

The Torture of Solitary

Solitary confinement, once regarded as a humane method of rehabilitation, unravels the mind. Yet today, more than 25,000 U.S. prisoners languish in isolated cells.

BY STEPHANIE ELIZONDO GRIEST

HERE IS WHAT I KNEW ABOUT JOE LOYA BEFORE stepping into his car: During a 14-month stretch in the late 1980s, he stole a quarter-million dollars from 30 Southern California banks by donning a tailored suit and, occasionally, a fedora, striding up to bank tellers, and, in a low and smoky voice, demanding all their money. His panache earned him the nickname “The Beirut Bandit” because, he said, “no one could believe a Mexican from East L.A. could be so smooth.” He was finally bum-rushed by undercover agents while reading the newspaper at a UCLA campus café. (His girlfriend had tipped them off.) As he served out a seven-year prison sentence, he grew increasingly violent, once chomping a chunk off the ear of an inmate who had snaked his copy of *Playboy*. When his former cellmate was slaughtered in their old cell, Loya was pegged as a primary suspect and consigned to Security Housing Unit—otherwise known as solitary confinement—for two years, until cleared of the charges. He was released in 1996, at age 35.

All of this I could handle. But when he started careening 77 miles per hour down a Northern Californian freeway, slicing in and out of traffic, I began to worry. Tall and husky with mocha-colored skin, Loya was wearing Ray-Bans and a pinstriped shirt untucked

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over jeans. His temples were flecked with gray.

“There is something seductive about solitary confinement,” he mused. “It is the myth of the American male: I walk alone. There is a sense that solitary is a kind of adventure, and men love adventure.”

We narrowly avoided sideswiping an SUV, which blared its horn.

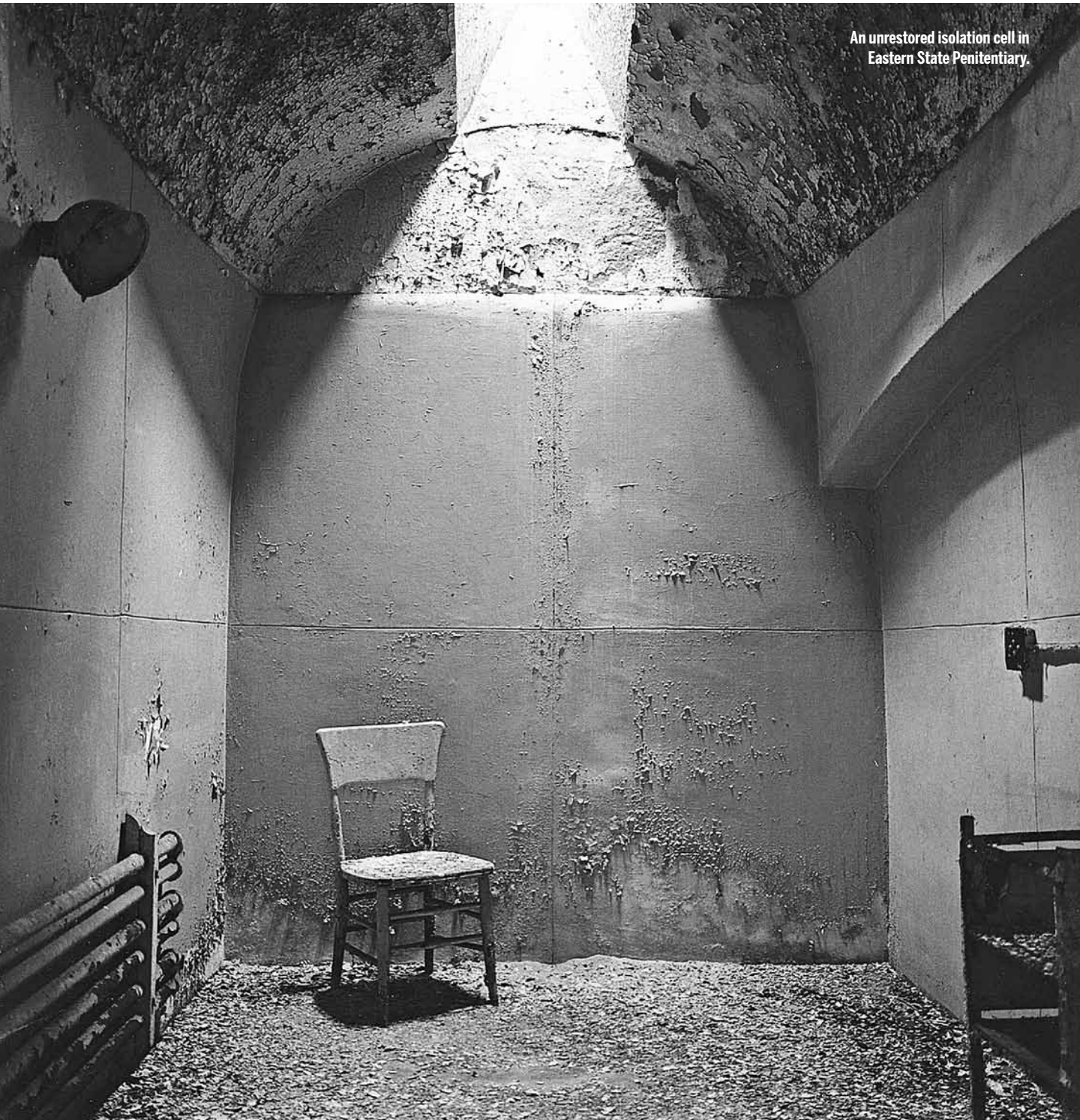
“It sounds like you already had a lot of adventure,” I offered.

Maybe too much. Loya’s mother died of cancer when he was nine, leaving him with a little brother and a Bible-thumping father for emotional support. He sought comfort in an older female neighbor, who repeatedly molested him. Meanwhile, his father tried to beat the demons out of him. After an especially brutal pummeling at age 16, Loya plunged a steak knife into his father’s neck. The old man survived, but Loya landed in county custody, embarking from there on a decade-long crime spree that included auto theft, larceny, fraud, and, finally, the bank robberies that landed him in prison.

“No adventure is like solitary,” he said, gliding into another lane. “It’s almost erotic, like—like masturbation. You don’t rely on anyone else to pleasure you. You just do it yourself. Solitary is just you creating your own universe with you at the center of it, to sleep, to read, to jack off, to think, to be with yourself.”

He glanced at me and grinned. “When you come

An unrestored isolation cell in
Eastern State Penitentiary.



out of solitary, you know that you've taken stock of yourself. You know who you are."

In his case, that meant discovering a knack for the pen. Halfway through his prison sentence, Loya struck up a correspondence with the writer Richard Rodriguez, who emboldened him to pursue his literary tendencies. Six years after his release, Loya starred in a one-man show he'd written about his past called *The Man Who Outgrew His Prison Cell*, which HarperCollins later published as a memoir.

The exit for San Leandro loomed ahead. Loya zipped across three lanes, pivoted east, then dog-legged through an upscale neighborhood. "Pretentious bullshit," he muttered at a sign featuring the word "estates" in floral script. We pulled up to a cream-colored house with rust-brown trim. Inside, the living room radiated newness. Black-and-white photographs of sidewalk cafés in foreign lands were propped against the walls, waiting to be hung. Teddy bears, blankets, and teething toys were scattered on the floor. Just a few months earlier, Loya and his wife had been nesting in East Oakland, but they decamped after five shootings occurred within a few blocks of their home. The safety of their 16-month-old daughter trumped their desire to help "foster community."

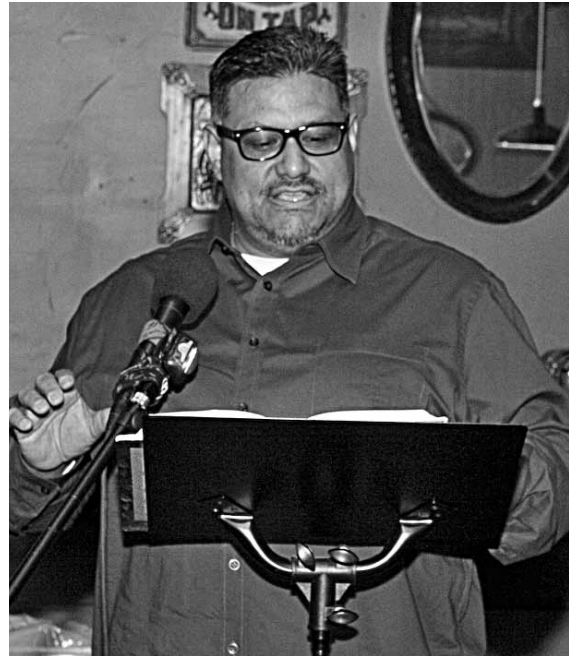
Loya motioned for me to sit. We stared at each other for a long moment.

"So, solitary," I said.

"So, solitary," he repeated, combing his fingers through his gel-spiked hair. "Rule number one is, you make your bunk in the morning and you don't lie on it again. Not until lunch, and even then, just for a nap. Your bunk is like quicksand. Spend too much time on it, and your mind will grow sloppy. You have to be vigilant. You have to take control of your thoughts before they grip hold of you. Mind games help, because they keep you sharp.

"First, you sit on the edge of your bunk. Don't lie on it. SIT. Find a spot on the wall. OK, now—stare. That's it. Stare. Don't look away. Just keep staring at it, staring at it, at that same little spot, for a whole entire minute. Once you got that, stare at it for five minutes. Then 10. Then 20.

"That's when things start to happen. Things like light. Panels of light will slowly open as your peripheral vision recedes into darkness. And then that spot on



Joe Loya began writing while in solitary confinement. After being released, he turned the skill into a profession.

the wall, it will dance. It will become a dog or a horse, and after a while it will become a man, and that man, he will start to walk. If you concentrate hard enough, deep enough, long enough, a little movie will flicker.

"Eventually, this will happen without you even trying. Faces will appear, but without you concentrating. You just open your eyes, and a scene appears right in front of you. But then those faces, they start to morph, like in that Michael Jackson video. Only, they morph into people you don't want to see. People you f****d over. People suffering. People in pain.

"And then you start hearing things."

When Philadelphia Quakers conceived of solitary confinement in the late 18th century, the punishment was regarded as humanitarian. At the time, convicts were typically hanged, flogged, or tossed into wretchedly overcrowded dungeons. What these prisoners needed, Quakers argued, was a spiritual renovation. Give a man ample time and quiet space to reflect upon his misdeeds, and he will recover his bond with God. He will grieve. He will repent. He will walk away a rehabilitated man.

And so, after conducting a few test runs at local

jailhouses, Philadelphia, a city infused with the theology of the Quakers who had helped to found it, sank a record \$800,000 into building a prison on an elevated piece of farmland just north of the city limits (known today as the Fairmount District). The structure consisted entirely of isolation cellblocks. In 1829, Eastern State Penitentiary opened its iron-studded doors. Its high stone walls and castellated towers suggested a fortress, yet its Gothic façade was redolent of a monastery. For 142 years, it tried to be both.

“If reform is possible, it will happen here,” proclaimed a sign in the modern-day visitor’s center. When I visited a few years ago, I walked down a corridor draped with cobwebs, gripping a map. Every few feet, I passed another cell. Some were whitewashed and barren; others were refurbished with rusty cots and wobbly workbenches. Entering a cell required ducking your head, an act of supplication. The room measured eight feet by 12 feet, with a barrel ceiling that reached 10 feet at the crown. A tiny round skylight—known as “the Eye of God”—cast a circle of sunshine on the floor. I stepped inside it as legions of inmates had done before me, following the light as it slowly revolved around the cell, the sole indicator of time’s passage. As the soft glow warmed my face, I imagined the horrors that had once transpired here.

First, you were hooded. A black woolen sheath covered your head, clung to your shoulders, clouded your vision. Supposedly, this kept you from discerning the prison’s layout (and thus concocting an escape), but it also disabled you. Guards shoved you forward, warning when to duck, when to turn.

Next, you were assigned a number corresponding to your spot in the admissions log. For the duration of your sentence, you’d be known only by this number. It was written above your cell door, stitched on your shirt, shouted when you were needed.

In quick succession, you were examined by a physician, shorn by a barber, and shown to a shower. By the time you emerged, dripping wet, your belongings had been confiscated: your socks, your shirt, your un-

derwear, the contents of your pockets. In exchange, you received woolen trousers, a close-fitting jacket, a shirt, two handkerchiefs, two pairs of stockings, and coarse leather shoes—all of which itched.

Then you were led (or, if you resisted, dragged or carried) to your cell. At last, you could pull off the mask. Aside from a cot, a stool, and a whale-oil lamp, the cell was empty. No paper, no ink, no reading material. Nothing whatsoever to occupy your time, at least those first weeks. (Eventually, you’d be permitted to cobble shoes or roll cigars for the prison’s profit.) A side door led to a small yard where—if you behaved—you’d be allowed to exercise for an hour a day. Baths were offered every two to three weeks. Aside from that, you’d spend your entire sentence between those white walls, visited only by the warden, a clergyman, and your own mounting regret.

All seven cellblocks connected to a central surveillance hub, like the spokes of a wheel. The walls were 18 inches thick. But architecture wasn’t the only cause

AFTER THE 1890s, solitary confinement largely fell out of practice for decades except as a short-term punishment for bad behavior.

of the silence that engulfed the place. In the early days, the guards pulled woolen stockings over their boots to muffle their footsteps and wrapped the wheels of the food cart in leather to quiet its creaking. Yet the inmates were inventive with their noisemaking. They shouted down the toilet every time they flushed it. They banged on the water pipes, each clang corresponding to a different letter of the alphabet. The guards retaliated by covering the skylights, eclipsing the prisoners even from God. If the noise persisted, they stormed the cells. In wintertime, they stripped the offending inmates, chained them to the wall, and tossed buckets of cold water on them until icicles hung from their limbs. In summertime, they strapped inmates into chairs for days at a stretch, until their legs ballooned. If the inmates *still* kept talking, the guards put them in the “iron gag,” a five-inch metal brace that was clamped over their

tongues and attached by chains to their wrists, which were handcuffed behind their backs.

Yet the physical pain of these tortures—common in many prisons at the time—paled beside the mental anguish of solitude. Charles Dickens spent an afternoon visiting Eastern State inmates in 1842, and wrote an account of the experience in his travelogue *American Notes*: “On the haggard face of every man among these prisoners, the same expression sat. I know not what to liken it to. It had something of that strained attention which we see upon the faces of the blind and deaf, mingled with a kind of horror, as though they had all been secretly terrified.” At another point in the book, Dickens wrote:

I hold this slow and daily tampering with the mysteries of the brain, to be immeasurably worse than any torture of the body: and because its ghastly signs and tokens are not so palpable to the eye and sense of touch as scars upon the flesh; because its wounds are not upon the surface, and it extorts few cries that human ears can hear; therefore I the more denounce it, as a secret punishment which slumbering humanity is not roused up to stay.

The prison’s annual reports listed scores of suicides, and while loneliness was never cited as a factor, a certain side effect was. One report described a “white male, aged 17” who died of “debility. . . . Persistent masturbation was the sole cause of his death.” Another mentioned a prisoner who set his cell ablaze and snuffed up all the smoke. Cause of death: “excessive masturbation.” In fact, the 1838 report ascribed 12 cases of insanity to this “solitary vice.”

Eastern State gradually abandoned the practice of solitary confinement. There were simply too many bodies—with too few minds—to keep. As early as 1841, the warden was doubling up the inmates, and by the turn of the century, cells bunked as many as four apiece. Solitary confinement also grew costly. Whereas inmates at other penitentiaries could toil together in chain gangs, quarrying marble or tending crops, Eastern State inmates could only labor within the confines of their cells, and the piecemeal tasks they performed didn’t turn enough profit. The “crucible of good intentions,” as the authors of a history of Eastern State call it,

finally shuttered in 1971, reopening a quarter-century later as a museum and, during the Halloween season, as “the scariest haunted house in America!” (according to television talk-show host Rachael Ray).

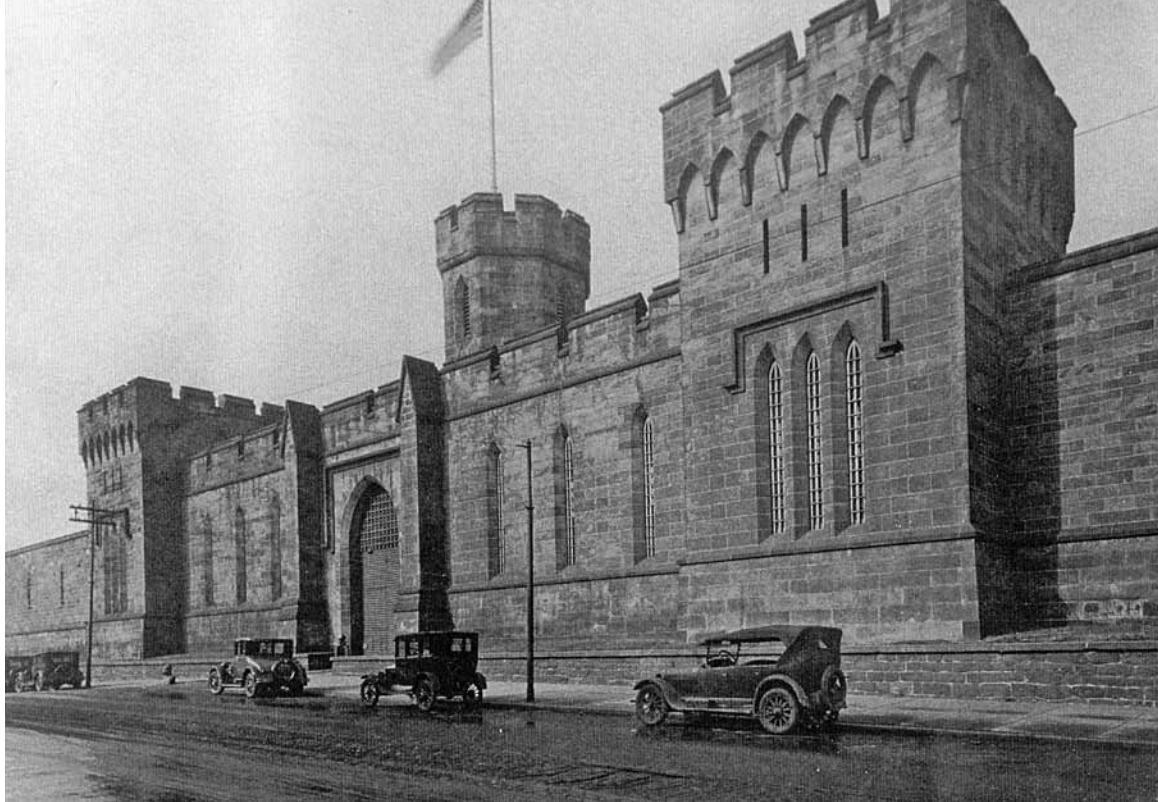
Eastern State Penitentiary was widely considered a failure, but that didn’t stop other prisons from implementing its “separate system”—with equally disastrous results. In the second half of the 19th century, German researchers published 37 studies documenting the psychotic illnesses suffered by their country’s isolated inmates, including hallucinations, delusions, and “psychomotor excitation.” In England, guards at Pentonville Prison had to cart so many inmates off to the insane asylum each year that the warden finally ruled that no one be isolated longer than 12 months.

In 1890, the U.S. Supreme Court nearly declared the punishment unconstitutional. Writing for the majority, Justice Samuel Miller argued,

A considerable number of the prisoners fell, after even a short confinement, into a semi-fatuous condition, from which it was next to impossible to arouse them, and others became violently insane; others, still, committed suicide; while those who stood the ordeal better were not generally reformed, and in most cases did not recover sufficient mental activity to be of any subsequent service to the community.

Solitary confinement largely fell out of practice in the century that followed, save as a short-term punishment for exceedingly bad behavior.

Fast-forward to the 1970s. Increased penalties for drug crimes swelled the nation’s prison population. Ronald Reagan’s “war on drugs” sent the number yet higher. Meanwhile, lawmakers wishing to seem tough on crime dissolved the bulk of prison educational and occupational programs, leaving inmates with an infinity of hours and no way to fill them. When two correctional officers were shanked to death in a single day at Marion Federal Prison in Illinois in 1983, the warden ordered the entire facility put on “permanent lockdown,” forbidding inmates to leave their cells to work, take classes, eat in the cafeteria, or do anything but shower. Heralded as a success, the Marion lock-



down spawned a new breed of prison called the “Supermax,” which cooped all inmates in solitary cells for no less than 23 hours a day. More than 60 such prisons have sprung up across the nation, housing up to 25,000 inmates. Tens of thousands of other men and women—nobody knows the exact number—are languishing in what are essentially concrete cages at other facilities. And they aren’t all just staying for days or weeks or months or even years. Some Americans are enduring solitary confinement for decades.

Robert Hillary King is a star in certain circles. He is the subject of a British documentary narrated by Samuel L. Jackson, and has published an autobiography and touted it to hundreds of groups around the world. He has mingled with members of Congress, gabbed with historian Howard Zinn, and befriended the cofounders of the Body Shop. The cause behind his célèbre isn’t so glittering: He survived one of the longest known stints in solitary confinement. For 29 years, King passed all but perhaps an hour a day inside a six-by-nine-foot concrete cell at Louisiana State Penitentiary at Angola. Since his release in 2001, he has launched a one-man campaign to end this form of punishment.

“I saw men so desperate, they ripped prison doors apart,” King told me in a slow Cajun drawl when we



Philadelphia’s Eastern State Penitentiary combined the elements of a fortress and a monastery. All seven isolation cellblocks connected to a central surveillance hub.

met at a café in Austin. “They starved themselves. They cut themselves. My soul still mourns for them.”

King, in his late sixties, walks with a noble gait. That day in Austin, he was wearing sunglasses, a black ankh necklace, and an ivy cap turned backward. Tattoos of daggers and spiders covered his arms, and his face was pockmarked, yet he exuded yogic tranquility. The tops of his knuckles were tattooed with the word L-O-V-E, while the bottoms read H-A-T-E.

King was born in 1942 to a mother who drank and a father who split. Although his grandmother was still rearing some of her own nine children, she added him to her brood. One of his earliest memories is of watching an uncle strangle a rat and stew it for the family’s

supper. After living in a smattering of Louisiana towns, including New Orleans, King ditched home at 15 to ride the rails with a couple of hoboes. A brief stint in reform school followed, and at 18 he received the first of several prison sentences for armed robberies he claims not to have committed (though he acknowledges other crimes), landing at Angola, known as the nation's bloodiest prison. A former plantation so massive that the entire island of Manhattan could fit on its grounds, Angola was named after the African nation where the bulk of its slaves originated.

The first thing King noticed upon his arrival was that the majority of the inmates were black and the guards were uniformly white. Known as "Freemen," the guards lived with their families on the prison grounds, served by inmates called "houseboys." Before the light of dawn, the Freeman marched the inmates down to the fields and watched on horseback as they cut, bladed, ditched, and quarter-drained sugarcane in a work line for up to 16 hours a day. In 1951 more than 30 inmates slashed their own Achilles tendons with razorblades to protest these working conditions. The Freeman called them the "Heel String Gang" after that.

King thus spent the 1960s in a time warp. While serving out his sentences at Angola, he was trapped in the pages of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. During his intermittent stretches of freedom, however, he lived in the spirit of the nation's flourishing civil rights movement. "By 1969, everybody who was black, even those with just a trace of black blood, wanted to be Black and Proud. It was a time of consciousness. I loved it," he said.

He didn't have long to revel in it: By 1970 he had racked up yet another conviction, for robbery, which carried a 35-year sentence. While awaiting transfer to Angola, he shared a cell with some Black Panthers who had just been arrested in a police shootout. Their ideology enthralled him. "Through our discussions, I grasped the historical plight of blacks and other poor people in America. I saw that, for these people, America is one great big prison, a perpetuation and continuation of slavery."

Back in Angola, he befriended two inmates also serving time for robbery, Herman Wallace and Albert Woodfox. They had recently founded the nation's first prison chapter of the Black Panther Party, and invited him to join. Under their tutelage, King started crack-

ing books—the Bible, philosophy, and especially law—and leading political discussions and hunger strikes.

Angola was a war zone in the 1970s. Roving gangs raped vulnerable inmates and forced them into prostitution. Stabbings occurred on an almost daily basis. When a young white Freeman joined the list of fatalities, after being knifed 32 times, Wallace and Woodfox were pinned with the blame—despite dubious testimony from a witness who was legally blind, another who was on antipsychotic medication, and a third whom the warden had bribed with a carton of cigarettes a week for life. Wallace and Woodfox were exiled to Closed Cell Restriction, Angola's isolated chamber. King soon shared their fate, after he was falsely accused of murdering a fellow inmate. In time, these Panthers would be christened "the Angola Three" by activists and championed by human rights groups such as Amnesty International. Back then, however, they felt as though they'd just been sucked down a hellhole, never to resurface.

The first years of solitary were the hardest. Denied even exercise privileges, King did crunches, jumping jacks, and pushups in the skinny plot between his toilet and cot. He read. He wrote. He paced. Most of his family had either died or wandered away, so letters were scant and visitors nonexistent. Other inmates lived on his cellblock, but he could only communicate with them by passing notes or shouting—and if caught, he'd be thrown in the "dungeon," a darkened room without a mattress or even a blanket, for weeks at a time. Black Pantherism became King's touchstone. He meditated on its tenets like a lotused monk.

A sweet tooth inspired a risky hobby: candy making. Having learned a few culinary tricks from Angola's chief cook years earlier, King fashioned a stove out of scraps of metal and wire, transformed Coke cans into a pot, and, using toilet paper for fuel, started cooking confections atop his toilet seat (so he could quickly conceal the contraption inside the bowl to avoid detection, if need be). Before long, inmates were sneaking him pats of butter and packets of sugar stashed at breakfast, while Freeman smuggled in bags of pecans. King's pralines grew famous; requests streamed in all the way from Angola's death row.

The bulk of King's time, however, was devoted to a thick stack of law books, in hopes that the contents

might free him. Eventually, in 1975, he was able to win a retrial for the murder. Another man testified to doing the killing solo, but an all-white jury convicted King again anyway. Back in solitary, King wrote a flurry of letters—signed “the Angola 3”—that landed in capable hands. Human rights groups began to champion the trio’s cause, while top lawyers adopted their cases pro bono. After a great deal of legal wrangling, in 2001 King’s advocates won him a reprieve of sorts: He could walk if he promised not to sue for wrongful conviction. He agreed—though as he stalked out the gate, he paused to shout, “I may be free of Angola, but Angola will never be free of me!”

The cases of Wallace and Woodfox have proven more difficult. Angola’s warden has repeatedly accused the two of “still trying to practice Black Pantherism,” which he has likened to the doctrines of the Ku Klux Klan. The men briefly rejoined the general prison population after a 2008 visit from Representative John Conyers (D-Mich.), but have since been returned to isolation. Wallace and Woodfox have now endured more time in solitary confinement than anyone in U.S. penal history: 40 years each, as of April.

Angola Three lead counsel George Kendall and his team are currently pursuing two legal cases in the Louisiana courts, one of which argues that indefinite solitary confinement violates the constitutional guarantee against cruel and unusual punishment. His clients hope to live to see the outcome, but the odds are formidable: Approximately 85 percent of Angola’s inmates die in captivity. Wallace turned 70 in October. Woodfox has blood pressure so high that once a nurse who was administering a medical exam checked her machine to make sure it wasn’t broken. But according to Kendall, the two men are still mentally sharp. “I really braced myself for our first meeting,” he admitted to me in an interview. “I thought that after so many years in solitary, they’d be lying on the floor sucking their thumbs. But no: You are still able to have a con-



Robert Hillary King, accused of murdering a fellow inmate, spent 29 years in solitary, one of the longest known stints.

versation with them about what is happening in the Middle East. By sheer determination, they have not let this confinement crush them.”

After he was released with nothing but a one-way bus ticket and a few crumpled bills in his pocket, King moved to New Orleans to forge a new life—only to lose everything he’d cobbled together in the floodwaters of Hurricane Katrina. “I cried more during those first two weeks after Katrina than I did the whole time I was in Angola,” he said, shaking his head.

Texan friends rescued him in a boat and helped him relocate to Austin. He travels at least two weeks a month campaigning for the release of Woodfox and Wallace. Speaking engagements cover

most of his bills, as do profits from the pralines he perfected in prison and now sells over the Internet. They arrive in a package stamped with a sleek black panther and labeled “King’s Freelines.”

Four years have passed since my car ride with Joe Loya. Curious how he was faring, I called him in January. His daughter is a vivacious kindergartener now; he has been happily married for 13 years. Several of his television and movie scripts are being shopped around Hollywood.

Yet Loya still feels solitary’s grip now and then. In 2003, hallucinations so haunted him that he checked into a hospital for eight days. He has developed a case of tinnitus and sometimes hears sounds like the rumbling of a crowd, a reminder of those long days in solitary he had recalled the day he drove me through Oakland.

“At first, you think it is only blood rushing in your head, but then the silence just gets sucked out your ear. Literally. There is a suction sound. Eventually, you start hearing radio static, and it grows louder and louder. Before long, you can’t eat. You can’t sleep. You’re f***ing drowning in sound. After a few months of that, you realize there’s no such thing as silence anymore.” ■