June 2014, I was arrested for violating a court order. I bailed out on July 3. But because I had no money and an overworked public defender, I knew I’d have to serve time for my violation. That’s when my mentor, animator-director Ralph Bakshi, advised me to “document my exploits.” Jailed in the women’s division of the Los Angeles County jail system for two months, I was sent first to Century Regional Detention Facility (CRDF) in Lynwood and then to Twin Towers Correctional Facility in downtown Los Angeles for my final three weeks. Armed with nothing more than a golf pencil and whatever paper I could get my hands on, I drew the strange world into which I’d been dropped. 

A CARTOONIST DOES TIME IN L.A. COUNTY JAIL

During a two-month ordeal, the author faced random searches, angry guards and bizarre sleep schedules. She used a tiny golf pencil to draw what she saw.

By ELANA PRITCHARD
One of the most difficult parts about jail is traveling to and from court. It’s a long, arduous day that begins at 4 a.m. and often doesn’t end until after midnight. After a bus ride spent in chains, you spend most of your time in a variety of holding cells with five to 50 other people. The cells are cold and filthy, and you drink from one scummy sink shared by everyone. The worst cell I experienced was strewn with toilet paper and moldy bread. When you finally return to jail (at 8 or 9 p.m. if you ride the afternoon bus), guards from the Los Angeles County Sheriff’s Department strip-search and shout at you. Needless to say, none of it is fun. In fact, it’s such a tiresome and draining process that those who can’t afford bail often end up pleading “no contest” instead of fighting their cases — just to avoid having to repeat the experience.

Here’s an example of how draining the trip to and from court can be: On the way from CRDF in Lynwood to the far-off San Fernando Superior Court in the Valley, the bus stops downtown at Men’s Central Jail to pick up male inmates for their court appearances. I saw some ugly things on that bus: prostitution, nudity, profanity. A group of male prisoners ganged up on me and thought they could pressure me to show them my breasts — in exchange for crystal meth. I tried telling them to mind their manners, but it didn’t work. I just had to sit there and wait for it to be over. Even though they were all in handcuffs and blocked off by a barrier, they still succeeded in making me feel uncomfortable. I’m not sure if the guards knew what went on in the back of the bus, but I’m pretty sure they didn’t care.

A few deputies were kind, but about a quarter of the L.A. County jailers were verbally abusive to inmates. We were called “stupid” and “bitches,” told to shut up, and were regularly humiliated in various ways, especially by the staff who checked us into jail. The story in this comic didn’t happen to me but to another woman in one of my pods, and it’s the perfect example of this behavior. When she returned from court, the deputy conducting her “property search” arbitrarily decided to throw away her court papers (jailers can just rip up and throw away whatever they please). When the woman protested, deputies placed her in handcuffs and put her in a cell alone, and then taunted her for being handcuffed.

After my final court appearance, I went to “temporary housing.” You’re supposed to stay there for only a day or two but, likely due to overcrowding, CRDF was keeping people there for a week or more. We weren’t given clean clothes, and had no access to phones or showers. People started to get pissed. One lady, who hadn’t been allowed to shower for a week, began banging on her door, yelling at the guards. Others joined in, and the group became so vocal that deputies were unable to turn a blind eye any longer. Reluctantly, they sent a guy around to sign people up. He asked me how many days I’d gone without a shower. I told him four. He said it wasn’t long enough, as some women hadn’t showered in a week. This apathetic attempt to console me failed, and I banged on the door until I got a shower.
When you arrive in jail, you are (eventually) given an “indigent kit,” a little bag filled with a few packs of shampoo, a miniature toothpaste and toothbrush, a bar of soap, a comb and some foul-smelling deodorant cream. After that, beyond basic bar soap, you’re on your own. You have to order supplies through the commissary system, a sort of monopoly drugstore run by the Keefe Group out of Missouri. This is where you purchase everything from hygiene supplies and chips to a Styrofoam cup. You place orders once a week, and the following week a delivery guy shows up with a cart piled high with plastic bags of stuff. If nobody on the outside puts money on your “books” (inmate account), you can order a second indigent kit. But as soon as someone sends you money, Keefe deducts that cost. And with a 20-cent pack of ramen costing $1.18, just like most monopolies throughout history, goods are sold at an inflated rate.

At Twin Towers you were only given cleaning supplies once a week, an event they called “double scrub.” They would spray our rooms down with cleaner and provide the whole pod of about 40 women with a single mop and bucket. If you didn’t hurry up and grab the mop right away, by the time you got the bucket, the water would be filthy and black.

At CRDF it was fairly easy to get toilet paper and sanitary pads — all you had to do was flag down a trustee (an inmate worker). But for some reason, at Twin Towers they treated toilet paper as if it were a precious, nonrenewable resource. For a few days of my stay, we experienced a toilet paper crisis, yet for some reason the staff refused to bring us more. At Twin Towers, a popular response to inmate requests was, “Welcome to jail.” When someone finally came around with a garbage bag full of toilet paper, it felt like Christmas — and they were some kind of toilet paper Santa Claus.

A jail has its myths and legends. This rumor never checked out in my book, but some people swore by it. Supposedly, if you flushed your toilet several times in a row, the water in the sink would get hotter and you could use it to make tea or coffee. It never worked for me, so I contented myself with lukewarm sink-tea in the morning. At Twin Towers, sometimes the water in the toilet was hot, so go figure.
To escape the monotony of being locked in my cell for 23 hours a day (which is the practice at CRDF), I signed up for the Education Based Incarceration, or EBI, dorm. Once in EBI, people can get their high school diploma or take anger-management classes, parenting classes or drug counseling. In my opinion, EBI was the most humane part of the jail, and I saw it helping people. EBI was not without its jailhouse foibles, and one of them was that occasionally—and without warning—the doors would open an hour early for breakfast. You either had to wake up and run downstairs, or miss it and go hungry. A pretty funny scenario if you can laugh at yourself.

One day as I was innocently sitting in class, I got yanked out and shipped downtown to Twin Towers Correctional Facility, where they kept the AB-109 people—those who are sentenced to a year or more. This was not my classification and I still don’t fully understand why the Sheriff’s Department transferred me. Twin Towers is primarily a men’s facility, with women occupying only a single floor. One of the perks of this arrangement was that, if you drained the water out of the toilet and yelled at the top of your lungs, you could almost have a conversation with the men on the floor below. I never did this. But you could sure tell when someone was doing it, especially if you were trying to sleep.

In jail it is extremely difficult to get accurate information about anything. You have no Internet, phone calls are expensive, and you may or may not get access to a newspaper or be able to watch the news on television. If you ask the guards about anything, they either ignore or yell at you, so most of the time all you can do is speculate with the other inmates. In L.A. County, the jails are so overcrowded that most people sentenced to “county time,” or less than a year, serve only 10 to 15 percent of their sentence. So if you get 180 days of county time, you most likely will serve 18 to 27 days. This magical percentage is ever-shifting and changes depending on a variety of factors, so inmates just sat around all day long guessing each other’s release dates. Naturally, everyone thought she was right.
In this downtown jail, we were locked inside a pod while the deputies watched us from a separate command center, through cameras. So for a decent portion of the day we were seemingly left on our own to self-govern. Within this system, the woman who yelled the loudest usually got her way. But if we yelled too loud, we got locked down (sent to our cells), so it was a delicate balance.

At Twin Towers they had this godawful practice of waking us at 4 a.m. every day for “count.” You had to be fully dressed, standing at your door, while they strolled through the pod with clipboards. After that, they either served breakfast or you were allowed to go back to bed for a few hours. Every day.

Some people had money to shop and some didn’t, and then there were the people who spent $200 a week on chips and ramen and tried to lord it over everyone, like pre–French Revolutionary aristocracy. It's just chips, folks, get over yourselves.

As you can imagine, it was damn difficult to get nail clippers. Someone was supposed to come around with them once a week but often didn’t show up. I watched my roommate frantically bite off all her nails in desperation. It’s actually quite a good metaphor for jail. Someone hands you a bunk situation ... and then you freak out. And then you take care of it the best way you can.

Elana Pritchard is a cartoonist and animator in Los Angeles. Prior to her experience in jail, she worked on Ralph Bakshi’s film Last Days of Coney Island (coming in summer 2015). She has launched a Kickstarter campaign to produce her animated short The Circus. For more information, visit elanapritchard.com.