

DOING TIME

Everyday diversions

In jail, boredom is the biggest hassle

Fourth of a five-part series

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SALEM — In the semidarkness of the cell block, I was startled by the occasional eruption of sparks from the granite floor outside my cell.

After a moment, I realized the inmates on the two tiers above me were flipping cigarettes out their cell doors. They were landing on the floor in the Flats.

The Flats, as the first level is known, was everybody's wastebasket and ash-tray. And my cell, No. 6, was in the middle of the row.

I recalled an inmate's warning about standing out in the open space of my corridor. He warned me to stay under the protective catwalk of the tier above.

"They throw butts and spit and throw water. Don't stand out there, man," he said. A few inmates have even been known to urinate from above, he said. I stayed under the catwalk.

Boredom was the biggest problem. Each night, when I wasn't reading or making notes, I practiced flipping cigarette butts through my cell door, trying not to hit the bars. My average was lousy.

Rock and country music blared from several cells and mixed with the voice of Howard Cosell on "Monday Night Football." I had bet on the game with the jail house bookie: two packs of cigarettes on Green Bay. I would lose, beaten by the spread. The next night, the bookie's assistant came to my cell carrying a clipboard and advised me, "We also handle basketball."

He showed me a list of the night's game with the spreads for betting. I asked him if Larry Bird would be playing for the Celtics. I was aware that Bird had been injured. He said he didn't think so. I told him I wasn't going to bet. I would have won.

Inmates would also come around and ask me if I wanted to rent a television set. The fee was two packs of cigarettes a day or a carton a week, about \$10.

The TV set I had purchased would not show up for another day. When it did, I could barely watch or hear it. Other inmates told me the poorest reception was in the Flats.

Some tried to help me by rigging wires as makeshift antennae. Nothing seemed to help much.

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17-year-old Frank McAskill reads in his cell.



Washing down the cell block.

GLOBE PHOTO BY TED DULLY

Jail boredom biggest hassle

■ JAIL

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Without a TV set I couldn't see the football game, but from the reactions of the prisoners I had a rather clear idea of what was going on. It was obvious when the ABC cameras focused on the cheerleaders. The cell block erupted with catcalls and a variety of obscene suggestions; "Take me home, momma" being the most constrained.

Yelled conversations took place from one cell to another.

"How many S's in Xmas?" an inmate yelled.

"Two," came the reply from somewhere.

I subdued an urge to correct him. As a reporter serving time on a phony drunken driving charge, I did not want to do anything that would draw attention to me.

Tuesday morning I awoke after a fitful night's sleep. It was daylight outside, but I had no idea of time, having been warned not to bring my watch or anything else of value. There were no clocks on the cell block walls.

"What time is it?" an inmate yelled.

"About 8:30," was the reply.

"That ain't good enough," the first inmate quipped. He knew the cell doors didn't open until 9 a.m.

At long last, the electric motor churned again and my door slid open. I had been locked in the cell 13 hours. I grabbed my shaving gear and went to the washroom. One of the two toilets was covered with plastic. It was obviously out of order.

The water was hot, and I had washed and shaved before I was suddenly conscious that I didn't have a towel. Nobody had ever given me one.

I returned to my cell and wiped my face and hands with sheets of toilet paper from a roll given to me by a guard the night before. I tried to comb my hair, but there were no mirrors. I would not see my face for five days.

Getting used to my surroundings, I felt a bit more relaxed and less threatened by the other inmates.

I began to assess my living conditions. Not only did I not have a towel; I had slept without a pillow. I had asked a passing guard for a pillow, and his response was, "They're hard to come by."

Some guards had been abrupt with me, but no guard had ever been unkind to me. A few of them even called me "Mr. Leader" in apparent deference to my age.

Nevertheless, I was intimidated by them. If I saw a guard watching me, I became inexplicably tense. I attributed it to my early training to respect authority.

"The policeman is your friend," my mother had always said.

Unlike most other prisons, the guards in Salem Jail walk inside the cell blocks and mingle with the prisoners. Several joked with inmates and in some cases even shadowboxed with the young men.

But we were always subject to their whims. They controlled our existence. They could make it easy or hard for an inmate. I did not want any of them mad at me. When I asked for something and didn't get it, I accepted my fate. No complaints.

The inmates were more help. They explained the rules and told me what to do and when to do it. It was an inmate who eventually made it possible for me to get a towel. Within 24 hours of entering the jail, my fear of the inmates had waned, but I was still cautious.

None of them had even seemed surly to me. One, a young man from Boston's North End, had become my self-appointed body guard.

"Anybody hassle you?" he asked.

"No, everybody's been OK," I told him.

"Just let me know if anybody hassles you."

An inmate named Dick who

(The following poem was written by Mark Brophy, 29, an inmate serving time at the Salem House of Correction for breaking and entering.)

Salem Jail 1813-1982

Awakened from sleep
by sounds in the night;
Bars cast evil shadows
in the flickering light.
Through the mind's eye
vague images steal,
Questioning logic,
Imagination or real.
Nocturnal specters
wander the tiers
For crimes of the past,
enduring the years.
The aging cell walls,
Indifferent of time,
Leave only inward exits
through the labyrinth of
the mind.
Idle thoughts caught in
eddies
of time's random streams.
Torment the soul
like a crazy man's
dreams.
Raging winds of the cosmos
blow visions of hate
From souls that are
earthbound
by vast chains of fate.
Coal fires still stoked
by those who were cursed
To wander the maze
between Heaven and
earth.
Witches and killers,
the criminally insane.
Brawlers and drunkards
and the wrongfully
blamed
Eternally exiled
by spirits aloft;
Hell would be welcome
no matter the cost.
By dawn they retreat
back into the void
Leaving this plane
where they harmlessly
toyed.

took pity on my inexperience procured a plastic water pitcher for me from another inmate.

At one point, he tried to make me a drinking cup out of an empty Pepsi can by frantically rubbing one end of the can on the granite floor. "If you do this long enough the top comes right off," he said.

Another inmate spotted Dick on his hands and knees scraping the top of the can.

"Trying to tunnel out?" he asked with a grin.

Unable to dislodge the can top, Dick came up with a large metal peanut butter can. "You can use this if you clean it out," he said.

The sides and bottom were still thick with peanut butter. It took nearly an hour of rinsing with hot water to get rid of the peanut butter. I used it for ice, which gave the water a faint flavor of peanut butter.

Breakfast consisted of pancakes with syrup and coffee in large, dented aluminum pitchers. Milk had already been added to the coffee.

I am a tea drinker and dislike coffee. I drank coffee, but I would have given several packs of cigarettes for a cup of hot tea. It was an inmate who finally remedied that need. A trusted inmate who was allowed out of his cell during periods when many of us were locked up brought tea to my cell two different nights.

After breakfast, I made my bed and began to read a book when a voice rang out from the second tier. "Leader, up here."

My anxiety quickly subsided. It was time for me to report to the first of my three sessions with group counseling for my "alcohol problem."

Although I did not know it at that moment, I was about to witness tough-talking young men peel back their protective macho layers and reveal some of their inner selves, sometimes through their tears.

NEXT: The final days