

Prisons all over the country are trying to figure out how to deal with an aging prisoner population. Longer prison terms, the removal of good time credits, and more aggressive prosecution of old man crimes, like sexual assault, have put many more grandfathers behind bars in their golden years. Here at the New Hampshire State Prison, the population is aging as well. On sunny days the South Unit's exercise yard has so many guys in wheelchairs it looks like a retirement home. The line for medication call keeps getting longer. The white hairs will soon outnumber the rest, and this can make for some interesting problems. One old guy who lives in my unit had a stroke since coming to prison. He knows where he is, but doesn't know why he's here. He can't remember his crime. "I guess I must have done it," he says, shaking his head. Prison is hard time for the elderly. The strong prey on the weak; old men survive by hooking up with a younger prisoner who will look out for them. These friendships often come at a price.

"Charlie" is eighty-three years old. He's a tall man with a full head of white hair. He walks with a stiff, deliberate gait. It's partly the reserve and formality of his generation and partly arthritis with a touch of Parkinson's. I've heard that the state got Charlie's daughter to testify against him by promising nursing home quality care for her dad where he would get the treatment he needs. He's been in prison ever since. Charlie does his best to adapt. He seldom takes the slow walk to the chow hall for meals. He depends instead on food purchased in the canteen and prepared in his room. His life revolves around cell and dayroom; his associates don't extend much beyond his pod-mates.

Prison rules require that everyone's bed be made before 9:00 a.m. Failure to make your bed can result in a disciplinary write-up. An unmade bed is an invitation to the guards to shake down your house and go through all your stuff looking for contraband. Even someone with nothing to hide hates a shakedown. Guards tear apart your bed and pull everything out of your footlocker. For a young man, a shakedown is an annoyance. For an arthritic old man, it's a major event. It can take the rest of the day to recover some sense of order.

Charlie had trouble making his bed. He couldn't bend over enough to reach the far side. His fingers were stiff in the morning. He found a younger guy on his pod willing to make his bed each morning in exchange for an ice cream bar on canteen days. On the outside, the arrangement would have

been fine. In here, it's illegal. The prison wants to discourage gambling, drug deals, and the sale of sexual favors. All these things are sold through the barter of canteen items. Any exchange of canteen items between prisoners is an infraction of the rules.

Somehow Charlie's arrangement was discovered. He was called to the office and given a write-up. His punishment, five days in the hole, was suspended. It would be imposed if he re-offended. Like many old men, Charlie has a feisty streak. He dared them to put an 83-year-old in the hole. On canteen day he made a point to buy an ice cream bar and publicly gave it to his benefactor. I'd like to have heard the guards' discussion about how to handle the situation. Charlie called their bluff. They couldn't really make good on their threat to send him to the hole. What if he died there? Extra duty was out of the question. The guy can hardly walk. It wouldn't do any good to add disciplinary days to his minimum parole date. He is going to die in prison anyway. They called him to the office. He got another write-up. This time the punishment was 60 days loss of canteen privileges. Later that day Charlie was told to pack up his things. He was being moved to the infirmary, not as punishment, they said, but to evaluate whether he could continue to live in the general population.

I do not know whether Charlie will get to come back to the South Unit. After all, it is not a nursing home. That's what he really needs. I look around the yard and wonder how many beds they have in the infirmary. It looks to me like they are going to need add some pretty soon.

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