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## **Asian Shame, an American Stain**

By Franklin Lee

The metal crossbar slid open with a loud "clank," signaling each of us "fresh fish" to open the metal-barred gates into our personal purgatory. The small, dark, concrete six-by-nine room held a solid metal bunk bolted to the floor, a stainless steel sink and toilet combo just behind it, and the barest of essentials: one thin mat for each bed, two starched sheets, and two questionable black blankets. The cracked plastered walls showed wear from years of exposure to human sweat, tears, and who knows what else, unveiling several paint layers of puke green, rusty red, and a beige that was once off-white. Some of the old layers most likely contained lead.

After making my bed, I climbed onto the top bunk, staring at the old scarred, worn walls. The last occupant left a souvenir for me, a taped magazine picture of an ocean sunset with a scripture scribbled beneath it. It was from Philippians 4:8: "Whatever things are true, noble, just, lovely, good report; if there is any virtue and if there is anything praiseworthy.. meditate on these things."

Outside I could hear the roar of laughter and hundreds of conversations in every direction, all talking over one another, reminding me of a demented Mad Hatter's tea party. A half-scripted rap song or a lunatic's heckle filled

the night as I, staring at my paper ocean, attempted to drown out the chaos of my living Hell.

This was my first day in San Quentin State Prison.

About two generations ago, hundreds of Chinese escaped the Communist regime, in hopes of a better life in America. A century earlier, many sought the taste of "Gold Fever," or a chance to earn money to send home to their families by laboring and dying while building railroads. Around the early 1900s, many Chinese immigrants were locked away in a prison just east of the city at San Francisco's Angel Island. Families were torn apart, separated by gender into cramped dorms, most often three metal bunks high. The government interrogated the Chinese trying to determine who were already citizens and to cap the flow of immigrants pouring onto America's soil.

Months would pass, and many families never learned what had happened to their loved ones. With no access to paper with which to write home, poems, letters, and personal stories of singular struggles were carved in silence into the wooden walls of the barracks. The hope was that one day someone would discover their sad fates.

My grandfather was one of the lucky ones. His father had already established dual

citizenship through Hawaii and paved the way for his son to come to the United States. Later my father, at age thirteen, and his mother, would find themselves walking the streets of San Francisco, brought over from China by my grandfather.

Lying wide awake in my bunk that first night, I could hear the late-night encore of "San Quentin Idol" as contestants tried to out-rap one another with their own "hardcore gang" lyrics. Finally, the evening concludes with the Lord's prayer being recited and everyone joining in. Halfway through it gets drowned out by the Prison's prayer—the program shut-down call. Across the rotunda, in the other block, I could hear the rallying cries of Blacks, whites, and Mexicans shouting out their good-night roll calls. How did I end up being drafted into this army of criminals, locked away in one of the worst places in the world?

Growing up as a Chinese-American, I live a life of duality. Some may see it as a collaboration, a hodgepodge of two cultures blending into one. I called it, "not quite one or the other." Often shunned by my white peers for my "slant eyes" or "pug nose," to describe my characteristics; "Ching Chong China man" or "Ah-so" to describe my language, and "too smart" or "bad driver" to

describe my personality. I had to struggle against my anger, feelings of injustice, and disgust towards the ignorant and prejudiced, but it is not in my "Asian nature" to lash out. I cannot fault the "Gui Lo" person because I am and will always be an outsider.

The other duality is my being an American. Asians look at me as "whitewashed" or "ABC" (American-born Chinese), as if I am not real enough to be Chinese or even considered Asian. I have an American tongue because I have difficulty rolling my dialect as quickly as my Chinese brothers, and because I would rather eat a hamburger than white rice. I grew up believing that I did not fit in anywhere.

The next morning, I marched down with the other inmates through narrow corridors, and descended stairs into a dingy, stained, raucous chow hall. The food was barely edible and suddenly I even missed the taste of white rice. In prison, everyone sits at the same time. Everyone gets up at the same time. Everyone walks at the same time. You are just a number in blue, forced to comply with any whim or command of the guards. Talk in line, and you get yelled at. Hands not behind your back, you get yelled at. Walk out of line, and you get yelled at. In San Quentin, you are a nobody. Unless the guards or some other inmate provides you with some unwanted honorific.

In Asian culture, honor is everything, and living without it is a fate worse than death. In the past, Japanese men who disgraced their family's name committed 'hari-kari' or ritual suicide, often by disemboweling themselves with their blade. In China, the dishonored are shunned or beaten which often falls upon daughters who have brought shame upon their family. Those who have brought shame are

not only exiled by their family but their friends and the community.

It made sense to me, although it was a painful truth when I was escorted throughout San Quentin for medical and psychological interviews. The Asian officers or Asian free staff would avoid me with such distaste like I had the plague or some other communicable disease. All eyes would disconnect from mine as I walked in bitter silence. I was not white; I was not Asian. I was not human. Who is a typical Chinese-American? A straight-A student who becomes the next successful doctor or entrepreneur, computer genius, or savvy engineer who creates the next smartphone or luxury car. They are also a lousy driver who sings karaoke every Friday night, dining on sushi and dog, and roll their "r's" when they talk, timid and passive but a master of Kung-Fu or a prodigal pianist.

I have none of those traits or talents. My family is not "crazy rich Asians." My parents struggled every day to make a living. I never had straight 'A's' in high school and I did not become a doctor. The only typical thing was that my parents owned a generic Chinese-American restaurant and I was that kid doing homework at the far corner table.

When you look at me, what do you see? Do you make your mouth wider to articulate each word in hopes I understand you better? No need, my English is fine. Maybe you pull your eyes at the corners to make fun of me. I argued once with a white inmate who stated I must not be fully Chinese because my eyes slant the wrong way and I must have Japanese blood. This is the ignorance I have confronted my whole life. Maybe you compare your skin to mine to see if I am dark enough to know what racism

is. When I fill out forms, I am not white, black, or Mexican. I am categorized in prison as "other," even though there are more Asians than any other ethnic group in the world.

The enslavement of Blacks was forever abolished, and yet Asians labor in sweatshops, performed forced prostitution, and sweat as field workers. Slavery still exists in this country. The cry for diversity warms the media, yet while more and more Black and Mexican icons go mainstream, Asians are still marginalized.

I feel that I am nothing but a marginal person.

I stood in the small enclosed yard, overlooking the bay, watching ferry commuters float by. Like most of the inmates, I wore a white t-shirt and boxers as part of a controlled, three-hour yard time. Most of the time, we craved fresh air, a break from the 21-hour confinement we suffered. On many days it would rain, a common occurrence next to the Bay, or a heavy, dripping fog would descend. On this particular day, it started to rain. There were no shelters, no coverings, just the freezing rain, pelting me in my boxers. The guards, above us in their enclosed tower, just watched us armed with their loaded rifles.

In prison, the whites hang out with the whites, the Blacks with Blacks, Mexicans with Mexicans, Asians with Asians. All others who felt misplaced hung out with the "paisas," non-affiliated Mexicans – usually the ones who speak little or no English. To mingle with another group could lead to an act of violence.

Like packs of wolves marking their territory, the clans do not cross boundaries. The white's TV, the Black's table, the Mexican's equipment time – everyone has their place. You have your own kind to watch your back

in the showers, in the chow hall, or out in the yard and when another of your kind falls out of line, you handle your own. If a fight breaks out, you must protect your own. It is a race war in a place that is supposed to deter us from gangs and if you are not part of a gang, you could be a casualty.

It is a fine line to walk the straight and narrow. Outside, the magnifying glass watches you. In prison, it is a microscope. Every step, every action, every reaction is scrutinized by everyone. If you are not in prison for drugs or gang violence of some sort, then you are looked upon with suspicion. The pecking order finds murderers on top, with gangs, snitches, and sex offenders on the bottom of the totem pole.

The percentage of Asians incarcerated is small. I am one of the unlucky ones. An Asian without an affiliation does not fare well in prison. Small in stature with features like delicate porcelain, Asians are targeted as passive, easily manipulated, or worse, preyed upon by obsessive sexual predators.

After being locked up in San Quentin for a year, I had the experience of being part of its 150+ year history as the oldest continually run prison. I spent a year in "reception" as they call it, a hub for incoming inmates. My stint at San Quentin was over. From seeing several stabbings with homemade shanks, gunfire from the guards and even getting caught on the sidelines of a ten-man fight with a pepper spray bomb, I witnessed some of the most horrific incidents.

I watched strong, tough men attempt to hang themselves or slash their wrists, an inmate receive a cracked skull from a gun misfire, and worse, cockroaches. Thousands upon thousands of cockroaches. At night, I could hear

them scurry across the walls and floors. In the darkness, rats fed upon whatever they could scavenge. San Quentin, at 150 years of operation, is a sad, sad testament to the stain of incarceration. It is a stain upon this state and this country.

When I was thirteen, I visited my father's village in China. Already experiencing culture shock while visiting the big cities, my father's village was a stone in the pit of my stomach. Two hours from the nearest city of Canton, we traveled through rice fields and flat farmlands on an old, one-lane, unpaved road. When we arrived, I saw a small community of wooden shacks. The one belonging to my father's family had two rooms: one for a bedroom for six, separated by a curtain, and the main room with a small, portable sink to serve as kitchen, dining, and living area. There were no wood floors or linoleum or carpet, only dirt, and the light source was a shoddily rigged light bulb, dangling from the ceiling. This was the poverty my parents grew up in, much like hundreds of villages across Asia. It was what my father left behind, for me to have a better life.

I look down at the concrete and steel tier of fifty cells, one of which was my own nightmare hostel. It was three in the morning when I got the wake-up call to pack my meager belongings. I was traveling to my next destination. I will now serve the next twenty years, bouncing around to various prisons all over California.

One day, I will go home, wherever that may be. In twenty years, most of my family will be gone. I am still trying to determine if it matters. I have lost my identity within the carceral system but I will continue to discover myself. I will always carry my Asian shame, like a scarlet letter. I will not waste my mind, heart, and spirit on

looking back. I have only the future to look forward to.

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### ***The Long Walk Home: Return of the Rising Sun***

By Ricky A. Ortega

Sunrise, where the earth meets the sky in a kiss of splendor as it prepares for the birth of dawn. It lights the world with hope and promise but only for a moment as it slowly surrenders to the lure of the night. Enticed by the light of the moon and the glitter of starry skies, it squanders its brilliance while setting into darkness. Now we wait for the hope of a new dawn as the prodigal sun bids farewell.

Raised in a beautiful home, I had every opportunity to succeed in life, not with a silver spoon but a spoon filled with humility and goodness. Tempted by the desires of the world, I squandered the inheritance of love that was promised to me and traded it all for a life of debauchery – a life without parole.

This series of articles will peer into the lives of those sentenced to die in prison. As the sun that hides behind the storm, the prodigal prince refuses to shine. Similarly, those with life without parole describe our fall from grace on a journey back to our true, authentic selves while experiencing the birth of a new dawn, the return of the prodigal son.

Michael Donnell Niles was arrested in 1983 and sentenced to life without parole. The story of his life began to take shape at the age of nine when his beloved mother developed cancer. "I would rub medicine on her wounds hoping to keep her alive but instead I watched her die slowly before my eyes," confessed Niles. "She was my everything, so I grew up mostly without parents. As a child, I never had much. My little brother and I

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were on our own at 13 because of an abusive situation. I learned from the streets that having a gun gave me power so I carried a silver plated 25 automatic, which led to my criminal behavior."

While fending for himself, he developed his love for basketball, a love that was instilled in him by his mother. "She taught me everything I knew about basketball and so I played with a lot of passion when she died like I had a chip on my shoulder," said Niles. At 6' 7", he was a force to be reckoned with. Then, at the age of 22, his skill on the court led to his signing a lucrative contract with the Phoenix Suns. "It was the break I needed, but it was bittersweet because I kept thinking that now, maybe I could have helped save my mother's life. But I had security for me and my brother. It was an emotional experience. I had worked so hard and I was proud – I felt like I had finally arrived.

But all this attention helped feed my ego. It gave me the false belief system that having money would allow me to control people rather than be controlled by them. I was idolized by the fans and had all the women I wanted. It takes a mature person to handle all this pressure and I was doing all the immature things. Fame and fortune are like a magnet and this fed my hunger for power and soon – basketball wasn't enough," confessed Niles.

When the Judge sentenced him to life without parole, it was an abrupt end to a living dream. "It was devastating to me," said Niles. "Back then, having LWOP meant you never had a chance of getting out. Surviving the mainline for over 30 years was the biggest

challenge I've ever faced in my life." Today, Niles is active in self-help recovery like Emotional Intelligence, Board Prep, and SAR, which has meant the most to him. His breakthrough moment came when he was in the hole on Christmas, 2010, when he felt like he was wasting away. Niles concluded, "I knew there was something better, so I left the mainline and came to Mule Creek where I could learn to stop my violence. I don't regret it because I honestly see myself back in society one day, and I want to be prepared."

The long walk home is not a physical destination: it's a place in the heart, a special kind of freedom that perhaps only LWOPs can understand. While tracing our steps back to our forgotten selves, we remember who we were before we committed our crimes. It is like the sun that rises from its slumber and awakens the world with its warmth once again. Perhaps Niles will never again play on the court of the Phoenix Suns, but as he steps onto the court of life, he will always be known as the return of the rising sun.

### **Synthetic Cannabinoids**

By Navarro Phillips

I am currently housed at Dixon C.C. in Illinois. I want to bring attention to the fact that the Dixon prison in Illinois is allowing officers to use Nark II drug testing to yield positive tests for synthetic cannabinoids. I am currently serving 28 days and 2 months commissary restriction for a bogus test. I read recently in the *Prison Legal News* that it is impossible to use a Nark II test kit to yield a positive test for synthetic

cannabinoids. There are plenty of guys in my situation who just lay down, plead guilty on this matter, and serve their disciplinary action – not me.

I'm trying to bring awareness to anybody and everybody that this is not right. This is a violation of my civil rights. This situation I'm in is going on all over the United States. Dixon is putting people in Restrictive Housing segregation with no repercussions behind it. I will be filing a lawsuit and eventually a class action suit all over Illinois because this is not right. Dixon is testing all kinds of paper saying it is synthetic cannabinoid rather than sending it to a lab for professional testing. I will keep you updated on my current situation

### **Karma's Far Worse Than Dates**

By Glenn Cornwell

3 a.m. – heard a soul stuck to the ceiling, screaming and banging and working with feelings. Calling out his homeboys, and cursing the cops, not a soul said a thing after he stopped.

What kind of world lets these things so easily happen? I lay there half asleep as if I was napping! Thinking back, the entire day– none of it mentioned, living in a different hell known as San Quentin.

You might think this happens every day. In real life it's usually users who pay.

Fentanyl, overdose, hanging from ceilings, end result, stays the same, working with feelings. Lessons learned, happenstance souls just can't wait. In the end, Karma's far worse than dates.