



Because Chicanos

Just Don't Care

+

Happy Birthday in
Juvenile Detention

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Two excerpts from
the upcoming book
Growing Up in Prison

by Seth Yates

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ones I wanted to see. "Do you have anything you would like to say to this officer?" He was big on the formalities, that was sure. I had no desire to apologize for anything I had been put through today.

"I do have something I would like to say to this officer," I told Red Shirt, matching his formal tone exactly. Then I locked eyes with my opponent. "Big Eddy?" I inquired innocently, as sweetly as possible. He hesitated, but I waited him out. Struggling to remember my name maybe, he asked finally, "Yes? Seth?" I waited for that admission, my name, before I spoke.

"Fuck you."

Because Chicanos Just Don't Care: First Court Date
Excerpt of Growing up in Prison, Chapter 2 by Seth Yates

I was awakened at breakfast and given clothes to wear. After brushing my teeth and fixing my hair, I was escorted off the pod by the officer. Even more solemn than usual, he lead me to a stretch of wall where a dozen other boys were already standing.

Ordered to face forward and remain silent, we were cuffed and shackled, hand and ankle. Then, one pair at a time we are separated from the group, uncuffed and unshackled, and then cuffed and shackled independently, only to be lead 20 feet down the hall and into a holding tank. Under the watchful eye of the Bailiff, we are ordered not to talk among ourselves, to respect the proceedings, and fed a matter-of-factly laundry list of do-nots. It all had the air of established ritual.

I watched the boys go into the courtroom one by one, until my turn came. The Bailiff escorted me into the courtroom, gripping his gun tightly all the while. My mom and the lawyer were standing next to a person I didn't recognize. I was positioned next to them in front of the Judges stand, between my mom and the Lawyer, with the Bailiff right behind me. I could feel his breath on the back of my neck as the Judge opened the ceremonies with a tap from her gavel.

I was introduced to the Court. The Lawyer went next, laying a rather eloquent, well-rehearsed plea for the court to release me into the custody of my mother, pending trial. My heart swelled with hope, I just couldn't see how anyone could refuse such a rational, well-reasoned argument. Glancing sideways at my mom, I could see she held the same conviction. I was coming home.

Then I looked at the Judge, who was staring at the Lawyer with an overly astonished look on her face, as he finished his piece. Lowering her voice to a whisper that enhanced the drama of our situation, she asked, "Do you not know what the charge is?" Pausing for a second,

she answered what must surely have been a rhetorical question with a theatrical flourish. With her next word, it was as if a bomb went off in the courtroom I heard gasps and the sounds of shocked disbelief.

The Prosecutor went next, turning out to be the person I hadn't recognized and mistakenly took for a social worker. Rattling off her reasons why I shouldn't be released into my mother's custody, such as that I was almost 16, she argued that I should await from Juvenile Detention. The Judge bobbed her head up and down sycophantically with every other word. It was clear that she had already made her mind up on the matter and this was all for show.

"I am afraid I agree." The Judge declared after the Prosecutor had stated her case. Seth Yates is a Threat to Public Safety and will be held in Juvenile Detention until his next court date. Court is adjourned," punctuating the fact with a rap of her gavel. "Next case!"

My mom and I had been looking back and forth from the Prosecutor to the Judge in askance, until the Bailiff grunted "Face forward!" and our heads swiveled back to the Judge just in time to make eye contact as she finished what the Prosecutor started, crushing what little hope I had with a wave of her gavel. For emphasis, the Bailiff placed his hand on his gun, his sole claim to authority, it seemed. The threat meant nothing to me. Shock settled over me as I was ushered out of the courtroom.

That definitely hadn't gone the way I had been promised. Back in the holding tank, the Bailiff began to berate me over my "disrespect" to the Prosecutor and the Judge in "his" courtroom. You would have thought that they were the ones conspired against and slandered. I zoned him out, which only made him rant harder, face turning darker and darker red as I continued to ignore him. What was I going to do now? I appeared to have no options left. Maybe... maybe...

I was rudely returned to the moment by more than a few flecks of

and slammed me into the wall, everyone backing off instinctively. They obviously were well practiced, performing this maneuver as a team. The others grabbed me after Red Shirt spun me around, lending a few hands as he executed the same move in reverse. Finally, after much unnecessary grasping that left me with Indian burns and scratches and sore elbows, Red Shirt managed to get those cuffs onto my wrists, about five or six notches too tight.

I was spun around and now was nose to nose with Red Shirt. He looked triumphant. "Congratulations," I wheezed, "You must be very proud," I wish I could have said it with more confidence. None the less, Red Shirt's smirk dissolved instantly, so I had hit my mark.

"You're a little smart-ass," Red Shirt said nastily. It was true, but I was too exhausted and out of breath to offer another comeback. Oh, but I wanted to. I had to settle for a smile instead. He didn't like that much.

Disheveled, I was lead back to my original pod but into a new cell. First, in line with the institutional fetish, I was strip-searched immediately after the hand-cuffs were removed. My hands were an angry red-purple and weren't responding to my commands. The officer assigned to this task caught an attitude with me at first before regaining his senses, and helped me pull the shirt off. I managed the pants myself. Then I was brought the green velcro dress. Stupid. Green. Velcro. *Dress.*

Some while later Red Shirt came to see me, accompanied by Big Eddy who at least had enough decency to look embarrassed. Maybe he felt guilty, as well he should, being that this situation was of his making, mostly. Then again, I didn't remember him joining in on my beat down. I might have died if he had.

Red Shirt came to gloat, to rub his victory in my cold, clammy, cut up face. I was covered in sweat, feeling nauseous, and nursing an aching tooth, a dull head-ache, and bruised wrists. These two were the last

was to be had. Their leader was wearing a different color shirt. Red. He was the one that spoke to me.

"You're refusing?" he intoned, pulling out his own cuffs. "Refusing?" I turned it into a question. Somehow the language sounded awfully formal. "Refusing!" he shouted inches from my face, spraying me with spit. His breath was horrible, and it was clear he wanted a yes or no. Also, his henchmen had me surrounded. But I had come this far already, and not to bow down and submit at the very end. Big Eddy was a part of this hit squad, too. "Yes, I'm refusing." Whatever that meant.

I found out what it meant when Red Shirt hit me in the mouth with his cuffs, wielding them like brass knuckles. And then all hell broke loose, as the entire gang jumped me. One took me into a headlock, while others elbowed and kneed and repeatedly slammed their bodies into mine from different directions. Which was pretty painful, actually. Red Shirt punched me in the mouth again, this time chipping a tooth, in a feigned, over-exaggerated attempt to put the cuffs on me. Got to make things look good for the camera.

I had one officer pulling me to the left and another to the right, trying to dislocate my shoulders maybe, occasionally punching me in the ribs, and every so often two or three others would take a few steps back and then charge forward, ramming me with their shoulders. Red Shirt got me with his cuffs again, cutting my forehead open. As if in parody of everything you have ever heard of the police, they periodically changed, "quit refusing!" in unison, although I had my hands on my sides when this began and had not moved a muscle. In fact, were I not being choked out, help up by the officer behind me, I probably would have been a small puddle on the floor by now. I was done refusing.

Red Shirt must have sensed that things had gone too far, or at least, just far enough. He grabbed the front of my shirt, took a few steps,

spittle flying into my face and eyes. I recoiled in disgust and glanced up. The Bailiff was standing over me; screaming directly into my forehead. His face was purple now. I locked eyes with him and tried to follow the incoherent mess that was coming from his mouth. "Disrespect" and "Apology" seemed to be key words, coming up frequently.

I did not feel like debating the Bailiff. I was done with all this already, so I waited for a lull in his tirade. When he finally paused for a breath, I offered a quick "sorry" but that just wasn't good enough at this point, obviously. Things were much too far along for that.

"Don't fucking interrupt me!" he shrieked. I got the feeling that the other kids generally went along with things to keep the peace or were otherwise too intimidated to buck his authority. I was never one of those types of kid, and his authority was at stake here. The Bailiff continued to criticize and verbally abuse me until he was good and ready to wind down and lower his tone to a more reasonable level.

"Now. What do you have to say for yourself?" the Bailiff demanded. "Sorry for the disrespect. To your courtroom. Sir." I said apologetically, getting specific and adding a sir only as an afterthought when the Bailiff's jaw clenched and a vein in his forehead bulged. Apparently unsatisfied, the Bailiff pressed harder. "And?" I considered his question for a couple seconds. If he had left a clue to what he expected me to say while yelling in my face, I hadn't been paying enough attention. "No and, That's all." I told him a bit lamely. "You are a fucking smart-ass, hard-headed little punk!" he spat venomously. But the Bailiff put me back in the holding tank and retrieved the next person, a younger Hispanic boy, for court.

I sat down, noticing a paper bag occupying the spot I had previously been sitting. It contained a bologna sandwich, ice cold, two soggy duplex cookies, and a carton of warm milk. I realized that I was hungry actually, even for this. As I began to eat one of the others declared

excitedly, "You know what BCJDC stands for? Because Chicanos Just Don't Care!" I looked up reflexively and realized that everyone else was staring at me. "What's up?" I asked nobody in particular. One of the boys tentatively offered an answer...

"You're fucking crazy, wey!"

Happy Birthday in Juvenile Detention

Excerpt of Growing up in Prison, Chapter 3 by Seth Yates

"If you not gonna clean, you gonna get a case," he threatened ominously. I blinked a few times. Was that really the best he had? I decided to mess with him. "I am going to catch a case?" I inquired in the most innocent, sweetest gasp possible. "Yes. You gonna clean all those cells or Big Eddy gonna write that case." he informed me in all seriousness, missing the obvious sarcasm in my voice.

Oh, no...

I drew the moment out a few seconds more, enjoying the look of satisfaction on Big Eddy's face. It wouldn't last. The bastard had been harassing me All. Damn. Day. And now it was my turn to have some fun. As if to comply, I stuck out my hand. Big Eddy grinned triumphantly and made to hand me the bucket of cleaning supplies. I snatched my hand back at the last second.

The bucket crashed to the floor, scattering supplies everywhere. I looked down at the mess and then back into his eyes, smiling wickedly. "No thanks, I won't need any of that. Go write that case, Eddy. And then clean those cells yourself. I want those toilets clean enough to eat off of."

Big Eddy was at a complete loss. Much like when he was hopelessly losing at chess, he froze up, stalling for time. Minutes went by. Silence. It was a simple staring match, now. Finally, he looked down at the mess and asked softly, "That's how it's gonna be?" I decided not to dignify that with an answer. A few more minutes went by. At long last, Big Eddy turned and walked away, towards the officers desk. He picked up the phone.

Concluding his call, he returned, pulling out his cuffs and clicking the mechanisms threateningly. Help was on the way. A whole team breathlessly burst into the pod, eager for whatever excitement there