

The Inmate and the Prison Guard

or

The Night the Walls Came Down

I had known this particular Correctional Officer for close to 25 years. The conversation we struck up the evening after the 2008 Presidential Election had us idly looking at each other's perspectives as African Americans, mine as an inmate on Death Row and his as a prison guard.

On any other occasional evening, this particular guard might stop to say hello just to pay a visit to the many years we had known each other. But on this night he passed the other cells and, with a wide grin, he waved to me in front of mine.

"Man, man! Could you've ever in all your life," said the guard, "In your whole lifetime believe something like this could happen?"

"Not in ten life times!" I said.

On both sides of the cell bars, we stood surprised. Unlike a prisoner face to face with a guard or vice versa, it was as if we had lost our way to seeing anything concrete, or being part of any prison way of thinking. Indeed, it was a rare moment to share in a once in a lifetime experience.

"Man, check this out!" said the guard after he stepped off to the side of the tier and up closer to my cell.

"Here's a serious true story! I get this phone call last night. And man, it must have been 'bout 4 in the morning! I was tired, had crashed out on the couch, asleep! But come to

find out it's my grandmother on the other end. So I go ahead and sit up and hand-wipe my face and clear my eyes."

"Where she's calling from?" I asked.

"She's way down in Mississippi," said the guard. "A country woman, 96 years old!"

"Is she?" I asked.

"... had raised me for a time," said the guard. "Even today, man, she's still something else!"

"So she's still doing well," I said. "That's good, man! Real good!"

"Oh, yeah she is!" said the guard. "She's one of those ol' deep southern women, wanna feed you all the time, you know the kind, everybody's her grandchild! And when not cookin', or hunched over the stove..."

"Yeah, I know. She's out dem doors, eh?" I asked.

"Man! sitting there on her 'ol porch!" said the guard.

"In her... in 'dat grandmama 'ol chair, too?" I asked.

"Oh! Yeah, right der, inside 'dat chair!"

"And wit' she bible?" I asked. She was so much like someone who had once been very special in my life but had long passed.

"Man, you got it! That's my grandmama!" said the guard. "And hey, you know as well as I do having someone special like this raising you for a time, you hear their voice."

"Yeah, yeah. I know I would!" I said.

"So... when I put my ear to that phone," said the guard, "I hear 'baby, baby can you hear grandmama?' and even before my mouth could even come open, she says, 'Oh praise God. Oh praise you holy Jesus. Please! Please get my grandchild on this phone.' I said,

'grandmama anything wrong? You alright?' All I can hear is this crying. She's cryin' so bad. To just hear the sound of my grandmama like that, you know? Ahh, man, it's like, it's goin' straight into me 'cause I can't do a damn thing, you know? I ain't goin' to lie, it was hurtin'. All I was able to do was listen. Grandmama said, 'Baby, you still there?' I said, 'Yeah, What's goin, on?' 'Now you listen,' says my grandmama. I hears this sniffing and she's trying to catch herself to blow her nose. 'Do you know I'm alive? I'm alive, is alive to see this day!' I said, 'You are alive?' 'I sure am!' she said. 'I sure am! To see we get us a black President of 'dis here country! To see one us get that far, be answered prayer for 'dis, our peoples! I'm jus' so happy I'm bout to die...baby, I'm just'a sitt'n here crying my eyes out. My mama, you grand daddy, I'm jus' cryin for dem, too! You don't mind if grandmama sit here, do you? Cause now, you all I have left.'

'I know I am, grandmama, I am so, so glad that of everybody', I says to her into the phone, 'that of all our family who can sit there, right there and still be to this day alive and to truly witness this night, it's you grandmama! Because', I says, 'I still remember stories. Those ones, you know which ones? You use to go outside to tell?'

"That she had to go outside and tell? They that painful?" I asked the guard. "Just hearing how you're describing this, your grandmama voice and what I see you hearing, it's really tearing me up, man! So I know it had to for you!"

"That's just it," said the guard. "My grandmother's heart talks. She say, 'Yeah, um-huh! Dem der was bad times child, some real bad times child', she spilling over in tears".

In front of my cell the prison guard silently started to cry. Wiping his tears on the green arm sleeves of his uniform, "Man, I swear," he said, with his both hands latched to the bars. "I'd never forget it. It was like my grandmama had once more gone outside. 'Boy,

don't you see how our peoples done so much for you? Don't you see?' She kept sayin', 'Don't you see? Don't you see, child?' which really broke me up inside! I ain't goin, to lie, it did! The way I heard it man, you know? You can just feel everything, seeing in my mind, that old couch she sits in...And, and just it being past her bedtime, alone!"

"I never thought," I said, "Not ever! That I'd be standing like this at these cell bars. Dude, we are literally looking and staring at each other, having had seen each other's real tears about all this, you know?"

"Man, let me just tell you something about this madness," said the guard. "Let me run it down to you like this, O.K? All the being "a guard" or a "correctional officer" stuff that a lot of us talk about around here, that is supposed to mean, especially around inmates, 'No-we-don' t-cry!' Well, hey, you and I have been here long enough to know where that comes from."

"Yeah, we know," I said, "What a place like this prison needs to make for it's own image. But, man, I also know just what this death row thing suppose to mean, what that suppose to say to you about me, and me to go on thinking about you..."

"Still, man!" said the guard, "We both know that's not what it's about. It was about me staying here and telling you this, about my 96 year old grandmother. It was about being men and showing just how blessed I was to celebrate with her probably the best thing, if not the one miracle, she's been praying and asking to be alive to see for all her life!"

"What I keep thinking about," I said, "is how she's lived almost a whole century in this country and has seen things we can't even begin to imagine, you know?"

"So, yeah, man," said the guard. "I did. I cried with this woman whose faith has guided her through so many things. Man, she's taught me to grow, both as a man, a father, and

who still today made me realize more about these past Elections, you know? Brother, that's who was on the other end of that phone line. And since the time I can remember, my grandmama use to always say 'It's not what you are, it's who you are and what you have to live with inside yourself.'

"It' not easy to see," I said, "How your grandmother, as have many others, been carrying so much. They have both the pains and hopes, and all the prayers nobody else has to have believed in something as possible as seeing Barack Obama with his beautiful family on television become the President. Can you imagine this? 96 years old?"

"I ain't never", said the guard. "Never! Never heard my grandmama like that. We cried. Man, we did until she says, 'Uh-huh! God, the Lord has been so, so good to me,' her voice feeling really tired and needing to lay down. It had been way past her bedtime. I couldn't believe she had stayed awake so late, you know?"

It was at this moment that the guard and I just happened to glance over at my small television on the shelf in my cell.

"Take a look, a look at that," said the guard, pointing over at the screen. A picture of the late white grandmother of Barack Obama is shown hugging her grandson, the now new President Elect.

Seconds passed.

"Man, that's being it," I said.

"Huh, what's that?" said the guard.

"That picture there," I said, "you see it? It's everything we've been talking about, you know? It's your grandmother, Barack Obama's grandmother, an image of the deep south, slavery, an African-American now being elected President! Their faces are everything

that's been reflecting and bouncing off where you and I have been, you know? It's both of us, too! A prison guard, an inmate, and right here on death row!"

"Hey, just being here and looking," said the guard, "At myself, who could have easily been in your cell, this cell, or it being you out here on the tier. I'm thinking it's really about a lot more. It's sort of like what I told you my grandmama had kept saying, 'Boy, don't you see how our peoples done so much for you? Don't you see?' I guess being here now is seeing more in that, you know?"

"There's no doubt." I said, "Because anyone who's looking, that can see this across their own TV screen will almost unavoidably come face to face with some sense of history. Hell, man. No wonder your grandmother cries! It's overcoming so much, this kind of love? Who's hugging this man Barack Obama like that? That there, look at it," I said, with having known this kind of nurturing, "It's unconditional! The same I got as a little boy."

"Nah, you?", asked the Guard.

"Man, I'm not jiving!"

"Really? You wait till now to tell me?"

"Can still remember as if it was yesterday, 5 or 6 years old, my very first foster parents. And I tell you...", I said, "I will never ever forget what it had opened in me, that I could feel special to at least someone, you know?" For seconds, I thought back to my once being the only child of two loving, elderly foster parents and the memories of wanting to become an astronaut and the way they had thought the world of me that I could.

There was some light laughter that had come from down the tier, as we became aware that others were listening to our conversation.

"How much had they heard?"

"Who cares, you?"

"Not me", said the guard. "You see, you see this other picture," quickly pointing into my cell at the television.

"What? Obama? His grandmother?"

"Yeah, you see 'em? That's her, my grandmama! That's her up and down! With that same big smile," said the guard, pointing to a much younger Barack Obama being wrapped in his grandmother's arms. No one could ever have convinced us that this proud loving face of Barack's grandmother had not been our own. She had.

"You see that? Man, you just don't know the way my grandmama touched and affected me in what she said."

"Brother!" I said, smiling. "Yeah, I do, too! Man, just look at Barack Obama! The way he has touched and affected the whole world over this night!"

As the guard went on sharing his grandmother's story, I realized there was another story taking place. It became a story about a prison guard and an inmate learning that, despite the hardened world around us, an almost dehumanized culture of separation, a wall that had stood between the two of us for more than twenty years, in fact, for a few minutes, had come down.

That what the two of us, the prison guard and the inmate, saw that night, and spoke of, and felt, all of it brought tears to our eyes. As men we learned to experience our lives, in those few moments, without shame or fear, in our own longing more than anything else, to be better human beings.

Together we had stepped beyond the prison walls and had become part of the hundreds of thousands of people who came before us, knowing it was because of them and all of their courage to love and to hope, that the rest of us found the strength to see past our limitations, even those of a wounded prison culture. Their determination brought us to this moment in time, an African American being elected President of the United States.

End

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