

Rooted in Prison

by [Armando Simón](#) (April 2023)



Still from Art & Crimes by Crimes, Molly Schwartz (animator), 2022

“Well, look who’s back,” muttered Keese.

Stone looked up from the table where he was playing a game of dominoes with Keese and the others. Outside the cell block, a guard was escorting four new prisoners towards the cell block. They were carrying their personal belongings and the mattresses assigned to them, with the large mattress over one shoulder (a very awkward process), so that at first the others could not see the newcomers’ faces.

“It’s Hickson!” Osby said, recognizing him.

“That fool!” said Stone. “How long has he been out, six, seven

months? And here he is, back again!"

"Some people never learn," Keese said, shaking his head, well aware that that statement could very well apply to everyone in the cell block.

They all knew of cases where the convict had been rearrested the same day that he had been released, either because of buying drugs from a narc, or simply going into a bar and getting drunk, thereby violating the terms of his parole right from the beginning, and getting picked up by the police for Public Intoxication, after boasting of being an ex-con.

"Must like the food here," muttered Osby as he slammed a domino down the table. Although he was not a black, he enjoyed slamming dominoes on the metal table bolted on the floor while playing.

"Yeah," agreed Keese in the same sarcastic vein, "free room and board, three square meals a day, job security, free medical treatment, recreation in a health spa, all utilities paid. Hey, what more could you ask for?" The others snorted with contempt. He, too, slapped down a domino on the table.

The door to the cell block was finally opened and the newcomers shuffled in. They were told by the guard which cells they were each assigned to and they parted to their different locations, carrying their individual burdens. Eventually, they came back out, one by one, into the adjoining Dayroom, where more of the cell block residents congregated at. Upon coming into the Dayroom, Hickson espied the group playing dominoes, gave a look of pleasant surprise at seeing some of his old buddies and waved.

"Hey, dawg!" Keese called out.

"Hey, dawg!" Hickson responded. He came over to the group. Everyone grinned in welcome.

"Whachu doing back here?" asked Stone.

"Whachu in for now ...? Fool!!" Osby asked in mock anger.

"Aww, man! They got me on a burglary rap!"

"How long has it been? Six, seven months?"

"Aww, man, nine months, don't remind me!"

"You must like this place," said Cantu, one of the four domino players.

"How much time they give you?" asked Keese.

"A dime."

"Aww, you should come up for parole in little over a year."

"Yeah, that's what I figure."

"Stone, here, he's scheduled to see the parole man tomorrow," Osby said, pointing to him.

"Oh, yeah? Think you'll make it?" Hickson asked.

"Don't see why not," Stone responded. "I've kept my nose clean in here. No disciplinary cases, so they've given me all that extra 'good time.' Got a good job in here. Also, my offense was nonviolent." He was confident. "I'm due to see him tomorrow. I'll make it."

"So what's been happening since I've been gone?" Hickson asked.

The others brought him up to date with gossip, telling him who had been transferred, gone home, gotten into a fight, had had an accident at work, who had been killed in a knife fight, as well as the latest news regarding staff and policies, including parole policies. After about a couple of hours, it felt like he had never left the place at all.

"Oh, and the latest stupid ideas they've had: if you get sunburned in the summer and ask the Infirmary for some lotion, they give you a case!" Keese informed him.

"Get outta here!" Hickson blurted.

"No, that's not all," Cantu told him. "Now, if you have an accident in the kitchen or anywhere else, and get injured, they give you a case and they may take away your good time, or put you in Lockup."

"You gotta be kidding me!"

"Nope." One of the other domino players backed it up.

"So! Enjoy your vacation?" asked Osby. "What'd you do while you were out?" Hickson, in turn, proceeded to tell them.

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The next day saw Stone sitting on a bench outside the parole office. Twelve other inmates were sitting, waiting to be called in by turn.

"Stone!" the parole commissioner called out and Stone went in. He sat down and the parole commissioner began to ask him background information as well as about some details about the original offense that had landed him in prison, then changed the topic.

"Well, everything looks in order. Your crime was not a violent one and your case didn't get any publicity, that's always the kiss of death for the possibility of parole, so you should get approved. How's your disciplinary record? Catch any cases while in here?" he asked, already knowing the answer from his records.

"No, sir, I've kept out of trouble all this time. Squeaky clean."

"What kind of job you got here?"

"The best kind you could get. I'm a cook at the Officers' Dining Room."

"Oh, that is good."

"Yeah, I can eat anything I want, when I want. If I want to eat something special, I just cook me up something, I don't have to eat that slop at the chow hall if I don't want to."

"All the officers know me," he went on, "I'm on good terms with everyone of them, even the captain. And, I can go to the showers when I want to, when there's only five or six guys there, instead of when the whole cell block showers, you know, 250 people taking a shower at the same time, it can get crowded."

"Well, you got it made here, no question about that. Just goes to show, a person can get used to anything with time. And speaking of jobs, have you got anything lined up, waiting for you for when you get out?"

"No, that I don't. You have to admit, it's kind of difficult to look for a job when you're in here."

"That's true. But, once you get out, you'll have to find yourself a job, that'll be one of the parole requirements. It's going to be especially hard if you got no references since you've been out of work for all this time. Unfortunately, the economy's in a recession right now, so you might have some trouble getting yourself a job—even with references. But, you'll find something, sooner or later." The Commissioner looked down at Stone's folder. "You've put down as your destination a halfway house—"

"Yeah, all my family's out of state. The halfway house is the only place that I can parole to."

"The halfway house will have quite a few rules you have to

abide by. It'll also take out a big chunk of your paycheck for rent and utilities, you do know that."

"Yeah."

"Same as if you were doing it yourself, though. Anyway, you'll have to do with the remainder." He paused before going on. "OK. That'll be all."

Stone left the parole office in a good mood and went straight to work at the Officers' Dining Room.

After lunch, after everyone had been fed, he fixed some lunch for himself and ate. Before returning to his cell block, he fixed three steak sandwiches and wrapped them up in cellophane. He put one under his right sock, one under his left sock, both just above the shoes, and straightened up. His pants' baggy legs covered the slight bulge each sandwich made and the socks kept them from falling out. He put the other one inside his clothes under his belt, where it stayed, secured by the belt. He then returned to his cell block.

In the cell block, he was able to trade the contraband for coffee, cigarettes and stamped envelopes, without any difficulty, from his steady customers (his morning customer, addicted to his Tony Tigers, had do without because of Stone's early morning appointment). At other times, he would trade for other things, or for fresh new clothes—even starched!—from a guy that worked in the laundry. There was a brisk trade for his cooking, so he always had everything that he needed.

Three weeks later, he was called back to the parole office along with some others, and was handed a short computer printout. In it, he was informed that his parole plan had been approved and he was scheduled to leave in two months. He showed the printout to everyone at work and in the cell block, grinning, and was congratulated by one and all.

A week after he received the approval, his demeanor began to

change. He became morose. He seldom smiled and would oftentimes be seen sitting alone in the Dayroom, lost in thought. His friends tried to draw him out, but he remained unusually uncommunicative.

The weeks passed and the change in character remained constant, except that now he became irritable. Even so, his outward activities remained unchanged. He would play dominoes, go to work and continued his wheeling and dealing in food, and one night a week went to school inside the prison. Since his change in temperament did not really intrude into others' affairs, no one really pushed him into revealing what was on his mind. Probably bad news from home. A few of his friends—those who had been around for quite some time—guessed what was preoccupying him all this time and said nothing since nothing could be done. They knew that life had suddenly become very, very complicated for him.

Osby, Hickson, Keese and Cantu were playing a vigorous game of dominoes one afternoon when Stone returned from work. He exchanged a few words with them and went to one corner of the dayroom, to watch TV.

About ten minutes later, they all looked up. There was an altercation going on. Stone and another inmate were loudly exchanging insults at the top of their voices in an increasingly insulting degree. A blow landed and a fight ensued. The tension in the dayroom flew through the ceiling.

Within a minute, additional guards ran in, overwhelmed and separated the two combatants, and they were taken to the shift captain. The captain spoke to each individual to ascertain the cause of the fight, then brought them both back in together.

“Have you gotten it out of your system? I’m not going to let you back into the ‘block and you’re going to start again, are you?”

“No, sir,” said Stone. “It’s over.”

"I got no problems if he's got none."

"OK, go on back." They both started to leave. "Hold on, Stone, I want to talk to you!" The captain sounded angry. Stone came back from the doorway. "That was really dumb of you! You know you're going to catch a case behind the fighting! There's a good chance that you'll lose some of your good time and your parole will be put off another year! That wasn't too smart of you, now was it?"

"No, I guess not, Captain. Do you think I'll lose my job?"

"No," said the Captain, surprised at the question. "I don't see why. The fight didn't take place at your station."

"Oh, good," said Stone, with relief. He smiled.

"Go ahead, go on back," the Captain motioned to the door.

He returned back to the cell block. Osby, Hickson, and Keese were standing by the water fountain when he went in, talking between themselves. They looked up at him as he entered the Dayroom, with inquisitive looks on their faces.

"Well?" asked Keese.

"Aww, man, I'm gonna catch a case behind that," Stone complained.

"Pits, man," Osby sympathized. "Think it'll hurt your parole?"

"No, the Captain is going to take care of that, so that instead of losing good time, I'll probably only get restricted from going to recreation," he lied.

"Well, that's good, then," said Keese.

"Yeah," Stone said. "It sure is. Anyone for a game of dominoes?" he asked, smiling for the first time in weeks. "I feel like playing."

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