

Solitary Watch

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

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by [Voices from Solitary](#) | December 30, 2016

As the year ends, we are republishing the following essay by Joseph Stanwick, who spent nearly two decades in solitary confinement in Texas prisons. I've seen men cut on themselves with razor blades, go on hunger strikes for the most absurd reasons, beat on the walls and doors, he wrote of his experiences there, because solitary confinement/isolation can drive you loony.

Originally put in touch with Solitary Watch by the invaluable [Real Cost of Prisons Project](#), Stanwick sent us occasional letters over the years, all of them beautifully written, astute, and wryly humorous. This piece, entitled Thin Comfort, was originally published in 2013. It describes an earlier holiday season, during which Stanwick developed a relationship with the man across the prison corridor, despite being on 24-hour lockdown.

Although we always wrote back, the letters stopped coming, and recently we learned that Joseph Stanwick had died earlier this year in a prison hospice at the age of 65. The cause was listed as liver disease related to Hepatitis C, an ailment all too common in American prisons. No obituary was published, and we have found no further information about his life or death. RIP.

To support our outreach program to people living in solitary confinement, please visit [Lifelines to Solitary](#), and if you are so inclined, [make a donation](#) to help support this work. To all our readers inside and outside of prison, we send wishes for peace, strength, and hope for the new year. James Ridgeway and Jean Casella

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We are on lockdown status again as every inch of the prison compound is searched for contraband and living on thin sandwiches again, jam sandwiches we call them, made of two pieces of stale bread and a spot of peanut butter jammed together. This time around they are the worst ever and I am hungry day and night or was until another con began giving me his food

Across the wide expanse of cellblock directly in front of my cell on the opposite side lives an elderly Mexican American man who is confined to a wheelchair. The day after Christmas he began refusing his meals. I didn't think it unusual at the time because some people fast around the holidays, you know? But then I recalled that up to Christmas Eve he had been getting law books delivered to him every other day or so for months from the prisons legal library, an activity that suggested he was diligently working on the appeal of his conviction or perhaps a law suit, but then abruptly after Christmas no more law books came and he quit eating.

The guards took no notice of this because they work a different cellblock every day and too there is always a con or two skipping a meal. No one seemed aware that the old man had stopped eating, but me. When we went on lockdown status on January eleven he had not eaten in sixteen days. I do not know his name or even if he speaks English. I stand at my cell door window panels and smile and nod across to him on the other side of the corridor and he does the same. That is the extent of our communications to each other, nods and smiles. I began informing the guards that the old man had quit eating.

I once read an article long ago in some magazine about the I.R.A. (Irish Republican Army) prisoners inside English prisons that went on hunger strikes to force England to recognize them as prisoners of war instead of common criminals. Many Irishmen starved themselves to death and the horrid publicity of it all compelled the English to agree to the strikers demands. I remember well reading about the I.R.A. prisoner who celebrated the victory from a hospital bed where in spite of his jubilation and desire to live he was doomed to die because after seventy five days or so of eating no food he had caused fatal and irreversible damage to his vital organs. He had passed the point of no return. I wonder what kind of damage the old man is doing to his organs and how much nearer his point of no return must be because of his age.

Not long after we began getting bag meals he started asking the guards feeding to give his bag to me. At every meal. It is no inconvenience to do so since we live right across from each other and so I began eating his jam sandwiches and my jam sandwiches too. He sits at his door at meal times and as soon as he sees that his bag has been given to me he shoots me a thumb up sign then disappears into the depths of his cell. I have asked a Sergeant of the guards and a Lieutenant and a Captain to stop at his cell and talk to him when they each came walking through the cellblock on their inspection rounds and they each did, but still he refuses to eat. I eat his food instead and am grateful for it too because eight pieces of bread at each meal instead of four keeps the pang of hunger away.

Today is the twenty third of January and it has been twenty nine days since the old man last ate. I woke up in the middle of last night to discover his cell door opened and he gone and I was startled by the sight of it. But then a few minute later guards brought him back to his cell. I think they must be taking him to the medical department to weigh him ever so often and monitor his weight loss. That seems logical and I can think of no other reason for taking him out of his cell at night. There are horror stories floating around inside this super segregated high security prison about force feeding cons who try to escape their sentence by starving themselves to ruin. Strapped down to a gurney, a rubber tube is pushed up their nose and down their throat to drip life preserving nutrients into their emaciated bodies. Ghastly tales.

I was able to get a guard to slide a National Geographic magazine and a religious magazine under his cell door. A minute later he appeared and shot me a thumb up. He is looking gaunt. I live in solitary confinement same as he and cannot leave my cell and so I have done all that I can possibly do to help him. I do not want him to give up on life. I care and yet at the same time hunger compels me to eat his food, a paradox I struggle with daily, reasoning with myself that if I refuse to accept his food the guard will just give it to someone else, but even so that rationalization provides thin comfort and I think that I am agonizing as much for eating his food as he must be for not eating it. Prison is hell I tell you.

On January twenty five the old man began eating again and on February one we were taken off lockdown status and jam sandwiches.

The Voices from Solitary series publishes dispatches from people surviving the lived experience of solitary confinement.

Accurate information and authentic storytelling can serve as powerful antidotes to ignorance and injustice. We have helped generate public awareness, mainstream media attention, and informed policymaking on what was once an invisible domestic human rights crisis.

Only with your support can we continue this groundbreaking work, shining light into the darkest corners of the U.S. criminal punishment system.

by [Voices from Solitary](#)

September 30, 2022

by [Voices from Solitary](#)

September 19, 2022

by [Voices from Solitary](#)

September 6, 2022

Solitary Watch encourages comments and welcomes a range of ideas, opinions, debates, and respectful disagreement. We do not allow name-calling, bullying, cursing, or personal attacks of any kind. Any embedded links should be to information relevant to the conversation. Comments that violate these guidelines will be removed, and repeat offenders will be blocked. Thank you for your cooperation.

This is a vivid and heartbreaking story of humanity thriving in the most inhumane circumstances. R.I.P. Mr. Stanwick.

As we enter the new year can I please ask everyone who knew or did not know my beloved brother Ricky Silva to celebrate his life that ended in Solitary Confinement this year. a respectful, courteous gentleman who retained his loving+caring attitude despite the mistakes he made. He didnt deserve to die alone desperate for forgiveness+pleading for medical help. anyone is interested his blog is still up, google concrete cage. I love you+will never forget you Riko. X

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