



Voices from Solitary: A Mouse and a Murderer

By William Blake

William Blake has been in solitary confinement in New York State for close to three decades. In 1987, while in county court, 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 serving a sentence of 77 years to life in administrative segregation, meaning he is in isolation more or less indefinitely, despite periodic pro forma reviews of his status. A prolific reader and a gifted writer, Blake here describes what happens when he bonds with another creature in his solitary cell. We have devoted this entire issue of the newsletter to a slightly shortened version of this poignant story.

"Pop! Pop-pop-pop! Pop-pop!" I heard the loud noise echoing through the solitary confinement unit 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 this prison's Special Housing Unit (SHU) in July of the year before.

"Don't 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.

"No, 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 of a 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 him," 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. The 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 pipe chase between my cell and my neighbor's to the left—Willie's cell was to my right. Mice run under the solid-steel doors of the pipe chases 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 pipe chase.

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 other's pulls the line in...

Leave just a crack or small hole anywhere in a cell and the men and women locked in solitary will find a way to 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 mouse's 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 didn't have a clue at the time as to how fast mice grow or how long they live, but since the mouse's 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. I could see a bump on the lower part of its spine that didn't 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....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...So I had tape when the 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...

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

About Solitary Watch

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Solitary Watch (www.solitarywatch.com) is a web-based project aimed at bringing solitary confinement out of the shadows and into the light of the public square. Our mission is to provide the public—as well as practicing attorneys, legal scholars, law enforcement and corrections officers, policymakers, educators, advocates, and people in prison—with the first centralized source of background research, unfolding developments, and original reporting on solitary confinement in the United States.

The print edition of Solitary Watch is produced quarterly and is available free of charge to currently and formerly incarcerated people, to prisoners' families and advocates, and to non-profit organizations. To receive future copies, please send a request to the address or email above.

We also welcome accounts of life in solitary confinement, as well as stories, poems, essays, and artwork by people who have served time in isolation. Please send contributions to “Voices from Solitary” at the address above, and tell us whether you would like us to use your name or would prefer to remain anonymous.

Note: We regret that we cannot offer legal assistance or advice and cannot respond to requests for this type of help. Legal materials sent to us cannot be returned to the sender. We also cannot forward mail to others. Thank you for your cooperation.

quire 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 fate's, or whoever it is that has dominion over such matters—and I am not going to pretend to know...

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 Mouse's 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 Mouse's 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 cell's concrete floor and do it in a dis-

tinctive 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 as 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 friend's 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.

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