

A Cruel Reign

"These machinations we deem cruel shall one day be commonplace."

- Ichirou Matsuo

In 2016 there was a room. It sat one hundred and fifteen feet below ground. There was a time it had a door but that had only been there to install the room's lone occupant. Afterwards, it was sealed shut.

Oscar Bedlow was a homegrown American psychopath. No remorse. He was also the most prolific murderer the judicial system had ever seen. Prior to issuing an almost forgone death sentence, the judge was approached by one Harold Green. He brought her a proposal. Green was a prison guard and part-time history buff when it came to various forms of incarceration. He had spent years researching the gulags of the Soviet Union, Bang Kwang prison in Thailand, La Sante prison in France, and the Supermax facilities in the US. His idea was simple yet was one of the most divisive ever proposed in a court of law. But new laws, originally conceived to punish terrorists, had been set regarding what "cruel and unusual" actually meant. The spiking of food with cyanide at an Alabama school by a heretofore-unknown arm of the white power movement was the last straw. Since the bombing of Guantanamo, there were no prisoners being held there. This meant real trials in American courts. It changed the public's perspective.

The judge ruled that death was far too lenient an option and that typical incarceration was far too normal. Oscar Bedlow was not told the extent of his soon to be one-of-a-kind incarceration and assumed, wrongly, that it would be normal solitary confinement.

He was transferred to Supermax until his accommodation was completed. At the same time, Harold Green was given time, space, and the resources he needed to complete his design. The Governor wanted to make an example of Bedlow and in Harold Green he had found his instrument.

On the transport to Supermax, Bedlow managed to assault two guards. As a result, he was given a "hero's welcome" at the prison. The guards formed a circle, threw him to the floor, and kicked him hard enough to rupture one kidney and break at least two ribs. He was treated in the infirmary, chained at four corners so that there would be no further damage done to the guards or health workers.

Construction started on the unique cell that was almost immediately christened "Splash Mountain" by guards in the know. It was built on the grounds of the Northern Correctional Institute in Somers, Connecticut. It began in August and was completed by October of the same year. A stairway was built alongside an elevator with the cell itself suspended five feet off the floor. There were no bars, no glass, and no means of exit once the prisoner was placed inside. The entire construction: hoses, lights, jets, and all other pieces were capped at the top of the shaft with a building that looked like any other piece of the prison. But Splash Mountain would only ever receive one occupant.

What exactly is torture? In the two months of construction, Splash Mountain was discussed and rediscussed around water coolers, on blogs, in online forums, and wherever else anyone talked. Harold Green was more than happy to appear on television and discuss his idea. Whether he was being lauded or vilified he was still getting a few bucks in his pocket and his face in the online periodicals. His mother saved every TV appearance and scrap-booked everything else.

"I suppose it's not that strange of a punishment." Harold said while discussing the matter on Face the Nation.

"But the concept is quite similar to Chinese water torture, correct?" The host was, like all other hosts, trying to bait him.

"In a way, I suppose. However, we have no real evidence that such a thing really ever existed. Besides, look at who we're talking about."

"We all know about Bedlow, Mr. Green. But he's still a human being."

"I've met some families that have lost parents, siblings, and children to this monster. To call him a human is really an insult to the rest of us."

The project was finished in two months. In the end, Oscar Bedlow was led down the staircase to what would be his last home. The Warden had decided he should be led down the stairs instead of the elevator as a way of inducing some kind of fear and panic. He wanted Bedlow to feel something of what the families felt. But Bedlow simply whistled through his spit shield and smiled. He jauntily took the stairs as if the four officers holding him with neck restraint bars weren't even there.

The shaft was dimly lit, simple halogens every six feet provided spotlights to the bare grey walls. When they reached the bottom of the shaft, Bedlow's gaze touched everyone. The four guards, the Warden, and Harold Green himself. Bedlow had never seen or met Harold Green. One thing they had been able to do was to keep many details away from Bedlow while he was being held in solitary confinement. He knew it was just another solitary cell, but he did not know the details. Nobody did. It was the first time this type of punishment had been utilized.

The Warden began, "Mister Bedlow, welcome to your new home."

"I've been in solitary before, you dumb shit. You think the dramatic stairs scare me?"

"No, I imagine not," said the Warden, "But with the help of Mister Green here, we think that we have something new and interesting for you to discover." He said it as if the cell would be filled with Christmas presents.

"I remember watching old movies. The hero is punched and kicked and pounded and then he always looks up and says *is that all you got?* So, is it?"

"Yes, Mister Bedlow, it is. This is all that I've got. I think it will do quite nicely."

The rules were next. They had been carefully thought out. It was a whole new concept that had been looked at from many different angles. The Warden stood back and let one of the guards come forward to read the rules to the prisoner.

"The prisoner is to be given one long-sleeved shirt and one pair of pants. Both made of light white cotton. There will be no footwear and no head coverings. The prisoner will also be given one waterproof nylon blanket to use when necessary."

As this was told to him, Bedlow decided that no matter what they threw at him he'd just smile with what the papers had called his "frightening visage". Granted, it lost a little flair when he had the spit shield on, but so what? He liked how they put him on a pedestal as the boogeyman. It gave him power, and he had always known how to exploit it.

The guard continued, "Your cell is eleven feet tall, ten feet wide, and contains one bunk, one food delivery chute, and one hole for waste. You will be confined to this cell indefinitely. You will receive no yard time, you will receive no visitors, you will receive no mail. Your food will be sent down to you on a bed of tinfoil. You will have ten minutes to complete your meal after which you will throw the tinfoil into the waste chute along with any food you have not eaten. Failure to do so will result in missing the next meal. Should we find you have kept any tinfoil or food, you will be denied your next meal."

The Warden smiled. Since he had been told of this new solution, he had rallied to have it at his prison. He had seen the news, had followed the trial. All those people. The children from the school bus. The three old ladies coming home from the market. Even Carol Anders. There was no remorse and there never would be. He was a monster, plain and simple. You didn't need to fly planes into buildings or gas an entire town to be a terrorist. Bedlow had proven that he could put up the same numbers regardless. He was just as content with twenty people as he was with one. Carol Anders was the one that got him. After the way they had found her, the things he had done to her body for those eighteen days, Bedlow had been caught thanks to a single hair that matched up on the FBI list.

"The human rights cannot be violated if said prisoner is not, in fact, human." Governor Spalding had said weeks earlier. He'd taken quite a beating in the press for that one, but he stood by his statement, "Those who would see him anywhere, but a dark hole do not understand just how warped this man truly is." Bedlow was nearly indescribable. A stone face at the Anders trial turned into a smile when he decided to turn it into a soapbox. He had forced his lawyer to put him on the stand and the second the prosecution started asking questions about that night he had simply ignored her and started describing crimes. His crimes. All the ones he had committed since he was twelve years old. The variety of crimes was immense. They had no order, no escalation. He would murder five people in an apartment with a handgun and then wait two weeks before stabbing a woman for her purse (he said later that he needed money, and she was closer than his local ATM).

The door to the cell was opened. Its large wheel made the door reminiscent of navy films. It did not *swing* open, it was made to be closed and the horrifying screech of metal on metal sounded like a plea to never open again. Two guards unhooked their rods from Bedlow's neck collar and stepped out of the way. The other two led him up the five concrete steps and into the cell. Finally, one of the guards reached forward and unhooked the collar from Bedlow's neck. Bedlow rubbed his neck and took in his surroundings. The Warden had the last word.

"Consider yourself sentenced."

The door was pushed shut and the wheel was turned. The world was now safe once again. There were many handshakes and triumphant hollering. Bedlow heard none of it.

Time worked differently in the cell. Three guards were assigned to watch over it. Each took a separate shift, and each sat in the room high above the open shaft and watched the single video feed from the cell. The camera was positioned so that Bedlow couldn't get his hands on it. It was curved in such a way that any guard could see everything that happened in the cell. They were also in charge of meals and precipitation.

Bedlow had spent roughly five hours in the cell before he first started hearing the drips. The first thing he did when the door locked was to see what he could do with his surroundings. Not much. He still felt confident that he'd persevere no matter what kind of solitary it was. Nothing had stopped him from the beginning so why should it start now? But the drip sound was strange because there was no shower or sink in the cell. Just a drip. It happened every ten seconds or so. Eventually he ignored it and sat down on his bed, which was only a slab of concrete sticking out of the wall. It was about six feet long but it would probably wreak havoc on his back. The heavy nylon sheet was almost purple. He smiled, realizing that if that drip was anywhere close to the bed, he'd be able to stop it from hitting him. He stood up. Time to walk the cell for a bit. Get some exercise.

The three guards watching over him were hand picked for the job. Each had exemplary records as Supermax guards. Each was trustworthy and known for being fair with prisoners. They were chosen from a group of twenty guards who signed up. One thing Harold Green had stressed to the warden was that he didn't want any puppet master behavior going on with the guards on duty. He wanted to make sure that it was all a well-oiled machine, minus the crazy and vindictive behavior that is sometimes found in prison guards.

There were three. Walsh, Diamond, and White. Peter Walsh had been in the marines and had his own understanding of the situation. He saw their work not as torture, but as a way to seize all control from scum. Walter Diamond was a lifer. He had been a guard for twenty-five years and although he wasn't always sure it was the right thing to do, he saw it as a job that let him stay a guard but also sit on a comfortable chair while doing his work. Jim White was the hard one to convince. Initially he turned down the program. He preferred the general population of the prison. It was only after he had been given a file to take home that he agreed. It was a file containing the names of all Bedlow's victims and what he had done to each and every one of them. One sleepless night with that file and he had signed up first thing the following morning.

It was Walter Diamond's first watch. He'd come in a bit early to see how things had gone that morning and was given a full briefing about how not much had happened. The set-up team had locked the prisoner inside his cell and then did one last check of all the exterior pipes and hoses. The prisoner himself had spent seven hours just moving around the cell, walking back and forth. They had already begun the precipitation program at its lowest setting. Meant to be more of an annoyance than anything else. But one thing the Warden had said was that the program was not automatic. It required someone to sit, watch, and control. That's what Walter was there to do, just like any other guard. Control.

Bedlow heard it again. But now it was speeding up. The dripping sound. He opened his eyes in annoyance, stepped off the bed, and walked over to look at the camera.

“What’s wrong with you people? You bring me into your scary new cell, and it already leaks? Brilliant. You should all win medals for being so wise.”

In the guard house, Walter smiled. The fact that Bedlow hadn’t figured out the cell yet was quite the coup. Walter hit two buttons on his control board and watched Bedlow’s face as three spray jets came on, misting the cell.

“What the fuck is this!?” Bedlow was clearly surprised and angry, “hey! You’ve got a leak down here, y’know!”

Walter watched him through the camera and chuckled to himself. *This guy just doesn’t have a clue.* He took a bite of an apple and began humming The Rain Song by Led Zeppelin.

They changed things up every so often. The goal was that the prisoner should never be able to anticipate the next phase of punishment. So, a gentle drizzle could be followed by the soft drips on one day and have it followed by torrential downpour the next. To their credit, none of the three guards ever saw it as a game. They were deadly serious about it. They were also the only three in the prison who refused to call the facility Splash Mountain. They referred to “the cell” and “the prisoner”. Bedlow had no name to them, but they’d never forget what he’d done.

Harold Green had figured a few things out as they had been building the cell, including the fact that if they used cold water (as many said they should) Bedlow would probably come down with pneumonia. So, the water was lukewarm. Temperature was something the three guards had to monitor but they did not have any way of raising or lowering it, just in case one decided to burn the prisoner. The cell was kept (without water) at seventy-seven degrees. When the water was running at full blast, the temperature of the cell was to remain at a constant seventy-four.

One other item that Harold Green came up with was the prisoner’s diet. The fact that they had a hole in the floor for waste and no toilet paper, they wanted the prisoner to have solid waste for less mess. This meant no dairy and certain types of fruit. However, he was given two meals a day featuring bananas, meat products, baked potatoes, and rice. The cleaner it came out, the easier it would be for the prisoner to clean himself. They were also foods that he could eat and finish within his ten-minute window. There was an argument a week before the prisoner was installed regarding how he would know if he’d hit ten minutes. It was decided that the constant vacuum effect of the waste hole would be ratcheted a few cycles when he had two minutes to go. A few days of that and Bedlow began to understand. They were banking on the fact that he wasn’t an idiot and would figure out some of the cues.

He got it. He’d figured it out. It all made sense now that he thought about it. The way his lawyer was acting cagey, the way the judge was looking so triumphant, and the reason they’d moved him to his new cell.

“Laws change. People change. Even,” he held out his hand to feel the droplets, “the weather changes.” It had been a pretty steady spring shower for at least a few hours. The only thing he had to go by was when the food showed up. Twice a day. He assumed it was during the first and third shifts. He could hear the food getting ready in the large envelope-sized hole on the left side of his cell. And just like magic, lo and behold, tinfoil. He was casual about it at first. He’d mosey over to the opening, or he would just pretend he didn’t see it. But they didn’t lie. If he didn’t throw all leftovers away

between when the tinfoil arrived to when the waste chute went into overdrive, he'd miss his next meal. But he could stand to miss a meal or two, even if it did mean missing out. He'd been without food before.

One thing the guards were told was: If he says something directly to you through the camera, do not immediately acknowledge. It seemed strange since there really were no times where two-way communication would be necessary. They didn't even have a system to answer back. Officer Diamond was the first one to test out this mode of thinking. It was day three and the prisoner was squatting over the waste chute. When he finished, he looked around for something and when he didn't find it he started yelling at the camera.

"You sons of bitches! Where's the toilet paper? I need me some fucking toilet paper! You can't keep that from me! What am I supposed to do?" Officer Diamond let him squat there for a few minutes until the prisoner became even more irate and finally cleaned himself with his hand, shaking it off over the chute. He stood and held up his hand to the camera. It was covered in a thin layer of feces. Officer Diamond looked at the monitor screen and then at the clock.

"So? Is this what you wanted?" The prisoner asked.

"Not really." Officer Diamond mumbled to himself. He counted down five minutes and then turned on the heavy downpour. It took the prisoner a few minutes, but he eventually realized that there was enough water pressure to wash his hand off.

"More like it." He said and returned to his bed.

He spent too much time eating his morning meal. As a result, it rained hard and steady for two days and he missed his evening meal. Huddling under his blanket, he felt and listened to the spray against the fabric over his head. The blanket was no real comfort. Bedlow figured it was only five feet long and maybe three across. It was like having a facecloth covering a giraffe. When he slept, which was never for long, he developed a method wherein he lay on his back with the blanket covering his head and upper torso. He often thought about how steady rain on the roof of his cabin had been a comfort when he was younger. Now it was just part of his backbreaking routine.

But that was the problem. There was no real routine. When you're in solitary there are distractions. Even getting ten minutes alone outside in the fresh air, in a cage, breaks up the day. But here they were having nothing of it. His back was a mess, he imagined dark circles under his eyes. There was no mirror to find out, but he knew how tired he was, and he could feel stubble on his cheeks. He had never grown a beard before. His face never wanted to cooperate. It grew out just a bit and then that was it. The only thing that could make his time worse would be thunder and lightening. What would make it better would be some darkness for a few hours. The lights never went out. Ever. They weren't really oppressively bright, but the human body likes a little darkness from time to time.

Two weeks and Bedlow started showing signs of fatigue. The guards took notes on what they saw. *Prisoner 4081 displaying introverted behavior* and *Prisoner 4081 food intake has decreased by roughly 20%*. The Warden came by once or twice to read over the notes, see how the troops were doing. He wanted to be everyone's best friend as long as the little project was still working. It was, and so he went on his merry way.

Harold Green was given visitation rights to check on how his experimental idea was working. He arrived during the evening shift where Peter Walsh was on watch. He watched as the food was sent down to the cell, how Bedlow was treating it, and how much he ate. On this particular shift, the prisoner ate all of his food, an interesting footnote for those reading through the previous week's notes. He often did not eat his entire meal, choosing instead to throw it down the waste tube. However, Green also read about how the prisoner was adjusting to a schedule of his own with meals being his central timetable. He knew that he ate in the morning and ate in the evening. Green looked through the notes and wrote down some suggestions for the guards. He also encouraged them to note anything strange or irregular even if they did not normally go into typical notes. "We're playing a whole different ballgame here. You aren't just guards, you are observers as well."

Green's first two suggestions were that mealtime was to be changed to different parts of the schedule. Have the food be switched to midday when he least expected it. Also, let the precipitation stay at a certain level for longer periods of time. This would make it harder for the prisoner to adjust. After a week of heavy downpour, switch to a drip-only schedule for the next few days. Follow that up with changes every two hours and then lower that after a few days to changes every five minutes. The purpose, he reminded his guards, is not for him to simply be locked in alone. It was also to make sure that he was never in charge and never comfortable. Routine was often all a convict had. So, it was all they would take from him.

Bedlow started to notice the changes. It was obvious they had changed mealtimes. But the main problem was the water. It had been a week and a half of heavy downpour, and he was getting gradually worse at thinking.

The first problems arose four months in. Jim White was on the monitors, and he started to notice something different. The rain was on full blast for the third day in a row and, at least at the beginning of the shift, everything was going pretty well. The prisoner was sitting on the bed with the nylon sheet wrapped around him. The rain pelted his head and ran down to his neck. He was stock still, no movement at all. White noticed that the prisoner's eyes were closed and that his hair, which had grown longer in recent weeks, was plastered down on his skull. In fact, it looked like it was thinning out as well. White wondered if the water could do that. The logbook for that day read as follows: *Prisoner seems to be in a subdued mood this evening. Food was only partially eaten, and prisoner did not eat under the nylon blanket as he usually does when the rain is turned up. All that was eaten was a banana, rest thrown down the waste chute. Since eating, the prisoner has not moved from his spot on the bed. Could be stomach trouble or run of the mill malaise. Will update next shift.*

White's observation was only the first that week. Even when they turned down the rain, it was quite obvious that the prisoner was troubled. His patterns were no longer thought out. When he did walk it was like a tiger at a zoo, just back and forth. His occasional rants were no longer projected at the single camera. Instead, he spoke while standing on the bed with his back to the camera, ranting about small boxes and how the smaller boxes were always being filled when they had no business being filled. None of the guards knew what was happening but they kept their logbooks just like they'd been told.

Bedlow stood facing the wall. He had no idea how long he'd been standing, shirtless, in the downpour. He was doing something that he'd never really done before, talking to God.

"The thing is, Lord, I'm just not sure about the whole thing. You've made it rain before but never like this. This must be some kind of new Gomorrah where you let some of us burn out the others. I've done some things in this life that I'm not proud of but there were plenty of things I was. I just don't see how you can look at this situation and allow it to keep happening. Where's my dove? Where's my hope of land? I've been in this box for months... I think. But you just keep adding more and more boxes on top of it. You know I haven't seen anyone since they put me in here? Haven't heard a voice. Not a sound. The only sound is all this goddamn rain that you keep throwing at me!" He paused, breathing heavily, "It's not that I blame you, hell as far as my faith goes, I may actually just be talking to this concrete wall. They really think they've got something here, don't they? All this water and waste. I think I can safely say that they aren't keen on rehabilitation, you know? Because with all this water I'd say they were in it for the sheer pleasure of the thing. Can't eat. Can't take an adequate shit when there's no rain. My body is in terrible shape. Can't use the floor for exercises because the grates really hurt my hands and feet. I don't even know what I look like anymore." He rubbed both hands on his cheeks, feeling the short beard he'd started to grow. He ran his hands through his hair then looked at his palms. They were covered in brown strands. "This isn't natural. This is not how someone should be treated!" His temper flared and he slapped the wall with an open palm, leaving it flat against it, as if measuring the distance to freedom. If there were tears, he never felt them. The rain poured down and he closed his eyes, wondering when tomorrow was going to start.

"What's he doing?" Diamond had just arrived for his shift and was taking off his coat. The guardhouse was nice and warm.

"Talking to the wall again." Explained White, "Some of it is just mumbles but I think he's just getting some talking done."

"No harm in that, I suppose." He sat down and began untying his boots and slipping on his work shoes.

"I don't know. I've been watching him for days and he's just...not himself. No more swearing at the camera, no food intake, and I think the rain is thinning his hair."

"Constant pressure. Sounds like it could happen."

"Again, I don't know. I mean, before we swap over, I have to set the rain to droplets again. Four hours of that and then we put it up to medium a little after the food comes."

"Got it. Anything else I should know?"

"Not sure. What do you think of all this?" Asked White.

"All what?"

"This, whole thing. I mean, does it get to you at all?"

"Not really. I talked about it with Judi, and she said that a lot of times guards don't know what everyone is in for. But with this prisoner it's different. We know exactly what he's done. And that turns into fuel for this fire." He gestured to his heart.

White sat forward and clasped his hands together. He looked at the monitor and at the prisoner with his hands against the wall. He noticed that although it grew slowly, the prisoner's hair was starting to get shaggy. A few more months and it would start to be long. He wondered what protocol would say when that happens. Were they going to send him down something to take care of it or were they just going to let the rain do its job.

"Is his skin losing pigment?" White asked. It had been six months and the two guards were changing shifts. Diamond moved in close and looked at the screen. It wasn't exactly high definition, but he could see alright.

"Looks like any other white guy I've seen. But the hair thing is an interesting point. Did you put it in the notes?"

"Yes sir!" White sarcastically saluted. Diamond smiled and slapped his hand down.

"I think what we have is a case of us reading into this too seriously."

"Why do you suppose he never sleeps under the bed?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, get out of the rain. Sleep underneath."

"Well, the grating is the entire floor except for the waste chute, right?"

"Right."

"You ever try sleeping on that stuff? Sure, the bed is concrete and not a plush mattress, but it's better than sleeping on that grating. They have a similar problem when they raise warehouse cows. The cows hardly move because they know that there is grating below them and that if they fall through, they'll break their legs."

"How does that apply?"

"Grates hurt. They hurt feet, they hurt backs. We've essentially given him a cell that is not ten feet wide, but actually four feet by five. He's on an island. And I think he's starting to realize it."

Time passed eternally in Splash Mountain. Out in the rest of the world people were living and dying. Deals were made, hands were shaken. People smiled at strangers, held doors, and held hands. Babies learned to crawl and, eventually, began to walk. Technology was invented, fads were enjoyed and then, just as quickly, forgotten.

One man, a prisoner, was unaware of these moments. He saw his entire life stretching before him and he prayed each day for death. He was a mess: Hair visibly thinning, clothes nearly translucent from a barrage of water. He had once been famous, but nobody remembered him anymore.

"Once you have been tortured, you can never belong in this world. There is no place that ever be your home."

-Roma Tearne