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Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

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Long Before the High-Profile Death Drew Attention to MCC, Uzair Paracha Endured Extreme Isolation and Suffering in the Federal Jail

by [Voices from Solitary](#) | August 19, 2019

In recent weeks, the nation has turned its eyes to the Metropolitan Correctional Center (MCC), the federal jail in Manhattan where Jeffrey Epstein died earlier this month. But some reformers and journalists have been [ringing the alarm bell](#) over conditions in MCC for years. In an [investigation for Gothamist](#) last year, Aviva Stahl described filthy conditions, substandard medical care, assaults by correctional officers, and extreme isolation in the facility.

The following is an excerpt from an essay by Uzair Paracha, which was originally published in the 2016 anthology [Hell Is a Very Small Place: Voices from Solitary Confinement](#). In the early 2000s, Paracha spent two and a half years in MCC while awaiting a federal trial in which he was accused of conspiring to help an Al Qaeda operative enter the United States illegally. He was housed in 10 South, a unit where people awaiting terrorism-related trials as well as a few others, like Joaquin El Chapo Guzman are held in extreme solitary confinement. People in 10 South are often held under Special Administrative Measures (SAMs), a post-9/11 designation that allows virtually no communication with the outside world. Paracha has written that his time in MCC was worse than the subsequent period he spent incarcerated at ADX Florence, the notorious federal supermax prison in Colorado.

Although Paracha was convicted and sentenced to 30 years in federal prison in 2006, he has always maintained his innocence, and there are advocates who support his position that he was a victim of federal overreach in prosecuting terrorism-related offenses. In 2018, a judge [awarded him a new trial](#), which he is currently awaiting from the Metropolitan Detention Center, a federal jail in Brooklyn (MDC). While conditions at MDC are not as extreme as in MCC's 10 South, the jail has had more than its share of problems with [substandard living conditions](#) and medical care, physical and [sexual abuse](#) by staff, and most recently a high-profile incident in which [many units had no heat](#) during the coldest temperatures of the winter. Katie Rose Quandt

Ten South was a disturbingly quiet place. There were cameras within our cells and sometimes the guards could be heard joking about our everyday behavior while they monitored us like lab rats. I remember them trying to joke around with us from their desks while we were using the toilet, for instance, because some cells were within hearing distance. The cells weren't all the same size, but two or three times as large as the average SHU cell. The bed, desk, and seat were concrete. The showers were inside the cells, which ran only hot or only cold water at a time (i.e., you couldn't mix the water temperature), so it took some time getting used to scalding hot or freezing cold water and I got burnt quite often. One camera had a clear view of the shower stall without a shower curtain or any other barrier for privacy. The other was either above the toilet or the bed. I myself knew of female guards who made comments on how some prisoners cleaned their private parts after using the toilet.

Our lights were completely controlled from outside and we had to ask the guards to turn our lights on or off. When we had particularly troublesome guards (please remember that the Iraq War was at its height and many of them were participating), they would turn our lights on in the middle of the night. The lights were large and very bright, and we wrapped our eyes with socks to sleep. The light issue was worse for those who were in cells that were beyond the guards' hearing distance, especially because most of them were lazy. There was a night light, which was simply a big light fixture that never turned off. We argued that it made no sense to have this night light because they could turn all the lights on from outside whenever they wanted to anyway, but we got nowhere with this. The windows were huge but the glass was frosted so we had a lot of light but couldn't see a thing. It was a shade of white during the day, blue in the evening and early morning, black at night, and yellow when it snowed, as the snow reflected the streetlights. This was one way to estimate the time because they didn't allow any watches (except once for a few months and then they confiscated them and put clocks in front of our doors so we could know the time for prayers).

We rarely saw anyone else. We saw the guards when they served the meals and they would also come over for small talk. We discovered that the guards wrote down a full account of each conversation in a register but that was our only opportunity for social interaction so we talked to them anyway. The senior administration people like the warden made rounds every few weeks. The SAMs prohibited us from talking to any other prisoner so we rarely and very cautiously talked to each other. I got a bunch of sanctions for just talking to other prisoners. You could spend days or weeks without uttering anything significant beyond please cut my lights, can I get a legal

call/toilet paper/a razor, etc. Some of the guards would steer the conversation toward our cases and ask for details, but that was not common and our lawyers warned us not to talk about our cases, so it never became a serious problem while I was there. All of the cells were heavily monitored, which was well understood from the SAMs.

The SAMs also denied me access to radio and television news, they only allowed newspapers that were thirty days old, and the delayed newspapers were supposed to be censored. MCC claims it did not have the resources to censor radio or television so we had no access to radios or televisions at all. As for the newspaper, one of the prisoners had a subscription to the *New York Times* and they suddenly started censoring it. He was very vocal about the fact that the paper was two months late (not one month as per the SAMs), that even articles from the food section were missing, and when they censored an article they cut it out of the paper so the articles on the back side of the page were also missing portions and he couldn't read most of it. The rest of us got the hint and I stuck to ordering travel magazines with pictures of beaches. The unit didn't have a leisure library or law library. If we needed any policy or case law we had to specify to education and they brought it over in a few days. There was no list or database to choose from so we had to know what we were asking for. If I needed time to read the material I could ask for a copy and they made me a copy after charging me for it. Depending on the person who was helping out they sometimes didn't charge me if there were not a lot of pages to copy.

About one in ten guards treated us like normal human beings. About one in ten hated us with a passion and harassed us at every opportunity. One of the respectful ones explained the harassment as the others wanting a piece of the action in the war on terror. The other eight just treated us like extra dangerous criminals. They were all very scared of the upper-level staff, especially the unit manager. One of the guards told me that the unit manager had warned them that if they didn't report us for talking to each other then he would report them. So the guards would report me to avoid trouble for themselves. Then he would come over and sanction me and take away my calls and visits with my family, the two things that mattered most to me. Once he was out sick and we were relieved that someone else might sanction us instead of him but he called in and put some kind of hold on things (that was not allowed by policy) until he came back to work. A few of us complained about him specifically but we never got anywhere with that. Nothing more than a verbal reprimand. I never met a prisoner who didn't hate him.

But the deafening silence of complete isolation all day every day and the constant awareness that someone is observing us through cameras 24/7/365 for years had an impact on each and every one of us and it was obvious. Generally it is about helplessness as we didn't have control over anything in our lives, our daily routine, the light, the water, etc. Isolation is also about privacy because we were all alone but there were constant reminders from the guards that we had absolutely no privacy.

When I was convicted of every single charge they actually made my SAMs more lenient. I faced the harshest part of my SAMs and incarceration while I was innocent in the eyes of the American law.

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

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Excerpt from *Species of a Lesser God*

VOICES:

Prisoners doing time in Security Housing Units (SHU) who claim to hear voices in their head; in the beginning generally describe them as very subtle. The voice or voices they hear, at first come ever so lightly, in almost a whisper. As if timidly requesting admission into the conscious mind. However, as the condition progresses the voices become louder, more aggressive and demanding.

I had been in the SHU for some four months when I first heard the voices. I was out in the dog run taking my daily stroll, allowing my mind to roam wherever it pleased when the first voice came, suddenly and without warning. But unlike the subtle process described above, this strange voice came with the force of a battering ram, demanding to be heard.

Eh! the voice shouted.

Caught by surprise I stopped in midstride not sure whether I had actually heard the voice or, if it had merely been the product of my wandering thoughts. I found myself holding my breath, astonished by what I had just heard or, thought I had heard.

Eh! Ehhh! it came again, only this time it was more forceful than the first. The sound of this voice had a hollow tone to it, as if someone were trapped inside a giant mayonnaise jar and shouting for help through its open lid. And then there followed a series of whistles, like those used to summon a dog. I cocked my head to one side in an attempt to zero in on where these sounds may be coming from. At first I considered them coming from beyond the walls which surrounded me. So I waited anxiously for the voice/whistle to come again. But nothing came, save the sound of my heavy breathing resounding off the walls. Shaking my head I continued my daily walk, shrugging off

the moments experience as part of the SHU Syndrome: reasoning, the voice had existed only in the canyons in my mind. In its lone desperate quest for companionship, perhaps my mind was creating its own Harvey, likened to Jimmy Stewarts classic imaginary companion and closest confident in his time of need.

Yes, indeed. The isolation in the SHU gives you plenty to think about. One must be very careful in keeping random thought in check and in perspective, lest he fall victim of his own fallacy. Not a good thing.

Going about my daily routine of exercise I again allowed my thoughts to run freely. Its what I do to keep from focusing on one particular train of thought for too long. Its not conducive to positive mental health to become fixated on ones dire situation in the SHU; as that will only breed anger and hatred the two deadly killers that gnaw and eat away at you bit by bit. Nor, do I permit myself to dwell on why my girlfriends letters have become few and far between. I try not to let my mind soar too far out into the free world, for the longing, at times, is unbearable. And when I think about my children, I try to reserve those thoughts for those moments when I whisper a prayer for their well being before surrendering to slumber. Everyday is a struggle to keep my thoughts from suffocating me in self pity and defeat.. Its why I write. Its the only effective weapon I have by which to fight back. I write so that others may see through my writings. That through writing, change will come about. That my appeals for justice will be heard. That the masses will hear my tiny voice screaming out from within this giant mayonnaise jar, that I too, have fallen into. I write for peace of mind. And I write, and I write, and the voice returned! Eh! You! it called. I was down on the ground doing push-ups when I heard it again.

Resting my knees on the ground I turned my head toward the echoing sound of the voice. The wall to my right was approximately five feet from where I had been doing push-ups.

Eeeeew! the whistle came. It seemed to come from a small weather drain situated along the edge and at the base of the wall. An iron grill covering, the size of a Frisbee, had been welded over it to catch whatever debris fell into the yard from overhead.

Still on my hands and knees I crawled over to the drain and as I went to peer into its dark hollow, a pungent odor arose from within and kicked me in my face, knocking me back on my hunches. Ugh!! It was the stench of death! If you have ever gotten a whiff of a dead animal in its decomposition state, than you know exactly what I am describing.

Eh! the voice came. And yes, from in the drain!

Removing my T-shirt I placed it over my nose and crawled back over to the drain, leaned down into it and shouted, Eh!

Yo! the voice shouted back excitedly. This is Double Life, in A-Pod! the voice identified itself.

It was actually someone from in the same unit on an adjacent yard, opening up a line of communication. Who is this? he asked.

Its Hector! In F-Pod! I shouted with the same excited enthusiasm. Hold-up, a second! I had to pull away from the putrid smell to catch my breath before I could continue with what would become the beginning of ongoing conversations with the many other voices I would eventually make contact with.

It so happened that the six yards in the unit were inter-connected via a drainage system which enabled us to communicate with one another. Crude, but effective. This communication system would later become essential to the relay of pertinent legal information central to our Constitutional claims in a court of law against cruel and unusual punishment. It also became a chat line for those needing to talk with someone. Staying in touch with one another was a comfort in itself.

After the first few conversations I had with different prisoners the smell of death that rose from in the drain seemed to have dissipated. I figured the rain must have washed away whatever had died in there, a trapped rodent or perhaps an accumulation of rotting insects. Or maybe I had just gotten used to it, who knows. But there is one thing for sure: I will never forget the haunting sound that arose from in the drain when no one was online talking. If you placed your ear up to the iron grill and listened real close, you can hear the tormented, moaning sound of the dead. A mournful sound which seemed to come from that charnel place in the netherworld. And not surprising. For the world we exist in is but a step away from Hell! . H.G. ..

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