

It wasn't any single thing that made a Chilean penitentiary a hell on Earth. It wasn't just the poisoned water, noxious pesticide spraying in the *módulo*, or nasty food, nor was it the incessant rats, brown recluse spiders, bedbugs, *baratas*, and flies that one had to deal with or try to avoid daily—not to mention the occasional pigeon or seagull crapping on a man while sitting out on the vile *patio*. It wasn't smelly and filthy cellmates, most of them heinous criminals, or the lack of familiar faces, or seeing people one knows. It wasn't fellow inmates threatening others or actually injuring them, nor was it being extorted, intimidated, or tortured by some hardened *choro* (tough guy) or corrupt guard. It wasn't just having one's life controlled by often doltish men, the vast majority of whom were no more qualified than his gardener or box boy, or by largely inept healthcare professionals offering slow, mediocre service—if any at all. Dying alone in a dark, damp cell from a severe illness or going blind for lack of medical care were hardly uncommon threats in prison. It wasn't just the lack of marital relations or technological innovations and resources that made one's life productive, pleasant, comfortable, efficient, and effective. It wasn't the dreary daily formation, cell-to-cell evening head counts, or occasional quarantines that left one locked inside for many days. It wasn't just the crowded, cold, drafty cells where a prisoner is confined eighteen hours a day. It wasn't just the humble quasi-slave-labor one had to undertake or the disallowance of certain foods, roach traps, vitamins and minerals, and pain killers, or the lack of comfortable furniture, lack of interesting or decent clothing, and lack of a standard shower with privacy. Anyone in a combat unit for an extended period or missing in action might be able to say that most or all of these same things characterized his life. But prisons brought mutable, arbitrary rules, uncertainty, dashed expectations, temptations to become a drug addict or commit suicide, strife, boredom, physical atrophy and decay, fear of being punished by the *gendarmes* if his cell phone were found, and a loss of meaning and joy in one's life—day in, day out. Prisons also brought occasional cell raids, raise-your-testicles strip searches, horrific paddy wagon trips to the courthouse or hospital, bound in ankle shackles and handcuffs, and fire or smoke inhalation dangers. Of course, unless he were paid off, the last thing any *gendarme* cared about was the comfort of a prisoner. In most cases, a prisoner had to swallow his pride and live off the beneficence of others, which caused a lot of emotional grief—not to mention his beleaguered wife and family ragging on him or so-called friends deserting him. On top of all that, souls were slain regularly, with some *módulos* being more murderous than others. No, it was not just anything but all these things and other maladies combined together, with one or more (or all) of them cropping up on any given day, that made a Chilean prison a terrestrial hell.