

Voice Not Recognized

By: Sterling R. Cunio

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2:30 p.m.

The female robot voice recording begins:

“Press one for English. Para Espanol oprima el dos”

While pressing one, I notice two guys assigned to a separate housing unit walking into the cellblock. Both are young white guys covered with tattoos, one with scraggly red hair and two day old whiskers, the other a clean-shaven blond. Both are wearing winter coats during the hottest summer. Oregon is in a state of emergency. It’s been forty-nine days without rain and over thirty-five thousand acres of forest are burning. The nearest inferno is 59.8 miles away and has turned Salem’s air quality hazardous while depositing ash on the window bars. This is the seventh day of a record setting heat wave, it’s hot as hell and their coats alert me.

Heavy denim coats with textbook shaped pockets can hide weapons. Prisoners caught in unauthorized areas face torture in solitary confinement. They are here for a reason. With an elevated threat level I scan the vicinity accounting for friendlies and hostiles. Prison is never safe. It is always violent and difficult, even one’s sleep is disrupted frequently by jarring sounds of slamming gates, clanky keys, and flashlights shone in the face unless the officer respects rest. The Oregon State Penitentiary itself is relatively safe and progressive in comparison with the rest of the nation’s prisons, yet, violence is inherent to the structure of prisons themselves. Any random variable sparked by mental illness, dysfunction, addiction or offense can ignite a destructive chaos affecting every aspect of a prisoner’s life. There is an ever-present threat of conflict erupting at any moment with indiscriminate violence capable of turning a prisoner’s world upside down with consequences ranging from solitary to loss of life. The problem doesn’t have to be the prisoner’s own to cause suffering in his home.

Having navigated the prison’s volatility for twenty-three years I am adept at identifying pending chaos and moving away from it in advance. Today however, I am not moving. I’m determined to make this call regardless of hazard.

"Please be informed that your continued use of Telemate's products and services shall constitute acceptance of Telemate's terms of use and privacy statement which are available."

Telemate is Oregon's sole provider of prisoner telephone services at .16 cents a minute. There are no instructions on how to acquire the terms and with my only other option being that of not calling home, I blindly agree.

The two guys look around sinisterly. One watches the officer who just began a tier walk to visually check fifty cells in a two-story building. He will be gone for a while so now is the time to strike. Adrenalin dumps into my body as war zone butterflies flutter in my stomach, I taste my saliva as my pulse increases. I'm prepared for fight or flight.

"Please enter your PIN code followed by the pound sign"

I hurriedly enter my fourteen-digit pin number hoping the impending trouble doesn't spill across racial lines. I mentally will the robot lady to speak faster because incidents prompt lockdowns.

"Press 8 for the inspector general"

The blond guy watches the officer walk away and then gives the red head a go ahead nod.

"Press 9 for the prison rape elimination act hotline"

The red hair plunges his hand into his pocket and darts into the cellblocks general-purpose room where prisoners exercise on the pull-up bars, do sit-ups and watch sports on the TV while drinking 16-ounce sodas at \$1.85 a pop. This unit is the only unit in the prison that has a coke machine.

"Go get a wheel chair, we got a man down," the officer suddenly screams into his radio from the top tier. Confused and disorientated, I wonder how the man down is connected to the out of area criminals on a mission. Quickly glancing in their direction I see they too have paused to calculate the commotion.

"Please enter the area code and the phone number you want to call, or for international calls dial 011, the country code and the number."

Punching in the numbers quickly I know it won't be long before security staff and medical nurses swarm to the officer's summon. All I want to do is complete this call, earlier my wife spent .25

cents to send me a message on a Telemate tablet that cost a nickel per minute to use. The text read: "Call me when you can, we heard back from the Editor"

"Please say your full name and the facility at the beep and then press pound"

"Sterling Cunio, Oregon State Penitentiary"

"Sorry voice not recognized"

Officers and nurses pour into the unit.

"Please say your full name and the facility at the beep and then press pound"

"Sterling Cunio, Oregon State Penitentiary"

"Sorry voice not recognized"

After the staff go running past to the medical emergency the two guys begin moving.

"Please say your full name and the facility at the beep and then press pound"

"Sterling Cunio, Oregon State Penitentiary"

"Sorry voice not recognized. You have no access to this phone" Dial tone.

The voice recognition software works an average two out of ten times. Since the entire recorded process takes one minute and thirty-seven seconds I am fearful there wont be much time before the next chaos unfolds and assures a lock down until administration sorts out the incidents.

Hanging the phone up to reset the recording I pick it back up and hastily dial again.

The medical emergency is for a fifty-eight year old named Dave who is a tutor in the education department. I see him flopping around on the tier in a diabetic seizure. Nurses attempt to stabilize him while the officers strap him to a gurney in preparation to be rushed to an ambulance. Dave's friends and a few random gawkers have formed a group outside the general-purpose room's door.

"Press one for English. Para Espanol oprima el dos" the robot begins again.

Writers, lawyers, professors and criminal reform activist have encouraged me to submit writings to The Marshal Project's "Life Inside" so I sent a story about the prison wedding of Michael. A friend dying in the prison hospice at forty-seven years old. Michael was remarrying his first wife on the same day another friend, Arnold, was releasing after seventeen years. The story attempted

to braid narratives about intersecting hardships of loss commonplace inside, and how the pain of never seeing a friend again is only overcome by the joy of seeing him regain liberty.

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The Guys are sliding their way through the group in their commitment to the unknown mission. Dave has been strapped on the gurney and is being hauled down the steps. He's no longer moving.

"Please say your full name and the facility at the beep and then press pound"

"Sterling Cunio, Oregon State Penitentiary"

"Thank-you for using Telemate."

"Hey, we heard from the Editor" Says Cheryl. my wife of fourteen-years.

"Yo, what'd he say?" I ask in excitement. Eyes darting between environmental threats.

"Says it needs to be more narrow. It's a bit too much for life inside."

Dave's feet disappear through the door.

"Too much, what the fuck!" stammering in confusion. Thinking how to tell Michael the story isn't going to be published.

"Are you going to write another piece? Just focus in on something simpler"

"I wish anything around here was simple, I'll call you later."

The guy in the coat makes his move.

As soon as the gurney goes by, the red head sprints across the floor while pulling out three soda coupons and jamming them into the coke machine. Then shoving the sodas into his coat pockets he slips out the door with his accomplice. Their cold drink mission complete.

Glancing at the clock I hang up the phone.

It's been twelve minutes.