

# A Warming Trend

By Michael Fine

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The cold had come slowly to the Northeast, but it had arrived at last. The ground was finally frozen. There was no ooze when you walked on the grass, no give. Walking on grass or dirt was like walking on concrete. The leaves were long gone from the trees. There were some winter birds, of course, sparrows and tits that skittled in the bushes, trying not to freeze to death, sorry perhaps, in the manner birds can be sorry, that they were not built to fly south. The sun stayed low on the horizon and glared into your eyes when you drove or on walks, which you had to force yourself to take. The days were short. Grey light at dawn. Sun dropping near the horizon about two-thirty and gone by four. No moths fluttering around the porchlight now. Nothing moving. Everything still.

“Take the garbage out when you go, please. And take the trash can to the street,” Ella said.

“Go fuck yourself,” Rodney said. He was wearing an aviator’s hat which had fake fur earflaps that he was wearing down, a rainbow-colored wool scarf that Ella had knitted for him, a padded blue denim jacket with Jack’s Boiler Repair embroidered over the left pocket and on the back, and padded mittens.

“You look silly,” Ella said. “Like a bear or the Pillsbury Doughboy.”

“Fuck yourself,” Rodney said, and he walked down the uneven narrow stairs, his padded boots thumping on each one, his feet flying over the stairs as in an abbreviated set of small falls. Ratatatattat, like the sound of a machine gun or the belching of a truck out on Route 95 as its cylinders fired in quick succession. “There ain’t no bad weather...” he added and then slammed the outside door before he could finish saying what he always said, Rodney being a person who talked in clichés, one cliché after the next.

“Be like that,” Ella said, to herself but out loud. *So I’m talking to myself now*, she thought. *Well. Truth be told, I’ve been talking to myself for a long time. Perhaps the whole time.* And she rose, without a coat, and took the garbage out herself.

Rodney suited up and dogtrotted into the unit with four others, a camera and Valdez the shift supervisor. They knew the Deputy was watching the video feed. It didn't matter. They had a job to do. They were trained and ready. It didn't matter who was watching.

Mullins had gotten his hands on a broom. He was pummeling the door of his cell with it. No CO could get anywhere close to him without bodily injury to one or both of them. Mullins was shouting at the top of his lungs so the whole unit was on edge, the offenders standing at the doors, all juiced up, licking their chops. They loved trouble.

The deal at the ACI is this: there are about twenty-five hundred low level offenders, most of whom run drugs or get caught with more dope than they ought to have or pull stupid stuff, like B and As or low-level car theft. You always got to watch your back with them, but most are pretty docile. They shuffle from place to place, waiting their turn, killing time to flatten a bid. There are also rapists, child abusers, con artists and a whole mess of parole violators mixed in with the low level offender population, who have been in before and should have learned something but didn't.

Sixty percent repeat offenders. Most stay a couple of months to a year and a half and then flatten their bid and are gone. Lots do drugs, outside and inside. Lots have diagnosed mental health issues, but so do half of the people on the street who don't end up in the ACI. It's a crazy culture and a crazy world.

Most of the low-level offenders would do ok if someone gave them a decent place to live, a decent job, and a little medical care, and some support, living outside, so they didn't go back to the street. But we don't do that, so lots end up back in the joint.

But then there are a couple of hundred offenders who are off the wall nuts, whose brains don't work like your brain or my brain works, some of whom were messed up in childhood but some of whom were just born that way, the people who both hear voices and do what the voices say when the voices say to hit or stab someone, or whose brains don't recognize right and wrong and can't tell the difference between other people and objects, for whom people are like chairs that are okay to just throw around the room, and for too many of those offenders the only thing they feel is anger or hurt that they aren't like the rest of us, mad that they don't have feelings and emotions like love. They can figure out how to use and manipulate other people well enough,

but they stay mad because they can't figure out how to be like the other people they disdain and hate. When they feel anything at all. Some experience nothing but what flicks into their mind to want or to do. Some of those can't tell the difference between their imaginations, their nightmares, their dreams, and the world of people and things.

Mullins was a crazy. Murder One now. He killed a priest he had picked up on River Road near the Boat Club. Murder Two for that one. Mullins was fifty-three when he got out on parole from his first bid. Two months later he killed a stupid white woman who lived in East Greenwich, who'd befriended him when he was inside, who should have known better. Murder One that time. Life without parole. Mullins had grown up in South Providence, near the Zoo, with the gangsters and the cops, and he knew their brothers and sisters and their brothers and sisters knew him. But people in East Greenwich, well, they are just not in on the game.

None of that mattered. He was crazy. He'd swallow any object he could – pens, spoons, batteries, bolts, small bottles, paperclips, clothespins – what have you, anything he could get his hands on—swallow it or put it up his asshole. He'd throw anything he could get his hands on, his food, his excrement, anything, at security staff. He was an offender you could never turn your back on, not once, and someone you couldn't make any kind of agreement with, not for anything, because he himself didn't know what he was going to do next.

That broom-handle was going inside him, top and bottom, once he either broke it or broke the door. You think a steel door ain't going anywhere when it's hit by a wooden handle. But stranger things have happened inside. When a man is completely crazy and unrestrained, all sorts of strange thing can happen. And do. All the time.

Most of Mullins' life inside was in solitary. Solitary is torture. Everyone knows that. But it was the only place for Mullins. What are you going to do with an offender who doesn't know himself what he's going to do next, and whose unconscious mind is always screaming at him to slice or punch or grab or throttle anyone and everyone in arm's reach. To turn everything in his environment into a weapon. Least restrictive environment. Ha.

They pulled the cell door open and poured through it, five suited up, helmeted guys with shields, a flying wedge, a thousand pounds of steamrolling muscle and bone, a locomotive of flesh.

Mullins was old and he was skinny and pale from spending his life inside. Maybe a hundred and forty pounds. Maybe five-six or five-seven. Mullins didn't stand a chance.

They had him on the floor in an instant but that didn't stop him. He was a wiry bastard and strong. Those guys work out inside, in their cells, even the crazy ones, even the ones in solitary. They don't know anything else. They can't think straight. They don't know the time of day or the week or the month and before long they forget who the president is, but they work out, they do a thousand pushups, a thousand sit-ups. They find a way to keep themselves hard and wiry because they know they need to be able to fight back, they know what they need to do to survive, even if they don't know one other thing and can't think their way out of a cardboard box.

Mullins squirmed and he hit and bit and screamed while he was doing it. They had a cage on him, so there was no place he could go. That didn't stop the little buzzard. They got the leg irons on one leg but it took three of them to hold one wrist and arm still enough to get cuffs on that wrist. Then they tried to roll him over, his scrawny body held to the floor by that cage.

It didn't stop him. There wasn't enough room in the cell for all of them to be on him at once. The other members of the CERT team just tried to grab a limb and hold on, trying to be the human version of four point restraints. But for a moment it looked like no amount of force, no human being could hold him down.

Rodney found himself on top of Mullins, the cage between them. He was spreadeagled, using all his bulk to keep that man down. They needed to turn Mullins over, to get him on his back, but he lay on his side scrunched into a ball, and then he twisted and turned, scratching the arms that tried to hold him, kicking, spitting, snarling, and shouting.

Then he turned face up and looked at Rodney, right in the face, his eyes just a few inches from Rodney's eyes, his mouth just a few inches from Rodney's mouth, with only the cage and Rodney's face-shield between them.

"The kingdom of heaven is right here on earth. Don't you know that? you fuckin bastard," Mullins snarled. "Cold-hearted asshole. I hope you roast in hell."

Then Mullins went limp, his eyes open.

The team eased off slowly, ready for Mullins to turn it on again, never fooled: they didn't have the leg irons or the cuffs on. So they were still hanging in the breeze.

But Mullin's eyes had glazed over.

As the team eased off, the pale skin of Mullin's face began to turn waxy white, and then, very slowly, blue.

That day was the first sunny day in two weeks. It was ten days after New Year's. The world had shriveled, sunken into a kind of seasonal despair of cold and a constant fine mist that made it seem as though the earth had retreated from the sun, which was never coming back, and all people could expect from then on was this darkness, was to hurry from place to place hunched over, buddled up, collars raised and hats on to prevent a chill. But that day was different. Ella hadn't quite noticed the days getting a little longer or the sun a little higher in the sky because it stayed shrouded in cloud and mist.

But that day she noticed. The sun was strong by 10 am, and the colors of the boxwoods, the signs on the stores in the strip mall down the street, the banners that flopped in the wind and the paint on the houses around their apartment had turned vivid: green, blue, and yellow and red.

Ella cringed when she heard the door slam. Then she heard Rodney's footsteps on the stairs to their apartment. She looked around but she knew what she would find. It was a small one-bedroom apartment with an off-yellow kitchen with yellow curtains that opened into their little dining room and living room, a nice open space but one that left no place to hide.

When Ella thought about her life, she thought only of caution, of fear, of the need to be still and not seen. What she did with Rodney was the only brave thing she had ever done in her life. And now look at them. Her kids were grown and out of the house. And when she found Rodney again it seemed her life made sense for the first time. But now look at them. Stuck in a

one bedroom one floor apartment in West Warwick at age forty-nine, trying to start fresh with the one that got away. All they could afford until their divorces got finalized. Until they paid the lawyers. And even then, what came next was unpredictable. There wasn't going to be any child support. Was Vin ever going to agree to any fair distribution of the property? He had the house. He'd take his damn sweet time selling it or buying out her share. Two years, maybe three, living like this. And Deborah, Rodney's wife, was exactly the shrew Rodney said she'd become. Texting him or calling him every minute with this problem and that problem, every little thing about their kids or the garage door or the septic system, as if he still lived with her. Or just screaming at him because she was so mad he'd left her. No wonder Rodney was always depressed and anxious. No wonder that Ella had retreated into herself again, the only place she felt safe, the place she deserved to be, the only life she deserved.

Deja Vue all over again. You don't leave yourself behind when you think you are changing your life. You carry yourself with you. The box changes. Not the Cheerios.

"Hey," Rodney said, when he came through the door.

"Hey," Ella said, her back to the door so she didn't have to look at Rodney and see the anxiety and depression on his face, the anxiety and depression that had been there for weeks.

She stood with her watering can in front of a red amaryllis she'd bought on sale at Ocean State Job Lot a month before Christmas that had done nothing for weeks but had finally sprouted, grew two feet tall and had just opened, brilliant deep red and beautiful. \$4.99.

She heard the hall closet door close and two thumps as Rodney took his boots off and left them on the mat near the door and she cringed again. And then started to turn.

He was coming toward her, his arms outstretched. He was still in uniform.

She felt his arms around her before she had a chance to think. She closed her eyes and stiffened herself for what she knew was coming next.

He was standing behind her, his arms around her waist and he nuzzled her cheek with his and then he kissed her neck.

“Have I told you lately how much I love you?” Rodney said.

“No,” Ella said, turning around, so her eyes were just level with Rodney’s eyes.

“Hey, look at that flower!” Rodney said. “So red! Where did that come from?”

“The store,” Ella said, laughing.

“Spring is coming,” Rodney said.

“Eventually,” Ella said. “But not soon enough.”

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