

Solitary Watch

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://solitarywatch.org/2014/10/07/voices-from-solitary-a-mouse-and-a-murderer/>

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by [Voices from Solitary](#) | October 7, 2014

William Blake wrote this post while in solitary confinement at Elmira Correctional Facility in upstate New York. In 1987, while in county court on a drug charge, Blake, then 23, grabbed a gun from a sheriff's deputy and, in a failed escape attempt, murdered one deputy and wounded another. He is now 50 years old, and is serving a sentence of 77 years to life. Blake is one of the few people in New York to be held in administrative rather than disciplinary segregation meaning he's considered a risk to prison safety and is in isolation more or less indefinitely, despite periodic pro forma reviews of his status. He is now in his 27th year of solitary confinement.

Billy Blake is a prolific reader and a gifted writer who has written for Solitary Watch before, notably a piece that went viral worldwide called [A Sentence Worse Than Death](#). Here, he describes what happens when he bonds with another creature in his solitary cell. He welcomes mail at the following address: William Blake #87-A-5771, Great Meadow Correctional Facility, 11739 State Route 22, PO Box 51, Comstock, New York 12821-0051. Savannah Crowley

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Pop! Pop-pop-pop! Pop-pop! I heard the loud noise echoing through the solitary confinement unit at Shawangunk Correctional Facility in the spring of 1988. It sounded like somebody was slapping a sneaker onto the concrete floor of their cell.

I put down the book I was reading and went to my cell gate to call my neighbor, as it sounded like the noise might be coming from his cell. Willie, is that you making all the racket?

Yeah. There's a mouse in my cell, and he picked the wrong cell to try to steal some food from. I'm gonna kill his ass now, the man locking next to me said. Willie had been my neighbor since I had arrived at Shawangunks Special Housing Unit (SHU) in July of the year before.

Dont kill him, bro, just chase him out of your house. He's just trying to live like everyone else is, I pleaded for the little rodent's life.

Fuck that! I'm gonna kill this sucker so he can't come in here again. They ain't feeding us good enough to be giving anything up to a damn mouse, Willie said.

I heard a few more pops as Willie chased the tiny creature around his cell, swatting at it with his sneaker. All the sudden, as I stood at the bars looking toward Willie's cell, I saw the mouse fly onto the company and stop a few feet from the wall opposite the cell fronts.

Yeah! I got that motherfucker, Willie loudly said, sounding happy about ridding the unit of one mouse. It would not make his food any safer, though, the little he would save from his trays during the day to eat come nighttime. Shawagunks box was loaded with mice, roaches too. I have never seen a prison that isn't, and I've been in many. Killing one would make no difference.

The mouse didn't move for several minutes as I watched it, so I at first thought it was dead. But then it moved and began to head down the company, right toward my cell. It was moving very slowly, though, nothing like a mouse usually does, furry little rockets on four feet that they normally are, shooting across open areas to move about along the walls. As it got closer and I could see it better in the dim light shining on the company, I saw that the mouse was dragging itself by its front legs only. Its back legs were stretched out behind it, looking useless and not moving at all.

The angle the mouse was taking would have put it just past my cell gate, so it probably was trying to make it to the door of the pipechase between my cell and my neighbors to the left. Willie's cell was to my right. Mice run under the solid-steel doors of the pipechases all the time, and once in there are safe from any traffic there might be when guards are taking inmates out of their cells to shower, for recreation in the empty SHU yards, or to visits or call-outs to the prison hospital or elsewhere. That is probably where they make their homes, as those pipe chases are dark and are rarely opened. They could hide safely during the daytime and come out at night to search for food, as mice like to do, nocturnal things that they are. It looked to me like the injured mouse was heading to the safest place it knew, heading home to the pipechase.

Willie may have been happy because he thought the mouse dead and still lying out near the wall, but to me it was a terribly sad sight to see that tiny mammal struggle down the company dragging its useless back legs behind it. I have always loved animals, totally innocent and completely without malice as they are. It is with people that I have had my problems. People often operate with malicious motivations and ill intent, while animals never do.

My heart went out to that injured mouse as I watched him bravely make his way down the company, and I wanted to help him.

A missile is mandatory cell equipment for inmates doing time in SHU. It is a short pole made of rolled-up newspaper or other paper. After pulling thread from a bed sheet, or from anything else with thread in it, we make a long string (called a dragline in prison parlance) and attach it to the missile. By firing the missile through the cell bars and down the company, inmates cross draglines, and the inmate whose line is on top of the others pulls the line in. Magazines and newspapers go through many hands before they are discarded, and guys make deals to swap food all the time. A man might need a stamp to mail a letter or any number of other things, and because nobody can get their hand through the cell bars, there is only one way to pass something. The cell bars are in a plain-weave pattern of about two-inch squares, and feed-up hatches in gates and back doors stay locked, so no hand or arm is getting out of the cell to pass anything. If an inmate wants to send or get something from another prisoner, he must go fishing. To do that he has to have a dragline and missile

Fishing is against the rules, possessing a dragline or missile is not allowed, and the prison authorities have tried many things to stop inmates from passing items from cell to cell in SHU. But none of this has stopped the show. Almost every inmate in the box (SHU) keeps a dragline, and when the guards take it and its missile the inmate will simply rip another sheet for thread and roll up some more paper, usually before the day is done. Nearly every inmate will at one time want to pass something to or get something from a neighbor, so he will need the equipment to do it. Fishing goes on every single day in SHU. All the threats to write tickets that officers make, or actually writing them, and their many attempts to stop it in different ways, has never done a thing to keep inmates from fishing daily. And it never will short of sealing the cells up tight.

When my cell bars had been sealed off by a plexiglass shield that had been placed on them, I have fished under the gate with only a half-inch space to work with, tooth-paste squirted into folded paper and put into an envelope being my car or whip to attach a dragline to, to get it down the company. I have pulled crushed bread rolled up in a sheet of writing paper through a hole in my cell wall no bigger around than a number two pencil. I loosened the bolts beneath the steel bedframe, which ran through the wall to my neighbors bed, by jumping up and down on my bed like a kid on a trampoline till sweat poured out of me. Once I had gotten a bolt loose enough to turn, I unscrewed it and pulled it out. A small hole ran through the wall, and when I looked through it I saw my friends brown eye looking back at me. I smiled and knew he was too, though all I could see was his eye. Then I heard him say, Its chow time now, Billy! The guards hadnt fed me in more than two days, and they had put garbage cans and pillows on the narrow company to block it off and make it impossible to fish under my plexiglass-covered gate. I could eat at last, though, pulling bread that my buddy rolled up in paper through that tiny hole in the wall.

Leave just a crack or small hole anywhere in a cell and the men and women locked in solitary will find a way to reach through it to the world outside their steel and concrete cage.

I used a missile to reach under my gate to gently guide that injured mouse into my cell. He needed help, and I wanted to see if I could give him some.

I am no veterinarian or doctor of any kind, but after watching how the mouses hind legs were dragging uselessly behind it, it did not take a medical degree to figure that its back may be broken. I was worried about causing the little animal more pain than it was already likely in, or doing more damage, so I slid a sheet of writing paper under it to pick it up rather than use my hand, which would squeeze it no matter how gentle I tried to be. When I got the mouse onto the paper, I took it to my bed and set it down there. I wanted to check it out thoroughly.

The mouse was clearly a baby. I didnt have a clue at the time as to how fast mice grow or how long they live, but since the mouses body, sans the tail, was no longer than the tip of my pinky to the first joint, I knew it had to be very young, just a baby. I could see a bump on the lower part of its spine that didnt look like it belonged there, and it grew bigger before long. This made me feel certain that its back was broken.

What could I do? I thought to myself. I expected that it would probably die before the night was done, so I decided to just try to make the tiny creature comfortable till it did. If I let it go it was not likely to find any food or do very well in the condition it was in, so I set it in my dry sink to keep it from wandering off while I made a box for it.

In the early part of 1988 I was allowed the same property in my cell as population inmates, though I was housed in SHU. I was in the box then, as I still remain twenty-six years later, because the prison authorities had deemed me a security threat too risky to be allowed in general population. I was in the county jail charged with armed robbery and possession of cocaine when I shot two police officers during a failed escape attempt in 1987, killing one. It was for this crime that corrections officials deemed me a security threat and placed me in SHU upon my arrival to the state prison system. Later in 1988 New York State would enact more draconian laws for its administrative segregation status inmates, which I was, so they would be allowed no more privileges or property than inmates serving SHU disciplinary sentences for serious violations of prison rules.

I had all the privileges and property that a general population inmate would have when I tried to help the paralyzed mouse, I was just segregated and kept locked in a SHU cell all day apart from population. I had no disciplinary sanctions and had violated no rules or regulations but would soon be living under the exact same barren conditions as the SHU disciplinary status inmates around me, when the Department of Corrections changed its regulations regarding how it treats its inmates who have violated no prison rules but whom they have labeled a threat to prison security for one reason or another or for no good or real reason at all, as is my situation today. My crime is nearly three decades old, and I am a world away from the young fool I was when I committed it. But in ad seg I have remained for all these years.

So I had tape when the paralyzed mouse happened along, though I would soon be banned from possessing it and most of the other property in my cell. I used it to tape the cardboard backs of five writing tablets together to make a box for the mouse. When I finished

putting it together I put the mouse in it, keeping the sheet of paper underneath him lest he be jostled about while I was trying to slide it out.

When I was a kid growing up on the south side of Syracuse, New York, the city's worst neighborhood, we had plenty of mice in every house we lived in, all of which were multi-family homes. My father, with whom I lived with a younger brother, fought a never-ending battle against the rodents and roaches that he never gave up on despite the futility. I remembered him mentioning that mice love peanut butter and jelly on bread better than any cheese; and since he was always catching plenty in the traps he would set around the house, I figured he must know what he's talking about. I didn't have any cheese on hand anyway, so I could not have tested the theory had I wanted to.

I did have plenty of peanut butter and jelly, though, so I dabbed a bit on a small piece of bread and put it in the box with the mouse, right in front of him so he wouldn't have to crawl at all to get to it. To wash it down the tiny fellow would need some water, so I put a little in the lid of a Styrofoam cup and put it within easy reach for him.

Back in 1978, ten years before the handicapped mouse and what today seems to me like forever ago, I was a 14-year-old doing time in a juvenile facility called South Lansing Center, not far from Ithaca, New York. I took a first aid class there that, as it would happen, helped me save the life of a friend who had cut his wrist wide open with a butcher knife and severed veins. Among other things, I learned how to treat shock in that class. I thought that with a broken back the mouse might be in shock, since I recalled that severe physical trauma could cause it. I could not elevate the mouse's feet above the level of its head as I was taught to do in the case of a person in shock, but I had the thought that the mouse's physiology didn't require it to help the flow of blood to the brain. His head was down and resting on the paper he lay on, I saw and looked to be as low to the ground as any part of him. It was early spring, though, and pretty chilly on the unit. So I knew what he needed.

I got my small blunt-tipped scissors out and cut a little square from my blanket. I then laid it over the mouse's back, taking care not to cover his head so as not to interfere with his breathing. That was about everything I could do after doing that, little though it seemed to me to be.

A prayer isn't something that I have ever been convinced guarantees anything, or even has a chance to work well for anything but the peace of mind of the one making it, but I was at the time as I still am talking to God daily on the off chance that He may be listening. So I said a prayer for that baby mouse, asking God to ease the pain that I knew it must be in. I did not ask God to save the tiny creature. What could a paralyzed rodent living in a solitary confinement unit do to stay alive? I had thought. Likely nothing. But I was not going to pray for the poor animal's death either.

So I prayed that its pain would be relieved, and I hoped in my heart that it would be. Whether the mouse lived or died was in God's hands, or fates, or whoever it is that has dominion over such matters and I am not going to pretend to know.

I never told Willie, or anyone else, that I had the injured mouse in my cell that night. So no one on the unit knew.

The next morning, soon as I got out of bed, before I even went to the commode to take my morning leak, I checked on the mouse. He was still alive, and he had moved. He had also eaten all the bread with peanut butter and jelly on it. I put my finger in front of his nose to see if he had made some kind of miraculous recovery and would try to run, but he didn't move at all, just stood there frozen, eyes wide open so I knew he was not sleeping. I could see rapid movements on his body signaling fast breathing and the speedy heartbeat of a small animal, so he wasn't dead with his eyes stuck in the open position. I could also see the bump on his spine far down his back; it looked bigger than ever.

When I touched him with my finger he moved then. He was still dragging his hind legs.

I didn't know if the mouse was a he or a she, and I knew not a thing about their anatomy that would allow me to have a look and see what it was. When I was talking to him as I did what I could to make him comfortable that first night, though, I had referred to him as a male. So he was always a he to me, even if he was in actuality a she.

Since he had lived through the night I became hopeful that he would make it for the long haul, and I really wanted him to. As I watched him still dragging his back legs uselessly behind, I was convinced that the bump on his spine was indeed a break that meant he would never run like a normal mouse again. But I was loving that tiny animal before he had twenty-four hours in my cell, and I wanted him to live. He could not be set free in the condition he was in because he would either starve or be easily caught dragging himself slowly about by an inmate like Willie, and I knew this. But I would take care of him and hope the guards would leave him alone when they were in my cell searching it, as they did several times a month when I was at rec.

Days passed and the mouse lived and got more and more active along the way. I stopped keeping him in the box except when I was out of my cell. When I was in the cell I would block the front gate and back door off so he couldn't slip under them and get away. This allowed him to roam freely around the cell, and I thought it good for his rehabilitation. He needed the exercise.

After the first few days, when I was convinced that he would live, I officially gave my new pet a name. I called him Mouse. I did not want to give him a female name and have him turn out to be male and you know he would never forgive me for that. Likewise, if I gave her a male name when she was in fact female, that would not be cool. So I gave it the genderless appellation Mouse, figuring that there could be no name more aptly suited to a mouse. That was what I had been calling him since the first day anyway.

One day, as I was watching him drag himself across the floor, I had a flashback to something I had seen on TV awhile before. I couldn't recall what show I had been watching at the time, but while watching television one day years before I had seen paralyzed dogs in these contraptions with two wheels that looked a bit like the buggies that jockeys ride in as they race harness horses, the trotters and pacers that I had watched run countless times at the track my father would bring me to when I was a kid. The dogs had broken backs just like Mouse did, and the two-wheeled buggies allowed the animals to run around by using only their front legs, bodies resting on and held aloft by the buggy, its wheels acting as substitutes for the animals' useless hind legs. Could I make a buggy like that for Mouse? Would he even move around in it if I did? I was going to find out.

I used Styrofoam feed-up trays that I was served my meals in to make most of the buggy, with a paper clip as an axle for the two tiny wheels I had fashioned to spin on it. I cut a harness out of one of my green prison shirts and sewed it right to the platform of the buggy that Mouses body would rest upon. In a couple of hours, after a little trial and error, I had the buggy done. Now to see if Mouse would like it.

A couple months had passed since Mouses back had been broken and he had grown bigger quickly, had even gotten a bit fat. I spoiled him with Carnation Instant Milk, which he loved, and any food he cared to have that I would get in my meal trays or in packages and commissary (both of which were privileges I would lose when the ad seg regulation changed). Though he remained paralyzed he seemed to otherwise heal well, and I could pick him up with no apparent distress. I even discovered that he was far smarter than I ever thought a mouse could be.

I was wondering if Mouse was in any manner trainable, so I decided to put him to the test. Before I fed him I would tap a plastic pen loudly on the cells concrete floor and do it in a distinctive pattern that I would never alter, sort of like spelling the same message out each time in Morse code. Then I would go get him usually from under the bed where he liked to hang out and feed him. So he only ate after hearing the same distinctive tapping sound being made on the floor. For a few weeks I'd tap and wait before I went to get him, and eventually he did exactly what I had been wondering if he would ever do: he came out from under the bed on his own, to where I was tapping and had his much-loved PB and J on Keebler Townhouse Crackers with Carnation Instant Milk, looking to eat. He was tentative at first but before too long would come quickly whenever I would tap. Mouse was trainable after all, a veritable genius among mice, I was certain.

I maneuvered Mouse into his harness, wrapped the little strap around his back that secured him snugly, locked the strap in place with its clasp made of a staple, and put him on the floor in his new buggy. He took off immediately just a short distance at first, like he was surprised that he could move so easily and quickly, but then he was gone, zooming all over the cell like a joy-filled man who had just been healed at a Christian revival after spending half his life in a wheelchair. Just like the paralyzed dogs I had seen on TV. Mouse could now run fast and well, with wheels for hind legs.

I learned a lot about mice from Mouse during those first couple of months that I had him, and one of those things was that mice will play just like a young kitten and puppy will do. At least young mice like Mouse will. When I would put my finger on the floor and slide it back and forth very quickly in front of him, he would watch it intently just like a kitten does, head snapping from side to side to follow and looking like he is ready to pounce. When I'd shoot the finger toward him real quick Mouse would jump as much as having only two good legs would allow, take off running in his buggy, make a quick circuit of the cell and come right back to play some more. Sometimes he wouldn't come right back, though. But a tap of the pen on the floor would bring him to me fast.

Mouse was not so little anymore once even requiring me to rebuild his buggy and make a new harness when I went to the yard one fateful day, as I did almost every day back then. I always put him in his box when I would leave my cell and I did likewise this day, like I had done for all of the seven or eight months I had him. When I returned to my cell, after putting the newspaper barrier back in front of the gate to block it off, I went right to the box to set Mouse free. I kept him in his buggy most of the time so he could move around the cell easily as he pleased, taking him out for his thrice weekly baths, that I suspected he never cared for, and not much otherwise. He was still in his buggy when I looked into his box, but the buggy was crushed. Mouse had a black Papermate pen stuck through his back, the same kind of pen that I used to call him to me, only this was one that a C.O. had owned, as many did since the prison gave them out free to officers and inmates alike. There was blood all over the cardboard box.

A C.O. had come into my cell when I was at rec and murdered Mouse. My best friend in that prison was dead and I was on fire inside.

I had three dogs that I loved when I was growing up, and I loved Mouse every bit as much as I had loved them. For the months he was with me he had been good company in a place that can be a lonely world, and I would miss him dearly.

No inmate could tell me who had gone into my cell and killed Mouse because none had seen. The inmates in the area of my cell were at rec in the SHU yards just as I was, or in the dayroom if they were protective custody inmates. Any C.O. could have come out of the SHU control bubble (console) and gone into my cell unobserved by any prisoner. But I knew who had done the dirty deed.

All the guards knew I had the paralyzed mouse and none had bothered him for the months that Mouse was with me, though they regularly came into my cell to search it when I was at rec or on visits. There is no such thing as privacy in prison and nothing that you might think is yours is truly your own. The police will come into your cell whenever they please, take what they please, break and destroy what they please, and few have any regard for the law or prison rules or regulations themselves, not the regulations regarding cell searches or property confiscation or any other regulations. To them, the law and rules and regulations are for the inmates alone. We have no rights but what the whim and fancy of our keepers deign to grant us at a given moment. These are facts that no corrections official would ever publicly admit, but that every prisoner knows only too well.

I had written a complaint against a SHU officer (for all the no good it would do) days before Mouse was killed, and in the days that followed he would let me know that it was he who had done the deed. I had known it immediately anyway, before he began taunting me about my friends bloody death.

On top of the sadness I felt over the loss of my buddy, I was angry in a monumental way, the Irish in me working its curse through a fiery temperament. I thought about making a counterattack on the man in blue who had murdered Mouse to punish me for writing what was a totally truthful complaint, but in the end I chose to handle the blow without riposte rather than get myself in serious trouble by serving the cop the comeuppance that he rightly deserved. Back then, in my younger and more foolish days, I did not always make this sort of smart choice: I did not always let an injustice or misdeed be served up to me without seeking to make the one who had served it wish to God that he had not, no matter what the consequences of the payback might be.

But we live and learn, and if we are smart we gain some wisdom along the way. I like to think that I have.

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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Thank u for sharing.

Thank you for sharing this story.

Great little story. There should be psychological testing of guards or anyone in positions of power over others; and then periodic testing. The guard who killed Mouse has clearly been dehumanized, probably because of his impotence and inability to hurt and kill prisoners under his care, or at least not as much as he would like to. And William Blake has found his own humanity, grown out of his careless and destructive behaviors. A great example of the paradox of freedom; William in solitary for decades choosing compassion, and a guard in his blind hatred choosing to be a shithead. Kudos to William Blake. Keep writing!

Billy, Thank you for a wonderful tale of your dear friend Mouse. Your compassion and kindness for a tiny wounded little mouse speaks volumes about your humanity. One of the problems of our system of justice is it seems not to allow for personal growth and change in people. The young man you were is not the man you are now. Continue to grow, as you obviously do through your writing. Ill watch for more of your stories. Smiles to you.

I have just found a mouse in my conservatory. I am not bothered as I love & respect all gods creatures. I looked up solitary mice & found this story. So moving & I hope the man who murdered the mouse gets his own karma. Beautiful story you show compassion Billy. Thank you.

Killing a mouse with a pen is an insult to writing. I hope that this man has many correspondants. He seems to have the strength and concentration to reward them with beautiful answers. So please people, make good use of your pens!

Two main considerations:

1. Billy, you express yourself beautifully, with true command of the language as observed by your sentence structure, punctuation, vocabulary, paragraphing and interesting references or sidebars which dont deter you from focusing back on the main topic. Its wonderful writing.
2. True learning is a change in behavior. Though it is very true that the caring and love you had for Mouse is the essence of your story, what is perhaps more poignant is your love of your own self by denying yourself the impulses to seek physical retribution on that prison guard who brutalized Mouse. Your self discipline shines. It was your lack of self discipline that put you in the SHU. Whether you make it beyond your present SHU conditions is unknown, but in a very spiritual sense you have already been freed from those confines. Stone walls do not a prison make, nor iron bars a cage. You can live knowing you showed a respect for yourself and others through your humane self discipline. Its quite something to me to realize that where you have lived all these 27 years so brutally restricted ultimately could not deny you some wonderful mastery of your own mind.

Thank you Billy for this beautiful story. Your love for this creature of God is never lost Mouse takes your love and humanity with him wherever he goes in his travels. The world is blessed to have the love in your heart it shines on all of us. Your love is a gift to every one of us.

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