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Nothing to See Here

Lisa Lesyshen



It was a quintessential prison setting. Everything was concrete, gray, and frigid. The metal doors were a stale army green and clanged shut every other minute, adding to the chaotic environment. The noise in the unit was almost unbearable with TVs

battling, illegal radios blasting different stations, and 41 women talking, laughing, yelling, and singing. In the background, one could hear the garble of officers calling offenders to the block office over the faulty PA system. This unit was slightly toxic and

would have been unrecognizable to most human beings. It reminded us daily that everything in prison was in short supply except for anger, fear, and grief.

In my cell, I was trying to read when I heard the voices in the unit erupt into a hurricane of sound. The tenor of the unit flipped hastily. People were yelling “Stop!” and “Why are you going up to the third tier?” And then the horrific unfathomable splat of a human skull hitting the concrete floor. The yells of the women morphed into screams and guttural animalistic wails. Their screams spiraled upward to the ceiling as their words crashed on top of one another, spilling out fast and frenzied. The officers bellowed, “Lock the fuck down now!”

The bedlam increased as the women ran to the jumper to see if she was still alive and if they could put her brain matter back inside her skull. We were waiting for her body to show some sign of life. I caught a glimpse of her splattered on the concrete in her green outfit that swallowed her body.

Every moment passed like water through a clogged drain, barely moving, barely getting through. The woman was dead, but the officers were still required to do CPR on her. All three of the officers who witnessed the suicide would quit in the next three months due to PTSD. For the women of Unit 3, CDOC would offer a one-time-only group mental health session to help deal with the trauma of having watched someone swan-dive to their death.

The disparities were on full display as management tried to minimize the severity of the situation. Their flagrant disregard for our well-being was apparent in their lack of action. Their power of denial was potent.

The whole pod became unhinged, undone by what everyone had just witnessed. At this point, no one could comprehend what had just transpired. It defied all logic. This event would remain imprinted on my mind with disturbing clarity forever.

But the most troubling part of this story is that the woman who killed herself had been pleading for help for the last seven days. She had been literally begging the staff for a mental health provider to come and talk to her. No one took the time to talk to her; no one thought she was worth the effort, so she took matters into her own hands and killed herself. Her world was unraveling, and no one cared. Ending one’s suffering in a place that did not value people—that deemed them unworthy of help—was common in this setting.

During this time, the facility had only four mental health providers, which meant that each mental health provider was responsible for two hundred clients. I declined their gracious offer of a mental health appointment because I realized that that would have opened up a can of worms that they were ill-equipped to deal with. If I had shared with them all the problems that were occurring around me, they would have offered up a few pages of word searches or maybe a crossword puzzle to soothe my angst and promised me they would be able to see me again in a year. It is disorienting trying to provide for our own mental health in a system that does not care. Her suicide had annihilated our hope, which had been tenuous at best.

Inside the razor-wire fence she was a number, a throwaway, unseen. But outside the fence, she was a mother, a daughter, a sister, a friend. Someone who was missed. Her name was Rachel.