

# Mother Jones

## My Four Months as a Private Prison Guard: A Mother Jones Investigation

*I saw stabbings, lockdowns, and inmates and officers pushed to the edge.*

By Shane Bauer | Thu Jun. 23, 2016 8:13 AM EDT

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## Chapter 1: "Inmates Run This Bitch"

Have you ever had a riot?" I ask a recruiter from a prison run by the [Corrections Corporation of America](#) [1] (CCA).

"The last riot we had was two years ago," he says over the phone.

"Yeah, but that was with the Puerto Ricans!" says a woman's voice, cutting in. "We got rid of them."

"When can you start?" the man asks.

I tell him I need to think it over.

I take a breath. Am I really going to become a prison guard? Now that it might actually happen, it feels scary and a bit extreme.

I started applying for jobs in private prisons because I wanted to see the inner workings of an industry that holds [131,000](#) [3] of the nation's [1.6 million prisoners](#) [3]. As a journalist, it's nearly impossible to get an unconstrained look inside our penal system. When prisons do let reporters in, it's usually for carefully managed tours and monitored interviews with inmates. Private prisons are especially secretive. Their records often aren't subject to public access laws; CCA has fought [to defeat](#) [4] legislation that would make private prisons subject to the same disclosure rules as their public counterparts. And even if I could get uncensored information from private prison inmates, how would I verify their claims? I keep coming back to this question: Is there any other way to see what really happens inside a private prison?

CCA certainly seemed eager to give me a chance to join its team. Within two weeks of filling out its online application, using my real name and personal information, several CCA prisons contacted me, some multiple times.

They weren't interested in the details of my résumé. They didn't ask about my job history, my current employment with the Foundation for National Progress, the publisher of Mother Jones, or why someone who writes about criminal justice in California would want to move across the country to work in a prison. They didn't even ask about the time I was arrested for shoplifting when I was 19.

When I call Winn Correctional Center in Winnfield, Louisiana, the HR lady who answers is chipper and has a smoky Southern voice. "I should tell you upfront that the job only pays \$9 an hour, but the prison is in the middle of a national forest. Do you like to hunt and fish?"

"I like fishing."

"Well, there is plenty of fishing, and people around here like to hunt squirrels. You ever squirrel hunt?"

"No."

"Well, I think you'll like Louisiana. I know it's not a lot of money, but they say you can go from a CO to a warden in just seven years! The CEO of the company started out as a CO"—a corrections officer.

Ultimately, I choose Winn. Not only does Louisiana have the highest [incarceration rate](#) [3] in the [world](#) [5]—more than 800 prisoners per 100,000 residents—but Winn is the oldest privately operated medium-security prison in the country.

I phone HR and tell her I'll take the job.

"Well, poop can stick!" she says.

I pass the background check within 24 hours.



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[From the editor: Why we sent a reporter to work as a private prison guard](#) [2]

1/6 My Four Months as a Private Prison Guard: Part One



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Two weeks later, in November 2014, having grown a goatee, pulled the plugs from my earlobes, and bought a beat-up Dodge Ram pickup, I pull into Winnfield, a hardscrabble town of 4,600 people three hours north of Baton Rouge. I drive past the former Mexican restaurant that now serves drive-thru daiquiris to people heading home from work, and down a street of collapsed wooden houses, empty except for a tethered dog. About 38 percent of households here live below the [poverty line](#) [7]; the median household income is \$25,000. Residents are proud of the fact that three governors came from Winnfield. They are less proud that the last sheriff was locked up for dealing meth.

Thirteen miles away, Winn Correctional Center lies in the middle of the Kisatchie National Forest, 600,000 acres of Southern yellow pines crosshatched with dirt roads. As I drive through the thick forest, the prison emerges from the fog. You might mistake the dull expanse of cement buildings and corrugated metal sheds for an oddly placed factory were it not for the office-park-style sign displaying CCA's corporate logo, with the head of a bald eagle inside the "A."

At the entrance, a guard who looks about 60, a gun on her hip, asks me to turn off my truck, open the doors, and step out. A tall, stern-faced man leads a German shepherd into the cab of my truck. My heart hammers. I tell the woman I'm a new cadet, here to start my four weeks of training. She directs me to a building just outside the prison fence.

"Have a good one, baby," she says as I pull through the gate. I exhale.

I park, find the classroom, and sit down with five other students.

"You nervous?" a 19-year-old black guy asks me. I'll call him Reynolds. (I've changed the names and nicknames of the people I met in prison unless noted otherwise.)



Mother Jones Senior Reporter Shane Bauer (pictured above in his prison uniform) has previously reported on solitary confinement, police militarization, and the Middle East. He is the co-author, with Sarah Shourd and Joshua Fattal, of *A Sliver of Light*, an account of his two years [as a prisoner in Iran](#). [8] James West

military—looks excited.

"I don't think this is for me," a postal worker says.

**"Do not run!"**

The next day, I wake up at 6 a.m. in my apartment in the nearby town where I decided to live to minimize my chances of running into off-duty guards. I feel a shaky, electric nervousness as I put a pen that doubles as an audio recorder into my shirt pocket.

In class that day, we learn about the use of force. A middle-aged black instructor I'll call Mr. Tucker comes into the classroom, his black fatigues tucked into shiny black boots. He's the head of Winn's Special Operations Response Team, or SORT, the prison's SWAT-like tactical unit. "If an inmate was to spit in your face, what would you do?" he asks. Some cadets say they would write him up. One woman, who has worked here for 13 years and is doing her annual retraining, says, "I would want to hit him. Depending on where the camera is, he might would get hit."

Mr. Tucker pauses to see if anyone else has a response. "If your personality if somebody spit on you is to knock the fuck out of him, you gonna knock the fuck out of him," he says, pacing slowly. "If a inmate hit me, I'm go' hit his ass right back. I don't care if the camera's rolling. If a inmate spit on me, he's gonna have a very bad day." Mr. Tucker says we should call for backup in any confrontation. "If a midget spit on you, guess what? You still supposed to call for backup. You don't supposed to ever get into a one-on-one encounter with anybody. Period. Whether you can take him or not. Hell, if you got a problem with a midget, call me. I'll help you. Me and you can whup the hell out of him."

**"If a inmate hit me, I'm go' hit his ass right back. I don't care if the camera's rolling."**

He asks us what we should do if we see two inmates stabbing each other.

"I'd probably call somebody," a cadet offers.

"I'd sit there and holler 'stop,'" says a veteran guard.

Mr. Tucker points at her. "Damn right. That's it. If they don't pay attention to you, hey, there ain't nothing else you can do."

He cups his hands around his mouth. "Stop fighting," he says to some invisible prisoners. "I said, 'Stop fighting.'" His voice is nonchalant. "Y'all ain't go' to stop, huh?" He makes like he's backing out of a door and slams it shut. "Leave your ass in there!"

"Somebody's go' win. Somebody's go' lose. They both might lose, but hey, did you do your job? Hell yeah!" The classroom erupts in laughter.

We *could* try to break up a fight if we wanted, he says, but since we won't have pepper spray or a nightstick, he wouldn't recommend it. "We are not going to pay you that much," he says emphatically. "The next raise you get is not going to be much more than the one you got last time. The only thing that's important to us is that we go home at the end of the day. Period. So if them fools want to cut each other, well, happy cutting."

"A little," I say. "You?"

**CCA RUNS 61 FACILITIES ACROSS THE UNITED STATES:**

- These include **34** state prisons, **14** federal prisons, **9** immigration detention centers, and **4** jails.
- It owns **50** of these sites.
- **38** hold men, **2** hold women, **21** holds women and children.
- **17** are in Texas, **7** are in Tennessee, and **6** are in Arizona.

"Nah, I been around," he says. "I seen killin'. My uncle killed three people. My brother been in jail, and my cousin." He has scars on his arms. One, he says, is from a shootout in Baton Rouge. The other is from a street fight in Winnfield. He elbowed someone in the face, and the next thing he knew he got knifed from behind. "It was some gang shit." He says he just needs a job until he starts college in a few months. He has a baby to feed. He also wants to put speakers in his truck. They told him he could work on his days off, so he'll probably come in every day. "That will be a fat paycheck." He puts his head down on the table and falls asleep.

The human resources director comes in and scolds Reynolds for napping. He perks up when she tells us that if we recruit a friend to work here, we'll get 500 bucks. She gives us an assortment of other tips: Don't eat the food given to inmates; don't have sex with them or you could be fined \$10,000 or get 10 years at hard labor; try not to get sick because we don't get paid sick time. If we have friends or relatives incarcerated here, we need to report it. She hands out fridge magnets with the number of a hotline to use if we feel suicidal or start fighting with our families. We get three counseling sessions for free.

I studiously jot down notes as the HR director fires up a video of the company's CEO, [Damon Hininger](#) [9], who tells us what a great opportunity it is to be a corrections officer at CCA. Once a guard himself, he made [\\$3.4 million](#) [10] in 2015, nearly 19 times the salary of the director of the Federal Bureau of Prisons. "You may be brand new to CCA," Hininger says, "but we need you. We need your enthusiasm. We need your bright ideas. During the academy, I felt camaraderie. I felt a little anxiety too. That is completely normal. The other thing I felt was tremendous excitement."

I look around the room. Not one person—not the recent high school graduate, not the former Walmart manager, not the nurse, not the mother of twins who's come back to Winn after 10 years of McDonald's and a stint in the

**Reveal**

from The Center for Investigative Reporting

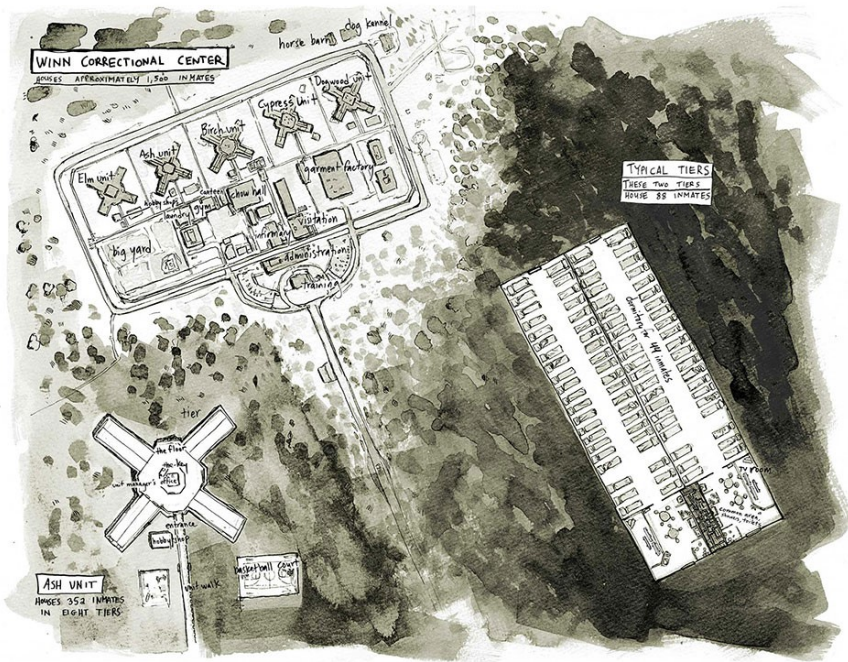
[Listen here](#) [11] to Shane Bauer's story on the current episode of *Reveal* from The Center for Investigative Reporting and PRX. The episode airs on [public radio stations](#) [12] across the country and on the [Reveal podcast](#) [13] starting Saturday, June 25.





When we return from break, Mr. Tucker sets a tear gas launcher and canisters on the table. "On any given day, they can take this facility," he says. "At chow time, there are 800 inmates and just two COs. But with just this class, we could take it back." He passes out sheets for us to sign, stating that we volunteer to be tear-gassed. If we do not sign, he says, our training is over, which means our jobs end right here. (When I later ask CCA if its staff members are required to be exposed to tear gas, spokesman Steven Owen says no.) "Anybody have asthma?" Mr. Tucker says. "Two people had asthma in the last class and I said, 'Okay, well, I'ma spray 'em anyway.' Can we spray an inmate? The answer is yes."

Five of us walk outside and stand in a row, arms linked. Mr. Tucker tests the wind with a finger and drops a tear gas cartridge. A white cloud of gas washes over us. The object is to avoid panicking, staying in the same place until the gas dissipates. My throat is suddenly on fire and my eyes seal shut. I try desperately to breathe, but I can only choke. "Do not run!" Mr. Tucker shouts at a cadet who is stumbling off blindly. I double over. I want to throw up. I hear a woman crying. My upper lip is thick with snot. When our breath starts coming back, the two women linked to me hug each other. I want to hug them too. The three of us laugh a little as tears keep pouring down our cheeks.



Map of Winn Correctional Center Jon Stich

Medium-security prison for inmates serving 50 years or less

- Inmate population: **About 1,500**
- **75% black, 25% white** or other
- Average inmate age: **36**
- Average sentence: **19 years**
- Average time served: **5.7 years**

### "Don't ever say thank you"

Our instructors advise us to carry a notebook to keep track of everything prisoners will ask us for. I keep one in my breast pocket and jet into the bathroom periodically to jot things down. They also encourage us to invest in a watch because when we document rule infractions it is important that we record the time precisely. A few days into training, a wristwatch arrives in the mail. One of the little knobs on its side activates a recorder. On its face there is a tiny camera lens.

On the eighth day, we are pulled from CPR class and sent inside the compound to Elm—one of five single-story brick buildings where the prison's roughly 1,500 inmates live. When we go through security, we are told to empty our pockets and remove our shoes and belts. This is intensely nerve-racking: I send my watch, pen, employee ID, and pocket change through the X-ray machine. I walk through the metal detector and a CO runs a wand up and down my body and pats down my chest, back, arms, and legs.

The other cadets and I gather at a barred gate and an officer, looking at us through thick glass, turns a switch that opens it slowly. We pass through, and after the gate closes behind us, another opens ahead. On the other side, the CCA logo is emblazoned on the wall along with the words "Respect" and "Integrity" and a mural of two anchors inexplicably floating at sea. Another gate clangs open and our small group steps onto the main outdoor artery of the prison: "the walk."

From above, the walk is shaped like a "T." It is fenced in with chain-link and covered with corrugated steel. Yellow lines divide the pavement into three lanes. Clustered and nervous, we cadets travel up the middle lane from the administration building as prisoners move down their designated side lanes. I greet inmates as they pass, trying hard to appear loose and unafraid. Some say good morning. Others stop in their tracks and make a point of looking the female cadets up and down.

We walk past the squat, dull buildings that house visitation, programming, the infirmary, and a church with a wrought-iron gate shaped into the words "Freedom Chapel." Beyond it there is a mural of a fighter jet dropping a bomb into a mountain lake, water blasting skyward, and a giant bald eagle soaring overhead, backgrounded by an American flag. At the top of the T we take a left, past the chow hall and the canteen, where inmates can buy snacks, toiletries, tobacco, music players, and batteries.

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**There are almost never more than two floor officers in a general population unit. That's one per 176 inmates.**

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The units sit along the top of the walk. Each is shaped like an "X" and connected to the main walk by its own short, covered walk. Every unit is named after a type of tree. Most are general population units, where inmates mingle in dorm-style halls and can leave for programs and chow. Cypress is the high-security segregation unit, the only one where inmates are confined to cells.

In Dogwood, reserved for the best-behaved inmates, prisoners get special privileges like extra television time, and many work outside the unit in places like the metal shop, the garment factory, or the chow hall. Some "trusties" even get to work in the front office, or beyond the fence washing employees' personal cars. Birch holds most of the elderly, infirm, and mentally ill inmates, though it doesn't offer any special services. Then there are Ash and Elm, which inmates call "the projects." The more troublesome prisoners live here.

**WINN CORRECTIONAL CENTER**

- Daily rate charged to state per inmate (2015): **\$34**

#### INMATE OFFENSES

- Violent crimes: **55%**
- Drug crimes: **19%**
- Property crimes: **13%**
- Other: **13%**

We enter Elm and walk onto an open, shiny cement floor. The air is slightly sweet and musty, like the clothes of a heavy smoker. Elm can house up to 352 inmates. At the center is an enclosed octagonal control room called "the key." Inside, a "key officer," invariably a woman, watches the feeds of the unit's 27-odd surveillance cameras, keeps a log of significant occurrences, and writes passes that give inmates permission to go to locations outside the unit, like school or the gym. Also in the key is the office of the unit manager, the "mini-warden" of the unit.

The key stands in the middle of "the floor." Branching out from the floor are the four legs of the X; two tiers run down the length of each leg. Separated from the floor by a locked gate, every tier is an open dormitory that houses up to 44 men, each with his own narrow bed, thin mattress, and metal locker.

Toward the front of each tier, there are two toilets, a trough-style urinal, and two sinks. There are two showers, open except for a three-foot wall separating them from the common area. Nearby are a microwave, a telephone, and a Jpay machine, where inmates pay to download songs onto their portable players and send short, monitored emails for about 30 cents each. Each tier also has a TV room, which fills up every weekday at 12:30 p.m. for the prison's most popular show, *The Young and the Restless*.

At Winn, staff and inmates alike refer to guards as "free people." Like the prisoners, the majority of the COs at Winn are African American. More than half are women, many of them single moms. But in Ash and Elm, the floor officers—who more than anyone else deal with the inmates face-to-face—are exclusively men. Floor officers are both enforcers and a prisoner's first point of contact if he needs something. It is their job to conduct security checks every 30 minutes, walking up and down each tier to make sure nothing is awry. Three times per 12-hour shift, all movement in the prison stops and the floor officers count the inmates. There are almost never more than two floor officers per general population unit. That's one per 176 inmates. (CCA later tells me that the Louisiana Department of Corrections, or DOC, considered the "staffing pattern" at Winn "appropriate.")

In Elm, a tall white CO named Christian is waiting for us with a leashed German shepherd. He tells the female cadets to go to the key and the male cadets to line up along the showers and toilets at the front of the tier. We put on latex gloves. The inmates are sitting on their beds. Two ceiling fans turn slowly. The room is filled with fluorescent light. Almost every prisoner is black.

A small group of inmates get up from their beds and file into the shower area. One, his body covered with tattoos, gets in the shower in front of me, pulls off his shirt and shorts, and hands them to me to inspect. "Do a one-finger lift, turn around, bend, squat, cough," Christian orders. In one fluid motion, the man lifts his penis, opens his mouth, lifts his tongue, spins around with his ass facing me, squats, and coughs. He hands me his sandals and shows me the soles of his feet. I hand him his clothes and he puts his shorts on, walks past me, and nods respectfully.

Like a human assembly line, the inmates file in. "Beyend, squawt, cough," Christian drawls. He tells one inmate to open his hand. The inmate uncurls his finger and reveals a SIM card. Christian takes it but does nothing.

#### Staff and inmates alike refer to guards as "free people." More than half are women, many of them single moms.

Eventually, the TV room is full of prisoners. A guard looks at them and smiles. "Tear 'em up!" he says, gesturing down the tier. Each of us, women included, stops at a bed. Christian tells one cadet to "shake down bed eight real good—just because he pissed me off." He tells us to search everything. I follow the other guards' lead, opening bottles of toothpaste and lotion. Inside a container of Vaseline, I find a one-hitter pipe made out of a pen and ask Christian what to do with it. He takes it from me, mutters "eh," and tosses it on the floor. I go through the mattress, pillow, dirty socks, and underwear. I flip through photos of kids, and of women posing seductively. I move on to new lockers: ramen, chips, dentures, hygiene products, peanut butter, cocoa powder, cookies, candy, salt, moldy bread, a dirty coffee cup. I find the draft of a novel, dedicated to "all the hustlers, bastards, strugglers, and hoodlum childs who are chasing their dreams."

One instructor notices that I am carefully putting each object back where I found it and tells me to pull everything out of the lockers and leave it on the beds. I look down the tier and see mattresses lying on the floor, papers and food dumped across beds. The middle of the floor is strewn with contraband: USB cables refashioned as phone chargers, tubs of butter, slices of cheese, and pills. I find some hamburger patties taken from the cafeteria. A guard tells me to throw them into the pile.

Inmates are glued up against the TV room window, watching a young white cadet named Miss Stirling pick through their stuff. She's pretty and petite, with long, jet-black hair. The attention makes her uncomfortable; she thinks the inmates are gross. Earlier this week, she said she would refuse to give an inmate CPR and won't try the cafeteria food because she doesn't want to "eat AIDS." The more she is around prisoners, though, the more I notice her grapple with an inner conflict.

"I don't want to treat everyone like a criminal because I've done things myself," she says.

Miss Stirling says she sometimes wonders if her baby's dad will end up here. She doesn't like doing chokehold escapes in class because they bring back memories of him. He cooked meth in their toolshed and once beat her so badly he dislocated her shoulder and knee. "You know that bone at the bottom of your neck? He pushed it up into my head," she says.



[Related: Read Shane Bauer's story about solitary confinement.](#) [14]

Senior Reporter Shane Bauer can be reached by email at [sbauer@motherjones.com](mailto:sbauer@motherjones.com) [15].

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If he ends up in this prison, another cadet assures her, "We could make his life hell."

As we shake down the tier, a prisoner comes out of the TV room to get a better look at Miss Stirling, and she yells at him to go back in. He does.

"Thank you," she says.

"Did she just say thank you?" Christian asks. A bunch of COs scoff.

"Don't ever say thank you," a woman CO tells her. "That takes the power away from it."

**"Ain't no order here"**



Inmates gather in Ash unit’s yard.

Most of our training is uneventful. Some days there are no more than two hours of classes, and then we have to sit and run the clock to 4:15 p.m. We pass the time discussing each other's lives. I try mostly to stay quiet, but when I slip into describing a backpacking trip I recently took in California, a cadet throws her arms in the air and shouts, "Why are you here?!" I am careful to never lie, instead backing out with generalities like, "I came here for work," or "You never know where life will take you," and no one pries further.

Few of my fellow cadets have traveled farther than nearby Oklahoma. They compare towns by debating the size and quality of their Waldmarts. Most are young. They eat candy during break time, write their names on the whiteboard in cutesy lettering, and talk about different ways to get high.

Miss Doucet, a stocky redheaded cadet in her late 50s, thinks that if kids were made to read the Bible in school, fewer would be in prison, but she also sticks pins in a voodoo doll to mete out vengeance. "I swing both ways," she says. She lives in a camper with her daughter and grandkids. With this job, she's hoping to save up for a double-wide trailer.

### The shoulders of a young cadet are slumping. He says his check was for \$577, after they took \$121 in taxes.

She worked at the lumber mill in Winnfield for years, but worsening asthma put an end to that. She's been hospitalized several times this year and says she almost died once. "They don't even want me to bring this in," she whispers, leaning in, pulling her inhaler out of her pocket. "I'm not supposed to, but I do. They ain't takin' it away from me." She takes a long drag from her cigarette.

Miss Doucet and others from the class ahead of mine go to the front office to get their paychecks for their first two weeks of work. When they return, the shoulders of a young cadet are slumping. He says his check was for \$577, after they took \$121 in taxes.

"Dang. That hurts," he says.

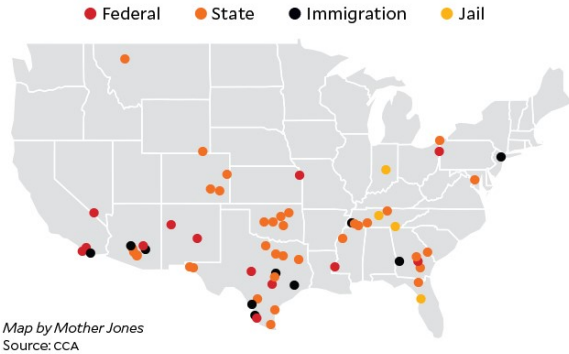
Miss Doucet says they withheld \$114 from her check.

"They held less for you?!" the young cadet says.

"I'm may-ried!" she says in a singsong voice. "I got a chi-ild!"

Outwardly, Miss Doucet is jovial and cocky, but she is already making mental adjustments to her dreams. The double-wide trailer she imagines her grandkids spreading out in becomes a single-wide. She figures she can get \$5,000 for the RV.

#### CCA Facilities



[Related: The Corrections Corporation of America, by the numbers](#) [17]

At the end of one morning of doing nothing, the training coordinator tells us we can go to the gym to watch inmates graduate from trade classes. Prisoners and their families are milling around with plates of cake and cups of fruit punch. An inmate offers a piece of red velvet to Miss Stirling.

I stand around with Collinsworth, an 18-year-old cadet with a chubby white baby face hidden behind a brown beard and a wisp of bangs. Before CCA, Collinsworth worked at a Starbucks. When he came to Winnfield to help out with family, this was the first job he could get. Once, Collinsworth was nearly kicked out of class after he jokingly threatened to stab Mr. Tucker with a plastic training knife. He's boasted to me about inmate management tactics he's learned from seasoned officers. "You just pit 'em against each other and that's the easiest way to get your job done," he tells me. He says one guard told him that inmates should tell troublemakers, "I'm gonna rape you if you try that shit again.' Or something; whatever it takes."

As Collinsworth and I stand around, inmates gather to look at our watches. One, wearing a cocked gray beanie, asks to buy them. I refuse outright. Collinsworth dithers. "How old you is?" the inmate asks him.

"You never know," Collinsworth says.

"Man, all these fake-ass signals," the inmate says. "The best thing you could do is get to know people in the place."

"I understand it's your home," Collinsworth says. "But I'm at work right now."

"It's your home for 12 hours a day! You trippin'. You 'bout to do half my time with me. You straight with that?"

"It's probably true."

"It ain't no 'probably true.' If you go' be at this bitch, you go' do 12 hours a day." He tells Collinsworth not to bother writing up inmates for infractions: "They ain't payin' you enough for that." Seeming torn between whether to impress me or the inmate, Collinsworth says he will only write up serious offenses, like hiding drugs.

"Drugs?! Don't worry 'bout the drugs." The inmate says he was caught recently with two ounces of "mojo," or synthetic marijuana, which is the drug of choice at Winn. The inmate says guards turn a blind eye to it. They "ain't trippin' on that shit," he says. "I'm telling you, it ain't that type of camp. You can't come change things by yourself. You might as well go with the flow. Get this free-ass, easy-ass money, and go home."

"I'm just here to do my job and take care of my family," Collinsworth says. "I'm not gonna bring stuff in 'cuz even if I don't get caught, there's always the chance that I will."

### "They ain't got shit for us here. What you think gonna happen when a man got nuttin' to

"Nah. Ain't no chance," the inmate says. "I ain't never heard of nobody movin' good and low-key gettin' caught. Nah. I know a dude still rolling. He been doin' it six years." He looks at Collinsworth. "Easy."

The inmates' families file out the side entrance. A couple of minutes after the last visitors leave, the coach shouts, "All inmates on the bleachers!" A prisoner tosses his graduation certificate dramatically into the trash. Another lifts the podium over his head and runs with it across the gym. The coach shouts, exasperated, as prisoners scramble around.

"You see this chaos?" the inmate in the beanie says to Collinsworth. "If you'd been to other camps, you'd see the order they got. Ain't no order here. Inmates run this bitch, son."

A week later, Mr. Tucker tells us to come in early to do shakedowns. The sky is barely lit as I stand on the walk at 6:30 with the other cadets. Collinsworth tells us another prisoner offered to buy his watch. He said he'd sell it for \$600. The inmate declined.

do?

"Don't sell it to him anyway," Miss Stirling admonishes him. "You might get \$600, but if they find out, you ain't go' get no more paychecks."

"Nah, I wouldn't actually do it. I just said \$600 because I know they don't got \$600 to give me."

"Shit," a heavysset black cadet named Willis says. He's our main authority on prison life. He says he served seven and a half years in the Texas State Penitentiary; he won't say what for. (CCA hires former felons whom it deems not to be a security risk; it says all Winn guards' background checks were also reviewed by the DOC.) "Dudes was showing me pictures," says Willis. "They got money in here. One dude in here, don't say nothin', but he got like six to eight thousand dollars. They got it on cards. Little money cards and shit."

Collinsworth jumps up and down. "Dude, I'ma find me one of them damn cards! Hell yeah. And I will not report it."

Officially, inmates are only allowed to keep money in special prison-operated accounts that can be used at the canteen. In these accounts, prisoners with jobs receive their wages, which may be as little as 2 cents an hour for a dishwasher and as much as 20 cents for a sewing-machine operator at Winn's garment factory. Their families can also deposit money in the accounts.

The prepaid cash cards Willis is referring to are called Green Dots, and they are the currency of the illicit prison economy. Connections on the outside buy them online, then pass on the account numbers in encoded messages through the mail or during visits. Inmates with contraband cellphones can do all these transactions themselves, buying the cards and handing out strips of paper as payments for drugs or phones or whatever else.

Miss Stirling divulges that an inmate gave her the digits of a money card as a Christmas gift. "I'm like, damn! I need a new MK watch. I need a new purse. I need some new jeans."

"There was this one dude in Dogwood," she continues. "He came up to the bars and showed me a stack of hundred-dollar bills folded up, and it was like this—" She makes like she's holding a wad of cash four inches thick. "And I was like, 'I'm not go' say anything.'"

"Dude! I'ma shake him the fuck down!" Collinsworth says. "I don't care if he's cool."

"He had a phone," Miss Stirling says, "and he's like, 'I don't have the time of day to hide it. I just keep it in the open. I really don't give a fuck.'"



Mr. Tucker tells us to follow him. We shake down tiers all morning. By the time we finish at 11, everyone is exhausted. "I'm not mad we had to do shakedown. I'm just mad we didn't find anything," Collinsworth says. Christian pulls a piece of paper out of his pocket and reads off a string of numbers in a show-offy way. "A Green Dot," he says. Christian hands the slip of paper to one of the cadets, a middle-aged white woman. "You can have this one," he says. "I have plenty already." She smiles coyly.

### "We are going to win this unit back"

"Welcome to the hellhole," a female CO greeted me the first time I visited the segregation unit. A few days later I'm back at Cypress with Collinsworth and Reynolds to shadow some guards. The metal door clicks open and we enter to a cacophony of shouting and pounding on metal. An alarm is sounding and the air smells strongly of smoke.

On one wall is a mural of a prison nestled among dark mountains and shrouded in storm clouds, lightning striking the guard towers and an enormous, screeching bald eagle descending with a giant pair of handcuffs in its talons. Toward the end of a long hall of cells, an officer in a black SWAT-style uniform stands ready with a pepper-ball gun. Another man in black is pulling burnt parts of a mattress out of a cell. Cypress can hold up to 200 inmates; most of the eight-by-eight-foot cells have two prisoners in them. The cells look like tombs; men lie in their bunks, wrapped in blankets, staring at the walls. Many are lit only by the light from the hallway. In one, an inmate is washing his clothes in his toilet.

"How are you doing?" says a smiling white man dressed business casual. He grips my hand. "Thank you for being here." Assistant Warden Parker is new to CCA, but he was once the associate warden of a federal prison. "I know it seems crazy back here now, but you'll learn the ropes," he assures me. "We are going to win this unit back. It's not going to happen in an hour. It's gonna take time, but it will happen." Apparently the segregation unit has been in a state of upheaval for a while, so corporate headquarters has sent in SORT officers from out of state to bring it back under control. SORT teams are trained to suppress riots, rescue hostages, extract inmates from their cells, and neutralize violent prisoners. They deploy an array of "less lethal" weapons like plastic buckshot, electrified shields, and chili-pepper-filled projectiles that burst on contact.

I get a whiff of feces that quickly becomes overpowering. On one of the tiers, a brown liquid oozes out of a bottle on the floor. Food, wads of paper, and garbage are all over the ground. I spot a Coke can, charred black, with a piece of cloth sticking out of it like a fuse. "I use my political voice!" an inmate shouts. "I stand up for my rights. Hahaha! Ain't nowhere like this camp. Shit, y'all's disorganized as fuck up in here."

"That's why we are here," a SORT member says. "We are going to change all that."

### The cells look like tombs. Men lie in their bunks, wrapped in blankets, staring at

"Y'all can't change shit," the prisoner yells back. "They ain't got shit for us here. We ain't got no jobs. No rec time. We just sit in our cells all day. What you think gonna happen when a man got nuttin' to do? That's why we throw shit out on the tier. What else are we going to do? You know how we get these officers to respect us? We throw piss on 'em. That's the only way. Either that or throw them to the floor. Then they respect us."

I ask one of the regular white-shirted COs what an average day in seg looks like. "To be honest with you, normally we just sit here at this table all day long," he tells me. They are supposed to walk up and down the eight tiers every 30 minutes to check on the inmates, but he says they never do that. (CCA says it had no knowledge of guards at Winn skipping security checks before I inquired about it.)

Collinsworth is walking around with a big smile on his face. He's learning how to take inmates out of their cells for disciplinary court, which is inside Cypress. He's supposed to cuff them through the slot in the bars, then tell the CO at the end of the tier to open the gate remotely. "Fuck nah, I ain't coming out of this cell!" an inmate shouts at him. "You go' have to get SORT to bring me up out of here. That's how we do early in the morning. I'll fuck y'all up." The prisoner climbs up on the bars and pounds on the metal above the cell door. The sound explodes down the cement



the walls. hallway.

Collinsworth and the CO he is shadowing move another inmate from his cell. The inmate tries to walk ahead as the CO holds him. "If that motherfucker starts pulling away from me like that again, I'm gonna make him eat concrete," the CO says to Collinsworth.

"I kind of hope he does mess around again," Collinsworth says, beaming. "That would be fun!"

I take a few inmates out of their cells, too, walking each one a hundred feet or so to disciplinary court with my hand around one of his elbows. One pulls against my grip. "Why you pulling on me, man?" he shouts, spinning around to stand face-to-face with me. A SORT officer rushes over and grabs him. My heart races.

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One of the white-shirted officers takes me aside. "Hey, don't let these guys push you around," he says. "If he is pulling away from you, you tell him, 'Stop resisting.' If he doesn't, you stop. If he keeps going, we are authorized to knee him in the back of the leg and drop him to the concrete."

Inmates shout at me as I walk back down the tier. "He has a little twist in his walk. I like them holes in your ears, CO. Come in here with me. Give me that booty!"

At lunchtime, Collinsworth, Reynolds, and I go back to the training room. "I love it here," Collinsworth says dreamily. "It's like a community."

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Chapter 2: Prison Experiments



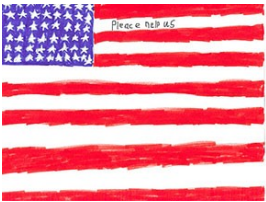
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[Related: Who Owns CCA?](#) [20]

People say a lot of negative things about CCA," the head of training, Miss Blanchard, tells us. "That we'll hire anybody. That we are scraping the bottom of the barrel. Which is not really true, but if you come here and you breathing and you got a valid driver's license and you willing to work, then we're willing to hire you." She warns us repeatedly, however, that to become corrections officers, we'll need to pass a test at the end of our four weeks of training. We will need to know the name of the CEO, the names of the company's founders, and their reason for establishing the first private prison more than 30 years ago. (Correct answer: "to alleviate the overcrowding in the world market.")

To prepare us, Miss Blanchard shows [a video in which CCA founders](#) [21] T. Don Hutto and Thomas Beasley playfully tell their company's origin story. In 1983, they recount, they won "the first contract ever to design, build, finance, and operate a secure correctional facility in the world." The Immigration and Naturalization Service gave them just 90 days to do it. Hutto recalls how the pair quickly converted a Houston motel into a detention center: "We opened the facility on Super Bowl Sunday the end of that January. So about 10 o'clock that night we start receiving inmates. I actually took their pictures and fingerprinted them. Several other people walked them to their 'rooms,' if you will, and we got our first day's pay for 87 undocumented aliens." Both men chuckle.

There is much about the history of CCA the video does not teach. The idea of privatizing prisons originated in the early 1980s with Beasley and fellow businessman Doctor Robert Crants. The two had no experience in corrections, so they recruited Hutto, who had been the head of Virginia's and Arkansas' prisons. In a 1978 ruling, the Supreme Court had found that a succession of Arkansas prison administrations, including Hutto's, "tried to operate their prisons at a profit." Guards on horseback herded the inmates, who sometimes did not have shoes, to the fields. The year after Hutto joined CCA, he became the head of the American Correctional Association, the largest prison association in the world.

To Beasley, the former chairman of the Tennessee Republican Party, the business of private prisons was simple: "You just sell it like you were selling cars, or real estate, or hamburgers," he told *Inc.* magazine in 1988. Beasley and Crants ran the business a lot like a hotel chain, charging the government a daily rate for each inmate. Early investors included Sodexho-



[Read more about the history of CCA, investigations of its prisons, and the](#)

Marriott and the venture capitalist Jack Massey, who helped build Kentucky Fried Chicken, Wendy's, and the Hospital Corporation of America.

The 1980s were a good time to get into the incarceration business. The prison population was skyrocketing, the drug war was heating up, the length of sentences was increasing, and states were starting to mandate that prisoners serve at least 85 percent of their terms. Between 1980 and 1990, state spending on prisons quadrupled, but it wasn't enough. Prisons in many states were filled beyond capacity. When a federal court declared in 1985 that Tennessee's overcrowded prisons violated the Eighth Amendment's ban on cruel and unusual punishment, CCA made an audacious proposal to take over the state's entire prison system. The bid was unsuccessful, but it planted an idea in the minds of politicians across the country: They could outsource prison management and save money in the process. Privatization also gave states a way to quickly expand their prison systems without taking on new debt. In the perfect marriage of fiscal and tough-on-crime conservatism, the companies would fund and construct new lockups while the courts would keep them full.

[growth of the private prison industry](#) [22].

(Above: A drawing by an immigrant child at CCA's T. Don Hutto Residential Center. [ACLU](#) [23])

Private and public prison populations, 1990-2014

	Public: state	Private: state	Public: federal	Private: federal
1990	676,466		58,838	
1995	972,784			88,427
2000	1,105,508			71,691
				119,599
2005	1,257,860			80,431
				160,563
2010	1,309,961			94,070
				175,934
2014	1,259,768			91,189
				170,559

Prisoners sentenced to one or more years. Chart by Mother Jones

Source: Department of Justice [Get the data](#)

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When CCA shares appeared on the NASDAQ stock exchange [in 1986](#) [24], the company was operating two juvenile detention centers and two immigrant detention centers. Today, it runs more than 60 facilities, from state prisons and jails to federal immigration detention centers. All together, CCA houses at least 66,000 inmates at any given time. Its main competitor, the GEO Group, holds [more than 70,000 inmates](#) [25] in the United States. Currently, private prisons oversee about 8 percent of the country's total prison population.

Whatever taxpayer money CCA receives has to cover the cost of housing, feeding, and rehabilitating inmates. While I work at Winn, CCA receives about \$34 per inmate per day. In comparison, the average daily cost per inmate at the state's publicly run prisons is about \$52. Some states pay CCA as much as \$80 per prisoner per day. In 2015, CCA reported \$1.9 billion in revenue; it made more than \$221 million in net income—more than \$3,300 for each prisoner in its care. CCA and other prison companies have written "occupancy guarantees" into their contracts, requiring states to pay a fee if they cannot provide a certain number of inmates. Two-thirds of the private-prison contracts recently reviewed by the anti-privatization group In the Public Interest had these prisoner quotas. Under CCA's contract, Winn was guaranteed to be 96 percent full.

"If you come here and you breathing and you got a valid driver's license and you willing to work, then we're willing to hire you."

The main argument in favor of private prisons—that they save taxpayers money—remains controversial. One study estimated that private prisons cost 15 percent less than public ones; another found that public prisons were 14 percent cheaper. After reviewing these competing claims, researchers concluded that the savings "appear minimal." CCA directed me to a [2013 report](#) [26]—funded in part by the company and GEO—that claimed private prisons could save states as much as 59 percent over public prisons without sacrificing quality.

Private prisons' cost savings are "modest," according to [one Justice Department study](#) [27], and are achieved mostly through "moderate reductions in staffing patterns, fringe benefits, and other labor-related costs." Wages and benefits account for 59 percent of CCA's operating expenses. When I start at Winn, nonranking guards make \$9 an hour, no matter how long they've worked there. The starting pay for guards at public state prisons comes out to \$12.50 an hour. CCA told me that it "set[s] salaries based on the prevailing wages in local markets," adding that "the wages we provided in Winn Parish were competitive for that area."

Based on data from Louisiana's budget office, the cost per prisoner at Winn, adjusted for inflation, dropped nearly 20 percent between the late '90s and 2014. The pressure to squeeze the most out of every penny at Winn seems evident not only in our paychecks, but in decisions that keep staffing and staff-intensive programming for inmates at the barest of levels. When I asked CCA about the frequent criticism I heard from both staff and inmates about its relentless focus on the bottom line, its spokesman dismissed the assertion as "a cookie-cutter complaint," adding that it would be false "to claim that CCA prioritizes its own economic gain over the needs of its customers" or the safety of its inmates.



### The escape

Two weeks after I start training, Chase Cortez (his real name) decides he has had enough of Winn. It's been nearly three years since he was locked up for theft, and he has only three months to go. But in the middle of a cool, sunny December day, he climbs onto the roof of Birch unit. He lies down and waits for the patrol vehicle to pass along the perimeter. He is in view of the guard towers, but they've been unmanned since at least 2010. Now, a single CO watches the video feeds from at least 30 cameras.

Cortez sees the patrol van pass, jumps down from the back side of the building, climbs the razor-wire perimeter fence, and then makes a run for the forest. He fumbles through the dense foliage until he spots a white pickup truck left by a hunter. Lucky for him, it is unlocked, with the key in the ignition.

In the control room, an alarm sounds, indicating that someone has touched the outer fence, a possible sign of a perimeter breach. The officer reaches over, switches the alarm off, and goes back to whatever she was doing. She notices nothing on the video screen, and she does not review the footage. Hours pass before the staff realizes someone is missing. Some guards tell me it was an inmate who finally brought the escape to their attention. Cortez is caught that evening after the sheriff chases him and he crashes the truck into a fence.

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### The prison is on lockdown. Staff are worried CCA is going to lose its contract.

When I come in the next morning, the prison is on lockdown. Staff are worried CCA is going to lose its contract with Louisiana. "We were already in the red, and this just added to it," the assistant training director tells me. "It's a lot of tension right now."

CCA said nothing publicly about the escape; I heard about it from guards who had investigated the incident or been briefed by the warden. (The company later told me it conducted a "full review" of the incident and fired a staff member "for lack of proper response to the alarm." When I asked CCA about its decision to remove guards from Winn's watchtowers, its spokesman replied that "newer technologies...are making guard towers largely obsolete.")

Later that day, Reynolds and I bring food to Cypress, the segregation unit. It is dinnertime, but inmates haven't had lunch yet. A naked man is shouting frantically for food, mercilessly slapping the plexiglass at the front of his cell. In the cell next to him, a small, wiry man is squatting on the floor in his underwear. His arms and face are scraped with little cuts. A guard tells me to watch him.

It is Cortez. I offer him a packet of Kool-Aid in a foam cup. He says thank you, then asks if I will put water in it. There is no water in his cell.

When inmates are written up for breaking the rules, they are sent to inmate court, which is held in a room in the corner of Cypress unit. One day, our class files into the small room to watch the hearings. Miss Lawson, the assistant chief of security, is acting as the judge, sitting at a desk in front of a mural of the scales of justice. "Even though we treat every inmate like they are guilty until proven innocent, they are...?" She pauses for someone to fill in the answer.

"Innocent?" a cadet offers.

"That's right. Innocent until proven guilty."

This is not a court of law, although it issues punishments for felonies such as assault and attempted murder. An inmate who stabs another may end up facing new criminal charges. He may be transferred, yet prisoners and guards say inmates who stab others typically are not shipped to a higher-security prison. The consequences for less serious offenses are usually stints in seg or a loss of "good time," sentence reduction for good behavior. According to the DOC, Winn inmates charged with serious rule violations are found guilty at least 96 percent of the time.

"Inmate counsel, has your defendant appeared before the court?" Miss Lawson asks a prisoner standing at the podium.

"No, ma'am, he has not," he replies. The inmate counsel represents other inmates in the internal disciplinary process. Every year, he is taken to a state-run prison for intensive training. Miss Lawson later tells me that inmate counsel never really influences her decisions.

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### For removing a broom from a closet at the wrong time, this inmate will stay in prison

The absent inmate is accused of coming too close to the main entrance. "Would the counsel like to offer a defense?"

"No, ma'am."

"How does he plead?"

"Not guilty."

an extra 30 days.

"Mr. Trahan is found guilty." The entire "trial" lasts less than two minutes.

The next defendant is called.

He is being considered for release from segregation. "Do you know your Bible?" Miss Lawson asks.

"Yes, ma'am."

"Do you remember in the Gospel of John when the adulteress was brought before Jesus? What did he say?"

"I don't remember that, ma'am."

"He says, 'Sin no more.'" She points for him to leave the room.

The next inmate, an orderly in Cypress, enters. He is charged with being in an unauthorized area because he took a broom to sweep the tier during rec time, which is not the authorized time to sweep the tier. He starts to explain that a CO gave him permission. Miss Lawson cuts him off. "How would you like to plead?"

"Guilty, I guess."

"You are found guilty and sentenced to 30 days' loss of good time."

"Man! Y'all—this is fucked up, man. Y'all gonna take my good time!?" He runs out of the room. "They done took my good time!" he screams in the hall. "They took my good time! Fuck them!" For removing a broom from a closet at the wrong time, this inmate will stay in prison an extra 30 days, for which CCA will be paid more than \$1,000.



[28]

[Related: Why Is It So Hard for Inmates to Sue Prisons?](#) [28]

"Hey. Move back to this table."

"Hell nah," he says. "I ain't movin'."

"Yes, you are," I say. "Move." He doesn't.

I get the muscle-bound captain, who comes and tells the inmate to do what I say. The inmate gets up and sits at a third table. He's playing with me. "I told you to move to that table," I say sternly.

"Man, the fuck is this?" he says, sitting at the table I point to. I'm shaky with fear. *Project confidence. Project power.* I stand tall, broaden my shoulders, and stride up and down the floor, making enough eye contact with people to show I'm not intimidated, but not holding it long enough to threaten them. I tell inmates to take off their hats as they enter. They listen to me, and a part of me likes that.

For the first time, for just a moment, I forget that I am a journalist. I watch for guys sitting with their friends rather than where they are told to. I scan the room for people sneaking back in line for more food. I tell inmates to get up and leave while they are still eating. I look closely to make sure no one has an extra cup of

### True colors

One day in class we take a personality test called True Colors that's supposed to help CCA decide how to place us. Impulsive "orange" people can be useful in hostage negotiations because they don't waste time deliberating. Rule-oriented "gold" people are chosen for the daily management of inmates. The majority of the staff, Miss Blanchard says, are gold—dutiful, punctual people who value rules. My results show that green is my dominant color (analytical, curious) and orange is my secondary (free and spontaneous). Green is a rare personality type at Winn. Miss Blanchard doesn't offer any examples of how greens can be useful in a prison.

The company that markets the test claims that people who retake it get the same results 94 percent of the time. But Miss Blanchard says that after working here awhile, people often find their colors have shifted. Gold traits tend to become more dominant.

Studies have shown that personalities can change dramatically when people find themselves in prison environments. In 1971, psychologist Philip Zimbardo conducted the now-famous [Stanford Prison Experiment](#) [29], in which he randomly assigned college students to the roles of prisoners and guards in a makeshift basement "prison." The experiment was intended to study how people respond to authority, but it quickly became clear that some of the most profound changes were happening to the guards. Some became sadistic, forcing the prisoners to sleep on concrete, sing and dance, defecate into buckets, and strip naked. The situation became so extreme that the two-week study was cut short after just six days. When it was over, many "guards" were ashamed at what they had done and some "prisoners" were traumatized for years. "We all want to believe in our inner power, our sense of personal agency, to resist external situational forces of the kinds operating in this Stanford Prison Experiment," Zimbardo reflected. "For many, that belief of personal power to resist powerful situational and systemic forces is little more than a reassuring illusion of invulnerability."

### Personalities can change dramatically when people find themselves in prison environments.

The question the study posed still lingers: Are the soldiers of Abu Ghraib, or even Auschwitz guards and ISIS hostage-takers, inherently different from you and me? We take comfort in the notion of an unbridgeable gulf between good and evil, but maybe we should understand, as Zimbardo's work suggested, that evil is incremental—something we are all capable of, given the right circumstances.

One day during our third week of training I am assigned to work in the chow hall. My job is to tell the inmates where to sit, filling up one row of tables at a time. I don't understand why we do this. "When you fill up this side, start clearing them out," the captain tells me. "They get 10 minutes to eat." CCA policy is 20 minutes. We just learned that in class.

Inmates file through the chow line and I point them to their tables. One man sits at the table next to the one I directed him to. "Right here," I say, pointing to the table again. He doesn't move. The supervisor is watching. Hundreds of inmates can see me.



Kool-Aid.

"Hey, man, why you gotta be a cop like that?" asks the inmate whom I moved. "They don't pay you enough to be no cop."

"Hey Bauer, go tell that guy to take his hat off," Collinsworth says, pointing to another inmate. "I told him and he didn't listen to me."

"You tell him," I say. "If you're going to start something, you got to finish it." A CO looks at me approvingly.



Winn's dog team tracks suspects and escaped prisoners.

### The dog team

Out in the back of the prison, not far from where Chase Cortez hopped the fence, there is a barn. Miss Blanchard, another cadet, and I step inside the barn office. Country music is playing on the radio. Halters, leashes, and horseshoes hang on the walls. Three heavysset white COs are inside. They do not like surprise visits. One spits into a garbage can.

The men and their inmate trusties take care of a small herd of horses and three packs of bloodhounds. The horses don't do much these days. The COs used to mount them with shotguns and oversee hundreds of inmates who left the compound every day to tend the grounds. The shotguns had to be put to use when, occasionally, an inmate tried to run for it. "You don't actually shoot to kill; you shoot to stop," a longtime staff member told me one day. "Oops! I killed him," she said sarcastically. "I told him to stop! We can always get another inmate, though."

Prisoners and officers alike talk nostalgically about the time when the men spent their days working outside, coming back to their dorms drained of restless energy and aggression. CCA's contract requires that Winn inmates are assigned to "productive full time activity" five days a week, but few are. The work program was dropped around the same time that guards were taken out of the towers. Many vocational programs at Winn have been axed. The hobby shops have become storage units; access to the law library is limited. The big recreation yard sits empty most of the time: There aren't enough guards to watch over it. (Asked about the lack of classes, recreation, and other activities at Winn, CCA insisted "these resources and programs were largely available to inmates." It said the work program was cut during contract negotiations with the DOC, and it acknowledged some gaps in programming due to "brief periods of staffing vacancies.")

### Prisoners and officers talk nostalgically about when the men worked outside, coming back to dorms drained of aggression.

"Things ain't like they used to be," Chris, the officer who runs the dog team, tells us. "It's a frickin' mess."

"Can't whup people's ass like we used to," another officer named Gary says.

"Yeah you can! We did!" Chris says. He then sulks a little: "You got to know how to do it, I guess."

"You got to know *where* to do it also," Miss Blanchard says, referring, I assume, to the areas of the prison the cameras don't see.

"We got one in the infirmary," Chris says. "Haha! Gary gassed him."

"You always using the gas, man," the third officer says.

"If one causes me to do three or four hours of paperwork, I'm go' put somethin' on his ass," Gary says. "He's go' get some gas. He's go' get

the full load. I ain't go' do just a light use of force on him; I'm go' handle my business with him. Of course, y'all the new class. I'm sitting here telling y'all wrong. Do it the right way. But sometimes, you just can't do it the right way."

With no work program to oversee, the men's main job is to take the horses and the packs of bloodhounds anywhere across 13 nearby parishes to help the police chase down suspects or prison escapees. They've apprehended armed robbers and murder suspects.

When we step inside the kennel, the bloodhounds bay and howl. Gary kicks the door of one cage and a dog lunges at his foot. "If they can get to him, they go' to bite him," he says. "They deal with 'em pretty bad."

Back in the barn office, Gary pulls a binder off the shelf and shows us a photo of a man's face. There is a red hole under his chin and a gash down his throat. "I turn inmates loose every day and go catch 'em," Chris says, rubbing the stubble on his neck. "And that was the result to one of 'em."

"A dog, when he got too close to him, bit him in the throat," Gary says.

"That's an inmate?" I ask.

"Yeah. What we'll do is we'll take a trusty and we'll put him in them woods right out there." He points out the window. The trusty wears a "bite suit" to protect him from the dogs. "We'll tell him where to go. He might walk back here two miles. We'll tell him what tree to go up, and he goes up a tree." Then, after some time passes, they "turn the dogs loose."

He holds up the picture of the guy with the throat bite. "This guy here, he got too close to 'em." Christian walks in the door.

"That looks nasty," I say.

"Eh, it wasn't that bad," Christian cuts in. "I took him to the hospital. It wasn't that bad." (CCA says the inmate's injuries were "minor.")

Gary, still holding out the picture, says, "He was a character."

"He was a piece of crap," Christian says. "Instigator."

"I gave him his gear and he didn't put it on correctly. That's on him," Chris says with a shrug.

## "Part of the bid'ness"

"I would kill an inmate if I had to," Collinsworth says to me during a break one day. We are standing around outside; most cadets are smoking cigarettes. "I wouldn't feel bad about it, not if they were attacking me."

"You got to feel some kinda remorse if you a human being," Willis says.

"I can't see why you'd need to kill anyone," Miss Stirling says.

"You might have to," says Collinsworth.

"I do what needs to get done," says a fortysomething, chubby-faced white officer. He wears a baseball cap low over his eyes. "I just had a use of force on an inmate who just got out of open-heart surgery. It's all part a the bid'ness." (CCA says it cannot confirm this incident.)

The officer's name is Kenny. He's been working here for 12 years, and he views inmates as "customers." While teaching class, he lectures us on CCA's principle of "cost-effectiveness," which requires us to "provide honest and fair, competitive pricing to our partner and deliver value to our shareholders." A part of being cost-effective is not getting sued too often. "One thing the Department of Corrections does is they give us a certain amount of money to manage this facility," Kenny explains. "They set a portion of money back for lawsuits, but if we go over budget, it's kind of like any other job. We got 60-something-plus facilities. If they not making no money at Winn Correctional Center, guess what? We not go' be employed."

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"I just had a use of force on an inmate who just got out of open-heart surgery. It's all part a the bid'ness."

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Kenny is detached and cool. He says he used to have a temper but he's learned to control it. He doesn't sit in bed at night writing up disciplinary reports while his wife sleeps, like he did years ago. Now, if an inmate gives him a smart mouth or doesn't keep a tidy bed, he'll throw him in seg to set an example. There are rules, and they are meant to be followed. This goes both ways: When he has any say, he makes sure inmates get what they are entitled to. He prides himself on his fairness. "All them inmates ain't bad," he reminds us. Everyone deserves a chance at redemption.

Still, we must never let inmates forget their place. "When you a inmate and you talk too much and you think you free, it's time for you to go," he says. "You got some of these guys, they smart. They real educated. I know one and I be talkin' to him and he smarter than me. Now he might have more book sense, but he ain't got more common sense. He go' talk to me at a inmate level, not at no staff level. You got to put 'em in check sometimes."

Kenny makes me nervous. He notices that I am the only one in class who takes notes. One day, he tells us that he sits on the hiring committee. "We don't know what you here for," he says to the class. He then glances at me. "There might be somebody in this room here hooked up wit' a inmate." Throughout the day, he asks my name on several occasions. "My job is to monitor inmates; it's also to monitor staff. I'm a sneaky junker." He turns and looks me directly in the eyes. "I come up here and tell you I don't know what your name is? I know what your name is. That's just a game I'm playing with you." I feel my face flush. I chuckle nervously. He has to know. "I play games just like they play games. I test my staff to test their loyalty. I report to the warden about what I see. It's a game, but it's also a part of the bid'ness."



Inmates' property is searched during a shutdown.

material," though she did enjoy it herself. There are also titles on the list about black history and culture, like *Huey: Spirit of the Panther*; *Faces of Africa*; *Message to the Blackman in America*, by Elijah Muhammad; and an anthology of news articles called *100 Years of Lynchings*.

"That's the craziest girl I ever seen," Miss Roberts says of the woman who wrote the letter she holds in her hand. She is familiar with many of the correspondents from reading about the intimate details of their lives. "She's got his whole name tattooed across her back, all the way down to her hip bone. When his ass gets out—*whenever* he gets out, 'cuz he's got 30 or 40 years—if he ever gets out, he ain't going to her."

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There are so many letters from children that we throw in the trash.

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I feel like a voyeur, but the letters draw me in. I am surprised at how many are from former inmates with lovers still at Winn. I read one from a man currently incarcerated in Angola, Louisiana's infamous maximum-security prison:

*Our anniversary is in 13 more days on Christmas and we could have been married for 2 years why can't you see that I want this to work between us?...Bae, [remember] the tattoo on my left tittie close to my heart that won't never get covered up as long as I have a breath in my body and I'm about to get your name again on my ass cheek.*

Another is from a recently released inmate to his lover:

*Hope everything is going well with you. Very deeply in love with you...*



[Related: Reporter Shane Bauer talks about his four months working in a private prison](#) [30]James West

## Mail call

Over Christmas week, I am stationed in the mail room with a couple of other cadets to process the deluge of holiday letters. The woman in charge, Miss Roberts, demonstrates our task: Slice the top of each envelope, cut the back off and throw it in the trash, cut the postage off the front, staple what remains to the letter, and stamp it: *Inspected*.

Miss Roberts opens a letter with several pages of colorful child's drawings. "Now, see like this one, it's not allowed because they're not allowed to get anything that's crayon," she says. I presume this is for the same reason we remove stamps; crayon could be a vehicle for drugs. There are so many letters from children—little hands outlined, little stockings glued to the inside of cards—that we rip out and throw in the trash.

One reads:

*I love you and miss you so much daddy, but we are doing good. Rick Jr. is bad now: He gets into everything. I have not forgot you daddy. I love you.*

Around the mail room, there are bulletins posted of things to look out for: an anti-imperialist newsletter called *Under Lock and Key*, an issue of *Forbes* that comes with a miniature wireless internet router, a CD from a Chicano gangster rapper with a track titled "Death on a CO." I find a list of books and periodicals that aren't allowed inside Louisiana prisons. It includes *Fifty Shades of Grey*; *Lady Gaga Extreme Style*; *Surrealism and the Occult*; *Tai Chi Fa Jin: Advanced Techniques for Discharging Chi Energy*; *The Complete Book of Zen*; *Socialism vs Anarchism: a Debate*; and *Native American Crafts & Skills*. On Miss Roberts' desk is a confiscated book: Robert Greene's *48 Laws of Power*, a self-help book favored by 50 Cent and Donald Trump. Other than holy books, this is the most common text I see in inmates' lockers, usually tattered and hidden under piles of clothes. She says this book is banned because it's considered "mind-bending

*I won't be able to spend x-mass with my family either. Baby my heart is broken and I am so unhappy. I always had a great fear of being homeless...And even if I did find a job and had to work nights or work the evening shift, then I wouldn't have anywhere to sleep because the shelter won't let you in to sleep after hours. In order to get my bed every night I have to check in before 4pm. After that you lose your bed so the program is designed to keep you homeless. It don't make sense...*

*I bet that this is a sad letter. I wish that I had good news. This will be a short letter because I don't have a lot of paper left.*

*Merry Christmas baby. Very deeply in love with you.*

The front of one card reads, "Although your situation may seem impossible..." and continues on the inside, "through Christ, all things are Him-possible!" It contains a letter from the wife of an inmate:

*Here I am once again w/ thoughts of you. I hate it here everything reminds me of you. I miss u dammit! It's weird this connection we have its as if I carry you in my soul. It terrifies me the thought of ever losing you. I pray you haven't replaced me. I know I haven't been the most supporting but baby seriously you don't know the hell I've been through since we got torn apart And I guess my family got fed up w/ seeing me kill myself slowly I attempted twice 90 phenobarb 2 roxy 3 subs. I lived. 2nd after I hung up w/ you 60 Doxepin 90 propananol i lived WTF? God has a sense of humor i don't have anyone but u, u see no one cares whether I live die hurt am hungry, well, or safe...So I've been alone left to struggle to survive on my income in and out mental wards and running from the pain of you bein there...*

*Your my everything always will be*

*Love your wife.*

This note and its list of pills haunt me all weekend. What if no one else knows this woman tried to commit suicide? I decide I need to tell Miss Roberts, but when I return to work, I sit in the parking lot and have a hard time summoning the courage. What if word gets out that I'm soft, not cut out for this work?

After I pass through the scanner, I see her. "Hey, Miss Roberts?" I say, walking up behind her.

"Yes," she says sweetly.

"I wanted to check with you about something. I meant to do it on Friday, but, uh..." She stops and gives me her full attention, looking me in the eyes. "When we had a class by the mental health director, she told us to report if there was any kind of suicidal——"

She cuts me off, waving her hand dismissively, and starts walking away.

"No, but it was like a letter thing——"

"Yeah, don't even worry about that," she says, still walking toward her door.

"Really?"

"Mmmhmmmm. That's if you see something going on down there," she says, pointing toward the units. "Yeah, don't worry about it. All right." She enters the mail room.

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After Christmas, we take our final test. It is intimidating. The test was created by CCA; we never take the qualification exam given to the state's guards. Ninety-two questions ask us about the chain of command, the use-of-force policy, what to do if we are taken hostage, how to spot a suicidal inmate, the proper way to put on leg irons, the color designation for various chemical agents. We went through most of these topics so cursorily there's no way I could answer half of them. Luckily, I don't need to worry. The head of training's assistant tells us we can go over the test together to make sure we get everything right.

"I bet no one ever doesn't get the job because they fail the test," I say.

"No," she says. "We make sure your file looks good." (CCA says this was not consistent with its practices.)

About a third of the trainees I started with have already quit. Reynolds is gone. Miss Doucet decides she can't risk an asthma attack, so she quits too. Collinworth goes to Ash on the night shift. Willis works the night shift too; he will be fired after he leaves the prison suddenly one day and a bunch of cellphones are found at his post. Miss Stirling gets stationed in Birch on the day shift. She won't last either. Two and a half months from now, she will be escorted from the prison for smuggling contraband and writing love letters to an inmate.

- [Chapter 1](#)

["Inmates Run This Bitch"](#)

- [Chapter 2](#)

[Prison Experiments](#)

- [Chapter 3](#)

The CCA Way

- [Chapter 4](#)

["You Got to Survive"](#)

- [Chapter 5](#)

[Lockdown](#)

### Chapter 3: "The CCA Way"



Most inmates live in dormitory-style tiers. Each general population unit has eight tiers and two floor guards.

Another inmate, whom Jefferson calls "the unit politician," demands an Administrative Remedy Procedure form. He wants to file a grievance about the lockdown—why are inmates being punished for the prison's mismanagement?

"What happens to those ARPs?" I ask Jefferson.



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"If they feel their rights have been violated in some way, they are allowed to file a grievance," he says. If the captain rejects it, they can appeal to the warden. If the warden rejects it, they can appeal to the Department of Corrections. "It'll take about a year," he says. "Once it gets to DOC down in Baton Rouge, they throw it over in a pile and forget about it. I've been to DOC headquarters. I know what them sonsabitches do down there: nothin'." (Miss Lawson, the assistant chief of security, later tells me that during the 15 years she worked at Winn, she saw only one grievance result in consequences for staff.)

I do a couple of laps around the unit floor and then see Jefferson leaning against the threshold of an open tier door, chatting with a prisoner. I walk over to them. "This your first day?" the prisoner asks me, leaning up against the bars.

"Yeah."

"Welcome to CCA, boy. You seen what the sign say when you first come in the gate? It says, 'The CCA Way.' Know what that is?" he asks me. There is a pause. "Whatever way you make it, my boy."

Jefferson titters. "Some of them down here are good," he says. "I will say dat. Some of 'em are jackasses. Some of 'em just flat-out ain't worth a fuck."

"Just know at the end of the day, how y'all conduct y'all selves determines how we conduct ourselves," the prisoner says to me. "You come wit' a shit attitude, we go' have a shit attitude."

"I have three rules and they know it," Jefferson says as he grips the bars with one hand. "No fightin'. No fuckin'. No jackin' off. But! What they do after the lights are out? I don't give a fuck, 'cuz I'm at the house."

The next day, I'm stationed in Ash, a general population unit. The unit manager is a black woman who is so large she has trouble walking. She is brought in every morning in a wheelchair pushed by an inmate. Her name is Miss Price, but inmates call her The Dragon. It's unclear whether her jowls, her roar, or her stern reputation earned her that name. Prisoners relate to her like an overbearing mother, afraid to anger her and eager to win her affection. She's worked here since the prison opened in 1991, and one CO says that in her younger days, she was known to break up fights without backup. Another CO says that last week an inmate

It's the end of December, and I come in at 6 a.m. for my first of three days of on-the-job training, the final step before I become a full-fledged CO. The captain tells an officer to take me to Elm. We move slowly down the walk. "One word of advice I would give you is never take this job home with you," he says. He spits some tobacco through the fence. "Leave it at the front gate. If you don't drink, it'll drive you to drinking."

[Research shows](#) [31] that corrections officers experience above-average rates of job-related stress and burnout. Thirty-four percent of prison guards suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder, [according to a study](#) [32] by a nonprofit that researches "corrections fatigue." That's a higher rate than reported by soldiers returning from Iraq and Afghanistan. COs commit suicide two and a half times more often than the population at large. They also have shorter life spans. A recent study of [Florida prison guards and law enforcement officers](#) [33] found that they die 12 years earlier than the general population; one suggested cause was job-related stress.

The walk is eerily quiet. Crows caw, fog hangs low over the basketball courts. The prison is locked down. Programs have been canceled. With the exception of kitchen workers, none of the inmates can leave their dorms. Usually, lockdowns occur when there are major disturbances, but today, with some officers out for the holidays, guards say there just aren't enough people to run the prison. (CCA says Winn was never put on lockdown due to staffing shortages.) The unit manager tells me to shadow one of the two floor officers, a burly white Marine veteran. His name is Jefferson, and as we walk the floor an inmate asks him what the lockdown is about. "You know half of the fucking people don't want to work here," Jefferson tells him. "We so short-staffed and shit, so most of the gates ain't got officers." He sighs dramatically. (CCA claims to have "no knowledge" of gates going unmanned at Winn.)

"It's messed up," the prisoner says.

**"We so short-staffed and shit, so most of the gates ain't got officers."**

"Man, it's so fucked up it's pitiful," Jefferson replies. "The first thing the warden asked me [was] what would boost morale around here. The first two words out of my mouth: pay raise." He takes a gulp of coffee from his travel mug.

"They *do* need to give y'all a pay raise," the prisoner says.

"When gas is damn near \$4 a gallon, what the fuck is \$9 an hour?" Jefferson says. "That's half yo' check fillin' up your gas!"



"whipped his thing out and was playing with himself right in front of her. She got out of her wheelchair, grabbed him by the neck, threw him up against the wall. She said, 'Don't you ever fucking do that to me again!'"

In the middle of the morning, Miss Price tells us to shake down the common areas. I follow one of the two COs into a tier and we do perfunctory searches of the TV room and tables, feeling under the ledges, flipping through a few books. I bend over and feel around under a water fountain. My hand lands on something loose. I get on my knees to look. It's a smartphone. I don't know what to do—do I take it or leave it? My job, of course, is to take it, but by now I know that being a guard is only partially about enforcing the rules. Mostly, it's about learning how to get through the day safely, which requires decisions like these to be weighed carefully.

A prisoner is watching me. If I leave the phone, everyone on the tier will know. I will win inmates' respect. But if I take it, I will show my superiors I am doing my job. I will alleviate some of the suspicion they have of every new hire. "Those ones who gets along with 'em—those ones are the ones I really have to watch," SORT commander Tucker told us in class. "There is five of y'all. Two and a half are gonna be dirty."

I take the phone.

Miss Price is thrilled. The captain calls the unit to congratulate me. The other COs couldn't care less. When I do count later, each inmate on that tier stares at me with his meanest look. Some step toward me threateningly as I pass.

Later, at a bar near my apartment, I see a man in a CCA jacket and ask him if he works at Winn. "Used to," he says.

"I just started there," I say.

He smiles. "Let me tell you this: You ain't go' like it. When you start working those 12-hour shifts, you will see." He takes a drag from his cigarette. "The job is way too fucking dangerous." I tell him about the phone. "Oh, they won't forget your face," he says. "I just want you to know you made a lot of enemies. If you work in Ash, you gonna have a big-ass problem because now they go' know, he's gonna be the guy who busts us all the time."

He racks the balls on the pool table and tells me about a nurse who gave a penicillin shot to an inmate who was allergic to the medicine and died. The prisoner's friends thought the nurse did it intentionally. "When he came down the walk, they beat the shit out of him. They had to airlift him out of there." (CCA says it has no knowledge of this incident.) He breaks and sinks a stripe.



Damien Coestly on suicide watch.

Suicide watch

On my first official day as a CO, I am stationed on suicide watch in Cypress. In the entire prison of more than 1,500 inmates, there are no full-time psychiatrists and just one full-time social worker: Miss Carter. In class, she told us that a third of the inmates have mental health problems, 10 percent have severe mental health issues, and roughly a quarter have IQs under 70. She said most prison mental health departments in Louisiana have at least three full-time social workers. Angola has at least 11. Here, there are few options for inmates with mental health needs. They can meet with Miss Carter, but with her caseload of 450 prisoners, that isn't likely to happen more than once a month. They can try to get an appointment with the part-time psychiatrist or the part-time psychologist, who are spread even thinner. Another option is to ask for suicide watch.

A CO sits across from the two official suicide watch cells, which are small and dimly lit and have plexiglass over the front. My job is to sit across from two regular segregation cells being used for suicide watch overflow, observe the two inmates inside, and log their behavior every 15 minutes. "We never document anything around here on the money," Miss Carter taught us a month ago. "Nothing should be 9:00, 9:15, 9:30, because the auditors say you're pencil-whipping it. And truth be known, we do pencil-whip it. We can't add by 15 because that really puts you in a bind. Add by 14. That looks pretty come audit time." One guard told me he just filled in the suicide watch log every couple of hours and didn't bother to watch the prisoners. (CCA's spokesman says the company is "committed to the accuracy of our record keeping.")

One guard told me he just filled in the log every couple of hours and didn't bother to watch the prisoners.

For one inmate, Skeen, I jot down the codes for "sitting" and "quiet." For the other, Damien Coestly (his real name), the number for "using toilet." He is sitting on the commode, underneath his suicide blanket, a tear-proof garment that doubles as a smock. "Ah hell nah, you can't sit here, man!" he shouts at me. Other than the blanket, he is naked, his bare feet on the concrete. There is nothing else allowed in his cell other than some toilet paper. No books. Nothing to occupy his mind.

The sparse conditions are intended to be "a deterrent as well as protection," Miss Carter said. Some inmates claim to be suicidal because, for one reason or another, they want out of their dorms and don't want to go to protective custody, where they would be labeled as snitches. Inmates on suicide watch don't get a mattress; they have to sleep on a steel bunk. They also get worse food. The official ration is one "mystery meat" sandwich, one peanut butter sandwich, six carrot sticks, six celery sticks, and six apple slices per meal. Assuming

this meal contains no nutritional supplements, I calculate that eating it three times a day provides at least 250 calories less than the [US Department of Agriculture's daily recommendation](#) [34] for sedentary adult men younger than 41 years old. (CCA says suicide watch meals are of "equivalent nutritional value" to general-population meals. It also says suicide watch "is designed for the safety of the inmate and nothing else.")

Nowhere else does a single guard oversee one or two inmates. If more than two inmates are on constant watch for more than 48 hours, the prison has to ask the regional corporate office for permission to continue, Miss Carter tells us. (CCA says this is inaccurate.) Sometimes the regional office says no, she says, and the prisoners are put back on the tiers or in seg.

"Come on, man, get the fuck out of here," shouts Coestly. "You know what I'm about to do is, get up on top of this bed and jump straight onto my motherfucking neck if y'all don't get the fuck out from the front of my cell."

I look over to the cell to the right and see Skeen sitting on his metal bed, staring at me and masturbating under his suicide blanket.

I tell him to stop.

"I'm having some

"Move your chair, then. I'm just doing my thing." He keeps going.

I get up and grab a pink slip to write him up, my first disciplinary report.

mental health issues, man." He has a wild look in his eyes and he speaks intensely, but quietly.

"You making a mistake," he says. "You fuck with me like that, I'm gonna go all night."

"All right," I say.

"Write that bitch. I don't give a fuck. I'm on extended lockdown." He tells me he's been in Cypress for three years. He starts singing and dancing in his cell. "*All night, all niight.*" Prisoners down the tier laugh. "I'll add that to my collection. I have about a hundred write-ups. I don't give a fuck!"

Someone down the tier calls for me. He's not on suicide watch, just regular segregation. "I'm having some mental health issues, man," he says. He has a wild look in his eyes and he speaks intensely, but quietly. "I'm not suicidal or homicidal necessarily, but it's hard for me to be around people." There is another man in his cell with him, sitting on the top bunk, shaving his face. "And, and, and the voices, demons, whatever you want to call them, want me to wait till y'all come down here and throw defecation or urine or something. I don't want to do that, okay?" He says he wants to go on suicide watch as a preventive measure. "Until I figure out what's going on here"—he taps the sides of his head with his index fingers—"then that's where I need to be." His request is denied by the unit manager. With four inmates on suicide watch, we are already over capacity.

"We are gonna have a Mexican standoff," Coestly says. "Ever seen one of those? I get off the bed, jump off that mothafucker headfirst." He says he's having a mental health emergency, which I am required to report. When I tell the key officer, she rolls her eyes. In class, Miss Carter told us that "unless he's psychotic and needs a shot to keep him from doing the behavior, then I just let them get it out of their system." It takes six hours for a psychiatrist to show up.

One of the other inmates on suicide watch, who's been silent until now, starts yelling through his food slot. "World war!" he shouts. "I got some niggas who need to tell the CIA something, since they already got their eye in the sky, the satellite orbiting in space processing global information." His voice has a demonic quality to it and he occasionally hits the plexiglass to punctuate his sentences. The CO sitting directly across from him twiddles his thumbs and gazes ahead blankly.

In the neighboring cell, Skeen is staring at me, completely naked, masturbating vigorously. I tell him to stop. He gets up, comes to the bars, and strokes himself five feet in front of me. I leave and come back with the pink sheet and he shouts, "Stop looking like that 'cuz you making my dick hard!" I don't respond. "Stop looking like that 'cuz you making my dick hard! Stop looking like that 'cuz you making my dick hard!" The seemingly schizophrenic man next to him hits the plexiglass over and over. "That's what the devil's doing to you, in the invisible world—sticking his invisible dick in your white or black ass and *fucking* you with it." My heart is pounding. For an hour, I stare at a cup on the floor and study the blotches in the concrete.

A few hours later, a SORT officer walks a cuffed man onto the tier. The man's eyes are tightly closed and snot is dripping off his upper lip. He was pepper-sprayed after punching my old instructor Kenny in the face as Kenny sat in his office doing paperwork. Kenny's in the hospital now—after he confiscated another inmate's cellphone, the prisoner put a paid hit out on him.



Shane Bauer's partner Dave Bacle in Winn Correctional Center's Ash Unit.

I might have rank over someone, but I don't want to step on their toes."

Without the orderlies, the prison would not function. Each unit has a key orderly, whose job is to keep the key clean and pack up the property of any prisoner sent to seg. Count room orderlies deliver the tallies from each unit to the room where they're tabulated. Tier orderlies, floor orderlies, yard orderlies, walk orderlies, and gym orderlies keep the prison clean. Orderlies typically maintain a friendly relationship with the guards but take every opportunity to make it clear to other inmates they are not snitches. And they rarely are. It is much more likely for them to be movers of contraband. They cozy up to guards who will bring it in, and their freedom of movement allows them to distribute the goods. I will see some of the most trusted orderlies get busted while I'm here.

### Building rapport

Kenny is gone for days, recovering from his busted nose. The message his assailant sent was clear: Keep your hands off our phones. Meanwhile, the fact that I took the phone in Ash showed Miss Price that I'm a strong officer who plays by the rules, so she asked the warden if I could be posted there permanently. Now I work there, on the floor, almost every day. I immediately try to smooth over the phone thing with the inmates. I tell a few of them that I took it because I didn't have a choice and suggest they should try to hide their contraband better. "You ain't no police?" one asks me. "Nah. I ain't here to be police," I reply. "If people ain't fucking with me, I ain't got a problem with them."

Don't be like your partner Bacle, they tell me. In some units and on some shifts, the pairing of floor officers changes day to day, but for whatever reason Bacle and I become a regular pair. (He has allowed me to use his real name.) I tell the inmates I'll never be like him, all that shouting and hollering.

The truth is, Bacle's temper tantrums make us laugh. One inmate asks him for his Social Security number every day just to set him off. If he were not a squat, hobbling 63-year-old, Bacle's occasional fantasies about putting shock collars on inmates or shoving his keys down their throats might not seem so harmless. But he hates the company too. "All you are is a fucking body to 'em. That's the way I feel," he says. He counts the days until his Social Security kicks in and he no longer needs to work here to supplement his retirement checks from the Coast Guard.

Every day, I come to know him more and more. He is a reader of old westerns and an aficionado of Civil War reenactments. He uses words like "gadzooks" and phrases like "useful as tits on a boar hog." Back before the hobby shops closed, he liked to buy his wife gifts made by prisoners. Once, he bought her a handmade saddle for her toy unicorns. "When she seen it, she was tickled pink. We are still fat, dumb, and happy over it!" His breath smells perpetually of menthol chewing tobacco, a fleck of which is always stuck in the corner of his mouth.

Bacle becomes a teacher of sorts. "You got to have what I call a *rapport* with some of the inmates," he says. Mostly, he is referring to the orderlies, the prisoners selected for special roles inside each unit. When an orderly passes out toothpaste, Bacle tells me to follow the inmate's lead. "I just kind of modify it from when I was in the service."



Bacle regularly gives his lunch to the muscular key orderly. We are not allowed to do this, so he does it discreetly. "It's a habit I got into when I started," he says. Bacle isn't afraid to bend the rules to keep things under control. When one inmate starts marching around angrily, saying "fuck white people" and we're too afraid to try to get him into his tier, Bacle buys cigarettes from another inmate, gives them to the agitated prisoner, and says, "Why don't you go have a smoke on your bed to calm your nerves?" And it works. When Miss Price isn't watching, Bacle lets a guy called Corner Store off his tier so he can run deodorant and chewing tobacco and sugar and coffee between inmates on different tiers. They aren't allowed to trade commissary items, but they do anyway, so when we let Corner Store handle it, they stop pestering us with ploys to get off the tier, like faking medical emergencies.

Corner Store is a 37-year-old black man who looks 55. His hair is scraggly, his uniform tattered, his face puffy. He walks with the clipped gait of a stiff-legged old man who is late for a meeting he doesn't really want to attend. He's been in prison for half his life, though I don't know what for. I rarely know what anyone is in for. I do know that he used to sell crack, that he saw his friend get shot to death when he was eight, and that he once had a firefight with some white men in Mississippi who called him a "nigger." At least that's what he tells me. Fourteen of his 18 years behind bars have been at Winn.

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### Corner Store has to hustle because he has no family support. He learned early that little comes without strings in prison.

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Corner Store does not inspire fear, yet he is confident. He tells COs to open the tier door for him; he does not ask. On his pluckier days, he flaunts his status by sitting in the guards' chairs and smoking. He talks to us as if we are office colleagues from different departments. And unlike the floor orderly who protects his reputation by loudly proclaiming that rats deserve to get stabbed, Corner Store doesn't need to make a show of his loyalty to inmates, yet it is unwavering. When I ask him to teach me some prison lingo, he refuses gently.

The first time I meet Corner Store, he walks through the metal detector at the entrance of the unit. It beeps, but neither Bacle nor I do anything; its sound is one of the many we tune out. The device was installed not long before I started working here, in an effort to cut down on the number of inmates carrying shanks, but functionally it is a piece of furniture. We never use it since it takes at least two officers to get inmates to line up, walk through it, and get patted down whenever they enter or exit the unit, which leaves no one to let inmates into their tiers. When Corner Store makes it beep, he calls over to me: "Hey, watch this here! I'm going to go back through this thing and it won't go off." He jumps through it sideways, and it doesn't make a sound. I laugh. "This is something my granddaddy taught me years ago," he says. "Anything that a man makes can always be altered. Always."

He had to learn to hustle because he has no money and no support from his family. For his courier services, inmates kick him cigarettes, coffee, and soup. He doesn't take charity; he learned early that little comes without strings in prison. Sexual predators prey on needy inmates, giving them commissary or drugs, seemingly as gifts, but eventually recalling the debt. If you don't have money, the only way to pay is with your body. "When I first come to prison, I had to fight about five times for my ass," Corner Store says. "This is how it starts: You're scared of being in prison because of the violence or whatever. You go to people for protection. But this is the No. 1 thing you don't do. You have to be a man on your own." He tries to discourage vulnerable inmates from seeking help and says he's gotten into fights to stop new prisoners from being sexually assaulted.

"It just hurts me to see it happen. A kid who really don't even understand life yet, you turn and fuck his life up even more?"

He says there have been periods when he's had to pack a shank. "Sometimes it's best, because you got some bullheaded people in prison who don't understand nothin' *but* violence. When you show them you can get on the same level they gettin' on, they leave you the fuck alone."

"They always talking about how prison rehabilitates you," he says. "Prison don't rehabilitate you. You have to rehabilitate yourself." When Miss Price is around, Bacle and I are careful not to make it obvious we are letting Corner Store out, and he makes sure to stay out of her sight.



An eagle mural at Winn.

Instructors like Kenny preached against giving concessions to inmates, but in reality most guards think you have to cooperate with them. Frankly, there just aren't enough staff members to do otherwise. Bacle and I don't have time, for example, to keep watch over the corrections counselor when she is in her office, where there are no security cameras, so she uses two inmates as her bodyguards. (CCA says this went against its policy.) COs are always under pressure to impress on the supervisors that everything is under control. We rely on inmates for this, too, letting some stand out in front of the unit to warn us when a ranking officer is coming so we can make sure everything is in order.

It can be a slippery slope. In 2007, a Tennessee inmate, Gary Thompson, sued CCA, claiming that guards, including a captain, periodically ordered him to beat up other inmates to punish them, giving him the best jobs and privileges as a reward. On one occasion, he claimed, guards called him the "largest nigger," put him with a mentally ill inmate who'd cut a swastika into his arm, and ordered Thompson to "rough [him] up." When Thompson filed a complaint, he was put in the hole. CCA denied his allegations but settled the case.

In Idaho, CCA was accused of ceding control to prison gangs to save money on wages. A lawsuit filed in 2012 by eight inmates at the Idaho Correctional Center alleged there was effectively "a partnership between CCA and certain prison gangs," in which gang members were used to discipline inmates. A subsequent FBI investigation found that employees had falsified records to cover up their understaffing of mandatory positions.\* A confidential CCA memo that was disclosed in the case showed that inmate-on-inmate assaults were four times more frequent in the CCA prison than in all other Idaho prisons combined. No charges were brought against CCA, but the state pulled its contract. "It was a lot better than this place," an out-of-state guard who worked in Idaho at the time told me.

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### In a prison that is 75 percent black, people of different races sit together in the chow hall.

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There are no gangs at Winn, but that has more to do with Louisiana prison culture than the management of the prison. In most prisons around the country, the racial divide is stark and internal politics are determined by racialized prison gangs like the Aryan Brotherhood and the Mexican Mafia. But Louisiana is an anomaly. Here, there are no prison gangs. In a prison that is 75 percent black and less than 25 percent white, people of different races sit together in the chow hall, hang out on the yard, and sleep in the same dorms.

Throughout my time at Winn, I meet guards from CCA prisons around the country who talk up the benefits of gangs. Two SORT members filling in from Oklahoma speak to each other in Sureño sign language that they learned from prisoners transferred from California. The influx of gang members is a "good thing," one of the SORT guys tells me, because gang culture is highly disciplined.

"With their politics, they *have* to clean their cells. They *have* to maintain cleanliness. If they don't, they get stabbed. If they acted the way these guys act, they'd get stabbed."

I quickly learn it's no longer possible to be the silent observer I was in training, so I try to find the middle ground between appearing soft and being draconian. When I write up one inmate after he runs off the tier against my orders, I think about it all weekend, wondering if he will get sent to Cypress. I feel guilty and decide I will only write up inmates for two things: threatening me and refusing to get on their tier after they enter the unit. The floor is where most assaults happen, and if a lot of inmates are out there, things can get out of hand. That's not why I choose to write them up for it, though. I write them up because my main job is to keep inmates off the floor, and if I don't establish authority, I end up having to negotiate with each prisoner over how long he can wander the unit, which is exhausting.

I spend free moments leaning up against the bars, making chitchat with prisoners about their lives. I tell one, Brick, that I am from Minnesota. He says he has friends there. "We got to hook up!" he says. I cultivate these relationships; having gray-haired, charming inmates like him in my good graces helps me because younger, harder prisoners follow their lead. I do favors for others—I let a cop killer outside when it's not yard time because he seems to have influence over some of the inmates. Guys like him and Corner Store teach me how to win inmates' respect. They teach me how to make it in here.

Investigating and fact-checking this story took 18 months of nonstop work. If you agree it was worth it, [become a monthly donor](#) [18]—or [make a one-time gift](#) [19].

Investigating and fact-checking this story took 18 months of nonstop work. If you agree it was worth it, [make a tax-deductible contribution](#) [19] today.

I try to address every request and respond to every inmate who yells "Minnesota," my new nickname. The microwaves on some tiers are broken, so I help out by carrying cups of water for soup or coffee to Brick's tier, where he heats them up. When Corner Store isn't working and people ask if I can let them off the tier for a minute so they can run and exchange a honey bun for a few cigarettes, I unlock the door. "You're cool," one inmate says to me. "Real laid-back." I let people out to see the corrections counselor when they need a mattress or need to call their lawyers, even when she tells me she doesn't want to field these requests, which is most of the time.

Brick can see that I get tired striking across the unit from one place to the next for 12 hours a day. He sees that by the end of the day my feet and back hurt and I start to ignore the inmates. He knows that two people aren't enough to run this floor. "This shit don't work," he says to me. We bump fists.

- [Chapter 1](#)

["Inmates Run This Bitch"](#)

- [Chapter 2](#)

[Prison Experiments](#)

- [Chapter 3](#)

[The CCA Way](#)

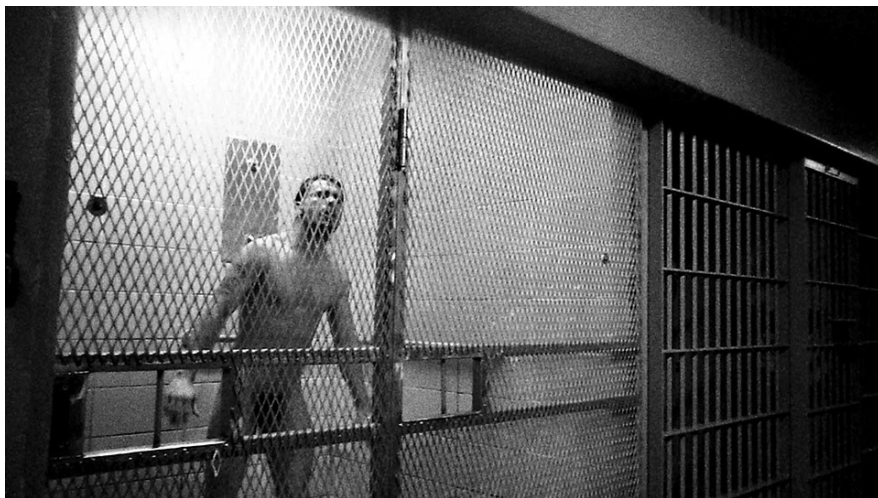
- [Chapter 4](#)

["You Got to Survive"](#)

- [Chapter 5](#)

[Lockdown](#)

#### Chapter 4: "You Got to Survive"



An inmate in seg after being pepper-sprayed by the SORT team.

There is a looming sense of crisis at Winn. Shortly after Cortez escaped, the warden decreed that the security staff should meet at the start of every shift. So at 6 a.m. each day, everyone is shepherd into a conference room, where they brood over coffee and Monster Energy drinks. "I apologize if it seems as though we're coming down on y'all all the time," says Assistant Warden Parker, who introduced himself to me in Cypress four weeks ago. He's sitting on a table, the picture of a guy-next-door, we're-in-this-together type of boss. "Unfortunately, due to a series of events that took place over 2014, culminating with that escape, there is a high, high level of scrutiny on how you do your job."

He doesn't get into specifics, but guards tell me there was a rash of stabbings over the summer that CCA didn't report to the Louisiana DOC. (The company's spokesman says it reported all assaults.) "Someone said this place has slid downhill for a long time," the assistant warden says to us. "Here's what we have before us: We have to climb up that hill extremely fast."

#### PRIVATE PRISONS HOLD

- 7% of state inmates
- 19% of federal inmates
- 62% of immigration detainees
- 31% of juvenile detainees.

The DOC, which has ultimate authority over all prisons in the state, has been taking a closer look at Winn's day-to-day operations. (According to DOC documents I later obtained, the department had just written to CCA about "contract compliance" and areas where Winn's "basic correctional practices" needed improvement.) Wardens from publicly run state prisons have appeared out of nowhere, watching over COs as they work, asking them questions. The newer guards fret about losing their jobs. Old-timers shrug it off—they say they've seen Winn weather tough times before.



At each morning meeting, we are given a new "game plan": keep inmates off the bars of the tiers, move them quicker out to chow, keep them off the floor, finish count faster. We never discuss the problem that both guards and inmates complain about most: There aren't enough employees. Corporate has tried to mitigate the problem by bringing officers in from out of state. The economics of this are never clear to me—it seems far more expensive to pay for their transportation and lodging than to hire more locals or raise wages. In addition to the SORT members, there are an average of five guards filling in for a month or so at a time from places like Arizona and Tennessee.

According to CCA's contract with Louisiana, 36 guards are expected to show up for work at 6 a.m. every day. Twenty-nine of them fill mandatory 12-hour positions that require a body in them at all times—these include unit floor officers, front-gate officers, perimeter patrol, supervisors, and infirmary officers. I make a habit of counting the number of security staff at the meetings. Some days there are 28, some days 24, but there are almost always fewer than 29.

It's possible that employees working overtime from the night shift aren't there or that others trickle in late. But it still appears there are often fewer people on the shift than contractually required to keep the prison open, let alone running smoothly. CCA's spokesman later tells me I was too low on the totem pole to have an accurate understanding of staffing at Winn. (He adds that "security is everyone's job" and a "team effort" involving even employees who are not guards.) Correspondence between CCA and the DOC shows that in early 2015 Winn had 42 vacancies for regular guards and 9 vacancies for ranking officers. Miss Lawson, the assistant chief of security, says that when officials from the DOC were scheduled to visit, "we would be tripping over each other, but it was just because we were paying people overtime to come in and work extra."

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## Wardens from state prisons have appeared out of nowhere, watching over guards as they work.

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Often, the only guards in a 352-inmate unit are the two floor officers and the key officer. There is supposed to be an officer controlling the gate that connects each unit walk to the main walk, but often there isn't. From 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. on weekdays, every unit should have two case managers, who manage rehabilitation and reentry programs, two corrections counselors, who are in charge of resolving inmates' daily issues, and a unit manager, who supervises everything. Not once do I see all these positions filled in a unit.

During my time at Winn, I witness corners cut daily. Key officers, who are charged with documenting activities in the units, routinely record security checks that do not occur. I hear that these logbooks are audited by the state and are the only evidence of whether guards walk up and down the tiers every half-hour. I almost never see anyone do such a security check unless DOC officials are around. Collinsworth tells me that when he worked in the key he was told repeatedly to record security checks every 15 to 30 minutes, even though they weren't being done. Miss Lawson later says she was once reprimanded by a warden for refusing to log checks that did not occur. "I'm just going to write down that you are doing your security checks every 30 minutes," a ranking officer once told me. "That's just how it's been done, so until someone up top tells me different, that's how we'll do it." (CCA's spokesman says the company had no knowledge of security checks being skipped or logbooks being falsified.)

Even with the guards filling in from out of state, we are required to work extra days, which means that for up to five days in a row, I have just enough time to drive home, eat, sleep, and come back to the prison. Sometimes I have to stay longer than 12 hours because there is no one to take over for me. A guard I relieve one morning is ending a four-day stretch; in a 48-hour period he worked 42 hours at the warden's insistence, he says. He didn't sleep the whole time. (CCA says no such incident occurred.)

Assistant Warden Parker tells us the DOC has required CCA's corporate office in Nashville, Tennessee, to report what CCA is doing to fix the mess at Winn. An obvious remedy would be to raise the pay of nonranking officers to the level of DOC officers—which starts at \$12.50 per hour, \$3.50 more than ours—and reinstate rehabilitative and recreational programs for inmates. Miss Lawson says such requests hit a roadblock at the corporate level. "There were years that the wardens would beg for more money, and it was like, 'Okay, on to the next subject,'" she tells me.

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## "If inmates want to act stupid, then we'll give them some pain to help increase their intelligence level."

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Instead, corporate takes a different approach to show it means business: A few days after I worked suicide watch, it removed the local officers from Cypress and turned the unit entirely over to members of the company's national SORT team. These are guys who "use force constantly," Assistant Warden Parker says at a morning meeting. "I believe that pain increases the intelligence of the stupid, and if inmates want to act stupid, then we'll give them some pain to help increase their intelligence level." DOC data shows that during the first 10 months of 2015, which includes part of the time I worked there, Winn reported twice as many "immediate" uses of force as the eight other Louisiana prisons combined. ("CCA expressly forbids retaliatory force," its spokesman tells me.)

Over the next four months, Winn will report using chemical agents 79 times, a rate seven times higher than that reported by Angola. Collinsworth recalls an inmate who insulted a SORT officer's mother. The officer cuffed him, stood him in his underwear out of view of the cameras, and covered his whole body with pepper spray for "about eight seconds or so." When Collinsworth filed a report, standard procedure following a use of force, he says he was ridiculed by members of the SORT team, who told him "that I should have said I didn't see anything." He says an assistant supervisor admonished him for "tattling." (CCA says the officer who sprayed the inmate was fired.)

I enter Cypress briefly after SORT takes over. At 6:30 in the morning, the air is so saturated with pepper spray that tears stream down my face. The key officer is doing paperwork in a gas mask. A man screams and flails naked in a shower, his body drenched with pepper spray. Cockroaches run around frantically to escape the burning.



[35]

[Related: Read more about attacks and assaults behind bars.](#) [35]

### Sex and violence

One day, as prisoners go to chow, Bacle runs past me shouting, "Code Blue outside!" I dash out the front door of Ash, through a crowd of inmates. A couple of prisoners are pinning each other up against the fence, and a frail-looking, young white guy is rolling around on the ground.

I run to him. He rolls from side to side, whimpering and heaving in panic, grasping at small cuts and lumps on his arms. They are not deep like stab wounds; they are shallow and there are many. Under them there is a multitude of tiny scars, cut crosswise—the trademark self-mutilation [of the sexually abused](#). [36]

### Assaults behind bars

- **19%** of all male inmates in US prisons say they've been physically assaulted by other inmates.
- **21%** say they've been assaulted by prison staff.
- Officials reported fewer than **8,800** incidents of rape and other sexual victimization in all American prisons and jails in 2011.
- Yet between **3 percent** and **9 percent** of male inmates say they have been sexually assaulted behind bars, which suggests more than 180,000 current prisoners may have been victimized.
- Former inmates of private state prisons are **half as likely** to say they have been sexually victimized by another inmate as those who were in public state prisons. However, they are nearly **twice as likely** to report being sexually victimized by staff.
- **66%** of incidents of sexual misconduct by prison staff involve sexual relationships with inmates who "appeared to be willing," according to authorities.

### WOMEN ARE:

- **7%** of the total prison population
- **22%** of all victims of inmate-on-inmate sexual victimization
- **33%** of all victims of staff-on-inmate sexual victimization

"Calm down, man," I say, leaning over him. "We are going to take care of you. Just calm down." He keeps rolling and crying.

"He didn't get nothing he ain't deserve!" someone shouts from down the walk.

A sergeant and the captain come and cuff the inmate who's been pinned to the fence. When the crowd around him clears, I am shocked. It's Brick. The guy on the ground is probably about 25 years old. As Brick is taken off to Cypress, he calls the man a "bitch."

A couple of officers look down at the young man disdainfully, pull him off the ground, and take him away. Brick beat him with a lock in a sock. He was angry because the young man had stayed in Cypress for seven months, partly by his own choice. He was supposed to come back to Brick. He is Brick's punk.

There are many things about this incident that I don't know—intimacy and rape in prison are complex issues. Did the young man stay in Cypress to escape Brick? Does he belong to Brick like a sex slave? Or would he say the relationship is consensual in the way a battered woman might say she stays with her husband because she loves him? Did he agree to exchange sex for protection? Did he understand that once he crossed that bridge, there would be no going back?

*Once a punk, always a punk.* Miss Carter, the mental health director, told us she's seen just two inmates reverse their punk status in the eight years she's been here, and both cases involved stabbing a lot of people. Guards here do not turn a blind eye to overt rape, but the more subtle abuse of punks is accepted. Inmates and COs know a punk when they see one. He will do menial tasks when someone demands it. He is expected to keep his face clean-shaven at all times. He has to pee sitting down or by backing up to the urinal with his penis tucked between his legs. He must shower facing the wall.

Since 2003, the federal [Prison Rape Elimination Act \(PREA\)](#) [37] has required prisons to take measures to prevent sexual assaults. At Winn, this includes teaching new cadets about the law. "Why is the law so important?" our instructor Kenny asked us during training. "Liability." It was never fully clear whether the goal was to eliminate rape or to suppress homosexuality in the prison. Even consensual sex could lead to time in seg. "Don't even go there and entertain nicknames," Kenny said. "There's homosexuals down here got nicknames: Princess, Malibu, Tiki, Coco, Nicki. By calling them nicknames, that's entertainment. They think they got you goin' along with what they got goin' on. We can't stop 100 percent of the homosexuality that goes on down there, but we try to prevent and slow it down as much as possible."

Nationwide, as many as 9 percent of male inmates report being sexually assaulted behind bars, but given the anti-snitch culture of prison, the real number might be higher. According to the Louisiana budget office, Winn reported 546 sex offenses in the 2014 fiscal year, a rate 69 percent higher than that of Avoyelles Correctional Center, a publicly operated prison of comparable size and security level.

A [survey by the federal Bureau of Justice Statistics \(BJS\)](#) [38] showed that in 2011 the rate of substantiated rapes and other "nonconsensual sexual acts" between inmates in a sampling of CCA prisons was similar to that of public prisons. CCA prisons reported less serious incidents of "abusive sexual contact" at more than twice the rate of public prisons. CCA says this data may be inaccurate because it predates the final implementation of the PREA standards. The company states it has "a zero-tolerance policy with regard to sexual abuse."

Prison has a reputation as a place of homosexual predation, but it's not that simple. Inmates like Brick rarely see themselves as gay and typically go back to pursuing women once they get out. Self-identified gay or transgender prisoners are, however, often on the receiving end of abuse: Federal data shows that 39 percent of gay ex-prisoners reported being sexually assaulted by another inmate. One study found that [59 percent of transgender women](#) [39] in California's prisons for men reported being assaulted.

But not all sex in prison is violent; many of the letters from male lovers I read in the mail room were full of tenderness and longing. Take, for example, this one from a man in Angola, written to one of the most flamboyant men at Winn:

*You are the only same sex person in my life. So you have to never worry about anyone taking your place, not even a female...Sweetie, you are a good wife. I don't give a damn what anybody said because I saw the good in you; the true you. That's why when we had sex I'd always look you in the eyes. To truly understand you was my hardest goal but when I did our relationship got so good.*

An hour after the young man who was attacked went to the infirmary, he walks into Ash, his arms still bleeding. It's not clear whether Brick's absence is good or bad for him. Now, he has no protection. A couple of well-muscled inmates stand at the bars and look at him lustfully, telling him to try to get placed on their tier. He speaks with Miss Price and she abruptly tells me to put him on B1—Brick's dorm. Inmates have complained to me about this sort of thing: even people who have stabbed each other are sometimes put back in the same dorm. I open the gate and watch him walk down the tier.

Minutes later, he asks me to let him out. I do. He talks to Miss Price, telling her that he is in danger. People think he's a rat. Maybe they think he snitched on Brick to get away from him. Miss Price doesn't give it a moment of consideration, telling him to get back on the tier. When I open the door, a large, bearded man inside pushes him back out onto the floor. "You was asking her to put you on another tier?" he says. "If you think you can't live in here, you can't live in here. We don't need that kind of shit on the tier anyway." He slams the bars behind him.

The young man has two options: Go back on the tier or go to the count room, where they will assign him to another unit.

Miss Price tells me to take him out.

"You gotta go," I tell him halfheartedly.

"I don't want to go on no PC, man," he says to me. He thinks they are going to put him in protective custody.

"I don't know what to tell you," I say. I really don't.

Consider the options swirling in his mind: He could go back to his tier, where a man twice his size has made it very clear he is not welcome. There, he would risk nights as a punk without a protector. He might get robbed. He might get raped. He might get stabbed.

Then there is the alternative, the only one that Winn, like many other prisons, offers to inmates like this: the protective custody wing in Cypress. He would be put in a cell, maybe alone, maybe with another man, for 23 hours a day. He would be branded a snitch just for going there, which means that when he eventually left, the odds of getting stabbed would be high.

He storms past me, back to the key. "I ain't going on no PC, man," he shouts at Miss Price. "I just came from Cypress!" He paces back and forth, working himself up. "Y'all go' have to drag me out this bitch, man. Real talk. I ain't trippin' on what the fuck y'all fixing to do to me," he says, pointing at Bacle and me. "Real talk! 'Cuz I ain't going on no PC." Miss Price screams for him to get out.

"Man, I can live on any fucking tier you put me on!" he shouts. I escort him out of the unit; he's eventually placed in another one.

During our training, Kenny warned us how easy it was to be manipulated into sex by inmates. Even male guards "fall victim to bein' involved in a relationship wit' a inmate," he said. "We got some folks come in here with relationships on the outside, and it just blows my mind how these inmates get in that ear and they wind up falling victim. That's just the way it is. They don't call 'em cons for no reason." He warned us to be vigilant because even in a consensual relationship, the guard could be classified as a sex offender. He told us about one captain at Winn, Charlie Roberts (his real name), who got "involved wit' a inmate. Havin' oral sex wit' him. So guess where he is sittin' at? A federal institution."

This story came up several times as an example of a guard who had to face the consequences of his weak will. Nothing was ever said about the inmate who gave Roberts blow jobs. When I looked at the files from Roberts' case, I learned the inmate was a transgender woman [who went by the name China](#). [40] She had identified as a girl from age 11. Her father beat her repeatedly, and by the time she turned 13 she had left home and begun stripping on Bourbon Street in New Orleans. In 2000, she was sentenced to four years in prison for a "crime against nature"—oral sex for pay—and sent to Winn. During her first year, she was serving a stint in seg for a dirty urine test when, she later testified, Roberts shackled her, brought her to an office, and told her to give him a blow job. If she didn't, he said he would put her in a cell with an inmate who would "handle" things. When she later told two administrators what had happened, one allegedly told her that if she



Inmates wait while their tier is searched.

ever lied about one of his guards again, he would "plant [her] ass under Cypress."

Over the next two years, China said, she was raped several times by inmates, but she kept it to herself. "I was ridiculed and picked on by the staff, and that made it to where I couldn't go to the staff for help at all," she said in a deposition. "If an inmate did want to rape me...who could I turn to?" She became another inmate's punk. One day in 2003, Miss Price sent her to the count room for having an "outrageous" feminine haircut. There, an officer ordered her to take another urine test by peeing in a cup while standing. China had been through this with him before—she'd told him she couldn't pee standing up. After a long standoff, Roberts showed up and told her she could sit on the toilet. The other guards left. As she peed, Roberts entered the bathroom and closed the door behind him. He told her that if she didn't give him oral sex again, he would taint her urine test and send her back to Cypress.

**Over the next two years, China said, she was raped several times by inmates, but she kept it to herself.**

"Stop playing," China said. Roberts slapped her in the face. She dropped to her knees and did what he asked. When she finished, he said, "Bitch, you better swallow."

"I would die before I ever fucking swallowed anything he put in my mouth," she later recalled. She held the semen in her mouth and spit it out onto her shirt. After she filed a grievance and contacted the American Civil Liberties Union, she called the FBI. An agent came to the prison, took the shirt, and interviewed Roberts. The next day, CCA shipped China off to a publicly operated state prison, where she was held in a solitary cell "no bigger than a broom closet" and never let out for exercise. She was released from prison 11 months later.

"If I knew that the prison was going to shave me bald and send me to another prison and put me on maximum- security lockdown," she later testified, "I would have swallowed." Even harder than the solitary was knowing that, had she swallowed, she would have been able to finish her auto body class, which might have kept her from having to live on the streets and going back to sex work when she got out. "I would have swallowed and I would have kept on swallowing until I got that piece of paper."



[Related: How Congress made it even harder for inmates to sue prisons over poor conditions and abuses](#) [41]

Wavebreakmedia/iStockphoto

CCA denied all of China's allegations, but it settled the case out of court for an undisclosed amount. Roberts also denied her allegations when the FBI interviewed him, but the bureau found that the semen on her shirt was his. Roberts ultimately pleaded guilty to sexually assaulting China and making false statements to the FBI, and he was sentenced to six years in federal prison and a \$5,000 fine. I have not been able to track down China. Roberts served his sentence and was released in 2012.

Nearly half of all allegations of sexual victimization in prisons involve staff. In the [2011 BJS survey](#) [42], CCA prisons reported a rate of substantiated staff-on-inmate sexual assault similar to that of public facilities. However, CCA prisons' rate of reported staff-on-inmate sexual harassment was five times higher. Another federal report found that former inmates of private state prisons are twice as likely to report being sexually victimized by staff members as inmates who were in public prisons.



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Prisoners also sexually harass and abuse officers. A recurring issue is inmates standing at the bars and masturbating at women guards sitting in the key. I see some women's reports of sexual abuse by prisoners handled swiftly, but I hear other female guards complain that their sexual-harassment charges have gone nowhere. (CCA says it "takes any allegation of sexual harassment very seriously and has strong policies and practices in place for investigating such claims.") I once write up an inmate for masturbating in front of a nurse, a violation that should cause him to be moved to Cypress, but he isn't. I regularly see the macho culture of prison transcend the division between guards and inmates—male officers routinely ignore the harassment of their female colleagues. "Some of them staff, they'll wear clothes so tight you can see everything they got," Kenny lectured in class. "They'll walk down there and they just struttin' they stuff. We got one, shoot, trying to sue the company 'cuz an inmate touched her on the butt. Man, you was down here every day shaking your stuff! If you do all this trying to draw attention to yourself, you go' get some, and if you ain't mindful, you'll get more than what you asked for."

In a class on "inmate manipulation," Kenny told us that when he was a unit manager, there was a female officer he didn't like. Many prisoners didn't like her either, and one in particular was "bound and determined to get this girl fired." One night, the woman fell asleep in a chair on a unit floor, he said. She had also left the inmate's tier door open. The inmate crept out of his tier, pulled his penis out, and "went to town wit' it" inches from her head. Not long afterward, the inmate was released, and he sent a letter to the prison, telling them to look at the surveillance footage from that night. CCA fired the guard for sleeping on the job and for leaving the tier door open, Kenny recalled.

"Ain't nuttin' we could do to him," Kenny said of the inmate. "That's over wit'. He gone home." (CCA says it is unaware of such an incident and that it would have reported the inmate to law enforcement.) "I laughed, but it's also kind of scary. I don't want nothing bad to happen to nobody." But, he added, "We was lookin' to get her too. He got her for us. It worked out on both ends."

### Cracking down

In the morning meeting, the supervisor and Assistant Warden Parker admonish us about the topic they've been lecturing about all week—cracking down on sagging pants and homemade clothing. They are frustrated because no one is doing it. In private, the officers grumble that if the supervisors don't want inmates to wear bleach-stained jeans instead of their "CCA blues," they should confiscate the pants themselves. Why should the guards put themselves on the line? Parker seems to be aware of this, and he's keen to show he's not a front-office kind of guy. His personal goal is to become "lord of the do-rags," taking the prohibited head coverings whenever he sees them.

"Does anybody know why we don't want them to individualize their uniform?" Parker asks us. "We want them *institutionalized*. You guys ever heard that term? We want them institutionalized, not individualized. Is that sort of a mind game? Yup. But you know what? It's worked over the couple hundred years that we've had



Prison guards search inmates' belongings.

"All right," I say.

"They need to give these fools something to do besides eat, watch TV, and figure out how to fuck with us."

"You're with me," he says. "We're going to give these motherfuckers an eye-opener today. I don't play that bullshit. You get your ass on the bunk."

"You're not into this playing shit," Bacle says sympathetically.

"That's right," Edison says.

"You're a grade A1 asshole when it needs to be," Bacle says.

"I'm a grade A1 drill instructor when I have to be."

"That's what this place needs!"

"I know it does," Edison says. "It needs to go back to about 1960. Give a goddamn PR-24—a police baton—and hand a can of gas to everybody. You get stupid, you get beat down. You get big and stupid, you get gassed and beat down. Either way, you learn your fucking place."

Edison has been here for a year and a half. "With my skill set, and with where I moved to, it was the only fuckin' thing open," he says. He is an Army Rangers veteran and was once a small-town police chief. He says he retired when "the city council got afraid of me." "When I was a cop, I knew damn well that I would shoot your ass. I didn't carry two extra clips, I carried four. When I went to work, I went to war. When I got off, I still went to war. I carried two clips on me regardless of what I was wearing. I carried *at least* my Glock 40 underneath my arm, and usually I had a Glock .45 on my ankle. Go ahead, play with me."

We walk the floor. He stops. We stop. "You know what is stupid?" he says. "I see murderers. I see rapists. I see robbers. And then I see, the vast majority is in here for bein' stupid enough to smoke a joint too close to a school. Twenty-five years, federal mandatory. Then you got somebody that slaughtered a whole fucking family gets 25 to life and he's out in six to eight." (About one-fifth of Winn inmates are in for drug-related crimes. Getting busted with a joint near a school will [typically land you about six years](#) [44], not 25.) Edison's indignation about drug criminalization surprises me. "Now, where's the fucking justice in that? And we're paying how much per inmate per day?"



# BITE

A podcast for people who think hard about their food—check out our brand new episode today

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"Count time!" the woman in the key yells. I unlock the door of B1 tier and Edison walks in. An inmate is standing at the sink, brushing his teeth. "Get on your bunk," Edison barks. The inmate keeps his back turned to Edison. "Or would you like to do it in Cypress?" Edison steps in toward him. "Step out!" Edison shouts, pointing to the door. He's seriously sending a prisoner to seg for this?

The inmate walks out, still brushing his teeth. "This man is going on about some bullshit," he says, waving his toothbrush around. A spot of toothpaste lands on Edison's jacket, which is hanging on a nearby chair.

"Go ahead! Be dumb! Let's go!" Edison yells, turning his hat backward. "*Please* be stupid enough to touch me. I'm already taking your ass to Cypress." The inmate continues to brush his teeth.

prisons in this country. So that's why we do it. We do not want them to feel as though they are individuals. We want them, for lack of a better term, to feel like a herd of cattle. We're just moving 'em from point A to point B, letting them graze in the dining hall and then go back to the barn. Okay?"

"We do not want them to feel as though they are individuals. We want them to feel like a herd of cattle."

Parker says the DOC wardens have been pestering him. "Are they scared, Mr. Parker?" he mimics. "Are you not providing the adequate training that your staff members need, Mr. Parker, to be strong enough to take clothing away from an inmate? Are they that scared, Mr. Parker?"

His tone softens. "I don't know when it last dawned on me in the last couple weeks—I actually care about this institution and I care about all of you. I'm tired of people telling me that people at Winn aren't doing their jobs. A term that was used a couple of weeks ago that was very embarrassing to me was: They don't even understand basic prison management at Winn." Some of the guards shake their heads.

"Anybody feel good about that one? I know I sure as hell don't."

After the meeting, everyone moves slowly down the walk. Edison, a big white CO with a bull neck, says he's tired of this "'Kumbaya' bullshit." He was removed from his post in Cypress when the SORT team took it over. Suggesting he can't handle his own is about the worst insult you could give him. "I'm sick and tired of doin' this shit," he says. "The security in this place is pathetic. They need to tighten up on the tier doors, re-man the towers, and reinstitute the inmate work out in the field and the inmate programs, and give these fools something to do besides sit in their beds, eat, watch TV, and figure out how to fuck with us." He blames the "ivory tower" in Nashville—[CCA's corporate headquarters](#) [43]—for Winn's problems. "Those fools ain't got nothing in their mind but the bottom line."

Today, the supervisor tells Edison to join Bacle and me in Ash. Having a new guard come to Ash is like having a visitor to our twisted household. This morning, standing around, waiting for the day to begin, Bacle complains about the most mundane of issues: Some inmates don't sit on their bunks during count like they are supposed to.

"How's your fighting skills, Bauer?" Edison asks. The question makes me nervous. This is the opposite of the approach I'm trying to take in here.



I walk down the tier and do count. "That Crip boy go' to tear his ass up," one inmate says as I pass. "Your work partner going to get stabbed."

I can't keep count straight in my head. I just want to get off the tier.

When we leave the tier everyone comes up to the bars and yells at Edison. "You want to go next?" he shouts. "Behind the wall!" They don't budge. "Every one of y'all is going to Cypress."

"Suck my dick!"

The captain and a sergeant enter the unit. The captain tells Edison to step aside so he can talk to the inmates and try to ease the tension. "This pacification bullshit," Edison mutters to me. "Yeah, we knew how to pacify 'em in Vietnam. We dropped a fuckin' 500-pounder on 'em. That pacifies." The captain tells Edison to come with him. "It's not warm and fuzzy enough," Edison says to me as he leaves.

The sergeant, whose name is King, pulls me aside. "I'm here for you, bro," he says. In the past, I've heard him complain that the supervisors don't back the line officers enough. "Don't ever think I'm against you. 'Cuz I'm gonna knock one of 'em out if I have to. And we go' to write that report like he was trying to kill me and it was self-defense. Hahahaha!"

King has only been working at Winn for five months, but he's been in corrections for eight years. As a kid, he spent time in juvenile hall. Like Edison, he is an Army vet, and he credits the military for correcting his delinquent ways. After 22 years in the service, he got a job in a juvenile correctional facility in Texas. One day, he told a boy to get off the basketball court and the kid grabbed his throat and tried to strangle him. "I damn near beat the piss out of him. Sixteen years old, 6 foot 3. As soon as you put your hands on me, you're not a teenager, you're a man. I put that uppercut on his ass and the superintendent said, 'I strongly suggest that you resign, sarge.' I fucked him up pretty good."

"Oh well!" Bacle says.

"All of this I shattered," he says, pointing to his jaw and mouth.

"Oh well!"



Artwork in a prison hallway.

that are too long. I'm not like these other guys, all right?"

"All right," he says.

"But, you know, when people disrespect me like that for no reason, I can't just take that—you know what I mean?"

He tries to deny taunting me, but I won't back down. "Look, you going to have inmates talkin' crazy," he says.

### Pink Shades

During count, I tally bodies, not faces. If I look at faces, it means I have to keep the numbers straight while constantly calibrating sternness and friendliness in my eyes for each individual. When I go down the tier, I make a point to walk in a fast, long stride with a slight pop in my left step, trying to look tough. I practiced this in the mirror because inmates comment every day on a twist in my walk that I never knew existed. Sometimes prisoners whistle at me as I pass. In my normal life, I try to diffuse any macho tendencies. Now, I try to annihilate anything remotely feminine about me. As I walk and count, I tighten my core to keep my hips from moving.

I steel myself for A1 tier. For some reason, inmates on this tier are always testing me, and as I walk down one side, someone makes a comment about my "panties" as I pass. "You like that dick. You like that dick," someone sings as I go by. I ignore it. Another comments that I look like a model. I pretend I don't hear him. On my way back toward the front, I hear again, "You like that dick. You like that dick."

This has been going on for weeks, but this time something snaps. I stop count and march back to the guy calling out to me, a thirtysomething black man with pink sunglasses and tattoos crawling up his neck. "What did you say to me?" I shout.

"I ain't said nothin'."

"Why are you always saying shit like that? You are always focusing so much on me, maybe you like the dick! Bitch ass!"

"Say that again?"

"Maybe you like the dick!" I shout. I am completely livid.

"He doesn't know how big a mistake he just made," another inmate says as I storm out.

---

**"I ain't got nothing against any of y'all officers. I understand that you gotta live. You got to survive."**

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When we finish count, I go back to Pink Shades' tier. "Give me your ID," I say to him. He refuses. "Give me your ID! *Now!*" I shout at the top of my lungs. He doesn't. I get his name from another officer and write him up for making sexual comments. He says he's going to file a PREA grievance on me.

I try to cool down. My heart is still hammering 10 minutes later. "Are you all right, sarge?" a prisoner asks me. Slowly, my rage turns to shame and I go into the bathroom and sit on the floor. Where did those words come from? I rarely ever shout. I am not homophobic. Or am I? I feel utterly defeated. I go back to A1 and call Pink Shades to the bars.

"Look, I just want you to understand I don't have a problem with any of y'all," I tell him. "I think a lot of you are in here for sentences

"But you don't want me talking crazy to you, right?" There are inmates staring at us in astonishment.

"I feel you," he says. "You came here and talked to me like a man. And I apologize. I ain't got nothing against any of y'all officers. You feel me? I understand that you gotta live. You got to survive. Those words hurt you. I feel you. I mean I was singing a song, but you probably took it the wrong way. It triggered something in you." He's right. Something about being here reminds me of being in junior high, getting picked on for my size and the fact that I read books, getting called a faggot.

I tear up his disciplinary report and throw it in the trash. When I walk back down the tier for the next count, no one pays any attention to me.

3/6

My Four Months as a Private Prison Guard: Part Three



Man down

One day in Ash, a few inmates shout, "Man down! Man down!" A large man, Mason, is lying on his bed in C2, his right hand over his bare chest. His eyes are closed and his left leg is moving back and forth slowly.

"We just put him on his bed. He had fell off this side of his fucking bed just now, bro," an inmate says to me. "He's fucked up." I radio for a stretcher.

Mason starts to cry. His left hand is a fist. His back arches. "I'm scared," he mouths. Someone puts a hand on his arm for the briefest moment: "I know, son. They finna come see you now."

A stretcher finally arrives. The nurses and their orderlies move slowly. "They weren't supposed to send that man back down here," an inmate says to me. Earlier today Mason was playing basketball and fell to the ground in pain, he explains. He went to the infirmary, where they told him that he had fluid in his lungs.

Three inmates pick up Mason in his sheet and put him on the stretcher. His hands are crossed over his chest like a mummy as two prisoners wheel him away.

Within a few hours he is sent back to the tier.

"They told me I got fluid on my lungs and they won't send me to the hospital."

Days later, I see Mason dragging his feet, his arms around his chest. I tell him to take my chair. He sits and hunches over, putting his head in his lap. It feels like a "throbbing pain in my chest," he says. We call for a wheelchair. "They told me I got fluid on my lungs and they won't send me to the hospital," he says. "That shit crazy."

A nurse happens to be in the unit, passing out pills. I tell her they keep sending Mason to the infirmary but won't take him to the hospital. She insists "nothing serious" is wrong with him.

"When I saw him last week, he was almost passed out," I say. "He was in a lot of pain."

She looks at me sidelong. "But the doctor still ain't going to send him to the hospital just 'cause of that."

If he were sent to the hospital, CCA would be contractually obligated to pay for his stay. For a for-profit company, this presents a dilemma. Even a short hospital stay is a major expense for an inmate who brings the company about \$34 per day. And that's aside from the cost of having two guards keep watch over him. Medical care within the prison is expensive, too. CCA does not disclose its medical expenses, but in a typical prison, health care costs are the second-biggest expense after staff. On average, a Louisiana prison puts 9 percent of its budget toward health care. In some states it can be much higher; health care is [31 percent of a California prison's budget](#). [45] Nearly 40 percent of Winn inmates have a chronic disease such as diabetes, heart disease, or asthma, according to Louisiana's budget office. About 6 percent have a communicable disease such as HIV or hepatitis C.

One day, I meet a man with no legs in a wheelchair. His name is [Robert Scott](#) [46]. (He consented to having his real name used.) He's been at Winn 12 years. "I was walking when I got here," he tells me. "I was walking, had all my fingers." I notice he is wearing fingerless gloves with nothing poking out of them. "They took my legs off in January and my fingers in June. Gangrene don't play. I kept going to the infirmary, saying, 'My feet hurt. My feet hurt.' They said, 'Ain't nothin' wrong wicha. I don't *see* nothin' wrong wicha.' They didn't believe me, or they talk bad to me—I can't believe you comin' up here!"

His medical records show that in the space of four months he made at least nine requests to see a doctor. He complained of sore spots on his feet, swelling, oozing pus, and pain so severe he couldn't sleep. When he visited the infirmary, medical staff offered him sole pads, corn removal strips, and Motrin. He says he once showed his swollen foot, dripping with pus, to the warden. On one of these occasions, Scott alleges in a federal lawsuit against CCA, a nurse told him, "Ain't nothing wrong with you. If you make another medical emergency you will receive a disciplinary write-up for malingering." He filed a written request to be taken to a hospital for a second opinion, but it was denied.

Eventually, numbness spread to his hands, but the infirmary refused to treat him. His fingertips and toes turned black and wept pus. Inmates began to fear his condition was contagious. When Scott's sleeplessness kept another inmate awake, the inmate threatened to kill him if he was not moved to another tier. A resulting



Inmates line up for "pill call."

Subjects of lawsuits filed against CCA

Sexual harassment	2.8%
Deaths	3.2%
Sexual assault	3.7%
Use of force	4.2%
Physical assault	5%
Work-related	8.6%
Medical care	14.9%
Injuries	15%
Civil rights/prison conditions	16.1%

Chart by Mother Jones

Source: Prison Legal News; Mother Jones analysis of state and federal cases filed against CCA between 1998 and 2010. [Get the data](#)

Created with [Datawrapper](#)

CCA has also been the subject of medical malpractice cases involving pregnant inmates. In 2014, it settled a case for \$690,000 over the death of a prisoner's baby at a county jail in Chattanooga, Tennessee. When the inmate went into labor, she was put in a cell with no mattress and left there for three hours as she bled heavily onto the floor. CCA employees did not call an ambulance until approximately five hours after the prisoner asked for help. Her newborn baby died shortly thereafter. In court proceedings, the warden testified that surveillance footage showed no signs of an emergency. But before the footage could be reviewed, CCA claimed it had been accidentally erased. The court sanctioned the company for destroying evidence.

CCA settled another case for \$250,000 after a pregnant woman being held in a jail in Nashville complained of vaginal bleeding and severe abdominal pain. She said medical staff demanded "proof," so they put her in solitary and turned off the water so her blood loss could be "monitored." She claimed they did nothing to alleviate her pain as she endured contractions, filling the toilet with blood. The next morning, the inmate was shackled and taken to a hospital, where doctors found that she was already dilated. While prison guards watched, she gave birth and was immediately sedated. When she woke up, medical staff brought her the dead baby. She said she was not allowed to call her family and was given no information about the disposal of her son's body.

His fingertips and toes turned black and wept pus. Inmates began to fear his condition was contagious.

altercation drew the attention of staff, who finally sent him to the local hospital.

"But when I got my legs cut off they didn't come back and say, 'Robert, I'm sorry.' I done taked my lickin'. Part of being locked up." He is now suing CCA for neglect, claiming that inmates are denied medical care because the company operates the prison "on a 'skeleton crew' for profitable gain."

"Where do you think is one of the No. 1 areas that we get hit on as a confinement business?" Assistant Warden Parker asks us at a staff meeting. "Medical! Inmates have this thing that if they have a sniffle they are supposed to be flown to a specialist somewhere and be treated immediately for that sniffle." His tone becomes incredulous. "Believe it or not, we are required by law to take care of them."

It's true: Under [Supreme Court rulings citing the Eighth Amendment](#) [47], prisons are required to provide inmates with adequate health care. Yet CCA has found ways to minimize its obligations. At the out-of-state prisons where California ships some of its inmates, [CCA will not accept](#) [48] prisoners who are over 65 years old, have mental health issues, or have serious conditions like HIV. The company's Idaho prison contract specified that the "primary criteria" for screening incoming offenders was "no chronic mental health or health care issues." The contracts of some CCA prisons in Tennessee and Hawaii stipulate that the states will bear the cost of HIV treatment. Such exemptions allow CCA to tout its cost-efficiency while taxpayers assume the medical expenses for the inmates the company won't take or treat.

In 2010, the company and Immigration and Customs Enforcement settled a federal lawsuit [brought by the ACLU](#) [49] that asserted immigration detainees at a CCA-run facility in California were routinely denied prescribed medical treatment. (CCA admitted no wrongdoing.) In a rare case that made its way to trial in 2001, the company was found to have violated the 8th and 14th Amendments and ordered to pay \$235,000 to an inmate whose broken jaw was left wired shut for 10 weeks. (He removed the wires himself with nail clippers while guards watched.) The jury wrote they hoped the message sent by the ruling would "echo throughout the halls of your corporate offices as well as your corporate housing facilities." (CCA appealed and settled for an undisclosed amount.)



At least 15 doctors at Winn have been sued for delivering poor medical care. The prison hired several of them even after the state had disciplined them for misconduct. One, Aris Cox, was hired in the '90s, after his license was temporarily suspended for writing prescriptions to support his tranquilizer addiction. While Mark Singleton was at Winn, the Louisiana board of medical examiners discovered that he had failed "to meet the standard of care" at his previous position in New Mexico. He was put on probation, but CCA kept him on. Winn hired Stephen Kuplesky after his license had been temporarily suspended for prescribing painkillers to a family member with no medical condition. Robert Cleveland was working at Winn when he was put on medical probation for his involvement in a kickback scheme with a wheelchair company. He was later disciplined for prescribing narcotics from his home and vehicle. (It's not clear if he was working at Winn at the time. CCA says all doctors at Winn had "appropriate credentials.")

Data collected by *Prison Legal News* on more than 1,200 state and federal suits against CCA shows that 15 percent of them were related to medical care. (This sample is not a complete list of complaints against the company; in 2010 alone, CCA faced more than 600 pending cases. Between 1998 and 2008, the company settled another 600 cases.) Since most inmates can't afford legal counsel, it's nearly impossible for them to prevail in court. When I made public-records requests in a couple of states for a more recent accounting of lawsuits settled by CCA, the company intervened, arguing that a list of settlements involving claims of medical malpractice, wrongful deaths, assaults, and the use of force "constitutes trade secrets."

My reconciliation with Pink Shades encouraged me. Every time I have a problem with a prisoner, I try the same approach and eventually we tap knuckles to show each other respect. Still, these breakthroughs are fleeting. In the moment, they feel like a glimmer of a possibility that we can appreciate each other's humanity, but I come to understand that our positions make this virtually impossible. We can chat and laugh through the bars, but inevitably I need to flex my authority. My job will always be to deny them the most basic of human impulses—to push for more freedom. Day by day, the number of inmates who are friendly with me grows smaller.

There are exceptions, like Corner Store, but were I to take away the privileges Bacle and I have granted him, I know that he, too, would become an enemy.

My priorities change. Striving to treat everyone as human takes too much energy. More and more, I focus on proving I won't back down. I am vigilant; I come to work ready for people to catcall me or run up on me and threaten to punch me in the face. I show neither fear nor compunction. Sometimes prisoners call me racist, and it stings, but I try as hard as I can not to flinch because to do so would be to show a pressure point, a button that can be pressed when they want to make me bend.

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## Striving to treat everyone as human takes too much energy. More and more, I focus on proving I won't back down.

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Nearly every day the unit reaches a crescendo of frustration because inmates are supposed to be going somewhere like the law library, GED classes, vocational training, or a substance abuse group, but their programs are canceled or they are let out of the unit late. Inmates tell me that at other prisons, the schedule is firm. "That door would be opening up and everybody would be on the move," an inmate who's been incarcerated throughout the state says. Here, there is no schedule. We wait for the call over the radio; then we let the inmates go. They could eat at 11:30 a.m. They could eat at 3 p.m. School might happen, or maybe not. It's been years since Winn has had the staff to run the big yard. Sometimes we let the inmates onto the small yard attached to the unit. Often we don't. Canteen and law library hours are canceled regularly. There just aren't enough officers to keep everything going.

Guards bond with prisoners over their frustrations. Prisoners tell us they understand we are powerless to change these high-level management problems. Yet the two groups remain locked in battle like soldiers in a war they don't believe in.

Whenever I open a tier door, I demand that everyone shows me his pass, and I use my body to stop the flood of people from pouring out. Some just push through.

I catch one. "Get back in!" I shout. "I'm writing you up right now if you don't get back in there right now. You hear me?"

He walks back in, staring me down. "White dude all on a nigga's trail, man," he says. I shut the door, ignoring him. "You better get the fuck from down here before I end up hurtin' one of y'all," he shouts at me. "You green as a motherfucker!"

I'm tired.

An inmate comes around the key. Bacle is following him and calls for me to stop him. I stand in the inmate's path. I know him, the one with the mini-dreads. I feel threatened, frankly, whenever I see him. "This way," I say, pointing back to where he came from. He tries to walk past me. I lock eyes with him. "This way!" I command. He turns back and walks slowly away. I walk behind him. He stops, spins around, throws his hands in the air, and shouts, "Get the fuck off my trail, dog!" I know he's testing me. I open his tier door. He walks in, stands just inside, and stares me down hard. I grab the door and slam it shut—*bang!*—in his face.

I turn and step back into the throng of inmates milling around the floor. "Motherfucker's going to end up dead!" he shouts after me. I stop and turn around. He just stares. I grab the radio on my shoulder, then pause. Was I ever taught what to do when something like this happens? I know how to press the button and speak into the radio, but whom do I call? I think of King, the officer who smashed the kid's jaw. "Sergeant King, could you come down to Ash?" I say into my shoulder.

"En route."

When he arrives, I take him into B1 tier. I find Mini-Dreads.

"He needs to get locked up," I say, looking him in the eyes.

King cuffs him. I tell King he threatened my life. He needs to go to seg.

"What happened?! I ain't said nuttin'!" the inmate shouts. I walk away.

I go back to chasing the others into their tiers. "What you lock that dude up for?" an inmate asks me. "Dude was 'bout to go home," another says. "He ain't go' go home now." I walk away, unyielding. In the back of my mind, however, there is a voice: *Did you see him say anything? Wasn't your back turned? Are you sure what you heard?* It doesn't matter, really. He wanted to intimidate me and it was about time I threw someone in the hole. They need to know I am not weak.



One morning, Ash smells like feces. On D2, liquid shit is oozing out of the shower drain and running down the tier. "It's been here over 12 hours," one inmate says.

"Man, you got worms and everything on the floor. Real talk."

"This is a health and safety violation!"

"Man, this is cruel and unusual punishment!"

We let inmates out to go to the small yard. As they flow out of the tiers, I see a large group run to A1 tier. Bacle pushes the tier door shut and calls a Code Blue over the radio. Inside the tier, two prisoners are grappling, their bodies pressed up against the bars. Each is gripping a shank in one hand while holding the other's arm to keep him from swinging. Drops of blood spatter the floor. The surrounding scene is oddly calm. Inmates stand around and watch, not saying anything.

"Break it up," Bacle says indifferently. "Break it up."

The two combatants are speaking to each other quietly, almost at a whisper.

One man breaks his hand free, swings it up, and jams his shank into the side of the other man's neck.

"Come on," one says. "Come on with it, big dog."

"I'ma do you like you did me."

They grapple some more.

"Break it up!" Bacle yells.

"Come on!" I shout, feeling utterly impotent.

Bacle, Miss Price, a CCA employee from out of state, and I stand just two feet from them, separated by the bars, and watch the two try to press their knives into each other.

One man breaks his hand free, swings it up, and jams his shank into the side of the other man's neck. My breath stops for a moment, and I utter a gagging sound. "It ain't sharp enough, big dog," says the guy who was just stabbed. "Let me show you where the sharp one is."

Bacle reaches through the bars and grabs the stabber by his hood as the other inmate struggles to break loose. For the first time, the other prisoners make noise. "Hey, man, you're gonna get him killed like that!" one shouts at Bacle. Bacle lets go, and the two men tumble across the floor, landing in a heap by the toilet, blocked from our view by a short wall. They keep scuffling. An arm swings up and jabs down. One prisoner walks over to the urinal two feet from them and pees as they keep stabbing.

The fight lasts nearly four minutes, until a SORT member comes in with a can of pepper spray. "Don't fucking move," he barks. "Everybody lay the fuck down." He sprays the men as they try to stab each other. One, who's had a bit of his ear sliced off, is taken to the hospital. The other goes to seg.

The smell of pepper spray fades, but the smell of shit does not. It's not until the afternoon that someone comes in to fix the toilets and finds a shank stuck in the plumbing.

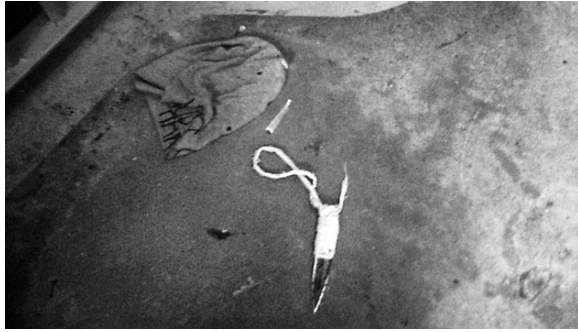
Later, I recount to a sergeant how one of the inmates was poking the knife into the other guy's neck. "Did you learn something from that?" he asks me.

"Not really."

The inmate could have slit the other guy's throat if he wanted to, he says. But he didn't. "Both of 'em scared. That's the reason for having' them shanks in the first place, 'cuz they are scared."

**The audit**





A shank.

At the end of my shift, I stride briskly down the dark walk. I am relieved to be going home, but after two weeks on the job as a full-time CO, I'm afraid in a way I wasn't at first. The longer I work here, the more people have grudges against me. As I head down the walk, inmates are coming and going from various parts of the prison and I can't see any other guards around. I don't have a radio—I am required to give it to the officer who relieves me. I've seen the surveillance footage, and I doubt it would be clear enough to identify anyone who might jump me in this darkness.

The gate before the exit is locked and I am routed through the visitation area. There, 20 or so officers from my shift are sitting at the tables, frowning. Two inmates are serving pizza. We've been trapped in a company meeting. Assistant Warden Parker is there. The chief of security, HR. I grab some pizza and sit down, frustrated.

"How many people here got less than a year in?" Parker asks. I raise my hand. "You've probably seen a lot of bad days, okay? We're gonna change that. And it takes all of us working together. It really, really does. As long as we stay as a decent team and we remember that the bad guys are the guys who stay here 24/7 and don't get to leave."

On the wall is a painting of a black kid and a white kid lying on their bellies on a grassy hillside, looking at a rainbow. Next to it is another mural of a lion and a tiger tearing through an American flag with a bald eagle flying overhead. "The CCA Way" is written above it.

"The company took a look at things and they realized that we need to do a little bit better for the staff here at Winn. I'm not going to say that we've waved a magic wand and everybody's walking out of here, gonna go buy new cars, but the hourly wage for a correctional officer is going to go up to \$10 an hour. So congratulations to everybody sitting inside this room." He starts clapping and a few people join unenthusiastically. "This is going to be one of those proud moments," he says.

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**"ACA's coming.  
We gotta panic!  
Hit the panic  
button!"**

---

"Does anybody know what the ACA is?" Parker asks. "Have you been hearing about 'We got ACA coming up. Ooooh! ACA's coming. We gotta panic! Hit the panic button!'"

"The [American Correctional Association](#) [50]," someone volunteers.

"Okay, why do we care about ACA?" Parker asks.

"We need our jobs. We need to pass."

"That's a theme that goes with it. Years and years and years ago, I think it was 1870, there was a governor upset with what he thought was cruel and unusual punishment," he lectures. "So he started drafting up a little group of people that would go around and they would check on prisons and prison conditions to ensure that the people who were confined were not being treated cruelly. After time they started developing a sophisticated auditing process. So, a third-party person who has no dog in the fight, so to speak, comes in and they take a look at how are we treating our inmates. And they give us a stamp of, 'You're treating them with proper care.'"

"That way when we go to court and the inmate says, 'Oh, they made me eat Pizza Hut pizza! That's cruel and unusual punishment! It should have been Domino's!'—when it goes to court, we pull up our ACA files and say, 'Hey, look, here's how we prepare our food in the kitchen. We prepare the food in our kitchen under these standards.'"

The ACA is a trade association, but it's also the closest thing we have to a national regulatory body for prisons. [More than 900](#) [51] public and private correctional facilities and detention centers are accredited under its standards. Winn was the first prison to be accredited in Louisiana. Shortly after T. Don Hutto co-founded CCA, he became the president of ACA.

Over the next few weeks, inmates repaint every unit in preparation for the ACA audit. The maintenance man is run ragged as he tries to fix busted vents, plumbing, and cell and tier doors. ("We didn't own the facility," CCA's spokesman told me, noting that major maintenance issues at Winn were the DOC's responsibility. CCA's contract states that it was responsible for routine and preventive maintenance.)

In anticipation of the audit, I read the ACA standards. How will the auditors deal with the fact that the cells in segregation are at least 20 square feet smaller than required? Or that inmates only get 10 minutes to eat, not the mandated 20? There are many other ACA standards and recommendations Winn does not appear to meet: We rarely have the required number of positions staffed; guards' pay is not comparable to the pay of state corrections officers; guards rarely ever use the metal detectors at the entrances to the housing units; prisoners often don't get one hour of daily access to exercise space; suicide watch meals are below caloric requirements; there aren't enough toilets in the dorms. (The ACA did not respond to a request for comment.)

Then again, Winn passed its last ACA audit, in 2012, with a near-perfect score of [99 percent](#) [52], the same score it received in [its previous audit](#) [53] three years earlier. In fact, CCA's [average score](#) [54] across all its accredited prisons is also 99 percent.



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On the morning of the audit, we wake everyone up and tell them to make their beds and take any pictures of women off their lockers. Two well-dressed white men enter Ash unit and do a slow lap around the floor. The only questions they ask Bacle and me are what our names are and how we're doing. They do not examine our logbook, nor do they check our entries against the camera footage. If they did, they would find that some of the cameras don't work. They do not check the doors. If they did, they would see they need to be yanked open by hand because most of the switches don't work. They don't check the fire alarm, which automatically closes smoke doors over the tiers, some of which must be jimmied back open by two guards. They do not ask to go on a tier. They do not interview any inmates. They do a single loop and they leave.

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After nearly two decades, Corner Store is about to be free. He has just six weeks to go before he qualifies for early release with the "good time" he's earned. How does someone reenter the world after two decades behind bars, with no friends on the outside and no money to his name? His first step, he says, will be to stay in a shelter until he can get on his feet. He doesn't know where he will go yet. He tells me he doesn't want to count the days. "It stresses me out. Anxiety sets in. Your mind goes, working and thinking about stuff. How am I going to do this? How am I going to do that? It causes a panic attack. When I walk, I walk."

But fantasies creep into his mind. "I'ma get me a big bottle of Kaopectate, a big German chocolate cake, five-gallon thing of milk," he says. "Just get out the way, that's all I'ma tell you." We are outside, talking through the fence; he's on the small yard and I'm on the Ash walk. "After that, I want me a seafood platter, a *real* seafood platter about the size of the kitchen table, just for me and Mom. It's all about Mom when I go home."

He puts his hand on the fence and leans in. "What I'm sayin' is this here, man: I just wanna go have fun, boy. And fun does not mean me-gettin'-in-trouble fun. Fun means just enjoying life. I wanna be able to take my mothafuckin' shoes off and socks off and walk in the sand. I wanna be able to just go outside in my shorts and just my house slippers and stand in the rain and just—" he spreads his arms, points his face to the sky, and opens his mouth. "Them things I miss. You can't do that in here. Alls I'm sayin' is this here: When I get out, I don't want to have to poke my chest out any longer. It hurts to poke my chest out. It's a weight on my shoulders I've been toting for the last 20-somethin' years, and I'm ready to drop that weight because the load is heavy."

- [Chapter 1](#)

["Inmates Run This Bitch"](#)

- [Chapter 2](#)

[Prison Experiments](#)

- [Chapter 3](#)

[The CCA Way](#)

- [Chapter 4](#)

["You Got to Survive"](#)

- [Chapter 5](#)

[Lockdown](#)

## Chapter 5: Lockdown



**SORT members with a cuffed inmate during a lockdown.**

in Cypress.

It is difficult to imagine how someone gets stabbed in segregation. How do shanks get in? How do inmates get to each other? The morning after the stabbing in Cypress, I hear Assistant Warden Parker call over the radio for maintenance to come and fix the cell doors there. A month ago, he told us that inmates in the unit could pull some cell doors off their tracks. A month before that, Mr. Tucker, the SORT commander, told us something similar. Apparently this problem still hasn't been fixed.

On my fifth week on the job, I'm asked to train a new cadet. He is a short white man in his 40s with peppered black hair. He says he worked as a security contractor in Iraq and Afghanistan for Triple Canopy and Blackwater. He is hoping to go back to Afghanistan soon. "I had terrorists who blew up schools and shit that I had to take care of. It wasn't all PC like it is here." Prisoners here, he says, get treated with kid gloves. "They got rights and all this crap. Fuck that."

I show him how to open the doors and do callouts, and I tell him we are going to start letting people out for chow soon. "What do you mean?" he says, suddenly looking frightened. "You are just going to open the doors and let them out? I can't believe that!"

He doesn't think they should go out at all. "Fuck 'em. Not unless you have absolutely an emergency. Or you're on a work plan or some shit like that. I'd make prison so bad that you would never want to come back. When I was growing up, my mom used to live in Mississippi. They had all the work gangs and they were all in orange and all chained up. Chain gangs and shit like that. That's how it should be. Make it so bad, you'd never want to come back."

"It's pretty bad in here," I tell him. "People get stabbed here all the time." At least seven inmates have been stabbed in the last six weeks. As people come in from chow, I hear on the radio, "Code Blue in Elm! Code Blue in Elm!" A CO is frantically calling for a stretcher. Several inmates are stabbing each other; they can't count how many.

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**Several people were injured, and I hear one was stabbed about 30 times. Miraculously, no one dies.**

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"Everyone on the tier!" Bacle shouts to the prisoners milling about. "Fuck all that," one says. "We'll have another Code motherfucking Blue." Bacle blows his whistle. We get everyone in and I head out onto the Ash walk to see what is happening.

A minute later, a bleeding man is wheeled by on a work cart and I return inside. Several people were injured, and I hear one was stabbed about 30 times. Miraculously, no one dies.

Three days later, I see two inmates stab each other in Ash.

A week after that, another inmate is stabbed and beaten by multiple people in Elm. People say he was cut more than 40 times. During this time, Miss Price quits after nearly 25 years of service. She says she's tired of this work. (We will go without a unit manager in Ash for weeks.) Not long after she leaves, someone is beaten unconscious and stabbed through the cheek in Birch and another inmate is stabbed

Miss Calahan (her real name), the Ash key officer, tells me they had the same problem in the unit before I started. She points at D1 tier and says that for two months, she and Bacle told the higher-ups to fix the door. At least one inmate filed a grievance about it. "I popped it several times using my foot," Bacle says. He even showed the warden how it was done. Then, one evening, two inmates shook the tier door open from the outside, apparently unnoticed by the floor officers. One was carrying an eight-inch knife, the other an ice pick. According to a [legal complaint](#) [55], the two inmates found another inmate who lived on the tier and stabbed him 12 times in the head, mouth, eye, and body. One of the attackers warned that he would kill anyone who alerted the guards, so the victim lay bleeding, waiting for a CO to come through for the mandatory half-hour security check. Unsurprisingly, no one did. He bled for an hour and a half until a guard came by for count. He spent nine days in the infirmary.

"Child, next day they was out here fixing that door!" Miss Calahan says.

Bacle says he wishes an investigative reporter would come and look into this place. He complains about how, in other prisons, inmates get new charges for stabbing someone. Here, they are put in seg, but they rarely get shipped to another prison with tighter security. "CCA wants that fucking dollar!" Bacle says through clenched teeth. "That's the reason why we play hell on getting a damn raise, because all they want is that dollar in their pocket."

High levels of violence have been [documented](#) [56] at several CCA prisons. After Ohio's Lake Erie Correctional Institution was bought by CCA in 2011, inmate-on-inmate assaults increased 188 percent and inmate-on-staff assaults went up more than 300 percent, according to a [state report](#) [57]. In 2009, Kentucky [declined](#) [58] to raise CCA's per diem rate at one facility because the company's prison was twice as violent as its state-run counterpart and because a suicidal employee smuggled in a gun and shot herself in the warden's office. There is no current data on how violence in public prisons compares with violence in private ones. The last [study](#) [27] released by the Department of Justice was in 2001, and it found that the rate of inmate-on-inmate assaults was 38 percent higher at private prisons than at public prisons.

The stabbings start to happen so frequently that the prison goes on indefinite lockdown. No inmates leave their tiers.

But are any of these numbers accurate? If I were not working at Winn and were reporting on the prison through more traditional means, I would never know how violent it is. While I work here, I keep track of every stabbing that I see or hear about from supervisors or eyewitnesses. During the first two months of 2015, at least 12 people are shanked. The company is required to report all serious assaults to the DOC. But DOC records show that for the first 10 months of 2015, CCA reported only five stabbings. (CCA says it reports all assaults and that the DOC may have classified incidents differently.)

Reported or not, by my seventh week as a guard the violence is getting out of control. The stabbings start to happen so frequently that, on February 16, the prison goes on indefinite lockdown. No inmates leave their tiers. The walk is empty. Crows gather and puddles of water form on the rec yards. More men in black are sent in by corporate. They march around the prison in military formation. Some wear face masks.

5/6 My Four Months as a Private Prison Guard: Part Five



The new SORT team, composed of [officers from around the country](#) [59], shakes down the prison bit by bit. The wardens from the DOC continue to wander around, and CCA also sends in wardens of its own from out of state. Tension is high. No inmates except kitchen workers can leave the tiers. Passing out food trays becomes a daily battle. Prisoners rush the food cart and take everything.

"CCA is not qualified to run this place," an inmate shouts to me a day into the lockdown. "You always got to shut the place down. You can't function. You can't run school or nothing because you got everybody on lockdown."

Another inmate cuts in. "Since I been here, there's been nothing *but* stabbings," he says. "It don't happen like this at other prisons because they got power. They got control. Ain't no control here, so it's gonna always be something happening. You got to start from the top to the bottom, you feel me? If [the warden] really want to control this prison—goddamn!—why ain't you go' call and get some workers? But you know what it's all about? It's about the money. 'Let them kill theyselves.' They don't give a fuck."

One day, a former public jail warden visits Ash. "I don't know what's going on down here, but it's not good," he says to me. "There's something fucked up, I can tell you that."

"I been doing this for 16 years. This is a free jail to me. Too much shit going on down here."

I ask if Winn seems different from publicly operated prisons. "Oh, hell yeah," he says. "Too lax." If this were his prison, he says, there would be four officers on the floor, not two. At his public facility, officers start at \$12.50 an hour. When they go to police academy, they get another \$500 a month. Every time they pass a quarterly fitness test, they get \$300. The initial training is 90 days. I tell him it was 30 days here. "This is a joke," he says. "I been doing this for 16 years. This is a free jail to me. Too much shit going on down here. Not no consequences." He says CCA could lose its contract.

One day, the visiting SORT team comes to Ash. One masked officer keeps watch over everyone with a pepper-ball gun. Other SORT members stand around, eating Twinkies and Oatmeal Creme Pies and drinking Mountain Dew. They tear up the tiers, throwing things out, slicing up mattresses. They find drugs and cellphones. Bacle tries to stop them from taking inmates' coffee or destroying their matchstick crafts. Their overzealousness riles him. "Some people here think just because they're locked up they're a bunch of shithheads. I look at it, they fucked up and they're doing their damn time."

As soon as SORT leaves, inmates scream over each other to tell me what was taken, cursing me for not standing up for them.

During the lockdown, Corner Store asks me to let him out of his tier. With the canteen closed, his services are badly needed. Everyone's commissary is getting low; many inmates are in search of cigarettes. They ask me to ferry things from one tier to the next, but I refuse, mostly because I know that once I do, the requests will never stop. I don't let Corner Store out. I tell him it's too risky with all these eyes around. For days, he just lies on his bed, staring at the ceiling.

His release date is five days away, but he still doesn't know where he's going when he gets out.

"Isn't it Tuesday you are getting out?"

"Supposedly," he says. Louisiana law doesn't allow early release unless the inmate has an address to go to. New parolees have to stay in the state, and his mother doesn't live in Louisiana. With no one outside to assist him, he has to rely on CCA to make arrangements with a shelter. The prison's coach was trying to help, but Corner Store says he got "roadblocked" by the administration.

"So they just keep you here?" I say, incredulous.

"Yeah, basically. I'm not even angry, man. I just know my day is coming. I've waited years for this. I'm not mad."

I ask Corner Store's case manager what is happening with him. "He might be supposed to be getting out," he says, but "as long as he don't have that [address], his feet will not hit outside that gate. It ain't nothin' I can do for him."

"They don't want nobody to leave," Corner Store tells me. "The longer they keep you, the more money they make. You understand that?"



A SORT officer inside Cypress unit.

"We don't give a fuck!"

"I ain't got no fucking soap! No nothing! No deodorant! No fucking cigarettes! This place is shit!"

I don't want to give the impression we are afraid, so I walk the floor. Everyone, everywhere, is pissed. I feel an explosion coming and I want to flee. "I'm surprised ain't nobody got you yet," a white inmate with a shaved head says to me, his eyes cold and focused. "They go' get you."

A few years ago, a [riot](#) [65] erupted in a low-security CCA prison in Mississippi over what inmates saw as [inadequate health care and poor food](#) [66]. A guard was beaten to death. When Alex Friedmann, [a former CCA inmate](#) [67] and a company shareholder, asked for a moment of silence for the guard at a corporate meeting in 2013, the board chair refused to honor the request. (At the time, CCA [said](#) [68] it had "honored his memory a number of ways.")

King calls Bacle and me to the door. "Listen, it's a lot of tension down here," he says.

"No shit," Bacle says.

"They found 75 shanks in two days. These sonsabitches is dangerous, y'all. I don't want y'all goin' in them tiers. I don't want y'all lettin' nobody out. As of right now, if this shit don't get handled, y'all going to have a fuckin' riot on y'all hands. All the black suits ain't going to do nothin' but pepper-ball and gas all of they asses." He leaves.

A while later, a CCA warden from Tennessee comes and talks to the inmates. "Y'all saying that y'all are being mistreated. I got plenty of people here. If we want to act like refugees and animals, then we can do it that way." The prisoners don't back down.

A couple of hours later, SORT comes and escorts the inmates to the canteen.

#### A drastic change

One of the SORT members tells me they'll be at Winn for months. Yesterday, they found 51 shanks in Elm, roughly one for every seven men. DOC [records](#) [60] show that during the first four months of 2015, CCA reported finding nearly 200 weapons at Winn. That made it the state's most heavily armed prison, with more than five times more confiscated weapons [per inmate](#) [61] than GEO's similarly sized [Allen Correctional Center](#) [62], and 23 times more than Angola. "They getting ready to start a war," one officer says in a morning meeting.

Sergeant King stops by Ash. As he makes to leave, people start shouting from their tiers. "What's up with the fuckin' store?" It's been three weeks since anyone here went to canteen. Inmates are up at the bars, looking angry. "You 'bout to start a whole riot," one says to King.

Bacle seems nervous. "If they start throwing shit, you step right up here where they can't gitcha," he tells me, pointing toward the entrance. Less than a week ago, inmates [rioted](#) [63] in a [privately operated immigrant detention center](#) [64] in Texas. I saw prisoners here watching it on the news.

I walk over to one of the tiers.

"There ain't go' be no count or no nothing!" one shouts at me.

"Ain't no COs coming in this bitch until we go to canteen."

"That's what's up. We all standing behind that."

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"If this shit don't get handled, y'all going to have a fuckin' riot on y'all hands."

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"We gonna put this bitch on the channel eight news."

"Y'all risking your fucking life around here playing these fucking games!"

"Fuck the count! Bring the warden down here."

King comes over to one of the tiers. "Y'all gotta give me an opportunity. Before y'all start bucking. Before y'all start refusing. Because here's what's going to happen: They're gonna bring the SORT force down here."

The lockdown lasts a total of 11 days. When it ends, Corner Store stands at the bars, waiting for me to let him out to work the floor. I ignore him. He pleads, but I am unbending. I have become convinced that he thinks he has influence over me, though I can't articulate why. I become suspicious of his friendliness and wonder if he is manipulating me. I start to talk to him like every other inmate and he looks at me with confusion. When he lingers too long as I hold the gate open for chow, I slam it shut and let him stew. He calls my name as I walk away. I feel a twinge of guilt, but it lasts only momentarily.

His release date comes and goes. When I do count, I see him lying on his bunk. Eventually, he stops making eye contact as I pass.

An inmate orderly corners me. "Listen, what's the problem?" he says, leaning against his broom.

"What problem?" I say curtly.

"Listen, be cool. Be cool. We talking. Relax. Why you so aggressive when I talk to you? You're too snappy."

"I'm not aggressive, man!"

"No, no, no. There's been a drastic change in you. What the fuck went wrong?"

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### Things I used to view as harmless transgressions I now view as personal attacks.

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I tell him we are under pressure from management to tighten up. This is true, but there is more. I see conspiracies brewing. Things I used to view as harmless transgressions I now view as personal attacks. When a physically disabled man doesn't leave the shower in time for count, I am certain he is testing me, trying to break me down, to dominate me. The same is true when I see prisoners lying under their blankets during the daytime or standing at the bars. I don't care about the rules, per se; many of them seem arbitrary. But I become obsessed with the notion that people are breaking them in front of me to whittle away at my will. I write inmates up all day long. One paper after another, I stack them, sometimes more than 25 disciplinaries in a day. Some inmates are clever; they know how to get under my skin without breaking the rules. So I shake down their beds and look for a reason to punish them.

I carry all this with me. Some days, when I stop for gas on the way home from work I notice myself, for a split second, casing the black men who enter the gas station. When I shoot pool at the local bar, I imagine—I hope—that the white man in hunting camouflage who's playing against me will do something to spark a fight.

One day, the key officer tells me to go to the captain's office. I am nervous; this has never happened before. He is sitting alone at his desk. "I think you are a very strong officer," he says. I relax—it's my employee evaluation. "I think you are a very detailed officer. You got a knack for this. You got a 'it' factor for this. It's just who you are as a person. So, like you went down there to Ash and you just took the bull by the horns and just ran with it. It seems like them guys are starting to understand now—this is how this unit is go' run. This is how CO Bauer go' run it."

The computer screen in front of him reads, "He is an outstanding officer. He has a take-charge attitude. He is dependable and stern. He would be an excellent candidate for promotion."

"That's how we feel about you. I just think that you need to stay consistent with what you are doing. Don't break." Despite myself, I crack a smile.

Even after the lockdown ends, SORT does not leave. They patrol the walk, frisking random inmates, and shake down tiers relentlessly. One morning, I spot white buses parked outside the prison as I pull in for work. At the morning meeting, there are about 15 wardens and COs from public prisons across the state. The Winn warden steps up to the podium. "Our friends here from the Louisiana Department of Corrections have come to help us out," he says. This is the moment everyone has feared. Are they taking over? Will we lose our jobs?



A warden and a couple of officers from Angola follow Bacle and me to Ash. One tells us they are taking inmates who are too friendly with staff and shipping them to other prisons. He also says they've been administering lie detector tests to officers. Several have already refused to take one and walked off the job. When he says this, I get nervous. I go into the bathroom and flip through my notebook. I rip out my notes. I throw them in the toilet and hold the handle down for a good 10 seconds.

When it's count time, the COs from Angola blow a whistle and bark for everyone to sit up straight on their bunks. We've never done this. They tell us that if we get used to counting people sleeping under their blankets, we might eventually count someone who is dead. All the inmates sit up without hesitation. As long as the DOC officers are here, everything is quiet and smooth. They make inmates walk through the metal detector as they enter the unit, and Bacle and I put them in their tiers. I feel less worried about getting attacked, and some inmates tell me things are better for them, too. But others say that as soon as the DOC is gone, things will go back to the way they were. "It's like Mommy and Daddy back home," one prisoner says. "But when they go back on vacation, the kids is back out."

The Winn COs are deferential to the DOC officers, but in private they describe them as elitist pricks. It feels like incompetence has been replaced with overzealousness. The DOC officers chide us for letting inmates smoke inside, and when they spot someone smoking on camera, they find him and strip-search him in front of everyone. When I sit on a chair to take a break, a DOC officer, staring at the monitor inside the key, tells me to go into the TV room in one of the tiers. There is an inmate in there whose pants are sagging. He orders me to tell the man to pull them up.

### "It gets in your blood"

Three days later, the DOC officers leave, and the order they imposed vanishes with them. COs slide back into their old routines and prisoners resist more than usual. Assistant Warden Parker, however, is jubilant: CCA has hung onto the prison. "The great state of Louisiana came in with both guns a-blazing," he tells us during a morning meeting. "They were ready to tear Winn apart." In interviews with staff, the DOC learned that staff members had been "bringing in mountains and mountains of mojo"—synthetic marijuana—and having sex with inmates. "One person actually said that they trusted the inmates more than they trusted me, the warden. One staff member said, 'The inmate made me feel pretty. Why wouldn't I love him? Why wouldn't I bring him things he needs because you all won't let him have it?'"

Later that morning, I clench up when my old instructor Kenny enters the unit and approaches me. "The warden told me to find somebody that's knowledgeable and ready for leadership," he says, smiling slightly. "Out of all y'all's crew down here, I'm gonna handpick you. If you are interested in moving on up, I'm go' make it happen. I'm going to train you for the next level." I've been on the job for two months.



In the following days, I walk up and down the tiers at count time, barking at inmates to sit up on their bunks. If they are asleep, I kick their beds. Some refuse to obey, so I write them up.

“Someone asked me if we were pretty picky about who we hire. I said, 'Well, I'd love to tell you yes, but we take 'em six-legged and lazy.'”

At the end of a long day, I head down the walk. On my way out, I meet Miss Carter, the mental health director.

"How do you like it so far?" she asks.

"It's okay. It can be exciting," I say.

"It gets in your blood, doesn't it? Someone asked me if we were pretty picky about who we hire," Miss Carter continues as we pass through the front gate. "I said, 'Well, I'd love to tell you yes, but we take 'em six-legged and lazy.' We take whatever we can get!" she says with a laugh. "When you get down like this, you'll take whatever. But then we come across a few good people like yourself. That's not the norm."

Outside, there is a chorus of frogs and crickets. The air is sweet and balmy. Like I do every night when I get off work, I take a breath and try to remember who I am. Miss Carter is right. It is getting in my blood. The boundary between pleasure and anger is blurring. To shout makes me feel alive. I take pleasure in saying "no" to prisoners. I like to hear them complain about my write-ups. I like to ignore them when they ask me to cut them a break. When they hang their clothes to dry in the TV room, an unauthorized area, I confiscate the laundry and get a thrill when they shout from down the tier as I take it away. During the lockdown, when Ash threatened to riot, I hoped the SORT team would come in and gas the whole unit. Everyone would be coughing and gasping, including me, and it would be good because it would be action. All that matters anymore is action.

Until I leave. When I drive home, I wonder who I am becoming. I feel ashamed of my lack of self-control, my growing thirst for punishment and vengeance. I'm getting afraid of the expanding distance between the person I am at home and the one behind the wire. My glass of wine with dinner regularly becomes three. I hear the sounds of Ash unit as I fall asleep. I dream of monsters and men behind bars.

Late one night in the middle of March, my wife wakes me. James West, my *Mother Jones* colleague who's recently come to Louisiana to shoot video for my story, has not returned from trying to get a nighttime shot of the outside of Winn. Something is wrong. The sheriff of Winn Parish answers James' phone. James, he says, will be in jail for a while. I feel the blood drain from my face. Then I wonder, "Will they come for me?" We scramble to pack up everything that has anything to do with my reporting and check into a hotel at 2 a.m. A few hours later, I call in sick.



[Related: How Mother Jones senior digital editor got arrested while working on this story](#), [69]

The same morning, James tells the sheriff he needs to make a call. "You can tell them we didn't shoot you at dawn!" the sheriff says. James is later taken in leg irons into a room for questioning. "We don't care if you are doing an exposé on CCA," a deputy tells him. "We have nothing to do with them. They have given us trouble in the past." A state trooper adds, "I don't care if that guy works in the prison." James assumes he is referring to me but says nothing.

James is charged with trespassing. By evening, a \$10,000 bond is posted and he is released. "Send me a copy of the article when it's done," one of the cops tells him.

We pick up James at a gas station at the edge of Winnfield and drive out of town. The next morning, as I get coffee in the hotel lobby, I see a SORT officer standing outside in a black uniform, flex-cuffs hanging from his belt. Are they looking for me? We exit through a side door, and as I pull my truck out I see another man I recognize from the prison. We go back to the apartment, hurriedly throw everything in plastic bags, and leave. We drive across the border to Texas. I feel, oddly, sad.

A couple of days later, I call HR at Winn. "This is CO Bauer. I'm calling because I've decided to resign."

"Oh! Mr. Bauer, I hate to hear that!" the HR woman says. "I hate to lose you. Your evaluation looked good and it looked like you were willing to hang in there and hopefully promote. Well, I hate it, Mr. Bauer. I truly do. In the future, if you decide to change your mind, you know the process."

EPILOGUE

When Bacle pulled into Winn's front gate after I left town, the guard told him the assistant warden wanted to see him. "What the hell did I do?" he thought. In his office, Assistant Warden Parker asked Bacle what he knew about me. "He was a good partner," Bacle told him. "I enjoyed working with the dude. He has no problem writing 'em up." He asked what was wrong, but Parker wouldn't say. On his way out, Bacle asked the officer at the front gate, "What's going on with Bauer?"



A road in Winnfield, Louisiana.

Miss Lawson also told me that Assistant Warden Parker texted her a photo of me, asking if she knew who I was. After she identified me, Miss Lawson says, Parker told her to delete the photo and "forget I sent it to you." She kept it, however, and emailed it to me. The image was a shot of a laptop screen on which a video of me was playing. I recognized the footage immediately: James had filmed it on the afternoon before he was arrested.

When James was detained, he was careful to protect his camera and the footage on it, even as he was surrounded by SORT officers from the prison and Winn Parish deputies. Police body-cam footage that I later obtained shows one deputy grabbing James' camera as James struggles to hang on to it, telling the officer that searching his camera and memory cards would be illegal. After James was cuffed and put in a police cruiser, two officers left their body cameras on. The video shows a SORT member scrolling through the images on James' camera. The sheriff never obtained a search warrant for my colleague's belongings, but someone apparently searched them anyway. Geolocation data on the photo Miss Lawson sent me points to the sheriff's office. (The Winn Parish sheriff says he was "not aware" of anyone searching James' things.)

In April 2015, about two weeks after I left Winn, CCA notified the DOC that it planned to void its contract for the prison, which had been set to expire in 2020. According to [documents](#) [74] that the DOC later sent me, in late 2014 the department had reviewed CCA's compliance with its contract and asked it to make immediate changes at Winn. Several security issues were identified, including broken doors and cameras, and unused metal detectors. The DOC also asked CCA to increase inmate recreation and activities, improve training, hire more guards, hire more medical and mental health employees, and address a "total lack of maintenance." Another concern raised by the DOC, CCA's chief corrections officer acknowledged, was a bonus paid to Winn's warden that "causes neglect of basic needs." The DOC also noted that CCA had charged inmates for state-supplied toilet paper and toothpaste and made them pay to clip their nails. In a [message](#) [75] to its shareholders, the company gave no hint of any problems at Winn; it only said the prison wasn't making enough money. [LaSalle Corrections](#) [76], a Louisiana-based company, took over in September.

## The Department of Corrections also noted that CCA had charged inmates for state-supplied toilet paper and toothpaste.

Some guards stayed on with the new company, but many left. Bacle got a job at a lumber mill. Miss Calahan became a CO at a local jail. One went on to Army basic training. Another took a security guard job in Texas. Some are still unemployed. Assistant Warden Parker took a similar position at another CCA prison. Some Winn prisoners have been transferred across the state and some have been released. Robert Scott is still suing over his amputated legs. I still don't know what most of them were in for, but I was shocked to find out that Corner Store was in for armed robbery and forcible rape.

One inmate's mother read about me in the news and asked an attorney to connect us. When the lawyer told me her son's name—Damien Coestly—it took me back to my first day on the job, when I was working suicide watch. It had been a year since I'd pulled my chair across from him as he sat on the toilet, his entire body hidden under his suicide blanket. He had told me to "get the fuck out of here" and threatened that if I didn't he would "get up on top of this bed and jump straight onto [his] motherfucking neck." He had gone on hunger strike repeatedly to protest the limited dietary options and inadequate mental health services. In June 2015, he hanged himself. His autopsy said he weighed 71 pounds.

Five months after I left Winn, *Mother Jones* received a letter from a law firm representing CCA. The letter dropped hints that the company had been monitoring my recent communications with inmates and was keeping an eye on my social-media presence. CCA's counsel claimed I was bound by the company's code of conduct, which states, "All employees must safeguard the company's trade secrets and confidential information." Since guards are not privy to confidential business information, the implication is that what I experienced and observed inside Winn should remain secret.

CCA insisted on receiving a "meaningful opportunity to respond" to this story prior to its publication. Yet when I asked for an in-person interview, the company refused. CCA did eventually reply to the more than 150 questions I sent; its responses are included throughout this article. In one letter to me, CCA's spokesman scolded me 13 times for my "fundamental misunderstanding" of the company's business and "corrections in general." He also suggested that my reporting methods were "better suited for celebrity and entertainment reporting."

In March 2016, Corner Store walked free. He stayed in prison a full year while CCA was supposed to help him find a place to go. A lawyer eventually tracked down his father's address and arranged for him to stay there. He rode a Greyhound bus to Baton Rouge. His mother drove from Texas to see him. He got his seafood platter. He walked in the rain. He got a job detailing cars. Sometimes he would hop on a bus, any bus, and ride the entire route just to see the city.

Two weeks after he gets out, James and I visit him at his house on a quiet street near the airport. His father invites us in.

"You all taking [him] somewhere?" his father asks us as we sit on the couch waiting for Corner Store to get ready.

"You ain't heard?" the officer said. "He was an undercover reporter!"

Bacle recounted this to me on the phone 10 months later. "Oh, I *laughed*," he said. "I don't know if you remember, but I told you once that it would be nice to have an investigative reporter out there."

Word about me got out quick. The day after I quit, the Winnfield newspaper [reported](#) [70] that I had been working at the prison. [National](#) [71] [media](#) [72] picked up the story and CCA issued a [statement](#) [73] saying my approach "raises serious questions about his journalistic standards." A couple of guards I worked with reached out to me right away. Miss Calahan, who'd quit before me because she thought the job was getting too dangerous, wrote to me on Facebook: "Hey boy you got they ass lol." Another sent me an email: "Wow, Bauer! I'm honored. I don't even know what to say."

## One concern raised by the Department of Corrections was a bonus paid to Winn's warden that "causes neglect of basic needs."

I attempted to contact everyone who's mentioned in this story to ask them about their experiences at Winn. Some refused outright. Others didn't respond to my phone calls and letters, and a few I could not track down. A surprising number, however, were eager to talk. Corner Store insisted he and other inmates knew something was up all along. "I just don't know no CO to pull out his pad every five minutes," he told me. "Everybody's like, 'Oh man, I knew it, I knew it, I knew it.'" Collinsworth said that when he found out I was a reporter, he "thought it was cool." Christian thought "pretty much what most people thought: Can't wait to read the story!"

Some people whom I would never have expected spoke to me. One was Miss Lawson, who'd been the assistant chief of security. "They were scared to death of who you were," she told me. "After they found out you were a reporter, it was like, 'Oh my God. Oh my God.'" The DOC quickly required the staff to undergo fresh background checks. CCA's corporate office sent people to Winn to open what she described as an "extensive" investigation on me. They gathered "everything that had your name on it," Miss Lawson said. Ironically, the investigation narrowed in on the item that, in my mind, had symbolized my transformation from an observer into a real prison guard: the cellphone I had confiscated in Ash. "I got called like four or five times for that one phone from corporate," Miss Lawson said. "It was like they were insinuating that you brought the phone in or there was some information in the phone. I'm like, 'No, he found it in a water fountain.'"

After I'd filled out the paperwork about the phone and handed it off to Miss Price, it had disappeared somewhere in the chain of command. The mystery of the missing cellphone grew into a broader probe in which Christian and Miss Lawson were fired for allegedly selling phones to inmates. Both deny it, and CCA did not pursue legal action against them.

"Yeah, we were going to see if he wants to go anywhere," I say.

"You all ain't come here to arrest him?"

Corner Store comes out of his room and walks directly outside. He tells us to get straight in the car—no talking in the street. He's tense.

"Hey, this no names involved, huh?"

"What are you worried about?" I ask.

"Let's just say something happens and I go back."

"Who would you be worried about?"

"The free people." He means the guards.

"Do you think you might go back?"

"Anything is possible," he says. The smallest parole violation could land him back in prison. "If they were ever to see me again, they wouldn't have too much of a liking for me. They feel like you shouldn't even be talking about this."

When we pick up Corner Store the next day, he tells me he hasn't seen the Mississippi yet. He used to fish in it, growing up. We head to the river. After we sit and talk awhile, he stops scoping out everyone who passes by, and he stares out at the glistening surface. A tugboat chugs past. He walks down to the bank, scoops up some water, brings it to his nose, and breathes in deep.

**Story by Shane Bauer**

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*\*This sentence has been revised for accuracy.*

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