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## The Rail

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# The Rail

46

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If the regular sights, sounds, and smells that assault your senses when you enter the prison chow hall aren't enough to discourage regular attendance, having to sit next to the rail can drive you to starvation. No one wants to sit next to the rail.

The rail stands about four feet tall and runs the length of the chow hall. Constructed of log-shaped pieces of stainless steel, the rail separates the herd of inmates into two groups: those who have already gotten their tray and those who haven't. Once you grab your tray, you are supposed to fill in the seats, beginning with the row by the rail. Tables that seat four are pushed up against the steel rail. When you're forced to sit there, everyone who enters the chow hall passes you by on their way to the serving line. This means that if a guy wants to shout a message to someone at another table, they have to do so right over you and your food. It also means all types of interesting characters pass within inches of you and your meal, complete with their coughs, sneezes, and other unpleasant bodily functions. Although there is an informal rail etiquette that inmates try to maintain, the best thing to do is avoid sitting by the rail. Over time we have devised clever ways to avoid the rail; you can count the people in front of you before you get your tray and, under a guise of politeness, offer the guy behind you to take your place in line. You can linger a step behind after you grab your dirty cup full of water or, if you're feeling rebellious, you can choose not to fill in the seat by the rail and sit somewhere else—but this usually results in getting yelled at and impolitely ordered to move by the lieutenant.

On one unlucky day when I was particularly hungry, I realized a step too late that I would be stuck on the rail. Resigned to my fate, I approached wearily. It was one of those days when most of the joint went to the chow

hall for a menu of hamburger and fries, or chicken, I don't remember, so people were packed in like sardines and the line went out the door. As I was sitting there, trying to protect my food from the spittle of people yelling over the rail, I was struck by the multitude of people in the place. When one line went out, another line replaced it, like an endless macabre procession. As I looked a little closer at the lines, I noticed that the composition of these lines didn't change much. Each line had similar characters: a few guys at the front of the line walking with a cane, rough kept characters that no one seemed to want to be around, the young crowd, the old crowd. But what struck me the most was the consistent way the ratio of black people outnumbered everyone else. There was a mix of whites and Latinos but over half of the guys in each line were black.

Having been in jail for awhile, I knew that it was foolish to make assumptions about the people around me—especially based on the color of their skin. Just because someone's skin was a particular hue didn't mean that they were from a particular place, or acted in a particular way, or were in because of a specific crime. Something didn't strike me as right, that the disproportionate ratio represented something sinister. I knew that in America blacks accounted for around a tenth of the demographic, but in here they accounted for over 60 percent. I wondered what the neighborhoods where all of these guys came from must look like with all of them gone. Each person in here had a story, stories filled with their own regrets and individual triumphs and heartaches. But why were so many of the people in here black? No one else in here seemed to be worried about it. I wondered if anyone else even noticed. But what did I know anyway, I was just stuck on the rail.