



Behind the Gates of Gomorrah: A Year with the Criminally Insane

By Stephen Seager

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A darker twist on *Orange is the New Black*, this true insider's account delivers an eye-opening look into the nation's largest state-run forensic hospital, a facility that houses the real-life Hannibal Lecters of the world.

Psychiatrist Stephen Seager was no stranger to locked psych wards when he accepted a job at California's Gorman State hospital, known locally as "Gomorrah," but nothing could have prepared him for what he encountered when he stepped through its gates, a triple sally port behind the twenty-foot walls topped with shining coils of razor wire. Gorman State is one of the nation's largest forensic mental hospitals, dedicated to treating the criminally insane. Unit C, where Seager was assigned, was reserved for the "bad actors," the mass murderers, serial killers, and the real-life Hannibal Lecters of the world.

Against a backdrop of surreal beauty—a verdant campus-like setting where peacocks strolled the grounds—is a place of remarkable violence, a place where a small staff of clinicians are expected to manage a volatile population of prison-hardened ex-cons, where lone therapists lead sharing circles with sociopaths, where an illicit underground economy flourishes, and where patients and physicians often measure their lives according to how fast they can run. To cross through the gates of Gomorrah is to enter a looking-glass world, where the trappings of the normal calendar year exist—Halloween dances and Christmas parties (complete with visits from Santa), springtime softball teams and basketball leagues, but marked with paroxysms of brutality (Santa goes berserk), and peopled by figures from our nightmares.

Behind the Gates of Gomorrah affords an eye-opening look inside a facility to which few people have ever had access. Honest, rueful, and at times darkly funny, Seager's gripping account of his rookie year blends memoir with a narrative science, explaining both the aberrant mind and his own, at times incomprehensible, determination to remain in a job with a perilously steep learning curve.

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Editorial Review

Review

"What happens when the judicial system concentrates a population of criminally insane men with nothing to lose and no compunction against murderous violence behind razor wire and steel doors? Dr. Seager reveals both the courage and the empathy demanded of the staff at this hospital without healing, prison without guards." (Judy Melinek, M.D. and T.J. Mitchell, authors of "Working Stiff: Two Years, 262 Bodies, and the Making of a Medical Examiner")

"[A] real-life account that progresses like a suspense novel....It may be impossible to fathom how the staff continues working in such an environment without experiencing it personally, but BEHIND THE GATES OF GOMORRAH may well provide the next best option." (ShelfAwareness)

About the Author

Stephen Seager is a board-certified psychiatrist, a former assistant professor of psychiatry at UCLA School of Medicine and a multiply published author. His work has been featured on national television and radio, including *Oprah*, GMA, NPR, and Larry King, among others.

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Behind the Gates of Gomorrah

PREFACE

Raymond Boudreaux and I sat at opposite ends of a rickety wooden table—with him nearest to the door. This was a mistake.

Two fluorescent ceiling tubes lit the cramped space, and the walls were war-surplus beige. A single small window in the door looked out into a hallway.

The July air hung musty and still. My chair made a tiny screech against the chipped linoleum floor as I slid it forward.

"Mr. Boudreaux, good afternoon," I said. "I'm Dr. Seager."

Boudreaux didn't reply. Clad in robin's-egg-blue hospital scrubs, he was a hulking black man with shoulders wide as goalposts. I felt fixed in his gaze.

"Mr. Boudreaux . . . ?" I tried again. Boudreaux's eyes didn't waver. I shifted uncomfortably, wondering how long someone could actually go without blinking.

A psychiatrist, I'd recently been hired to run an inpatient unit at a large state forensic mental hospital. It was the kind of dangerous, unsettling place made familiar by the fictitious Baltimore State in *The Silence of the Lambs*. After a week of training, Raymond Boudreaux was the first patient I'd talked to alone. I was rushing to get home. It was late, and the room had been convenient.

“I’m your new doctor,” I persisted. “How are you feeling, sir?”

Another pause. Then Boudreaux’s impassive face changed. “You’re a bloodsucker, aren’t you?” He smiled, his Creole-tinged voice smooth as glass. He tipped his head and studied me like a curious dog. His eyes narrowed. My heart leaped.

A forensic mental hospital isn’t like a regular mental hospital. The patients aren’t just psychotic. They’re also criminals. They’re the school shooters, James Holmeses, and Jeffrey Dahmers of the world. I’d seen Raymond Boudreaux on CNN when he was first arrested.

Boudreaux’s breathing accelerated. “You and that fucking district attorney,” he said. “You’re both in this together. I know your kind. You’ll beat a man to death, then suck the blood out of his corpse.”

Boudreaux, a New Orleans native, had graduated from Yale with an MBA. He’d worked in management for a bank in San Francisco. Then he became ill. A month after his termination, he killed his boss and several coworkers with a shotgun.

“I’m going to strangle that faggot DA,” Boudreaux snarled as he stood. “Or you.” His massive frame partially obscured the door and I became acutely aware of the seating error. Panicked, I stood as well.

With hands as large as skillets, Boudreaux grabbed the edges of the table and pushed it forward, pinning my thighs to the wall. My chair clattered to the floor. I looked frantically toward the small window into the hallway but saw nothing. I reached for the belt alarm we’d been issued for situations like this and remembered that it was still in my office.

Sweat rolled off the crest of Boudreaux’s shaven head. “Don’t move, you son of a bitch,” he seethed, and pushed the table harder.

Amid the terrified jumble in my head, an old piece of advice appeared: “If you’re ever cornered by an angry patient,” a medical school instructor had once told me, “keep talking.”

“Tell me about your crime.”

The veins in Boudreaux’s neck bulged and his eyes widened. The table hit bone in my legs. He took a couple of choppy breaths, and then the pressure on my legs waned. Boudreaux’s head dropped and his stare softened.

He let go of the table, sat back down, and put a hand on his forehead. He looked smaller. He looked mortal.

“I killed my closest friends,” Boudreaux said slowly. “What kind of a person does that?”

I edged out from behind the table.

“A person with an illness does that,” I said, sidling toward the door. I reached around a slumped Boudreaux and grabbed the door handle. “That’s why you’re here and not in prison. You’re not bad, you’re sick.”

Opening the door, I glanced down the long hallway and hurriedly waved toward Lola Palanqui, a unit nurse, and two strapping psych techs, who hustled toward me. My legs began to tremble, but I managed to turn back to Boudreaux.

“Will you be okay?”

Boudreaux said nothing.

“The staff will help you back to your room,” I said, and stumbled aside as the cavalry arrived.

The two techs escorted Boudreaux back down the hall.

Dark hair, thirties, Palanqui stood before me with her hands on her hips. We were nearly toe-to-toe. For the second time, I’d been backed against a wall. Although I grimaced in pain, she glared up at me.

“Were you in there alone with Mr. Boudreaux?” Palanqui asked in Tagalog-accented English.

“Yes . . .”

“Didn’t they tell you not to do that?”

“Yes . . .”

“He could have killed you.”

I caught a breath. “I know. It was really fright—”

“Didn’t you learn anything from that terrible first day?” she said.

I touched the stitches in the back of my head. “I just thought . . .”

I didn’t know what to say.

“We need you, Doc,” Palanqui said, and touched my arm. “Please get smarter.”

I sank to the floor. I’d taken the state hospital job thinking I could help. But I was on my way to getting myself or someone else killed.

Boudreaux called from the end of the hallway. He was walking to dinner with the rest of the patients.

“Thanks, Doc,” he said with a wave.

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