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Dept. of Corrections

The Castle

by [Ben McGrath](#)

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Not long ago, Roland Woods got an urgent call on his cell phone (“Yo, Ro!”) from one of the residents of 630 Riverside Drive, where he works as a kind of super. The caller, who had recently been in prison, had paid a surprise Valentine’s Day visit to his girlfriend’s apartment, equipped with a bouquet of roses, and found her entertaining another suitor. He was standing outside her door, enraged and beginning to panic. “Welcome back to the real world,” Woods told him. “Now put down the flowers and come back home, and we’ll talk.”

Home, for the Valentine’s caller and about sixty other men (plus the occasional woman), is the Fortune Academy, or, as it’s familiarly known, the Castle, a five-story Gothic fortress on the corner of Riverside and 140th Street, which serves as dormlike living quarters for parolees and ex-cons. Woods, a former convict himself, is a residential supervisor there. Every Thursday evening, the Castle dwellers assemble in a conference room on the ground floor and discuss the difficulties of adjusting to life on the outside. Their odds aren’t good—two out of three former convicts are arrested again within three years of their release—and so they keep talking their problems through.

At a recent meeting, a tightly wound forty-eight-year-old named John introduced himself. He’d arrived at the Castle the previous week, fresh from what he called a “small bid”—ninety days on Rikers Island—that had proved to be more destabilizing than either of his bigger bids (four and seven years, respectively). “I went to Social Security to get a card,” he said. “They told me to go to Medicaid. Well, Medicaid says you need a Social Security card. Then I go to Vital Records to get a birth certificate—they won’t give it to me because I don’t have an I.D.” He went on, “One plus one is two, two plus two is four, four plus four is eight,” continuing the sequence until he reached five hundred and twelve. “They don’t realize, when they release people, you have to have *one*.”

Across the table, another man shook his head and said, “I got the same story.”

A man wearing a skullcap, clam diggers, and a long, Merlin-like beard spoke up. His name was Yaseen. “They gave me an I.D. with an alias,” he said, “but a birth certificate with my real name. So here I am with this big beard . . .”

As the meeting progressed, a theme emerged: bad choices do not necessarily make bad people, and parole affords little room for error. (As John put it, “Years ago, you had to be a criminal to go to jail. Now all you have to be is a fuckup.”) Fraternizing with other parolees in public, for instance, is

not allowed. "But it's inhuman not to," a broad-shouldered man named Michael said. "If I see you, I'll speak—and people are going to be going back to prison." In 2004, of the ten thousand recidivists in New York State, eight thousand were charged with violating parole rather than committing new crimes.

JoAnne Page, the C.E.O. of the Fortune Society, which runs the Castle, was serving as the moderator. She tried steering the conversation toward "The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People," by Stephen Covey.

"Excuse me?" a man replied from the corner. "Seven habits?" Earlier, he had said, "I don't like following rules. The law's the law and it's not made for us."

Not everyone was downcast. Mustafa, the house chef and a former resident, stopped in, wearing a Bluetooth device in his ear. "One morning in August of 1977, I made a poor choice, and it took me until now to get out of it," he said. "I just got off parole with a violent felony."

"How many years?" Yaseen asked.

"I did twenty-five."

"Good for you."

"But one of my goals was to vote," Mustafa continued. "I'm going tomorrow to the post office to register. I'm fifty-one, I have a seven-month-old son, my own apartment, and another child on the way. The way I see it, I'm actually, like, twenty-six."

They all laughed. "It's the new math!" the man in the corner said. Applause followed Mustafa to the door. "We need to tell you who to vote for," someone called out.

"Hillary!" Mustafa shouted, raising his fist. ♦