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“I Do Not Belong to Them”: One Woman’s Experience in a Texas Prison

*Chamel Anderson**

I was told to strip. I felt like I was auditioning for a porno flick—lift your breast, spread your legs, squat & cough, lift your feet—with each of us advancing to the next stage in the process. I wake up in the middle of the night, wondering how it got this far. I gaze at the white walls in this 6x9 cell, laying on a bumpy mat that hurts my back, sleepless and uncomfortable on the top bunk.

Breakfast call at 4am. Still in the nighttime hours. Dressed in white in a straight line walking to chow. Looking around at the bright lights & the gated fences with razor wire, thinking I’ve been kidnapped & placed in a refugee camp. Rushed out the chow hall shoving food down my face. Knowing the 15 minutes aren’t up. Every day I’m around people that don’t know me, as well as I don’t know them. Oh my god, there’s baby killers, child molesters, drug dealers & murderers. I stopped asking questions to why people are in here ‘cause I almost went in shock behind disbelief as I say, no seriously, what are you in here for? But they were serious the first time when they said what they said to me.

Here I am in the category of assault, for self defense, questioning do I even qualify to be in a place like this. Ten years is better than “life” but still the punishment doesn’t suit the crime. Texas prison says parole is a privilege, it’s not mandatory. Guards can talk down to us, treat us unhuman, write bogus cases . . . giving us punishment we don’t deserve, then have to face parole with the “hopes” of going home. But disciplinary cases can change our date. I was already punished when the judge sentenced me to this time I don’t deserve.

Shipped from this unit to that unit & another unit. Sitting in the cage waiting for housing & to see U.C.C. [Unit Classification Committee], hearing I.C.S. (aka Inmates Causing Shit) over the officers’ radio. Watching them run to Building One wondering to myself what’s going on, still looking around like I’m on a college campus including all the gates

*Ms. Anderson submitted her story to *Hastings Women’s Law Journal* via postal mail. She was formerly incarcerated at the William P. Hobby Unit, a women’s prison in Marlin, Texas. She is currently incarcerated at Lane Murray Unit, a women’s prison in Gatesville, Texas.

with fences & all the people I see sitting in the grass. My eyes focus back to Building One. Watching and waiting but still no one comes. Other girls telling me stories who've been here, the horror stories I heard that go on here at Hobby. A girl came out the building handcuffed with two guards in tow & three guards behind her. As they bring her closer [I see] she's in a gown, all cut up & bloody—my eyes get big in disbelief to what I see. I didn't sign up for this.

We pay \$100 a year to medical to get unrealistic & bad service. I'd rather be sick than be a guinea pig. Fibroid cysts are damaging to black women. If untreated it can cause serious long term complications. Two cycles a month is not what's up but their way to treat it is to give me birth control every month instead of remove it and take me off the birth control, which is said to cause cancer. They don't care about us. The meat they serve us is uncured. I heard in the feds they have salad bars & internet service, why can't we? "I'm in & welcome to prison" is the line of B.S. they try & feed me. People are institutionalized, with feelings of having to prove a point. I try not to fight, but it's unfamiliar not to react even though I want to. I have a purpose & it's not spending more time in here than I have to.

I've had two black eyes, looking like I got kissed by a raccoon. I've had a roommate fight on me and bite me in my back so now I can tell her dental plan history with the permanent scar on my back. I've had two girls jump me, which got me put in transit & transferred to the Lane Murray Unit. I look in the mirror at my scratched up face, I'm reminded by all these incidents that a man could have done this to me when one's helpless, self defenseless & won't fight back. It's a constant battle to keep my sanity. I'm not going home the person I came in as. Intake [at] Plane State said dreads aren't allowed 'cause I might be hiding a needle or something. I said I came from county, I didn't want to cut my natural hair, 10 years in the making. I simply stated can I get back on the bus & go back to Dallas County, they didn't care about the length of my hair. If I don't comply they would tie me down & mace me, cut & void like it never existed.

It's a battlefield. . .

If it's not me against the guards standing up for what I believe, then it's me against the inmates 'cause of what they don't stand for & the negative they do. I may be a ward of the state, but I do not belong to them. God sees what's done isn't right, but He also sees me through.

Self preservation is my right, my patience is a given. No one can tell the story that I am meant to tell.