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# He Survived Inside; Now He'd Like to be Free

Berkley Hudson

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Chester G. Jefferds Jr. has survived 28 years in confinement. His face has deep, bold wrinkles. His hazel eyes are murky.

He spent five years in the state prison, then 23 more in the state mental hospital. He has seen other prisoners kill themselves—and sometimes each other. His was a world of beatings and rape, strait jackets and electroshock therapy, nurse's needles and attendants' pills.

Chester Jefferds learned how a man labeled crazy stays sane in a mental institution. You keep quiet. You try to forget why you're there. You don't listen to the moans and screams around you.

"You go through the alphabet, saying the letters over and over," he says. "You go through the fraction tables. 7 into 100. 8 into 100."

He has one tooth left. The rest he lost in fights. He has a raspy voice.

"There's only one way to go in this place," he says. "You keep your mouth shut."

Those who know him call him Jeff. He is 68. It has been 28 years since he was sentenced to life imprisonment for shooting his wife to death. Now he would like his freedom.

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"He doesn't belong here," says David J. Arone, a social worker at the state General Hospital. "There's plenty of evidence Chester has been able to take care of himself."

Since 1973, psychiatrists, social workers and nurses have been saying what Arone says: Jefferds is not sick, mentally or physically.

The problem, Arone says, is that Jefferds is unique among the 1,400 patients at the medical center. Like others there, he is elderly and has been in a mental hospital for many years, yet he is no longer ill. What makes him different is that he is under a life sentence for murder.

"He's still here because if he weren't here, he'd be at the prison," says Frederick Young, chief of social services at the General Hospital. Jefferds, Young says, doesn't belong in prison either. Mental health laws require the release of anyone who is not ill, but hospital officials believe that if he were released from the hospital, he would be required to go back to prison.

"Had he been at the prison all this time as a lifer, he'd probably be free now," Young says. "Most of the questions of why he is still here have to be answered by the Parole Board."

In 1977, the Parole Board gave Jefferds parole from the locked wards for the criminally insane at the state Institute of Mental Health. As a condition of parole, Jefferds agreed to continue living at the mental institution and not to leave the grounds.

Two years later, the General Hospital assumed responsibility for all elderly patients at the mental institution, and Jefferds was transferred to the hospital.

Last Thursday, Jefferds' case went before the Parole Board. The board, according to its vice chairman, Dr. Eliot B. Barron, "continued the matter" and asked hospital officials to provide the board with concrete alternatives on how Jefferds could be released from the hospital.

So far, no group home has wanted to take Jefferds. The Salvation Army in Providence did agree in 1979 to take him, but the Parole Board rejected that idea. The board, mental-health officials say, also rejected the idea of letting Jefferds move into his own apartment.

"There is pretty good evidence," Dr. Barron said, that "if you take people out of the state hospital and plunk them down in a community some place, they don't do well."

"The question of where to put a chronic patient who allegedly is recovered," added Barron, a psychiatrist, "is a problem for the mental-health people, not the parole board."

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"I'm not painting myself as a good guy," Chester Jefferds says. "I just think I've paid my debt in blood, sweat, and more."

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Chester, a carpenter and mechanic, met Eleanor R. Erminelli, a nurse, in 1938, and they were married three years later.

In February 1952, Mrs. Jefferds was granted a divorce on the grounds of nonsupport. Yet six months later, on July 9, 1952, Eleanor and Chester spent the day together. About 6:30 p.m. a car in which they were riding ran into two parked cars on Park Place

in Pawtucket. When police arrived they found that Eleanor had been shot by two .22-caliber bullets from a rifle found in the car. Chester had been shot once in the nose. Eleanor was dead on arrival at the hospital. Chester lived.

Neither the police then nor a jury the following June believed Jefferds' story that a hitchhiking sailor had been in the car, shot them both and fled. Nor did the jury believe Jefferds was innocent by reason of insanity.

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On Oct. 31, 1952, Jefferds was sentenced to life in prison. He was placed in solitary because, as a physician at the prison wrote into Jefferds' record: "He was confined for two weeks after he had become frightened, expressing the idea that people are going to kill him. ... He is overtly psychotic."

On Dec. 6, 1957, he was transferred from the state prison to the M Building of the state mental hospital, a quarter of a mile away. He stayed in that building for the next 14 years.

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Dec. 7, 1957. M Building. Monthly Report. "Patient became depressed after his admission... showed resentment by refusing to eat or drink. He stated he slept poorly last night because he worried about killing his ex-wife. He repeatedly asked: 'Do you think I'm crazy?'"

Jan. 30, 1958. "Jefferds does not play cards or watch television programs, but he plays bingo games once a week. He has no visitors. Medication has lessened his apprehension. He wears state clothing."

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Jefferds has an I.Q. of 121, brighter than average. But he lives around people who pick up cigarette butts and eat them and drink from discarded, half-empty coffee cups.

He has seen psychiatrists come and go. They asked him: Who were the last five Presidents? What are America's five largest cities? What's the price of sugar? What's 3 times 13? 3 times 39?

Doctors diagnosed him as "schizophrenic type, paranoid reaction." The psychiatrists said he had a persecution complex. They say he is a "guarded intellectualizer" who uses cryptic humor to deny his problems.

"Somebody walks up to you 39 times and takes a shot at you each time," Jefferds says. "Then the next time you duck when they come by. The doctors say you're paranoid. I say, if a horse falls down, you don't bet on it, do you?"

One doctor told Jefferds he laughed too much.

"I told him when you come up with a better medication than humor, let me know. Meanwhile *you*

take the medication. Then I imitated him." He lapsed into a German accent: "Ven you get vell, you come back and see me and ve vill talk again."

He himself never had the electroshock therapy. It has been years since he took any medication for mental illness.

He has outlasted the guards who spit through his cell doors. "In M, the guards lock the door and shut you in and that's it. They were afraid to open the doors on us," Jefferds says. "Guys were in there that had cut their mother's and father's heads off with axes.

"They used to send troublemakers up from the prison, screeching and hollering. They'd attack you when you walked across the hall. That's where I got my teeth knocked out. We used to tackle the guards. I thought we were going to die in there."

Some did. One prisoner, Jefferds recalls, killed himself just before supper one night. He used a cord tied on the cell window.

Once, three prisoners raped another. Jefferds sat in his cell with the radio on while a guard did nothing. "There was nothing I could do that would have stopped them," he says. "They would have just beat me up and still raped the other guy.

"There were goon squads. Guards would go out and get drunk and then they'd come into my ward and say: 'Jeff we're gonna beat this guy down the hall. Lock your door and nothing will happen to you.'"

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Spring 1959. M Building. "The patient is the ringleader of the Holy Three group that is attempting to control the actions and behavior of other patients."

June 12, 1961. "It has been reported by one or two patients that patient Jefferds is trying to organize the patients to be resentful, non-cooperative and rebellious."

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Jeff had been transferred to the Pinel Building. He didn't like it and wanted to be moved. So he "acquired" a half-dozen copies of the key to the locked ward door.

He stuck one new key in each side of his mouth and walked up to a supervisor, who had refused his earlier requests for a transfer. Jeff pulled the key from his mouth.

"What's that?" the supervisor asked. Then he realized it was the door key. "How'd you get it?"

"I got it. Right? Now I could leave anytime I want to, couldn't I? Why don't we be friends?"

"You ain't gonna blackmail me. Give me that key."

Jeff gave him the key and walked to the ward door. There he took the other key out of his mouth and pushed it in and out of the lock.

"What are you doing?" the supervisor asked.

"I'm trying this one to see if it's okay. You know

HE SURVIVED INSIDE; NOW HE'D LIKE TO BE FREE

they come with burrs on them.”

“Give me that.”

“Okay, but there’s more where that came from.”

“Which ward do you want to go on?”

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Harry C. Huguley is the administrator of the locked wards at the mental hospital. He came there in 1975 as an attendant in the Pinel Building.

“I learned from Jeff,” Huguley says. “He knew everything that was going on. He was a very shrewd operator. But he was always a mild-mannered kind of guy.

“At different times, he tried to sell me a house, a sports jacket, a radio and an automobile. I didn’t buy any of them. He was the middleman on a lot of things. He had somebody supplying him with radios at one time.

“He was never broke. For a mental patient, he always looked like he had a fair amount of cash on him. Like he would have \$25 or \$30 on him. Most patients are broke. One time he had a couple of old automobiles. He apparently fixed them up in the parking lot and sold them.”

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Jan. 30, 1977, Barry Hall. Monthly Report. “He deals in cars sometimes at a loss but more often than not he is fairly successful in turning over cars and keeping himself in sandwiches and in a secret nip. He’s an excellent mechanic and exonerates himself by doing a bang-up job of fixing other people’s cars.”

March 30, 1977, Barry Hall. “His parole was denied but one feels he is not secretly overwrought... being well-institutionalized or at least philosophical enough not to get rattled about anything the state does to him after 24 years of being locked up.”

Jan 6, 1978. Barry Hall. “It has been reported to me that he...reportedly is drinking, driving off the grounds and that he apparently is involved sexually...it is mentioned that a naked female in his room was observed...other things mentioned involve large sums of money...He is known to be a chronic liar. ...There is a good deal of administrative confusion (in his case) which will be cleared up in time.”

January-February 1979. L Building. “If Mr. Jefferds can manage to capitalize on the complex organization of this hospital, he certainly can cope adequately with community living. ...This man has been subjected to the red tape of the state system far too long.”

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“How long has it been since you had a steak, Jeff?” a hospital worker asked him once, a few years ago.

“Quite a while.”

“I don’t know you too well. You don’t know me too well. If you screw up, I’m going to call the police and tell them my car was stolen. Here’s the keys. I want you

back here in four hours. If you don’t show, I’ll report the car stolen. Then you’re screwed and I’m in the clear.”

“I think I’ll take the stool pigeon with me.”

“Good idea.”

Jefferds told the stool pigeon—another patient—to come with him.

They drove to Cranston Street in Cranston, passing a state trooper and waving.

At a restaurant near the Cranston Print Works Jefferds bought rounds of beer with a wad of money he had been saving. They ate spaghetti and meatballs.

“Where you working?” somebody asked Jefferds as he was leaving.

“Cranston Print Works,” he replied. “We were brought in from Canada. They had some trouble with the machines. Probably we’ll see you next Saturday.”

They got back to the hospital on time.

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Today, Jefferds has more freedom than ever. He lives with three other elderly men in a newly renovated room at the General hospital. The room costs \$95 a day; his Supplemental Security Income check covers part of the cost and the state pays the rest.

After payment for his board is taken out, he gets about \$25 a month from two federal checks.

He liked it better when he was getting paid to work in the Pinel Building’s kitchen and at other odd jobs on the grounds. But that stopped when he was moved to the General Hospital.

“I’m sick of this place. You don’t live here. We just exist. The people here aren’t going anywhere but to the cemetery. The two floors above us are cancer. Most of them die up there. You can smell it.”

“On my hall, one guy works at the library. He walks backwards and can’t go nowhere. Another guy is from God knows where, Johnston. An old Italian. His family got his house and they put him here. He’s in his 70s. He’s got no place to go. Where else but a nursing home? There are a lot of them in here like that.”

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On his bed in the Virks Building one day last month, Jefferds placed two solid blue sports jackets and one green jacket. He bought them because he thought the Parole Board would decide he can move into an apartment with a friend of his, a janitor who works at the Medical Center. Now he worried that the Parole Board may send him back to prison. He wouldn’t need the jackets there.

“You want to buy a sports jacket?”

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*Six weeks after the story was published, Chester Jefferds was released from the state hospital where he had been confined long past the time he should have been freed.*