

UTNE READER

Sentenced to Life

by Kenneth E. Hartman, from Notre Dame

Prison is a young man's world, a world of physical violence and posturing, a world of brute strength and primal, unfocused rage. It is not a place to grow old, although more and more of us are doing just that: growing old in prison.

When I entered the system, I was a young man. I spent my days lifting weights and worrying about my status among peers. I rarely considered the significance or the magnitude of my predicament. In fact, the only lesson prison imparted to me, at least to that younger me, was how to be a prisoner.

I found out how to exist with another angry young man packed into a concrete box too small to be a bathroom anywhere else. I learned to become an accomplished thief, an exceptional liar, and a proficient hand-to-hand combatant. The state wouldn't provide for my desires so I stole to satisfy them. Truth is often viewed inside, by prisoners and guards alike, as a form of weakness; I figured out early that the big, well-told lie was superior to the mundane and pedestrian nature of mere facts.

And in the joint—in a world where violence is king, perpetuated by us against us, by us against them, and by them against us in a dizzying choreography of preemptive attacks and retaliatory strikes do-si-do-ing around sneaky backstabbers and goonish thugs with battery-filled socks still dripping blood and lead-gray brains in their baggy pants—I came to the no-shit-Sherlock conclusion that I had best become as dangerous as possible. So I did.

All of this living at a high-revved pitch, expending all my strength to meet the challenges in this branch of Hades, wore me down to a cinder mote. This is the common experience of those who spend their youth in such concretized suffering. The accumulated weight of years lived pushing against the immovable yields a premature decrepitude. Long-term prisoners, particularly those of us who threw ourselves into the scrum as young men and never managed to slip back past the buzzing electric fences, age at a rate out of sync with the chronograph of time.

As I struggled to maintain the battlements I constructed in the frenzy of youth, the hinges and choke points began to fail—gradually but inexorably. My wrists can never forgive the thousands of tons of rusty pig iron I balanced, or the poorly executed angles I threw as I smashed fists into leather heavy bags. My knees were clicking and popping while I still struggled to hoist weight bars into narrow slots, well before I began the 10,000-mile trek on tight oval tracks as a prisoner of the state. Hair and teeth vacated follicles and sockets, blond locks disappeared, and vigor succumbed to weariness in the infernal contest to keep upright in this maelstrom.

Before long, an old man stands before all of us, his once bulging muscles and steady hands drooping and shaky. Around this old man the frantic and pointless swirl still heaves its poison in blackened chunks of dissipation and frustrated longing. The rough currents gouge fissures from our weathered hides, all battered into smaller visions of our means-to-an-end existence untethered by wrongs or rights: *Before you screw me I will screw you*. While almost inevitably we will end up screwing ourselves . . . or at least watching impassively as we are banged into tightly compacted knots of self-immolating futility.

Prisons are madly violent places. Even in the absence of manifest violence, even without the constant stream of broken bodies exiting horizontally, or the rifle fire and clanging, shrieking alarms hounding our beings like dangerous pitchmen hawking insanity, in even the less glaringly violent prisons, violence is always a part of the experience. Every encounter is tinged with the musk of incipient, barely restrained outbreaks of violence.

Prison is that part of the developed world least altered by civilization, by modernity, by the growth of any consciousness of peaceful interaction. In here, the old scourges hold sway in epidemic proportions. Racism, tribalism, all the old "isms" are still vital and dominant, still driving behavior and ruining lives. In a sense, prisons are society's dustbins, the dumps into which are swept not only the various miscreants but also the various felonious ideas no longer acceptable in polite company.

Perhaps at this more basic level, the prison is a literal repository of society's most feared ideas and people. The trouble for those of us growing old in prison, we of the broken body and wounded, drained spirit, is that free society's fears far outlive our fearsomeness. To that society I will forever be judged by the wail of a police siren long silenced by time and the ghoulish 8-by-10 photos of the man I killed in another lifetime. In the collective mind on the other side of the chasm between here and there, between some kind of death and some kind of life, I am still a merciless marauder with bloodied hands.

The type of man who endured when life was still "nasty, brutish, and short," who survived the primitive war of all against all, passed down to me his foul temperament and inclinations. But he is as dead in me now as the endless steppe. In his place stands this me of today. Immeasurably wiser, and indeed better, the me of today recalls the wild man of his youth as a sort of fictional character, a mythic being who did not know fear or infirmity, who had no concept remotely connected to mortality. Neither did this barely recalled me grasp the more fundamental concepts of right and wrong, of what it is a young man ought to do in the course of a day's turning. I now know all of these necessary truths—the truths of wisdom earned by the accumulation of scars.

For many of my age group who remain buried in these places, particularly those serving uniquely American sentences that stretch beyond the horizon of life expectancy, there is a willful juvenilization. It is a function of remorse's soul-etching acid bath. We desire to regress back to the time before our fall, before we tattooed the black letter of shame onto our foreheads, back to when possibility resided in our lives as a presence and not a barely recalled ideal.

Our resistance to maturity is also closely tied to the milieu of prison itself. The life we live is that of a child. Devoid of responsibility and cursed by the smallest of expectations, it is not the life of an adult. The program is geared to the lowest common denominator, to the erratic twists and emotional dysfunction of an out-of-control teenager. It is designed for who I was, not who I am. And this acts as a potent retardant.

Days for a prisoner grown old devolve to a fruitless struggle to be an adult in a world of juvenile delinquents while navigating the painful straits of physical and emotional decline. In this army of outcasts, one can never exceed the rank of buck private. It is a life of forever proving your Stygian bona fides to the human conveyor belt of newer but always the same damaged souls sleeping in the bunk above or below yours. It is convincing the next doctor, the new young guard, the latest whoever that you are not the irredeemable thug your tattoos claim you to be or that their dehumanizing training has preconditioned them to expect.

It is a series of maddening struggles that leave you drained and embittered—angry at the new prisoners around you who won't see the wisdom of your experience and demand to spend themselves on the same unwinnable battles; angry at the new guards who refuse to see you as a reformed human being and daily treat you with brutal disdain; angry at the world, at the nature of unreasonable fate, at God himself.

At the root of it all, down in the darkest recesses of your mind, your greatest anger is at the rotten mother—— who put you in this place in the first place. Your most pointed anger is directed at that younger you, that unthinking, unrepentant, and irrational you.

The problem is, no matter what the rest of the world believes, that younger me, the me who crashed into and out of my life and left such a chaotic path of destruction, he no longer exists. He is a ghost unaffected by punishment and pain, but his presence continues to define my life. When I look in the mirror at the old man looking back at me, I cannot see even a trace of the brute who stole lives, my own included. It would probably be easier if I too could still see the younger me, but I cannot.

Growing old in prison is a horrific existence of dashed hopes and sclerotic veins, of unrealized longings and arthritic knees. It is a withering away from life into the out-of-focus backdrop of a bad movie. It is a fate worse than death's frozen silence because it is all too cacophonous and all too desperate. I cannot imagine departed prisoners clamoring to rejoin this tormented existence. No one would wish to resume a life of seeing respite just out beyond the fence line, beckoning, shimmering right there in full view but always out of reach.

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