

Bruce Wilborn

Synopsis: Another Day In Paradise

Based on the author's experiences Another Day In Paradise is a work of creative nonfiction that presents a slice of life inside an adult male prison. It is an observational story told by stepping behind towering gray walls to follow convict Doug Harvey throughout one day.

Set in a facility plagued by drugs and violence the action begins the moment Doug awakens, his eyes open, recounting what he sees, hears, and smells laying in his bunk, standing in the chow hall line, walking the yard; what he feels and thinks of himself, his crime, and the men, convicts and screws, who crowd him in a world apart from his life as a college student. And interwoven throughout are the golden threads of Doug's enduring and deeply emotional relationship with his mother. Where other family members and friends have used prison walls as a relationship barrier, his mother has never left his side. This one relationship has given him hope, and the drive to build toward a future outside of prison, albeit, an unpredictable future.

Where Doug's incarceration spans twelve years he relates several aspects of prison life through flashbacks, including, corruption, drug smuggling, relationships, assaults, suicide, and a friend's failed escape. And early on he observed that dudes who bet with a zero account balance get their heads busted when time comes to pay up. Doug has never gambled, and yet, in deciphering the prison code of dos and don'ts he has not escaped moral and physical battles, which left him scarred and with a choice, pick a side or walk alone.

With little more than tv, old movies, and working out for distractions Doug has plenty of time to think about how he got into prison, and how he is going to get out. And out means home to his family, to his mother. To get there he walks a thin line, sometimes veering, but always with an eye on the ticking clock, counting down the years, seeing changes within and without, and desiring forgiveness for an attempted burglary turned murder. A murder committed by his codefendant when the homeowner appeared from around a corner with a gun in hand. It is a murder for which Doug does not always believe he is responsible, especially when his reaction to his co-dy's assault was to yell, "stop, stop, stop." And by the time Doug could move it was too late, the poor guy was dead.

Still a young man at thirty-two, but grown old after twelve years in, Doug knows right from wrong as definitively as he knows what doing the right thing would mean to one grieving family who wants to know, "why, why him?" Yet, at the end of every day when he switches off the cell's light and his head hits the pillow dark shadows shift within and this college student turned convict questions whether he'll ever have the courage to do the right thing.

Another Day In Paradise

With stealth and persistence the sun's first pale rays crept over a window sill. This gray infantry skirted a shirt hung as a barrier and infiltrated the room beyond; an incursion freeing captive colors and shapes from night's dark hold. These same invading rays shot through the eyelids of the room's sole occupant, Doug Harvey. His retinal receptors were struck and his eyelids fluttered, fluttered, batted and then opened. It was no longer the dark of night but neither was it full on light. Doug closed his eyes and curled up tight with his right hand beneath the stiff pillow where his mussed brown head lay. There this lone man's breath went out, touched a wall only inches away, and came back to him, warm and moist on his face; when just seconds before he'd been home frying eggs - three sunny side up in a black cast-iron skillet. The whites sizzled and popped, and he had stood, metal spatula in hand, waiting and watching, and as he watched the yellow globe at the center of the pan ruptured. Runny yolk poured out over the egg white. Darn it. That one would have to be hard-fried. Doug liked his eggs warm, oozing thick yellow-orange goo. He wanted to go back to his Mama's stove and start all over. Two for himself and two for her this time round. But that was impossible. It was morning and he was awake. In prison. His first real thought every day.

Doug lay curled in his bunk, cell 12, C-Building, Massachusetts Correctional Institution, Lexington. Lexy for short. A soft sigh passed his lips, followed by nothing, nothing except the steady hum of a large fan placed at the end of the tier. So quiet, so still in the moment, as if all of life was holding its breath. And Doug lay listening. ... What would it mean to hold his breath, to hold it until he was blue, until he alone felt nothing? That was not possible. Not yet anyway. Not without looking back. Not without seeing tears. So he lay curled to the wall listening - listening for nothing in particular but listening all the same - and the quiet whispered, 'it's early, so early.' But how early? And did he have time to get back to sleep? Doug couldn't answer either question. His watch was on the cell's metal desk. He wondered if he could reach it if he rolled over. Probably not. The cells in C-Building were bigger than his old one in West Down. And the voice that said, 'maybe you can,' was ignored as he pictured holding on to the bunk's metal frame with one hand while stretching for the desk with the other. A precarious leveraging, and a lot of effort at that. It'd be easier to just get up. He'd do that ... in a minute ... or two ... maybe. He continued to lay curled in his bunk, his breathing soft and shallow, and knowing full well if not for the damn sun he would still be asleep. The sun was a silent intruder that had always awakened him, halted his dreams, and drug him back to reality, ever since

he was a boy. Growing up with a window facing east over fields of corn he awoke every morning when the sun broke through the blue curtains hanging beside his bed. At ten he'd moaned and pulled the cover over his head 'til Mama called him and little brother to get up for school. At thirty-two, and in prison, he usually slept, denying the sun's existence by wearing a sleep mask. A nightly habit he'd picked up from his first jailhouse neighbor, a sour mouthed old timer who'd spent his life in and out of soup lines, AA meetings, and the joint. That was back in county lock-up where they both had been awaiting trial. The constant uncertainties of the future had made the time awaiting trial the longest fourteen months of Doug's life. Then and ever since he had worn a layer or two of fleece over his eyes at night, which was his only real hope of sleeping all the way through 'til morning count. And that was what he wanted, to sleep until count. There was no point in waking up early in prison, - he had no place to be. Doug would have had a mask on this day, but unfortunately his most recent piece of handsewn sleep gear had been confiscated as an unauthorized item when he was lugged to the hole. And now, this shit of waking up with the sun sucked. Yes, it sucked, and if he did nothing else that day he was going to get a piece of sweatshirt to make a new mask. And if the assholes took it, they took it, he would make another. He needed to sleep.

Doug opened his eyes, and during his unrestful stretch of resting the wall so close to him had turned by shades from a pale nothingness to a confirmed yellow. A dull, flat, aching yellow. A monotonous yellow covering every wall of every cell and corridor from floor to ceiling, corner to corner, filling every crack and crevice. This too was an assault on his senses. Enough already. Doug pushed back the white state issued sheet which covered him, and rolling over swung his feet round to sit up. The concrete floor was cool and blown with a fine brown grit, a courtesy of the fan at the end of the tier. He shuffled his size twelves into the brown rubber Clogs sitting beside the bunk. Only a nasty fuck walks around barefoot in prison. Scratching the back of his head he yawned. His watch was indeed on the desk, 6:14. Too early to be up, and too late to get back to sleep with a towel over his head. He stood to relieve himself. A metallic ring broke the stillness. Morning's call can be loud in a quiet cell, and according to Dr. Oz takes on average twenty-three seconds. His eyes followed the stream into the metal bowl of the combined stainless steel shitter and sink unit bolted to the wall at the foot of the bunk beds. Thank you DOC. He finished with a shake and reached for the plunger button set into the wall above the sink, but he stopped short, his hand in mid-air. Doug was no longer in the hole where the walls were over a foot thick, and as far as he knew everyone else on the tier was still asleep. Against the wall next to

the toilet leaned a lid left by the cell's previous occupant. Doug covered the metal bowl with this piece of brown cardboard cut to fit the pear-shaped crapper. To his satisfaction the lid quelled the rising smell of acid, and he had not awakened his neighbors with a pipe jarring blast of water before they absolutely had to be up for morning count at 7:15ish. Some guys wouldn't give a shit, but sleep was every con's escape from prison; a place where Doug could enjoy being home frying eggs for breakfast. And waking in a yellow shithole was everything in the world opposite of enjoyable.

With a gray bar of state soap Doug lathered his hands in the steel sink. Every Tuesday afternoon at Lexy one bar and one roll of one-ply tp are all you get for free as guests of the DOC; caring folks who spare no expense to provide the very least. Rinising, he splashed and rubbed cold water over a sleep wrinled face; his senses awoke with a shiver. He then ran wet fingers through his baby-fine brown hair before smoothing an ever thinning shag mop with a black plastic comb, and ended this morning ritual by parting the damp hair on the left as he had since kindergarten.

Above the sink he had taped to the wall a five by eight inch platic mirror. Two bucks for a ten cent piece of warped Chinese crap that gave back distorted reflections. His head was not that big, nor his ears that long. He hoped. And before him brown eyes, flashing gold flecks which he could not see in the piece of crap mirror, looked back at him.

"We'll get through this," Doug whispered to his horse-eared image. These easing words his Mama spoke to him during many a phone call. He turned, and mindful not to bang his head on the upper bunk, sat down on the foot of his bunk. Beneath the green vinyl covering of his cotton stuffed mattress looped wires and springs squeaked against the shifting of his one hundred and ninety pounds. It's not easy getting comfortable in prison, and each man tries to get it when he can. Settling in he leaned back against the pitted, yellow cinder block wall. The concrete was cool and under his thin, white state issued t-shirt goose bumps rose up and down his spine. He felt and endured the surprise of the cool wall and goose bumps, knowing that each would pass. All things pass. The wall across from him was as silent as he. He was alone. So he sat, and after a bit his fingers first found, and then began to pluck pilled fabric from the thighs of the gray mesh shorts in which he'd slept. The past month had been trying and the trying was not over.

* * * * *

Between his first and second year at Wennick Doug had trained to be a barber. A skill that would cover the rent and books for another two years. The training had shown up on his probation sentencing report and then his DOC intake folder. Within three weeks he had a job in the prison's four chair barbershop. He was assigned to the evening shift to cut the guys who worked during the day in the industries' building. Three bucks a day from the prison and two bucks from whomever he cut. Not bad - for a prison job.

Doug had replaced a guy released on parole, and was given the end chair, farthest from the shop's door, alongside Tony. Ray-Ray had the first chair. And five evenings a week, Monday through Friday, at five past six, Chappy, a rank and file old timer would unlock the shop's door, let the three barbers in, and then partially fill two benches with men wanting a cut. Chappy would then lock himself in with the cons. He wanted to listen to 70's rock, and smoke a cig or two in the storeroom, slash office that was outfitted with a scarred oak desk and a worn, but comfy looking, padded, brown recliner.

When Chappy wasn't snappin' his fingers to an old song or "resting with his eyes closed," as he liked to say, he told fishin' stories from his years on the waters off the Cape. Ray-Ray and Tony had heard all of the old man's long winded tales, so it was Doug who asked questions. He had neither heard the stories nor been on a trawler.

When two new desktop fans were delivered to the barbershop Chappy asked Doug if he had a fan.

"No, but I've got one comin' through Property," he'd answered.

"Well, take one of the one ones and pass it on once your's shows up."

The fan Chappy handed to Doug was same black plastic, twelve inch model cons could buy through the Property Office, which after being ordered took three to six weeks to arrive.

A month passed and on the afternoon that Doug received the fan he'd ordered he asked Tony, his fellow barber, if he wanted the fan from the shop. Tony accepted, he had a friend who was without. Doug could have sold the fan, but Tony was teaching him to cut styles some of the younger guys wanted, and one good turn deserved another.

That evening Doug carried the fan back to the barbershop and handed it off to Tony, who thanked him. The next day after lunch Danny, an older guy with a three-leaf clover tatoood across his gray-haired back, stopped in Doug's coorway. Doug knew him by name, that he ran a book - baseball, hockey, football - and had a half-dozen or more ass-kissing tagalongs.

"You wanna get the fan back from that nigger."

Doug had been stunned.

"What?"

"Look, you're new. You don't know the rules yet. If you weren't new there would be no conversation."

Doug had stared into Danny's dull brown eyes.

"I'm not in your gang."

"Yeah, but you still gotta stick with your own. And that means you don't do favors for the niggers."

Doug had not heard the n-word growing up, and hearing Danny say it, it was not a word, but a feeling of distain, and perhaps hate, born out of fear and ignorance.

"Why does it matter to you that I gave Tony the fan."

"It makes us look soft."

The only sense that made to Doug was that Danny was living in his head; that the old guy imagined other cons cared enough to judge him because Doug had given a fan to a friend.

"If you don't get the fan back you're gonna have a problem."

Danny had left Doug's doorway with that statement ... an ultimatum. Sitting on his bunk, making a cup of tea, watching Dr. Phil, Doug had pondered the situation for the rest of that afternoon. No one he grew up with was in prison. He had no homeboys. He was the very definition of a loner, and he would handle the situation with Danny alone.

That evening before a crowd gathered around the door to the barbershop Doug had explained the sitch' to Tony. His response had been to offer to go to Doug's block with a few of his boys and settle it with Danny. Doug had declined the offer.

After the shop had closed that night Doug walked the green and yellow tiled corridor back to his block and then climbed

the steel stairs. With each step his feet grew heavier and he could feel himself warming up to a sweat. He reached the third tier landing and stopped.

He could turn around. His cell, bunk, and tv were waiting for him on the second tier. Or, he could continue on to see Danny.

Would any good come of talking to him?

Would it turn into a fight?

Doug had felt his heartbeat picking up its pace as he walked down to Danny's end cell. He stopped at the threshold of the cell's doorway. The Red Sox were on, and looking up to his visitor, Danny had turned down the volume, but had not invited Doug in. From the doorway Doug laid out the happenings with the fan, and that he had no beef with anyone. Danny had nodded a couple of times and said a few words. There had not been any hostility, not even a back and forth of rising voices, and Doug had walked away. Hmm? It had not gone as he'd expected.

Doug had been brushing his teeth the following morning when four visitors rushed into his cell. They shoved and crowded him into a corner, lumping him up while a fifth guy stood in the doorway. Doug could barely move to fend off a blow, and when the pummelling stopped the four kept him shouldered into the corner while the one in the doorway spoke, "this isn't personal, if you's gotten the fan back we won't be here. You gotta stick with your own."

As quickly as it began they rushed for the cell's doorway, and Doug was alone. He envisioned running after them, and quickly saw how that could turn into a bloody mess, especially if he caught up with them on the stairs where they could easily, five on one, toss him over the railing. He bent and picked up his green, trampled toothbrush, then tossed it into the sink. The hard plastic had clinked against the stainless steel.

Doug had then sat on his bunk. The bed frame's wires and springs squeaked beneath him as he settled in, his back against the yellow cinder block wall. His left ribs were a bit tender but he wasn't really hurt. Though his mind had been stunned ... from the absurdity and violence over a fan ... but it was more than just a fan. He had sat and not ten minutes passed before Danny appeared in his doorway.

Doug had jumped up.

"Whoa, whoa. I'm here to tell you it's over. Unless you don't want it to be."

Doug stared him down.

"Why'd you do it?"

"It's just the way it is."

That had confused Doug.

"You make it the way it is."

"It was this way before I was born."

Doug would not change Danny, who enjoyed the benefits of the status quo. ... So long as he remained in his current role.

"Okay, it's over."

"Alright then, see ya around," Danny had said and then bounced.

But for Doug it had not been over, it would never be over. He would never forget, it had been his first prison fight ... not that it had been much of a fight. Bum-rushed and crammed into a corner he had spent fifteen seconds trying to fend off half-hearted blows. If the five of them had been there to hurt him they could and would have. Doug would also not forget that.