

Chapter 2 – The O & D

It was a little ironic that she had called Security, because at my other job, I was Security. They didn't actually call us that, but that's what we did, or rather, provided. The O & D (Observation & Detention) was another residential program, and, again, I was a relief worker. Again, primarily for the midnight shift. Its purpose was to detain (D) 'young offenders' while they were waiting for a court appearance – for trial, sentencing, or whatever. (So actually we were called Adolescent Workers. In reference to our clientele, of course.) While at the O & D, said young offenders would be observed (O), and the log kept by said adolescent workers offered to the court for consideration. This meant, of course, that, as with regular jail, you had innocent kids rooming with guilty kids.

Furthermore, in an odd display of parallelism to the mixed agenda of the MHA's sheltered workshop, the O & D also served as a safe house for kids who had been abused – who had not even been charged with anything criminal – while they were waiting for an adoption placement. (Essentially, for trial, sentencing, and whatever). And the interesting thing was, relief workers weren't allowed to read the kids' files. I confess that my behaviour toward a kid who's taken a cigarette lighter to the family gerbil would be different than my behaviour toward a kid who's had a cigarette lighter taken to himself. (So if it was the same kid – as it was likely to be – I was, well, confused.)

And as for my behaviour toward the cigarette-burning parents of such a kid (occasionally, parents came to visit their kid; very occasionally, now that I think of it), first, I'd have them both sterilized. That's it. No more kids. Then, since such parents demonstrate arrested moral development and are probably operating at the pre-adolescent stage, understanding morality only in terms of reciprocity, I'd take a cigarette lighter to the both of them.

Now, you might point out that chances are that's already happened – that's why they're the parents they are. Right. So not only would I sterilize the parents, I'd also sterilize the kid. The O & D could easily add it to their referral services. It could be a family outing. We're supposed to encourage that sort of thing.

But that's not fair! I know. But one, you're assuming the kid will actually want to have kids, and, truth be told, that's probably unlikely. (I say that because, truth be told, most people don't actually want to have kids. Whenever people announce to me they're 'expecting,' I ask them 'Why?' They usually give me a look, as if I'm sort of slow, and then they say, with a rueful grin, something like 'It was sort of an accident.')

(To which I reply something like 'Excuse me? You don't accidentally ejaculate into someone's vagina, nor do you accidentally catch some sperm with your vulva.')

And two, it may be unfair to the kid, but otherwise it's unfair to the kid's kids and to all the people who then have to deal with yet another victim of cigarette lighters. And it's especially unfair to gerbils.

Another interesting thing about the job was that staff were expected to psychoanalyze these kids' every move, or failure to move, and none of us were psychoanalysts. Half of us were ex-daycamp leaders, and the other half were cop-wannabes. (And then there was me. I just liked the hours.) Let me just say that if for twenty-four hours/day, seven days/week, your every word and action was subjected to

intense microscopic examination, by unqualified idiots, you'd have an anger management problem too. (Admittedly, most of us would also have a problem if we were subjected to intense microscopic examination by qualified idiots.)

Once, on an evening shift, I was reprimanded because I sat on the couch in the main room, reading. (Popular Mechanics or Car & Driver, I can't remember.) (Amish porn, in any case.) A mistake. Not what I was reading, but that I was reading. I was supposed to interact with the kids. Hell, we interacted with the kids more in one day than my own parents interacted with me in a whole year. (Not that instead they ever sat on a couch reading. Or took a cigarette lighter to me. But the only time my parents interacted with us kids – apart from the occasional reminder or query regarding various aspects of the household routine – was during the holidays. On Christmas Day, during that long time between opening the gifts and Christmas dinner, we didn't have any chores to do, we weren't allowed to do any homework, we especially weren't allowed to watch tv, and there's only so much enthusiasm you can generate for new socks and pyjamas and one or two toys; mom was in the kitchen, of course, making Christmas dinner, which somehow took all day, but dad wouldn't dare escape to his workshop, so he and my brother would have their annual game of chess, and my sister and I would sort of watch. There we go: parent-child interaction. Normal, healthy parent-child interaction.) (Okay, perhaps more normal than healthy, but still –)

So I put the magazine down and reluctantly joined the monopoly game in the kitchen. Another mistake. First, I implemented a sliding scale of payments for those who landed on my property. Then I interrogated prospective buyers: what do you intend to do with the property? 'Cuz if you're going to develop it into one of those super malls, forget it. We don't need more stores. We don't need to 'go shopping' as if it were a leisure activity. We in the so-called 'developed' world have way too much shit as it is. And we keep coercing those in the so-called 'developing' world to make it for us. Part way through my discourse on the sociopolitical evils of supermalls in general, and Walmart and McDonalds in particular, I was kicked out of the game.

Another time, at the end of a midnight shift, I was encouraged to watch tv with the others. Watching tv is interacting with the kids? Okaaaay. As it turns out, it was a Sunday morning and nothing was on but religious programming. Halfway through some evangelist's sermon, I started reciting "Jabberwocky": "Twas brillig and the slithy toves did gyre and gimble in the wabe, all mimsy were the borogroves..." They all yelled at me to shut up. Like they really wanted to hear the sermon.

Then there was a station identification announcement, concluding with the comment that as a religious network, the station did not accept ads for beer, liquor, or feminine hygiene products.

"Well, that makes sense," I said. "I mean, we all know what a good buzz you can get from a tampon." Silence. Not one 'Shut up!'

The next commercial was for guns. I kid you not. 'Course, as a religious network...

"I've got a better idea," I said when it was over.

"Yeah?" a kid snorted. I couldn't possibly.

"Yeah, what you do is get a dart gun and load it with a tranquilizer, or an emetic,

or an extra-strength laxative. Your guy's not going to be a threat if he's unconscious, puking his guts out, or shitting his shorts, right? And while he's doing that, you can run away!"

"Run away?" He was disgusted.

"Well, you could kick him good first," I suggested.

Okay. That was okay then.

"It achieves the same thing as a real gun," I continued. "But if you get caught, see, it's a lesser charge."

That got the kid's attention.

"And if someone happened to get in the way, well you wouldn't kill anyone by mistake. And that's kind of a good thing, right?"

The kid had to think about that. "Okay," he said, "but what if they shoot back with the same stuff?"

"Well better that than a bullet in the head, no?"

He had to think about that one for quite some time. "Maybe," he finally conceded.

Every now and then, when the O & D pressure cooker got to be too much, sometimes before or after a court appearance or a parental visit, a kid would blow. And we were supposed to restrain him or her. We were taught several restraint holds, one that could be done by one person, another that required two, but they all immobilized the kid's arms and legs while protecting the head (the kid's mostly) (unfortunately). What a stupid idea. As a teenager, whenever I was volcanic, I went for a run. A good hard run. Long too, depending. (I still do that. In fact, shortly after I last spoke with Director Jean, I set a personal best for my ten-mile.)

Instead of holding them down, which to my mind just adds to their rage, we should be letting them go – taking them to the nearest high school and letting them loose on the track or the football field. Escape shouldn't be a problem; there is, or should always be, at least one of us who can outrun a 15-year-old.

'Course there is the chance the kid will run full speed into one of the goalposts. But that needn't be considered a bad thing.

At the end of a week during which I happened to be lucky enough to be staff escort for a trip to the grocery store with the 602s and for a trip to an outdoor festival with the O & Ds, I had a great idea: why not pair a 602 with an O & D? I imagined a program that was a cross between those that paired juvenile delinquents with dogs and those that paired ex-cons with people in wheelchairs. You know the ones I'm talking about. (Kessie thought it was a great idea. But then she somehow got the idea that she'd get to go for a car ride in a wheelchair.) So I stayed up late, or early, and presented the idea to each place during the weekly staff meeting.

Surprisingly enough, it was accepted. Any idea proposed by a mere relief worker is usually rejected out-of-hand; actually, that's not quite true – rejection presupposes some degree of consideration. So I figure it was probably that time of the budget year when program directors were told to either 'use it or lose it' – and I suspect that neither the 602 program director nor the O & D program director had proposed anything new in a long while, so they were quite happy to grab the ball and run with it. My ball. Of course I didn't get any credit for it. Not that it would've done me any good – relief workers are

simply not on any career ladder, and neither initiative, good work, long service, nor ass-kissing results in advancement.

But that's just as well because the program – 'Northerly Hills 602OD' – was pretty much a disaster. Rott (short for Rottweiler), a big kid with hair that was a cross between a Mohawk and an Afro, was a repeat offender for assorted assaults. Actually, one of these was against a coworker who, in a moment of canine confusion, called him Poo (short for Poodle). That was the first time. The second time happened when I dared said coworker to tie a pink ribbon in Rott's hair when he was asleep one night (we had to do bedchecks every half hour). Anyway, Rott was paired with Len, the most meek and mild of the 602s (who didn't have so much a personality disorder as an absent personality). The idea was that antagonism would be statistically impossible and hence another assault equally unlikely. Rott beat the crap out of Len at their first meeting. So he was then paired with George, who was not only physically intimidating, at 6'4" and 240 lbs, but also suffering from delusions of questionable grandeur – he thought he was Hulk Hogan. Rott beat the crap out of George too. (The upside is that George no longer believes he's Hulk Hogan.)

Two other pairings are worth mention, both having been reasonably successful. Lily is 602's compulsive shopper. Luann is one of O & D's shoplifters. The three of us headed out to a mall one day, the two of them delighted at discovering in common an enthusiasm for shopping. They made a bee-line for one of those sprawling economy department stores that have everything you could possibly imagine but nothing you could actually want. Let alone need. I trailed behind, at a discreet distance that was supposed to make them feel independent, one of such a trip's many purposes.

Lily grabbed a shopping cart and began to fill it at once – with socks, tshirts, scarves, hats, jeans, sweaters, umbrellas – all the while maintaining a chatter that was part auctioneer and part shopping channel spokesperson. Luann followed, recognizing Lily as the perfect decoy, and stealthily secreted various items into various pockets.

By the time they left Ladies' Wear, Lily was onto her second shopping cart. By the time they'd gotten through Kitchenwares, she'd enlisted Luann to push a third. She was in Shoppers' Heaven. She'd never filled three shopping carts before.

Luann was feeling aggrieved – it was clear she was outdone. She'd never be able to lift more than Lily was accumulating. So she scored the next item when Lily was watching, and winked at her. Lily was confused for a moment, looking much like a puppy seeing for the first time an older dog calmly walk away with the just delivered pizza box. While stealing clearly had advantages over buying, she realized, as Luann had, that she couldn't possibly take nearly as much that way. So she decided to stick with compulsive shopping. And that made Luann doubly aggrieved. So when Lily put shoehorns into that third cart – six of them, one of each colour – Luann blew.

"YOU DON'T FUCKING NEED ALL THIS SHIT!!" she yelled. So loudly she lost half her loot. Among the many items that fell clattering to the floor was a travel mini-shoeshine kit. Lily stared at this shoeshine kit. Luann stared at the shoeshine kit. Lily looked at her shoehorns. Luann looked at the shoehorns. I call it 'the shoe moment'.

Then, wordlessly, they both left the scene. Unfortunately for me, through different exits. I eventually found them both, wandering in the parking lot, looking for my car. (I was doing the same thing.) We left the mall and neither one of them went 'shopping' again.

The other interesting pairing involved Shane, whose conversation was pretty much limited to "Fuck this!" and James, who had no conversation – he hadn't spoken in five years. We figured that Shane, having to carry both ends of the conversation, would be compelled to become a little more articulate. And that's exactly what happened. When he was with James, he was overheard to mutter things like "Wanna coffee?" and "Gotta piss." Given another ten years, I thought, he might actually engage in the mindless pleasantries that indicate social maturity. (Go figure, but that's how people measure social maturity.)

But the really interesting change occurred in James. One day, sitting alone in his room, he was heard to have quietly said "Fuck this." Now, not only had he uttered words, but there had been a reasonable facsimile of emotional expression in the utterance as well. Whatever, saying those two little words quietly, alone in his room, seemed sufficient to simply dismiss whatever it was he had been obsessed to silence with for all those years.

A little while later, while watching tv with the others, somewhat less catatonically than before, he again said, "Fuck this" and left the room. It was the first display of autonomy the staff had ever seen.

Of course, only one more step remained, which he took a month later. He said, once more, "Fuck this" – and walked out of 602, never to be seen again.

A few weeks after the demise of 602OD, I showed up for a midnight shift at the O & D to discover I'd be working with John. Shit. John is the kind of man who takes himself way too seriously, the corollary being that he takes me, and all women, not at all seriously. We had finished with 'shift change' (an interesting routine in which the outgoing shift read their logs out loud to the incoming shift) (a routine for which we were required to show up fifteen minutes early – unpaid time, of course), and the evening staff had left. John and I were in the upstairs office. I happened to be sitting at The Desk, in the position of Power and Authority; John was sitting in the small chair at the side. The arrangement clearly bothered him. So he stood up, thinking, I guess, that if we were playing basketball, he'd have the height advantage. I ignored him. That clearly bothered him too.

"Why don't you do the logs tonight," he said. Then he added, "You're good at writing" – in a tone implying that writing was a sissy task unworthy of his effort.

"Sure, okay."

In fact, when I first started at the O & D, I found writing the logs to be quite an engaging activity. Witness this gem: "Early in the shift, Matthew seemed to be trembling slightly as he lay sleeping. Thinking he was perhaps cold, I put another blanket over him. However, at the next bedcheck, I discovered he had thrown the blanket onto the floor. Obviously he was resisting even the smallest gesture of kindness that might be offered by others. Or maybe he was too warm.

"He spent most of the night sleeping in a fetal position, which, to my mind, could well indicate a desire to return to a state of infancy rather than accept the challenges of adulthood. However, since he is, after all, only thirteen, and has probably faced too many adult situations already, this is probably a healthy desire. Matthew should have a childhood.

"At one point, however, he moved onto his back, arms flung out to either side and

feet crossed, suggesting, of course, the crucified Christ. One could easily interpret this posture as indicative of a persecution complex. However, again, since so much has actually happened to Matthew during his young life, this attitude is not necessarily pathological. Nevertheless, we may be wise to realize that perhaps he is reaching a critical threshold with regard to unpleasant things happening to him that interfere with whatever life plan he might, if it were not for this constant 'persecution,' develop.

"Towards morning, Matthew's legs were jerking, as if he were running. Given the above observations, it may be that he is planning an escape attempt during tomorrow's outing, and day staff might want to be extra vigilant in this regard. Or maybe he dreamt that he was chasing rabbits."

Shortly after, I was told that I didn't have to be that thorough, and I was advised to look at other midnight shift logs to get an idea of what was required. So I did. The first one said "Slept well." I noticed the difference right away, but read on through several other logs. "Slept thru the night." "Slept soundly thru the night." "Restless but slept thru the night." "Did not fall asleep until mid-shift. Then slept soundly thru the night." Hm. There's a pattern here. Why not just use a key? The half dozen variations could be listed and numbered, and then staff could just enter the appropriate numbers in the logs. As I started to prepare such a key, however, I realized we didn't even need a half dozen – two options would suffice. 1 - Slept soundly thru the night. 2 - Did not sleep soundly thru the night. On further thought still, I decided 'thru the night' was unnecessary. I put my final version of the key at the front of the master log and ever since, my midnight log entries have consisted of simply '1' or '2'.

Now John was probably not aware of this, but it didn't matter. I was still "good at writing" and I was still agreeable to doing the logs for our shift. And he was still standing over me. I guess he was waiting for me to vacate the chair of Power and Authority. After all, the first few times I worked with him, I pretty much did what he told me to do; I had just been hired, and he'd been working at the O & D for a while. But he probably thought I'd been deferring to his Almighty Maleness.

"You can get started on the laundry and the meals, if you like," he said. "I can handle the Security Checks myself," he added, smiling. He actually called them Security Checks. He even had his own flashlight, a rather large and sturdy thing suitable for Arctic Search and Rescue missions, dangling from his belt loop.

"No, that's okay. If I'm doing the logs, it makes more sense for me to do the bedchecks." After all, the logbook was kept in the office upstairs, which was where the bedrooms were. He continued standing there. Rather dumbly, I thought. "You can do the laundry and the cooking tonight," I clarified, reaching into my knapsack for the book I'd brought to read.

Well that did it. I may as well have castrated him and thrown it into the garbage. He stomped around the small office as I opened my book and started chapter one. Then he stood in the doorway, arms raised against the sides. (Be big. Be very big.)

"Why are you being so uncooperative?" he demanded.

"I'm not being uncooperative," I said. "I agreed to do the logs and I offered to do the bedchecks."

"But you're supposed to do the laundry and prepare the meals. That's part of the midnight shift duties."

"I'm supposed to? Why am I supposed to?"

"Well why do you think they always put one guy and one girl on shift together? The guys take care of Security and the girls do the cooking, cleaning, and stuff."

"Nooo, that's not it," I absently turned a page, "'cuz we all have the same job description."

He came over to the desk then and leaned on it, over it, putting his hands rather far apart. But then found he had nothing to say.

"As for why one of each," I continued, "I suspect it's in case a strip search has to be done for a new admission. Though that assumes all our kids are heterosexual. Frankly, if I were a young gay male, I'd rather have me looking him over than you."

Oh that was definitely it. I'd now, somehow, called him gay as well as suggested he do the women's work. He was not, definitely not going to stand for this.

"What?" He looked at me as if I was crazy.

Unfortunately, we were not exactly whispering at this point and one of the kids woke up. Told us to shut up. (Damn. Now I'd have to erase '1' and change it to '2'.) Which unfortunately woke up another resident who called out, with some anxiety, "Stop fighting! Please, I didn't do anything!" John was now leaning in the doorway, arms crossed, glaring at me. I got up, brushed past him, and went to the kid's room to tell her it was okay, she was okay, go back to sleep.

When I returned to the office, John was sitting in the big chair at The Desk, smiling smugly. So I took my book, and the log, went downstairs, and made a pot of tea. I did not do the laundry. I did not prepare the meals. I did go upstairs every half hour to do the bedchecks. First time, he grunted, as if I was a simpleton, that he'd just done them. Second time, he informed me again that he'd just done them. By the fourth time, I think he figured out what I was doing. (The bedchecks.) And then his 'I just did them' got louder and angrier with every passing half hour. At the 5:00 bedcheck, I pointed out, being careful to whisper, that if he didn't start the meals soon (tuna salad sandwiches for lunch and some kind of casserole for dinner), he wouldn't get them done before shift change.

"I'm not doing the fucking cooking, are you dense?!" he exploded. And everyone woke up. Except Matthew, who was chasing rabbits.

Well, the day shift was rather peeved to discover that neither the laundry nor the meals had been done. It was hard enough for two adults to keep tabs on four kids who were restricted to one floor when you didn't have anything else to do. Especially when the kids had something new to complain about all day.

When the supervisor spoke to me about that fateful shift, she said things like "If you can't resolve conflicts with your coworkers better than that, well, I'm afraid you're not much of a role model for the kids" and "I'm concerned that you put the kids at risk – who knows what could have happened while you were busy bickering." And I said things like "John has a little flashlight" and "He lacks the capacity to follow a recipe." Then she said something like "What you lack is the capacity to get along with people."

So, later that morning, or evening, at around mile seven, it occurred to me that maybe I should look for a job that didn't involve people.