his head, growling like a pit bull and tearing the flesh away, drawing copious rivulets of blood. Hightower's eyes bugged and his mouth gaped in struggle for air that would not come.

With Hightower and Hitman grappling, the other team members returned to join the struggle. They eventually broke Hitman's grip on Hightower, permitting him – now gasping – to gain his feet. When he did get some air, he squared up and planted a devastating kick right to Hitman's face. The impact cracked audibly, and Hitman went limp.

They wrestled him facedown into the concrete and Hightower squared up again, landing another combat boot to his face. He then danced around into a new position and stomped on Hitman's right elbow. The bones cracked in report.

Hitman grunted in pain as Hightower knelt and helped twist the now useless arm. They slapped cuffs on his wrists and leg irons on his ankles. It was the last I saw of Hitman before they dragged him around the corner by his chains and resumed beating him – out of sight of any witnesses.

I shouted in disgust, "Stop it! He's restrained!"

Hightower came back around the corner, blood pouring from his head, to give me a "You're next" look. When the medics arrived, he helped carry Fontenot away on the gurney.

I looked at the streams of blood on the floor and saw two teeth lying there. The fire hose was quickly unrolled and the teeth washed away as the cell fire was extinguished.

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I saw Hitman again, about ten years later and in another facility. He'd lost much of his mass and muscle tone, and his hair had for the most part fallen out. Where once there had been thick, brown hair, there was now a pattern of massive scarring. Hitman could not recall any of that day's horrors nor did he recognize me. I noticed changes in his mannerisms and bearing – he was getting an early start on his second childhood.

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Texas, the "Lone Star", is unique in many ways. That makes its gully features uniquely horrendous. Texans take perverse pride in the exploits of Judge Roy Bean – a man with no allegiance to ideas of due process – and John Wesley Hardin – a notoriously mean, gunfighting serial killer.

Government officials would have us believe incidents like Hitman's are unavoidable in prison. But the little things, those which could have been addressed appropriately, leading up to such enraged attacks are never seen, seldom explained, rarely understood.

The Texas Department of *Corrections* has, since Hitman's day, changed its name to Department of Criminal Justice – Institutional Division, and stopped addressing us as “inmates”; now we're “offenders”.

But it's the government that's on the offense. There remains no pretense to “corrections”, and despite the insightful warnings of mental health and behavioral experts, from coast to coast hundreds of thousands of men and women just like Hitman are locked in cages, treated like animals, driven to frustrated, self-defeating rage, exploited in their downfall, and then unleashed upon an unsuspecting society to begin the cycle all over again.

These *fellow-citizens* who, for whatever reason, lack capacity for constructive problem-solving skills or the personal insight necessary to reconfigure self-defeating thought patterns, are being encouraged to act upon their frustrations with violence.

Each reported use of force or disciplinary infraction report – even threats to sue, which, in Orwellian Newspeak constitute a “verbal assault” – are reported to the legislature and contribute to increased funding for the prison.

A Texan on Death Row, perhaps in order to prove his insanity gouged out his own eyes and swallowed them. Others shred themselves with razorblades, overdose on drugs, and hang themselves.<sup>1</sup>

In Texas, prison guards who use force – allegedly in foiling an attempted escape, saving the life of another officer, or preventing a riot – are often commended, promoted in rank and pay grade, and might find themselves in *Correctional Peace Officers' Magazine*, named as Officer of the Month.

It will probably never be known how many little defeats Hitman suffered along the way to giving up altogether. But each little defeat of another person in this life is yet another defeat for all of us.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> The extent of the mutilation and the determination exhibited by prisoners to engage in serious acts of self-harm is astonishing. Prisoners have swallowed pins, inserted pencils in their penises and paperclips in their abdomens, bitten chunks of flesh from

their arms, slashed and gashed themselves. In many prisons around the country, Human Rights Watch has interviewed prisoners whose bodies are massively scarred from self-mutilation. Both correctional and mental health staff acknowledge that self-mutilation is a major problem. See “Suicide and Self-Mutilation” in *Ill-Equipped*, a Human Rights Watch Report, October 21, 2003.

### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Coffield Unit at the Tennessee Colony prison in Texas currently houses *William Steed Kelley*. “I was introduced to the endemic violence Texas chooses to call criminal justice just a few weeks after high school graduation”, he writes. He is now 41. He took the Long Ridge Writers’ Group writing course “to acquire the skills necessary to give appropriate expression to what I *must* say before departing this world. With time and practice I have found that writing helps me decide what I really think and feel about things – one has to understand before anyone else can be made to understand through writing”. These 23 years can never be returned, he writes, “but my life – however difficult – *will* serve a positive purpose if I have to move heaven and earth to that end”. This essay is his first publication. An earlier version, “The Seeds of Jasper Hate”, won the PEN American Center’s second prize for nonfiction in 2007.