

## THE REALITY SHOW

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*In this creative essay, Lamarr Little describes the monotony of abuse that prevails in prison. He draws striking parallels to television and film, depicting his daily routine as one of an actor in a production directed by prison officials. The role that officials give him is one he is bound to play, with no option to walk off set.*

My eight-by-ten cell has a toilet, sink, and cot. The bars encasing it are colder than the toilet-like sink I use to freshen up. Sometimes I feel as if I've been sentenced to an endless season of *Lock-Up*, the T.V. show. That's the best way to describe my life.

After putting on my state-issued green pants and button-up shirt, the show begins: I act like an inmate, by demonstrating model behavior – that is, living as a shaped-shifting, penitentiary-performing, disorder-having con artist. I tap into multiple personalities and will at any given moment display one of them. Take, for instance, the “Twins”: Passive and Aggressive. These personalities are inseparable in this environment. I wear them like the finest of fabrics and I developed an innate ability to shed them when necessary. However, it has to be suitable for the situation.

For instance, one time, I was reminded that I was an inmate, nothing more: one Black, one White, and one Puerto Rican officer – I know it sounds like the beginning of a cheesy joke, but bear with me – were standing in the corridor. This collection of characters is considered to be Gossip Girls. They were standing there, commenting as inmates pass by. Walking through the corridor is like the male version of *America's Next Top Model*. You're always on display. They scrutinized each prisoner, assessing each one based upon their physical appearance and swagger. They were calling them Crack Heads, Junkies, Drug Dealers, Killers, Child Molesters, Rapists, etc.

They named them like Hollywood directors summoning their actors.

How did they know who was who?

Was it that obvious?

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<sup>∞</sup> Being a writer in prison is difficult. Finding your voice, writing original things, and being honest is easy; however, figuring out what to write about can be challenging. Presumably, a prisoner is expected to write about prison and longing for freedom. I've been incarcerated for twenty-three-years and I feel drawn to dispelling misconceptions about prison, or prisoners' rights opposed to civil rights. The majority of my writing is done in a cell; seldom so I write in the yard (because of the inevitable distractions). Things are constantly changing in this environment, perhaps more so than in the free world. Prison's “consistent inconsistency” frustrates you until it manifests in your writing. Paradoxically, many things in prison remain the same. I hope the literary community looks at the honesty in my writing. I find many writers today to be intellectually dishonest. I am an artist, designer, leather craftsman, poet, sculptor, writer; and, I am currently working towards my BA in social studies.  
– Lamarr Starkim Little

I approached the reality checkpoint, waiting nervously to be objectified. They paused, looked me over. The dirty word, the same expletive uttered by my prosecutor left their lips. A nickname wannabe thugs use to bolster their street cred. A mobster's attribute. Something you give to a condemned person. "Murderer." I never killed anyone in my life. Me? They're obviously and definitely mistaken. I don't fit the criteria of the miscreants mentioned above. I guess it doesn't matter who I am, all that matters is who they think I am or want me to be. So I played the part; yeah, I'll play it until the director says, "Cut!"

Either way, the reality show has an array of expendable actors/inmates. Besides, the show must go on and ultimately evolve into something more. And although they didn't write the script, the directors are responsible for the reoccurring themes: testosterone, racial identities, the presence of women in a male's prison, gossip from guards and prisoners, unwarranted jealousy, prison yards, razors, and shanks. There you have it folks: a movie. It transforms from a reality show to a full-length feature film. Though hesitant and fearful, like walking into a prison for the first time, the actor/inmate's role is typical and short-lived. He seems like some of the contestants on *Naked and Afraid*. The next day a new character replaces him but the scene is redundant. Every day is the same. The prison cell receives a new tenant. A fresh body with a new identification number – no association with the Actors Guild, yet, a background in criminal activity. Ultimately, the script portrays the reoccurring life of an inmate.

As a result, you have something called the "Groundhog's Day Effect," similar to the movie where you go to sleep, only to wake up in prison. Same stale cell, same cold bars and same paint peeling corridors. The meals are the same. Your weird neighbors are the same. Your company officer never goes home. He stayed in the same exact spot while you slept. Everyone is playing their role, except you're the star of this show, movie, or whatever you want to call it. The only good thing is you get to play yourself, over and over and over again.