

# *Where Excuses Go to Die*

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# PRISON SHOWER HAZARDS

California Rehabilitation Center (CRC)—Norco, Level II  
Occupancy Design: 2358  
During Stay: 4200  
Today: 3430

**T**he black guys called him “What the Cat Dragged In” while the Whites and Latinos preferred the more condensed “Dumpsite.” Dump was an admitted “Crusty,” a prison term for the worst of the unclean. Crusties are live-under-the-freeway types who take filth the farthest, and damn near every cell block, unit, dorm, and tier in the country has one. When the fellas can’t stand it anymore some Crusties are tackled and scrubbed, but occasionally they’re so bad they’re just vociferously objected to ’til a dorm Badge or watch sergeant approves a bed change.

Other guys in prison don’t shower often either, mostly ’cause they’re afraid to. These are usually the new people; more often than not they get in there and get it over with when they realize grace periods are actually countdowns. Other fellas aren’t so bright. The last guy who waited more than a week to take his first prison shower was forced to conduct a little PR campaign to show some spine. He got through it, but he had to shove around a smaller guy for a day or two first.

**I could see nothing but steam escaping from around a corner and a pile of soggy towels. I wanted it over with immediately.**

Personally, I’d have opted for the shower before bullying someone to prove I wasn’t low-hanging fruit (and for the record I did), but not everyone has the luxury of almost a year’s worth of County Jail prep school before facing such milestones. And even *with* my Men’s Central

education I’d waited almost a week to take the plunge. Donovan may have *looked* a lot better than County, but I was still about to take a *prison shower*. The anxiety was crushing. I’d been told to strip down and follow a yellow line: the longest

walk of my life. I could see nothing but steam escaping from around a corner and a pile of soggy towels. Though it would be the first real shower to hit my skin in almost two months, I wanted it over with immediately: get soapy and get out. But I rounded the corner to find a single-man shower overseen by the control booth, where the worst that could occur was your being told to hurry the hell up.

Back on the Freeway, I'd kept relatively clean using the sinks of the various cells I was moved to. I didn't know it then, but unless it's directly monitored by (at least somewhat professional) sheriff's deputies, a Men's Central shower carries much more of a physical threat than your average State prison shower. Not that it matters to most new guys. For them the term "prison shower" might as well be "HAMMER TIME."

So let's get a few things straight about prison showers, hmmm?

They aren't filled with naked, seething, cage fighters and pigeon-hearted prey. Loony sodomites don't lurk around every corner. Ugly men with arms inked in bible quotes aren't going to stretch you into a vegetative state.

Sorry folks, but the prison showers I experienced weren't fraught with the peril rampant in your average prison-themed entertainment. Yeah, you're more vulnerable when you're naked and wet, but shower altercations can backfire on the sleaziest of marauders. C'mon, think "slip and fall." And everyone knows it's icky to bleed when you're naked. (Opposers of that last sentiment are in Secure Housing Units and thankfully have little or no human contact.)

In fact, the single-man deals I found at Donovan—called "Caddillacs"—are *de rigueur* in modern prisons. And at places like ol' Folsom? Psh! The showers and washbasins of Building 3 are all in the same area; nearby is the barber's station in a chain-link stockade. But no matter the facility, talk about traffic! Most showers are bustling places of congregation like everywhere else in custody: busy street corners.

Dope fiends love 'em 'cause the body language of economy heroin rushing up one's arm is so similar to hot water rushing over one's head, which means guards won't look twice if you

can stay on your feet. (Careful not to nod out and impede the routine of some Minotaur comin' off his shift at the kitchen loading dock.)

In general, though, multihead prison showers are places for politics, enforcement of hierarchy, and gossip. Sure, there are racial tensions galore and countless scores to settle, but despite what's depicted in movies, guys aren't gettin' raped there every few minutes. A lot of sex acts between inmates are consensual, which means they stay hidden so as not to piss off the more homophobic of our Badges. *They'd* rather remain clueless than sort out which tough guy eats sausage on purpose.

I will say, though, that a 2012 study released by the Bureau of Justice Statistics found that approximately one in ten former State prisoners were sexually abused while serving their most recent sentences, usually an act of power or payback and often by guards. So it's not that rape in prison is uncommon, it's just uncommon in a prison *shower*.

Showers are already crowded with people who want to shoot up, taste-test their fermenting custom beverages, engage in private conversation or commerce, and—of all things—clean the place. All this activity takes up a lot of space, so bringing in a crew of snickering deviants struggling with a victim *really* inconveniences the rest of us. You and your punk are more likely gonna be told to get lost.

Yet I love how prison movies always show a group of guys holding some poor bastard down so that only the principal sicko can nail him. Give me a break! Convicts are *way* too selfish for that. A guy twisted enough to be pinning another fella down for an assault in the first place would be fighting for a chance to see what's so great about it! I mean, if it's really worth the hassle, why should only *one* guy get any? More importantly, conducting your ugly business in our showers requires serious organizational skill, and that's exactly the point. Organization? Ha! Even inside you'd be hard pressed to recruit six or eight unquestionably cold-blooded accomplices for such an act; most inmates lay low and watch the clock or stay high 'til their release dates.

Why? Because everyone in prison is LAZY, that's why! *Son buevón!*

It's damn near impossible to get a group of guys to do *anything* where only one member benefits, leader or not. At least two of your "team" would have to be threatened into it.

And who's going to enforce the threats? *You* can't because you're busy whispering terrible things into the ear of the man you're violating. You'd need to recruit four *more* guys to make sure your two serfs fall in line. Four more guys! What are we up to now, ten? And where are your lookouts? Patrolling COs need only get close enough to hear muffled yelping. You'll need a lookout planted up the corridor to keep an eye out there, and then you'll need someone watching *him* to relay the warning to you. So there are two *more* guys not getting any. This victim of yours would have to be one very unpopular dude to inspire so much volunteer work.

All told, we're talking twelve or fourteen guys willing to miss their soap operas and workouts, all so you can show the feeble hostage how evil you are. And all to wind up with twelve to fourteen potential witnesses? Probably N-numbers to boot. And just ask your family parolee: despite their bluster to the contrary, inmates blab more frequently than chatty housewives. So how many of your helpers are actually foolish braggarts pumping up their Yard stature with hard stories?

"Half-Dead had it coming, man. You shoulda seen how Nitro messed that fool up." *Eventually* word will make its way to some antsy squealer, and from him to a watch lieutenant who *does* give a damn.

Anyway, all I'm saying is, Hollywood's prison shower scenes are just plain zany. Movies showing penitentiary life are restricted behind bars, but some stuff gets through. And when a jail reference appears in some TV show on the dayroom idiot box, there's more fun to be had than if laughing gas had been pumped in instead. When assaults are depicted—or, for that matter when riots, Blacks and Whites sharing cells, gangsters freely flying colors, poker games, or tender relationships between two races are shown—guffaws and boos echo through the corridors.

So . . . not so much with the hog-pen sodomites perched like gargoyles waiting to pounce. But there *are* real prison shower hazards and things to watch out for. Such as:

1. Crime wreckage! C'mon, we're talking 'bout a room full of naked criminals. At first it's hard to take, but soon you get good at telling the difference between a shotgun wound and the scar left by the pierce of a 9mm round. You'll see empty eye sockets, a festival of missing limbs, the ugly shred of razor wire, badly healed knife slashes, birth defects, dark spots where gangrene settled in, countless burn scars, and "Frankensteins," the marks left over from unskilled sutures, in addition to misshapen skulls, head wounds, gouges, missing ears, mangled fingers, botched amputations, and gimp legs. The fang marks from police K-9 unit German shepherds are pretty obvious, and Central American inmates who once either ran from or wore contra uniforms have the most badly mended injuries thanks to good ol' farm-field combat surgery. But *nobody* beats the white guys for missing teeth.
2. Grumbling! You can imagine the bitching and whining that heralds the arrival of a Crusty, but inside a unit's shower the squawking goes excessive. You'll watch as white power Peckerwood types check the sinks each morning for "watch springs," their cozy term for the nappy hairs that fall from the heads of Blacks. God forbid they use a sink that looks like it's been "used by a Toad." The black guys, meanwhile, even the bigots, couldn't care less if some Nazi longhair leaves a strand or two behind. They just wipe up and proceed. Long as no one's lancing or picking at a sore, shit happens and you get over it. Some of us whacked-out considerate mutherfuckers even tidy up a bit for the next guy!
3. Toilets, toilets, toilets! Implied in the phrase "custodial supervision" is a serious lack of privacy. But the full impact of that doesn't really hit you 'til you take your first prison turd. (I'm not even gonna get *into* how much your diet has changed or what the consistency of that turd is gonna be.) Forget about crapping in front of your cell mate; you're probably gonna have to sit down and push one out in front of twenty to thirty other men; on the Men's Central Jail court-line closer to ninety. SuperMax dorm units *do* have half-walls like you find at low-end campgrounds and public

beaches, but they're hardly the rule. Most facilities have *no* dividers, let alone stalls. So two of the milestones you'll get to achieve are learning to squat and dump in front of a full-blown circus sideshow and figuring out when to time your flushes. (I've been hollered at dozens of times to "courtesy flush" while still crowning.)

**Implied in the phrase "custodial supervision" is a serious lack of privacy. But that doesn't really hit you 'til you take your first prison turd.**

When you walk in and see, for the first time, ten porcelain pots with no seats, it can be a bit jarring. At eighteen to twenty inches apart, if you've got a three-hundred-pounder next to you, chances are your knees are gonna touch midcontraction. And you'll likely encounter at least *one* guy coming in off the weight pile after three straight hours of pumping pig iron who desperately needs to "release." Imagine yourself comfortable enough to do the deed amidst gambling, grunting, bargaining, fighting, barfing, straining, sweating, and singing—all of the things that go on in a prison bathroom—and you're cool, right? You've got it down. Suddenly in walks Mr. Universe, the *Iron Man* cover model who looks ready to split like a squished orange. His limbs are so patterned with veins that his body resembles marble. He's disturbing to look at when he *laughs* 'cause there's so much going on with his face; he builds muscle in his sleep and has the problem-solving ability of a yak. You almost feel sorry for the guy. But it's all fine until, in your periphery, you notice that his lats and biceps are so big he can't wipe his own ass from the side. He can only bend to the left so far, and try as he might, he's eventually gotta give up. This perfectly ripped, 260-pound gorilla has been forced to wipe between his legs like a woman. You look away; try to recall a favorite song—anything to keep from laughing. Sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn't. When it doesn't you better hope you were looking elsewhere and that you courtesy flushed in a timely manner, or you're gonna pay *big time*.

Beyond that I don't know what to tell the new guy facing a prison shower. Except maybe that he's damn lucky he's in a real prison and not a prison movie.