**“Prison without punishment”** by Nicole Abe Name\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

1. Describe the expectations for prisoners at Bastoy prison in Norway.

2. What is the recidivism rate at the Bastoy prison?

3. Describe the bedrooms for most of the prisoners.

4. What would prevent the American government from operating prisons in the United States similar to those in Norway?

5. What arguments could critics of the Bastoy prison make against alternative prisons?

6. Why is Raymond Olsen heading back to the mainland? What is meant by the statement, “Olsen will feel free?”

**Prison without punishment**

**In Norway’s Bastoy prison, says Nicola Abé, there are no bars, no armed guards — and no escapes**

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A Norway prison, without cells, bars, and armed guards, lets their inmates live, relatively, freely. *Photo: Corbis*

THE BOY ISN'T crying; the tears underneath his eyes are tattoos. He is standing in the snow, tall and broad, not knowing where to go at first. The guards took him from his cell to the ferry, which brought him to this island—without handcuffs. He is now left to his own devices, surrounded by red and yellow wooden houses and a church tower poking through the treetops.

This is supposed to be a prison. But Raymond Olsen doesn’t want to be here in the world’s most liberal prison, on this Norwegian island in Oslofjord, an island so small that it takes less than an hour to walk around its perimeter. Freedom beckons on the opposite shore, where the lights glitter at night like rhinestones. The 2-mile trip by boat to the mainland takes less than 10 minutes.

The warden, Arne Nilsen, wants the men here to live as if they were living in a village, to grow potatoes and compost their garbage, and he wants the guards and the prisoners to respect each other. He doesn’t want bars on the windows, or walls or locked doors.

The inmates on Bastoy have been convicted of crimes such as murder, robbery, drug dealing, fraud, violent crime, and petty theft. Some 115 prisoners live on Bastoy, and those who wish to stay are required to work and integrate into the community. The idea is that the prisoners should have an incentive to stay, and that they are still there when the count is taken—four times a day.

During the group meal, which is served once a day, the inmates in the room include a man with an iPod who stole two paintings by Edvard Munch from a museum—*The Scream* and *Madonna.* There is also a boy with dreadlocks who raped two women.

Jorgen Eilertsen, a former drug dealer, towers over them all. The knife and fork he is holding look like dollhouse cutlery in his enormous hands. He chews his food and stares out of the window. He sits alone at the table by choice.

Eilertsen used to keep his weapon on his bedside table when he went to bed. He sold drugs, snorted cocaine, took speed, swallowed pills, and went to techno parties, losing himself in the beat and the swirling lights. Eilertsen used to beat up customers who owed him money, sharpening his reputation in the gang environment. He has spent more than a third of his life in prison.

But now Eilertsen, 41, has a girlfriend who visits three times a week, along with other female visitors. She’s a good girl, not someone from his old world. She brings him chocolate and wears thigh-high boots, and her blonde hair is always freshly washed. The two agree that they want to have four children.

THIS PARADISE HAS been around for 20 years—and has a warden who loves statistics. Only 16 percent of the prisoners in this island jail become repeat offenders in the first two years after leaving Bastoy, as compared with 20 percent for Norway as a whole. The warden also feels vindicated because there has never been a murder or a suicide on the island—and because no one left Bastoy last winter even though the sea ice was frozen solid.

Olsen, the new inmate, is expected to work. He will earn 50 kroner a day. He is expected to get up every morning, cook his own food, and do his own laundry. He doesn’t know how he will manage.

Eilertsen failed when he came to Bastoy the first time, 20 years ago. After being there for two months, he was told to provide a urine sample—with a guard watching. They found traces of drugs, and he was returned to a high-security prison the next morning. Eilertsen didn’t care. “I didn’t want to get mixed up with the people here,” he says. “My fundamental emotion was hate.”

His job on the island now is to build houses. It keeps him busy, and he hardly ever thinks anymore about how he got here—or about the couple he beat up merely because they were there. He went to therapy and tried to understand what it was about breaking rules that appealed to him. He realized that he had enjoyed being hunted down.

This time, he says, he is better prepared for freedom. He learned carpentry on Bastoy, and now he knows how to work with wood and build small houses. He already has a construction job lined up for when he is released.

It is early in the afternoon. Olsen, the new kid, is finished with his work. Now he wants someone to tell him what to do next. He doesn’t want to go back to his room, where there’s a new guy from Poland. He walks through the village, past the school, the library, and the fields, until he reaches the shore where the little ferry docks. Another 90 minutes before it’s time to be counted.

Olsen got his first tattoo at 16, after robbing the warehouse of an electronics superstore, and after that he got another tattoo each time he did something illegal. The last time was just after he had robbed a kiosk. He has so many tattoos by now that the tendrils of black ink reach up to the back of his head.

There is one man here you don’t play around with, you don’t look in the eye, and you don’t approach—that’s what they tell every new inmate.

“Everyone knows who I am,” says Thorstein Hanssen (not his real name), 31. He was the best fighter in the Norwegian chapter of the white-supremacist organization Blood and Honor. The word “Skinhead” is tattooed onto Hanssen’s hands. He plans to have it removed when he leaves Bastoy. It wasn’t done well, he says. His head is shaved, and the only evidence of his red hair is the goatee on his chin.

He is here because he murdered a black boy. “I didn’t stab him, but the others did,” says Hanssen. The boy was still breathing when they left him, he adds.

The newspapers wrote that the skinheads had played white-power music to get themselves in the mood, and that they went out in search of a victim and found one in the parking garage of a shopping center. The victim, the 15-year-old son of a Ghanaian man, was stabbed to death with two different knives. The murder was planned, cowardly, and brutal, the court said. Hanssen, 22 at the time, was sentenced to 18 years in prison.

His neat room is furnished with a desk and a bed covered with flowered sheets, and there are colorful curtains in front of the window, like in all the rooms. Hanssen is studying history and philosophy at the University of Oslo. He takes his exams on the Internet. He still wants to fight, he says, against globalization, for the separation of ethnic groups and cultures, and for a peculiar idea he calls “holistic fascism.” He says that he intends to carry on his fight exclusively with words.

HEAT RADIATES FROM the oven as the smell of fresh bread fills the room. Hanssen has been baking. He insists on using whole-grain flour, sunflower seeds, and yeast. He reaches for a large knife and cuts off two thick slices of bread. “I don’t like knives,” he says.

He was in a high-security prison for nine years and spent one of those years in isolation. His eyes glaze over when he talks about it. He refuses to go into therapy. “I had a happy childhood,” he says with a smile.

Now he lives on Bastoy, together with people from 20 different nations, with Pakistanis, Ethiopians, Indians, and Iranians. “We get along fine,” says Hanssen. “We respect each other.” He applied for the island four times, and he had to fight to be allowed to live there. “It’s a good thing for me that we have prisons like this,” he says.

Hanssen wants to become a social researcher when he is released in a few years. He believes in the uniqueness of his viewpoint, and that his thoughts have to be worth something. He still hopes that society has a need for him. No other inmate on Bastoy can bench-press 308 pounds.

Night falls, and there are only five guards left on the island. The lights of the city of Horten twinkle on the opposite shore.

In Norway, about a third of prisons are open like Bastoy, and parliament has now ruled that there will be more in the future.

Nilsen, the warden, is a psychologist, but he doesn’t like to dissect people’s pasts. His mission is the future. What’s the point of punishment, he wonders, if revenge proves inadequate and prisons merely breed new criminals?

“I’m not a do-gooder,” he says, fixing his interlocutor with his blue-gray eyes. “I’m just an egoist who wants to give meaning to his life.”

He doesn’t see criminals as victims, but as citizens who will return to society one day. “On Bastoy, everyone has to learn to handle his freedom and set his own boundaries,” says Nilsen, “which is what they have to do outside, too.”

Early the next morning, the sun is still behind the trees, but the lights are already on in the buildings. A horse-drawn carriage rolls from the dock into the village. The poplar trees lining the path stretch their lumpy branches into the gray fog.

Hanssen, Eilertsen, and the others plan to break a hole into the ice once it’s thick enough. Hanssen hopes to go swimming in the icy water, for the first time in nine years. He imagines his pale white body sliding into the water, his heart racing, his breathing speeding up.

“It’s all totally surreal,” says Hanssen, blinking with his pale eyelashes.

The 10th anniversary of his murder came around recently. The people on the mainland held candlelight vigils and protested against racism, just as they did 10 years ago, after that bloody winter’s day that embedded itself in the soul of the nation like a barbed hook.

Hanssen took a bus once when he was on day parole. He had wondered whether people would notice him, whether they would point to him or just look away quickly. “No one recognized me,” he says.
He doesn’t want to live in a big city anymore when he gets out. People in the big city don’t relate to each other, he says. He wants to live in a village, like on Bastoy.

Raymond Olsen is sitting on a tree stump in front of the guardhouse. He is smiling. He filled out an application yesterday evening, he says, and they’ll be picking him up soon. He’ll be taken to the mainland on the little ferry and then driven to the prison in Tonsberg, where he’ll be welcomed by a fence topped with barbed wire. There he’ll spend 23 hours a day in his cell, with bars and Plexiglas outside the window.

He won’t have to be his own guard anymore. He’ll eat breakfast, lunch, and dinner at the prison. He’ll walk around the prison yard for one hour every day. He’ll have to ring a bell when he wants to go to the toilet.

Olsen will feel free.