

A CLEAR PICTURE

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In this piece, Mr. Rodriguez shares a “clear picture” of his day-to-day life incarcerated at Green Haven Correctional Facility, including the routines, small moments of joy, and memories that surround him in his cell.

I can see how some people might think that my cell (or any cell for that matter) could be dark and depressing. Sometimes it can be, but that’s not always the case for me. The cell I’ve been in for the last few months isn’t of average size. I would say it’s a cell and a half, approximately 9 by 14. I basically have enough space in the center of it to work out without getting hurt. The noise level, I’d say, is relatively quiet. I say this because there are always one or two guys who just talk too loud, not understanding that during certain times of day, noise really travels. There is one such neighbor who is half deaf, and he has a booming voice.

And then there are a few music lovers, men who want everyone to know what they’re listening to. Depending on the type of music, this could be annoying. Going to sleep around 10 p.m. is impossible for some. But this is not the case for me. I invested in a few ear plugs to get me through the night. And, boy, do they make a difference. While the noise level is minimized whenever I wear a pair of ear plugs, there are times when the vibration from loud music playing can be felt. Prison life is truly a world unto itself.

The temperature in a prison cell fluctuates during seasonal changes. During the summer season, cells turn into sweat boxes, especially on humid days, personal fans not promising too much relief. During the fall season, the cool breeze entering an offender’s private space is welcoming, as it assures most that a good night’s worth of sleep is in the making.

During the winter season, industrial pipes in housing blocks are turned on, and windows are cranked up half-way as a way to balance the raising temperature. I tell you, there were times when these pipes started banging because of hot and cold air colliding in the pipes themselves, which is caused from constantly opening and closing the heating valves. During these days, most offenders wake up agitated, with bags under their eyes. And to make matters worse, the extremely loud banging sound coming from the industrial pipes is a precursor to a night with no heat. These nights are the worst, because with no heat, it feels like you’re sleeping in the yard on the concrete floor. And to wake up in a cell with ice cold walls and floors would make anyone want to run back under the covers.

During the spring season, most offenders hate having to constantly dry rag the wet walls and sweep and mop their cell floors. Cleaning your cell daily isn’t so much the problem; it is dealing with the dirt pile up caused by tracking, a term used to describe bringing dirt in from the yard or program areas.

I was fortunate to have neighbors who were non-smokers. Since I don’t smoke tobacco, the only smell in our area was incense sprayed into the air with a nasal spray bottle. This bottle is a good device to use as an air freshener. Usually all a

person has to do is pick a favorite scent from the array of Muslim oils, pour about half of the bottle of oil in the nasal spray bottle, fill it up with water, and you're good to go. Trust me when I say: this device comes in handy, because there are times when you don't want to smell another man's shit when he's using the bathroom.

The scent of your favorite Muslim oil would undoubtedly cling to the steel walls, and this is a good thing. Since I prefer cleanliness, having my cell smell scented creates the sense of familiarity. It is my mark in an otherwise oppressive enclosure. The steel slabs and cell bars that make up my cell are always cold to the touch, a stark reminder of the crime I committed 18 years ago. But this space has been made into a home.

On the back wall of my cell is my sink and toilet. They're made out of porcelain, and above the sink is my mirror, which is huge according to prison standards. It, however, looks out of place because it's not mounted on the wall, where it's supposed to be. It's propped on the edge of my sink, the empty space it once occupied revealing layers of paint going back decades. Upon visual inspection, my cell underwent four paint jobs since the birth of Green Haven Correctional Facility in the 1940's: dull white, monster green, ugly tan, and depressing gray.

On the left side of the sink is a skinny but long table. It's dark brown with no drawers. Honestly, there's nothing appealing about it. But simply having it in my cell brings a smile to my face because it's an extremely rare commodity in NYS prisons. I often refer to my cell table as my workstation because my creative madness takes place at it. I spend most of my time and energy working at my workstation, creating little monsters: academic papers, informal letters, and portraits. In essence, my workstation teems with life.

I have a West Bend, two-speed, clip-on fan mounted on the left side of my workstation. It's a horrible pleasure to have during the summer and winter months because it only runs on high speed, blowing hot air around the cell. My C-Crane AM/FM radio, a birthday gift from my friend Daniel, sits behind my fan. It brings life to my mornings as I normally start them by tuning into NPR News as I begin my day. My Swintec typewriter, a gift from my stepfather, Poncho, sits propped up in the middle of my workstation. This electronic device, I'm sure, tortures my neighbors whenever midterms and finals come around, giving many of them nightmares about a typewriter that won't stop clicking (Freddy Kruger has nothing on me!)

My Blue Bunny ice cream container, which currently spouts top ends of pens, pencils, a ripped piece of paper, a yellow highlighter, and the ridge part of a scotch tape, hugs the right side of my typewriter. A clear red water bottle and two gallons of Crystal Geyser hug the wall on the right side of my workstation, right below a tack board. A clip-on lamp, a brown fitted hat, a roll of masking tape, and an extension cord dangle from three cell hooks above it. A five gallon pail sits under my workstation, and it's mostly used as a garbage can or wash basin.

There are two lockers on the left side of my table. The one to the left has six shelves, a lot of space inside of it, and a door to which I could secure my personal belongings with a combination lock. I keep my clothes and food items neatly

arranged in it. The locker on the right is narrow. It has two shelves, very little space inside of it, and no door. I store my cosmetics, bowls and utensils, cleaning supplies, and extra gallons of water in it.

Situated across from my locker is my man-cave, which makes my cell look like a penthouse. My bed literally looks like it's situated within a steel enclosure, with a small window at the foot of the bed and three bookshelves arranged at the head of it. I keep my footwear under the bed and all my books, magazines, and school supplies on the bookshelves at the head of the bed. When resting, I sleep with my head at the foot of the bed for two reasons: there's no way I'm sleeping with my face next to a toilet – no matter how clean I keep it – and I don't like the light in front of my cell beaming into my face all night.

Everyone creates memories, even incarcerated people. We not only attach them to locations but also small objects. There's an object in my cell that makes me smile every time I look at it – and it makes me feel somewhat guilty. It's the Blue Bunny ice cream container. The memory attached to it is funny. About a month ago, I was taking a nap in the afternoon before my planned workout session. Jalapeño, a good friend of mine who works in commissary, awakened me from my sleep.

"Green Eyes," he says in his broken English, his Spanish accent heavily dishing out his words. "I got you one of your favorite ice creams, Salted Caramel Craze."

I thanked him and he continued walking to his cell further down the company. When he left, I thought, *Great! There goes my workout!* I retrieved the ice cream from the feed-up slot on my cell bars and basically pigged out while watching one of eight Harry Potter movies I rented for the Winter Break.