

**Japanese Justice**  
**(Excerpts From a Prison Journal)**

*Ian B. Miller*

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*[Editor's note: Ian Miller was arrested in Tokyo in March, 1993, and was paroled and deported back to Canada 28 months later. After this experience, he noted: "You might think that after spending some time in a Japanese prison, a person would never want to return, and would do everything possible to stay out of trouble with the law. In spite of this harsh treatment, however, many of the Japanese prisoners have been in prison a number of times before. In fact, at Fuchu Prison all of the Japanese are repeat offenders. One wonders, therefore, how effective this austere form of confinement really is . . . ."]*

**M**ay 12: Well, I finally got a pen and a notebook so I can keep a record of all this. It's been 65 days now since I was arrested at Narita airport with 96.5 grams of heroin. (Actually, it was 96.49 grams - the Japanese are very precise). The worst part of it is that I wasn't even coming to Japan. I was returning to Canada from Thailand and I had a 12-hour transit stop, which included a free hotel room just outside the airport. I was arrested as I tried to pass through customs.

Since my arrest I haven't been allowed to make any phone calls at all; however, the police did notify the Canadian embassy - as well as my parents, who thought I was on Vancouver Island planting trees. At the airport jail the detectives interrogated me nearly every day for the first two weeks. I was handcuffed to a chair in a small office, a detective seated across from me and a translator on my right. They wanted to know everything, from the history of my drug use since I was a teenager to the age of my siblings and what they did for a living. The first few days, during the worst stages of heroin withdrawal, I would sit hunched over, shivering and sneezing, while they questioned me. At one point, a customs officer brought in the bag of heroin so I could confirm that it was mine. I would have admitted to mass murder if they would've just given me a little snort to make me feel better. In spite of my withdrawal symptoms, with the accompanying sweats and chills, I was only allowed to bathe once a week.

I shared a cell with two other guys (there were four cells, three people in each one) and we would sit in our cell and listen to the jets coming and going all day long, dreaming of the one that would finally take us home.

I spent five weeks there at the airport police station, where most of the other prisoners had also been arrested for smuggling, including:

- A Brit who arrived from Hong Kong with 2.4 kilos of hashish taped to his waist.
- A young Japanese guy who returned from a holiday in LA with 17 grams of cocaine in a tube of toothpaste.
- An Iranian with 700 grams of opium.
- A 53-year-old Vietnamese sushi chef with 3.8 kilos of marijuana.
- An Australian with 500 grams of hashish.
- A 63-year-old Japanese man with 29 handguns and silencers. (Guns are illegal in Japan: a \$200 handgun can fetch two or three thousand dollars).
- A Thai man who had 174 baby turtles, and a Singaporean who had a Johnnie Walker carton filled with 35 arrowanas, an expensive tropical fish.
- Another Thai man with 4,000 sleeping pills.
- A mentally challenged Malaysian guy who apparently was caught trying to steal a taxi from the airport.

I was transferred to the Chiba Detention House, a few weeks ago. I stay here until I get sentenced some time next month. I'm hoping I'll get a suspended sentence and be deported back to Canada, since I was only in transit and not bringing the drugs into Japan. I live in a solitary cell, about 5 feet by 12 feet, with a sink, a toilet and a small table. I sit on the floor on a tatami mat and read or write or stare at the wall. My bed is a cotton futon mattress on the floor, which I can unfold and lie on only after 6 p.m.

Prisoners are not allowed to talk with each other; there's no yelling back and forth down the hallways. The Brit who was in my cell with me at the airport jail is just down the hall. I wrote a letter to him a couple of weeks ago. The prison officials had to translate and censor it before posting it in the regular mail. A few days later it arrived back here at the

prison, was opened and read again, and then finally delivered to his cell, three doors away. I got his reply a week later.

I stay in my cell all day, every day, except for three days a week when we get a half-hour outdoor exercise, and the other two days when we get 15-minute showers. Even during exercise and shower we are still segregated and unable to communicate with each other.

**June 3:** Boy, am I depressed. I guess I can forget about a suspended sentence. I just got sentenced to three and a half years “hard labour.” The trial was a joke: I was in the middle of the courtroom facing the three judges, with the prosecutor on one side and my Japanese “lawyer” - I use the term loosely - on the other side. I wasn’t even allowed to talk with my lawyer at all during the entire trial.

I’ve had my head shaved and now I’m waiting to be transferred to another prison, where I will serve my sentence.

**July 17:** I am now at Fuchu Prison, on the other side of Tokyo. There are over 2,000 Japanese convicts here, as well as over 400 foreigners from around the world, mostly Southeast Asia, South America and Iran. Lots of them are in for drugs. Every Colombian I’ve met was busted for coke. The Japanese are pretty strict when it comes to drugs. I met one Australian who was convicted because the police found traces of speed in his blood. Even though no drugs actually were found, he got 14 months in prison merely for using. But I guess I’m lucky I didn’t get caught before I left Bangkok - I probably would be doing at least ten years in a Thai jail.

When I arrived here I had to strip and leave all my possessions in storage. I couldn’t even keep my old toothbrush - I had to buy a new one. After changing into the gray prison uniform, I was told to hold out my hands so the guards could see if any of my fingers were missing. Many of the prisoners here are members of the yakuza - the Japanese mafia - and they’ve had one or more of their fingers amputated in rituals to show loyalty to their gang or to atone for some mistake they’d made. The information concerning missing fingers is duly noted in each prisoner’s personal file.

After a week in a solitary cell for “observation” and another week in the “training factory,” where I learned how to march properly and obey the Japanese commands, I was assigned to a factory where I have to work, making widgets, from 8 to 5, five days a week. Prisons are a microcosm of the society. Japanese prisons are centered around work. Fuchu Prison contains nearly 30 different factories producing a variety of goods, with 50 to 100 prisoners working in each one.

When we arrive at the factory in the morning, we have to strip naked in a changing room and hang up our clothes; then we line up and pass through to an adjoining room while a guard gives us the once-over. In the next room is another set of clothing for work. At the end of the day we repeat the process in reverse. Such policies ensure that nobody has anything that can be used as a weapon. Consequently, Japanese prisons are probably the safest in the world. Even in the shower room we are accompanied by three or four guards, complete with rain jackets and rubber boots.

The whole prison system here is run like the military. We have to march everywhere, and if you so much as look around while you’re marching, they haul you off to a punishment cell for a few days of staring at the wall - a form of solitary confinement called chobatsu.

**August 22:** We spend all evenings and weekends locked in the cell. All the foreigners are kept in solitary cells here. Most of the Japanese are in larger cells, three to six prisoners each. In the cell, we’re supposed to sit on the floor all day; we’re not allowed to walk around, look out the window for any length of time, or anything like that. We can exercise in our rooms only on weekends and only at a specified time. A Canadian I know got three days in chobatsu for doing pushups in his room at the wrong time. And we’re not allowed to lie down until after dinner. On Saturday I was just sitting reading, and after a couple of hours I guess I kind of started to slouch against the wall. A guard came by and yelled at me and told me to sit up straight. “Hai! Sumimasen! Gomen nasai!” (One of the first things we learned to say here: “Yes! I’m sorry! Excuse me!”)

It is so damn hot and humid, I can’t stand it. In the factory, my heavy cotton shirt is soaked through with sweat by lunch time. And in the cell,

no matter how hot it is, we're not allowed to wash our bodies at all. If you get caught wiping your arms or back with a wet cloth, you'll get put in chobatsu.

**September 5:** I got caught talking to this Dutch guy in the factory toilet today. The "No Talking" rule is strictly enforced here. The only times we are allowed to talk are during our morning and afternoon tea breaks, a few minutes after lunch, and during our exercise periods - about four to five hours a week in total. That's not a lot of talking, when you think about how much people usually talk on the outside. Now I'm "under investigation" for breaking the prison regulation. It's being treated like a major criminal case.

**September 7:** Today I was interrogated by an officer who took detailed notes concerning my offense. He wanted to know what time it happened (9:55 a.m.), where it happened (standing at the urinal), was the Dutch guy on my right or my left? (left), what was said, exactly? (the usual bullshit) - in other words, just about everything except how many times I shook my "dick" after I peed. Tomorrow I have to appear at a "hearing" in front of some officers who will decide my fate.

**September 13:** I just finished five days in chobatsu. Wake up in the morning, fold up the futon, and then sit on this wooden box in the middle of the cell for the whole day. You have to sit with your legs together, back erect, hands on thighs, and stare at the wall all day, from 7:00 a.m. until 6:00 p.m. No slouching, no looking around. At six you can lie down and stare at the ceiling. If you need to use the toilet, you have to get the guard's permission first. They bring you your three meals, and you can get off the box and sit on the floor to eat, but then you have to get right back on the box. After the first couple of hours, I didn't think I'd be able to handle the rest of the day, let alone five days of this torture. But somehow I did; the minutes turn into hours and, eventually, into days.

**November 12:** Today we had our monthly "dick check." Many of the Japanese prisoners have had some little beads, ball-bearings or pearls - or something - implanted in the skin around the head of their penis. I don't know the reason for this, exactly - I imagine it's some kind of sexual aid, though I'm not quite sure if it's supposed to be for the man's benefit or

the woman's. In any case, when you first arrive here, they check to see if you have any of these things in your cock and, if so, how many. Then, every month they want to make sure you haven't added or removed any. I'm not sure how anyone would go about this bit of personal surgery here in prison, since we're so closely watched and there's no way to smuggle any tools out of the factory; I don't know why they would bother. And I certainly can't figure out why it should concern the prison officials.

I'll be sitting at my desk, diligently making widgets, and when the guard calls my name, I have to stand up and jog over to where he is sitting at the back of the factory. Slapping my hands down to my sides, I stand at attention, bow, yell out my name and prison number, and then whip out my cock so he can check it out. He has a quick look, then makes a little note in his list and I bow again and return to work. Sometimes I think I must be on another planet.

**December 6:** Last night I had a dream about Sister Jean, the Canadian nun in her fifties who comes out here once a month to visit the foreign prisoners and give a one-hour Japanese class. I dreamed we were in the class and she had her shirt off and I was fondling her breasts. I must be getting horny. Even this cute Filipino guy in my factory is starting to look good. He's a seaman and he got busted when 20 kilos of pot were found on his ship. Put a wig and a miniskirt on him and he'd be pretty hot stuff. Unfortunately, regulation number 24 clearly states: "You are not allowed to creep into your fellow inmate's bed." Of course, that applies only to the Japanese, since all foreigners are in solitary cells, anyhow.

There are so many stupid rules here. We have to keep our top shirt button done up at all times, even in our rooms - except during the summer, when we are allowed to undo one button. The list of regulations can make for some entertaining reading. Rule Number One reads: "Running away from the prison or any attempt of such is strictly forbidden." Other rules include:

- You are not allowed to talk loudly, make a big noise or sing a song at the places where conversation is prohibited.
- You should not make any rumours in order to put other inmates' or prison officials' minds into confusion.

- You must not say anything abusive, slanderous, or insulting to others.
- You are not allowed to paste on any paper crips [sic] at any place.
- Tatooing [sic] or changing your hair style or eyebrows in peculiar forms is forbidden.

**January 15:** Damn, it's cold. It's one o'clock on a Saturday afternoon and I can see my breath here in my room. All the buildings here are unheated, although the officers have portable kerosene heaters in their offices. We have a thermometer in our factory and when we get to work in the morning it's usually about 5 or 6 degrees Celsius and gets up to 9 or 10 by noon. I've become pretty good at guessing the temperature, and I estimate it to be about 7 or 8 degrees Celsius in my room right now, though it's colder in the morning.

We're allowed to cover our legs with a blanket when we're in our rooms, but we can't get into bed to keep warm until after dinner. I've had mild frostbite on my fingers for the last few weeks: they're sore and red. Some guys have it a lot worse. A guy in my factory has purple hands and feet: he limps when he walks and he has to go to see the doctor every day. But they still make him work.

**January 23:** Today one of the officers didn't like the way we were marching on the way to the factory, so we had to march in place for about five minutes, swinging our arms up to shoulder height and yelling, "Ichi, ni, san, shi" (one, two, three, four). This is a common discipline here.

**March 6:** Well, it's finally starting to get a bit warmer. It's a real drag to be stuck in a cold room all weekend (I'm on the shady side of the building) and to look out and see the sun shining but not be able to go out in it.

Yesterday a couple guys in my factory got in trouble for the stupidest thing. We had just sat down to have our tea break in the little lunch room that adjoins the factory. We have to march in and take our assigned seats, and then wait quietly with our eyes closed until everyone is sitting down and the guard gives the command to open our eyes and pour the tea. Only then are we allowed to talk.

Anyhow, there's this Indonesian guy named Lodi, who sits across from me at the table. He's a devout Muslim, and I always see him praying in his cell in the evening, since his room is right across from mine. So I ask him what he thinks about while he prays, and he replies, "I think about my God." Well, that's fair enough. But then Obi, a Nigerian and a professed Christian (he got busted with a kilo of heroin in his Tokyo apartment) who sits beside me, says, "I think about pussy." Well, I can relate to that. But Lodi is offended by this and gets all upset, waving his finger at Obi and yelling, "Pussy! Pussy!" I tell him to shut up because he's going to get in trouble, but he keeps getting more and more upset, and soon the factory guard comes over and takes both of them away for investigation.

I get called as a witness, which is pretty funny. I'm sitting in a little room with an officer and one of the two official prison translators, describing the situation while the officer takes detailed notes concerning this horrendous crime. He draws a little diagram of the lunch room and the table, with little circles and arrows indicating who was sitting where. The translator, a young Japanese man in a suit, is a real prude. He can't even bring himself to say the word, "pussy." He says, "So, after Obi said, 'I think about . . .', uh, about, ah, you know, that word . . . ."

Meanwhile, the officer is writing down the conversation but then he gets stuck on the word "pussy" (after the translator explained, red-faced, what it meant). The officer wants to make sure he's got the right pronunciation so he can write it in Japanese characters. He's looking at me, very serious, saying, "Boosy? Pooshy? Poozy?" I'm having a hard time keeping from cracking up - I don't want to get into any trouble myself.

**March 20:** I ran into Lodi at the doctor's office today. We're not allowed to talk, of course, but he managed to tell me what happened: he and Obi both got a week in chobatsu and then were transferred to separate factories.

**May 9:** We're not allowed to grow a beard here but the only time we can shave is during our shower time, twice a week. Until now, they've been changing my razor blade every three months; I put in a request a few



weeks ago and now they change it every seven weeks. Still, trying to hack off a four-day-old beard with a month-old blade isn't much fun.

**June 2:** I just got a letter from my family that was mailed from Canada over five weeks ago. Mail only takes about a week to get here but officers have to translate and read everything, so sometimes they get backed up and it will sit here for weeks before they get around to translating it. And when I write a reply it will sit here for up to a month before it gets mailed. We can write two letters a month, no longer than seven pages each. We have to use the lined writing paper which we buy from the prison and we have to write only on the lines - we're not allowed to squeeze in extra sentences between the lines or at the bottom or top of the page. Sometimes I've been given back a letter and told to rewrite it simply because I put a couple of extra sentences at the bottom of the page.

The censors also read the newspapers every day before they are delivered to the factories for us to read on our breaks. There are a couple of Japanese papers as well as the English language *Japan Times*. Once in a while we get a paper with a story all blacked-out with ink. It's usually possible to make out the headlines and so we get an idea of what it is the officials don't want us to know. Stuff like fights between rival yakuza gangs, or reports of prison breakouts anywhere in the world.

**June 14:** I was busted today for talking to this Australian guy in the shower room. I knew him from the airport jail; he's in another factory, but sometimes we have showers at the same time. He didn't get caught. When they asked me later who I was talking to, I gave them some bullshit story about some unknown Iranian. Turns out they knew all along who it was. Now I'm "under investigation," with my "trial" later this week.

**June 25:** I just finished seven days in chobatsu, staring at the wall and dreaming of freedom. After a week of that, working in the factory feels like a holiday.

**August 12:** There are no drugs in Japanese prisons. We're not even allowed to smoke. I was trying to get a little buzz on over the weekend by hyperventilating in my cell, but I got dizzy and fell over, spazzing out and hitting my foot against the wall in the process. Apparently, I dislocated a

toe. The doctors couldn't fix it here so they handcuffed me and took me out to a hospital. What a thrill that was: riding in a van on city streets, seeing normal people going about their business. In our day-to-day life we forget how precious freedom is. Like Joni Mitchell sings: "You don't know what you got till it's gone."

**August 29:** My Australian friend just got transferred to our factory after 10 days in chobatsu. He told me what happened to him: he had only four days left to work in his factory before he was to be paroled and sent home. After lunch, everybody is supposed to sit quietly with their eyes closed until the guards order you back to work. The guards in that factory are really strict, and they check everyone to make sure their eyes are closed. He was daydreaming about going home and he forgot to close his eyes. One of the guards started screaming at him and when an immediate apology was not forthcoming, the guard accused him of having a "defiant attitude." This resulted not only in 10 days punishment but now his parole has been revoked as well, and he'll have to stay another four and a half months to complete his sentence.

**October 18:** Every month we have to hand our notebooks in to be checked by the officers in the Foreign Inmates Section. We are not allowed to write the names or addresses of anyone except family members. A couple of weeks ago I received a newspaper from home that had a special feature on All-You-Can-Eat restaurants in Vancouver. Since I dream about food all day long here, I made a note of these places so I can check them out when I get home. An officer came into the factory today with my notebook and talked with the factory boss, who then called me up and asked me what all these addresses were. I explained it to him and pointed out that the names of the restaurants were clearly written there. He made me cross all the addresses out and gave me a warning.

**December 10:** When we're working, we're supposed to pay attention to our work and not look around. My friend, Kevin, an American who's in here after trying to bring 12 kilos of marijuana from the Philippines through Narita airport, came back to the factory today. He just finished three days in chobatsu after he was caught looking up from his work.

**December 14:** A couple of weeks ago I was so pissed off at the prospect of another winter in unheated buildings, I wrote, “FUCK THE JAP BASTARDS” and other obscenities in this notebook. I didn’t think they actually read every page, but I guess they do because when I got it back from the monthly check, there were all these little stamps all over the page. They haven’t said anything to me about it; I guess they just wanted to let me know that they had seen it. Of course, I was just upset, and that doesn’t reflect my true feelings for the Japanese people, whom I love, admire and respect. I really do. Especially the officers who read the notebooks. What a wonderful bunch of guys. First rate.

**January 2:** To celebrate the New Year, we get a few days off work and a little bento box of food, including some candied fish and mandarin oranges. We get to sit in our cells, freezing our butts off and read all day. What a treat.

**February 24:** It’s been nearly two years since my arrest. We’re never told if and when we’ll get parole, but I think this may be my last winter here. Most foreigners seem to get out after serving about 60 to 65 percent of their sentences, if they haven’t had too much chobatsu time. If I’m lucky, I should be going home some time this summer.

This is an interesting experience but not one I’d like to repeat. I want to be free. Like my Dutch friend said, “When you get out, man, you’ll be happy just to stand on a damn street corner.”

**PRISON WRITING JOURNAL**

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*PRISON WRITING JOURNAL* is published twice-yearly, in Spring and Autumn. Founded in 1991, its prime aim is to encourage prisoners' creativity through the written word and to get their writing 'over the wall', as to wide a readership as possible. The Journal is not overtly political or polemical. It is a criminological journal with a sharp literary edge and has the support of noted ex-prisoners John McVicar and Jimmy Boyle, prison reformers and academics.

The Journal is non-profit-making and survives on its subscriptions. It is printed and bound to a high standard. All funds received go into the production of the journal and on postage to subscribers, contributors and interested prisoners in Britain, Ireland, USA, Canada, Australia and New Zealand.



Some well-known British names have been published in the first 12 issues of *PRISON WRITING*: John McVicar, as well as being on the editorial board is a regular contributor; Valerio Viccei has told of the trials and tribulations of writing and publishing a book about his case (the Knightsbridge £60 million Safe Deposit Co robbery) from a maximum security prison. In issue No. 4, published Spring 1994, 'Mad' Frankie Fraser, contemporary to the Kray twins, tells of his experience

in British prisons and hospitals for the criminally insane over the past 50 years; many others, not so well-known, have been published for the first time and gone on to bigger things, their work appearing on BBC radio, in national newspapers and magazines etc.

*PRISON WRITING* has already printed the work of some US and Canadian prisoners, notably from Washington State Pen. and San Quentin, California. However . . . the journal has yet to come to the notice of the majority of prisons, prisoners, librarians and other interested parties in the USA/Canada. Thus we write to you to ask you to spread the word, and, hopefully, to ask your institution to subscribe.

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