

brought in a guy named Ernie who was caught sticking up a jewelry store. Ernie was small, white, and either Cuban or Italian. I couldn't tell. The police had caught him in the act. He had taken the money and the jewelry and then locked the two employees in the back room with a padlock they used on the front gates.

"But then I couldn't get out because they had a buzzer to open the front door," Ernie said. "I didn't know where the buzzer was and I had locked the two dudes who knew up in the back."

He waited for two hours while people came and tried to get into the store before he called the police. He said he wasn't guilty because he hadn't taken anything out of the store. He didn't even have a gun, just his hand in his pocket like he had a gun.

"What they charging you with?" somebody asked.

"Armed robbery, unlawful detention, possession of a deadly weapon, assault, and menacing."

But he felt he wasn't guilty. He had made a mistake in going into the store, but when the robbery didn't go down there was nothing he could do.

"Say you going to rob a guy and he's sitting down," Ernie went on. "You say to him, 'Give me all your money,' and then he stands up and he's like, seven feet tall, and you got to run. They can't charge you with robbing the dude, right?"

He was trying to convince himself that he wasn't guilty.

There was a fight just before lunch and a guy was stabbed in the eye. The guy who was stabbed was screaming, but that didn't stop the other guy from hitting him more. Violence in here is always happening or just about ready to happen. I think these guys like it—they want it to be normal because that's what they're used to dealing with.

If I got out after 20 years, I'd be 36. Maybe I wouldn't live that long. Maybe I would think about killing myself so I wouldn't have to live that long in here.

Mama came to see me. It's her first time and she tried to explain to me why she hadn't been here before, but she didn't have to. All you had to see were the tears running down her face and the whole story was there. I wanted to show strong for her, to let her know that she didn't have to cry for me.

The visitors' room was crowded, noisy. We tried to speak softly, to create a kind of privacy with our voices, but we couldn't hear each other even though we were only 18 inches away from each other, which is the width of the table in the visitors' room. I asked her how Jerry was doing and she said he was doing all right. She was going to bring him tomorrow and I could see him from the window.

"Do you think I should have got a Black lawyer?" she asked. "Some of the people in the neighborhood said I should have contacted a Black lawyer."

I shook my head. It wasn't a matter of race.