

Prison RAMEN

A photograph of a dark wooden bowl filled with ramen, sitting on a dark circular mat on a concrete floor. The background is a metal prison cell window with a grid pattern. The lighting is dramatic, with strong shadows and highlights.

RECIPES and STORIES from BEHIND BARS

Clifton Collins Jr. and Gustavo "Goose" Alvarez

With a Foreword by **Samuel L. Jackson**

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and
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I dedicate this book to my parents. forgive me for being a thief of your dreams, but thank you for showing me what unconditional love really means.

—G.A.

To my grandparents, Pedro Gonzalez Gonzalez and Leandra Aguirre Gonzalez. Without their love and understanding, who knows where I'd be today. And to Josh Huttenberger 5/25/1996–11/1/2014.

—C.C.



Acknowledgments

FROM GUSTAVO “GOOSE” ALVAREZ:

Clifton Collins Jr., I'm eternally grateful to have you in my life; you are a true friend.

Special thanks to my loving sister, Sandra Luna, for supporting me during my lowest points, giving me hope at those times when I felt hopeless, and, of course, keeping the flame lit for this project in ways too numerous to list.

To Kenia, with faith all things are possible. Love you always.

To Pastor Phil Serrano and Dave Mojaró, behind bars. During the darkest hours of my life, a word of encouragement from you would brighten my day, giving me steady hope.

Thank you to my lovely children for their patience and love while they watched their dad involve himself in a project that probably didn't make a lot of sense to them at the time.

To any youngster on the brink of detention: Heed my lessons. I dedicate this book to you also, with great love and respect.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Gustavo Alvarez". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a large, decorative flourish at the end.

FROM CLIFTON COLLINS JR.:

To my sister Veronica, for being that moral compass in times when I could not find my way.

To Pat Barrett, for showing me the value of a big bro and mentor at such a young age.

To my boy Goose, who pitched this idea in the visitation yard with the smell of burnt prison dorms still fresh in the air.

Special thanks to my long-trusted friend and lawyer, David Krintzman, for always believing in me and having a solution to seemingly never-ending obstacles. Danielle Josephs, whose presence and hard work would always get us through the day. Tim Cadiente, for his creative support throughout the year and passion for our project that kept us going in times when we thought we couldn't. The Agency Groups' Marc Gerald, for taking a chance on this way out-of-the-box project. Molly Derse, for her kind, caring ways. And, of course, that beast of a house Workman Publishing, with Mary Ellen O'Neill, a passionate talent, collaborator, and godsend; and Selina Meere, with her publicity wisdom. And a giant thanks to all my friends for contributing to this book. I love you guys!

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Clifton Collins Jr." in a cursive, flowing script.

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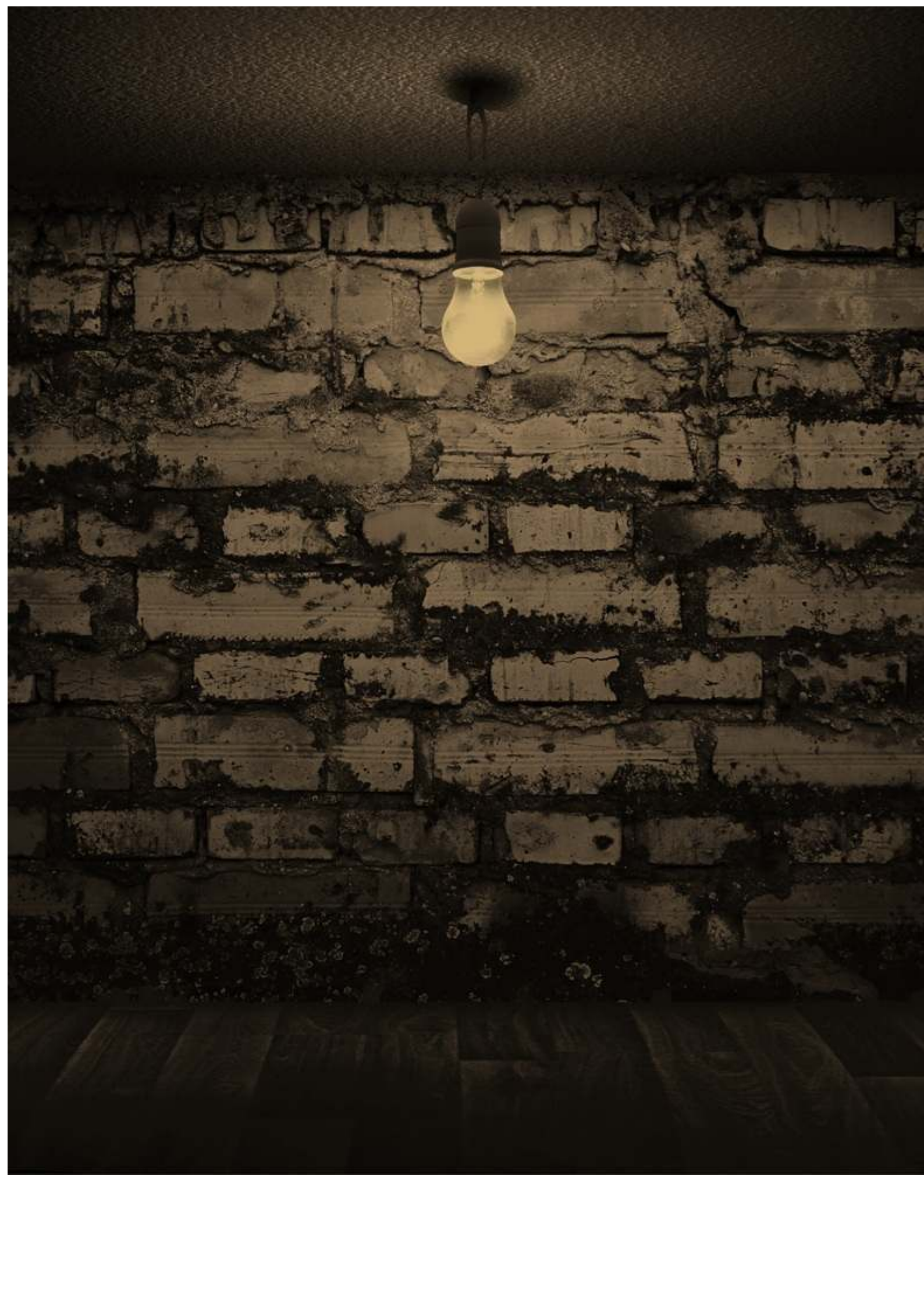
Author Bios



Foreword

Hunger! Quite possibly the first thing we feel entering this thing called life. A breast or a bottle quells it in the beginning, but it always returns, nagging, nagging, nagging, throughout our existence. Some of us have been fortunate enough to beat it back on the regular, others not so much. I've been on both sides of that pronouncement. As a kid, I was well fed by my Southern grandparents, aunts, and neighbors. In the summers, I was on a farm where all I could eat was right at hand. I could pick apples, pears, corn, berries, or anything that grew within my reach. It wasn't until I left home in pursuit of my future that I met real hunger, the hunger that won't let you sleep, study, or think about anything but hunger. Being broke makes you hungrier; it also makes you inventive and creative. Trix with water or Kool-Aid can be tasty. A stolen loaf of bread with mayo, scrumptious! Sardines and crackers, a righteous feast! But nothing prepared me for the inexpensive, filling, soul-refreshing discovery of Ramen and the wonders and complete joy it would bring at my lowest and hungriest times of need. These recipes make me smile and laugh out loud with joy, memory, and awe at their total culinary genius. All born from a bond of pure hunger!

—SAMUEL L. JACKSON



Introduction

One hot day in August, there was a prison riot at the California Institution for Men in Chino. I was halfway through a six-year sentence, the father of young children, and I wanted nothing to do with extending my time in that hellhole. But the race riot that unfolded that night was inescapable.

I was with a group of Southern California Hispanics, outnumbered and trapped in the last surviving dorm. Fires raged all around us. More than one hundred angry men were doing everything possible to break down a secured door. Their only desire was to maim or preferably kill us. We were pretty much doomed—we knew it, they knew it. The only thing I had left in that shithole worth fighting for were the pictures of my kids taped to my locker shelf. So we prepared ourselves for the massacre, lacing up and wrapping towels around our necks to protect our jugulars. There were two Christian brothers in our dorm just praying. It was pretty grim.

And then, as the door began to give way and the rioting inmates were just about to storm in, two older guys ran to our aid. They were OGs—Original Gang members of the Crips—and they stood between us and the bloodthirsty attackers.

They must have argued for two hours, until finally the rioting inmates backed down. The lines of race and gang affiliation are deeper in prison than anywhere else, so the fact that these African American guys defended us—Hispanics—against their own brothers is practically unheard of.

Since fires were still raging, and the door to our dorm was now jammed, we and our “enemies” were both trapped. They were outside in the prison yard, freezing and huddled up. I noticed one of the OG men passing them the little bit of food he had, from his locker. At that moment I felt it only right to try to return a small portion of a big favor. I gathered all the homies and we began to cook all our Ramen and commissary. We made huge spreads, jugs of coffee, and snacks. We shoved all the blankets and mattresses we could fit through the door they had once attempted to break down to kill us. Most of them were just kids, barely in their twenties, living and following the same lies we were.

Shortly after this, I received a visit from my childhood friend Clifton. Growing up in the mean streets of West L.A., who would have thought that many years later we’d still be friends? We came from the same housing projects, but grew up in different worlds. Cliff was never deep in the game like many others, but he was always in the mix. Squabbling, getting shot at, holding his own in street fights like the rest of us. Then he’d bounce the spot and go to an audition. I’d get snatched from the spot and go to juvenile hall. This went on for many years—casting calls for him, county jails for me; movie deals for him, state and federal prisons for me.

Through it all, we maintained our friendship through letters, phone calls, and visits, always holding the dream that one day we’d collaborate on something. I pitched this idea to Cliff when he visited me after the riot and now it’s a book in your hands. Take it from someone who knows what he’s talking about—you can change your life from wherever you are right now.

On August 8, 2009, I was in Iowa finishing up a heavy scene for a film I was doing with Adrian Brody and Forrest Whitaker called *The Experiment*. It's loosely based on Philip Zimbardo's Stanford prison experiment of 1971, in which regular citizens were assigned the roles of guards and prisoners for a psychological study—to disastrous effect.

This particular night was the scene of the big uprising, the convicts against the newly corrupt guards who had become sadistic. Shooting this scene was unusually tense because the director had taken off for a week and we were left to shoot, act, and riot on our own. There were some injuries, but we dealt with them and lived to tell the story.

The following morning I got the news that while I was shooting a riot scene in a movie, my boy Goose was fighting for his very life. I felt sick and wished I could have been there to get his back, as he has always had mine. The odds have never been in his favor, but somehow he has always managed to prevail; I hoped this was one of those times.

Never getting a straight story from news outlets, I did everything I could to get the real story. I took to Twitter and asked hood friends who lived in the area. I heard grisly details about point-blank shootings and convicts getting sliced open with makeshift swords of broken windows, but no Goose.

Just when I feared the worst, I got news that he was all right. We got on the phone and I made plans to go out and see him. He told me of the event that occurred—a meal shared rather than bodies destroyed. I could hear the amazement and pride in his voice. Everything was going to be all right.

—CLIFTON COLLINS JR.

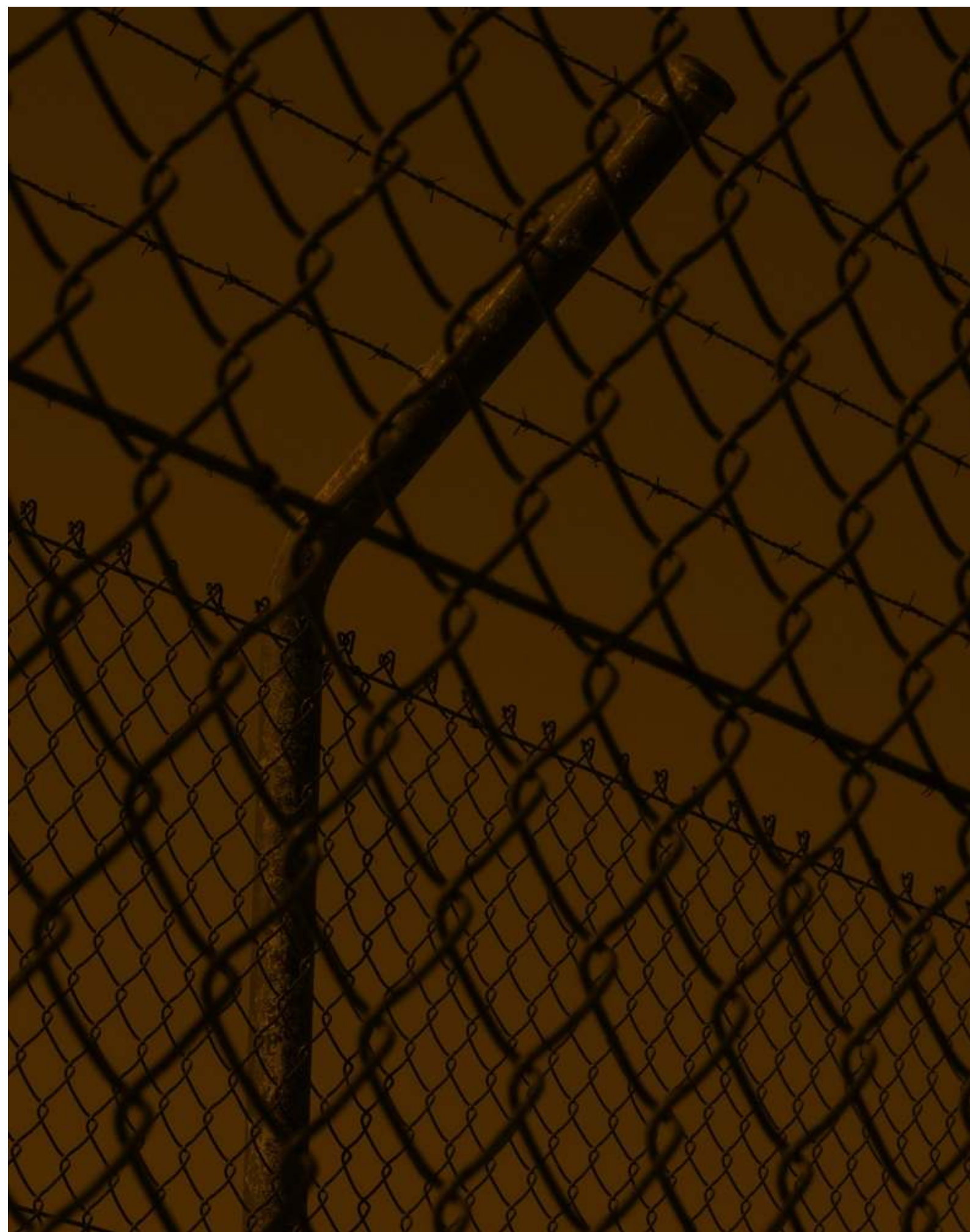


About the Recipes

In prison, having money in your commissary account is the difference between the misery that comes with a flavorless, horribly predictable life, where there is little creativity, and one in which you could travel to places of your youth by imitating the meals your mother made. With a little money, you could show some appreciation for your friends by hosting a spread that lets you all feel like humans rather than numbers for a while. Food items at the commissary are nothing like you'll find in a gourmet shop. Obviously, we didn't have anything that came in a metal can—it would need to be opened with a weapon and then it would become a weapon itself—so you'll see reference to pouches and various prepared items that you may not be able to find in your local store, but you'll find something close enough.

Cooking in prison is much different from cooking in the comforts of home. For one, in prison you don't have the luxury of cooking with proper utensils. Microwaves in prison are weak, so the timing should be adjusted for more modern microwaves. Bags from pork skins or rinds were a useful cooking tool because boiling water never melted the bag. Large buckets lined with plastic trash bags would be used to cook huge spreads.

We'd create sauces by combining ingredients available to us. For instance, strawberry jelly mixed with soy sauce made a pretty good teriyaki sauce. Sometimes we'd melt cheese by putting a jar of cheese in boiling water. We worked with what was available, and created the surprisingly tasty dishes you'll find in this book.



Accessory to Ramen

At the beginning of your struggle, wherever that may be, often all you have are the basics. In prison, that may be a single dollar you can trade for a pack of ramen and a handful of crackers. Elsewhere, it might be peanut butter and jelly, but no bread. This collection of recipes lets the ramen shine with simple additions.

Nuts to Butts



Being processed at the county jail is just about the most humiliating treatment you can experience. You're stripped of your clothes, packed in lines like sardines, and forced to be as close to each other as possible. The officers yell out, "Nuts to butts!" You can probably figure out what this means. Not only is it humiliating, but the smell of all those bodies mixed with fear, regret, and anger is so bad you can't help but gag.

While you're standing there butt naked, you're told to "spread 'em, bend over, and cough." This is to make sure you aren't bringing any contraband into the county facilities. The procedure usually takes a few seconds but I've seen deputies take their sweet time inspecting any orifice they please. It's all about humiliating the prisoners, breaking them down.

Once the process is over, you're handed a sack with a slice of meat and a slice of cheese. I would trade that stinking sack lunch for butt-naked soup any day.

BUTT-NAKED RAMEN SOUP

INGREDIENTS

1 pack Ramen (any flavor)

About 1 cup boiling water

NOTE: You can serve this with a good handful of chips on the side, but sometimes just enjoying it butt naked is best. The soup, that is.

1. Empty the Ramen into a bowl. Set aside the seasoning packet.
2. Add the water. The Ramen should be submerged.
3. Add more or less water as desired.
4. Add the seasoning. Stir, cover, and let sit for 3 to 5 minutes.

Dear John



Two days after my eighteenth birthday, I was sitting in the L.A. County jail waiting for my transfer to the California State Prison in Corcoran. I was trying to wrap my head around the ten years I had just been sentenced to, when mail call came. And there it was: my own Dear John letter. What did I expect? For my eighteen-year-old girlfriend to wait for me to serve a ten-year sentence?

The tension was particularly high that day because homies were coming in all day reporting on the madness and rage on the streets. It was just after four white LAPD cops were acquitted of beating a black guy named Rodney King just short of death. L.A. went crazy with riots for five days of looting, burning, smashing, and crashing when reports got back about a Hispanic farmworker getting his head bashed in by some black gang members on his way home from work. I knew a race riot was brewing in my new home.

I was trying to distract myself with thoughts of good food. With items from the commissary and a little help from a “stinger,” a makeshift prison heating device using metal plates and electrical wires, I cooked up this surprisingly delicious meal. Unfortunately, it tastes all the better when you know you won’t be eating any homemade meals for a very long time.

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