

The Most Dangerous Man I Ever Knew

Kyle Hedquist

Luis was born in Mexico; we called him "Tejas", in reference to his home on this side of the border in Texas. He worked alongside others and me in the prison infirmary. He was well loved; he had a funny disposition and was a hard worker. I held him in my arms the day Death came for him. You see although he had a happy disposition in his old age Tejas was a drug dealing, murderer with pages of crimes. When he was younger he was lured by the prosperity of carrying drugs over the southern border, he had been shot multiple times, stabbed, and beaten. But he continued to mule people and drugs and lived an outlaw lifestyle most only see portrayed in movies. He had crazy stories of tough times, and tough women. One thing that always stood out to me was the fact that he didn't like being around sick people! He worked all day cleaning and doing chores but really wanted nothing to do with the patients. He had been visited by Death too many times and I believe he was well acquainted having escaped his clutch often.

Tejas became sick suddenly and while he had never been a picture of health by any measure it caught me by surprise to see this resilient old man lying in bed. Apparently he had cancer but he quietly put up with the pain not knowing what was truly happening inside his failing body. When it became too great he found himself lying in a bed in the very place he had worked for years. Because of our close relationship, about as close as one can get inside of a prison, I found myself spending even more time with Tejas, he

was no doubt one of the most dangerous men I had ever met a real killer, without remorse or regret he would spend hours telling tales of dead men and the ruin of many communities. In a strange way I felt that this might be how his life should end, behind 25-foot concrete walls. He was a menace to society, he deserved this fate. I was just 25 years old, a naïve white kid from Roseburg, Oregon. I had never met a drug dealing Mexican, or Coyote or any other role he took between the borders of the U.S. and Mexico. I grew up believing what most Americans believe about prisoners, they belong in prison, and if they die in there well that's life, but is it justice? The families of murder victims might agree. But I was a murderer and I was in this "place" with Tejas, was I going to die in prison? Did I deserve this? I told myself, "no" but I really didn't believe it.

Tejas loved having lotion put on his feet, he had diabetes and his feet were usually dry. But as the days went by the stories were shorter, he couldn't seem to catch his breath. He needed my full assistance to get into and out of the shower. I washed his back, the scars of bullet wounds and stabbings told their own story of a life outside of the law. I never heard him speak of children or a wife, no family came to visit, hours would pass without speaking, at one point I thought he might even get well again and be working again.

I never thought my life would be spent bathing men, changing dirty linen, or hearing graphic stories of sex, drugs, and rock and roll. But I was here in a prison infirmary shaving Tejas, maybe I was his friend, I didn't know how he felt about me. His lack of remorse for the lives he destroyed made me feel scared and questioning what would drive a man to such evil acts. Maybe he didn't deserve to be cared for. Why not let him lay in

his own feces and urine soaked sheets and die like the dog he was? It was hard sometimes for me to get past my thoughts, my hopes, my dreams, and me. I didn't feel like a bad guy. I began to compare my sins with those of the men I cared for. I hadn't raped anyone, I didn't smuggle drugs, I wasn't as bad as some other poor bastard. I had to get past the fact that I too would die in this prison for my sins, I was a man, flesh and blood and so were my clients, just flesh and blood, but they were dying their bodies had given up the fight for life and they needed help. I couldn't say "no" I couldn't turn a blind eye and I certainly couldn't say I was better than them. How could I measure their humanity against my own? We were all condemned souls of the State; all we had was one another. The State had abandoned us would we abandon one another?

Death came in the morning for Tejas but not before letting me enter the room and prepare the shower. After a fresh shave and lotion I picked up Tejas and sat him on the edge of the bed. Normally I would bend down and sweep his legs over while he laid back. But this morning something different had happened after picking him up and setting him down he held on tight and whispered something in my ear, it was barely audible as his breath was weak. He hugged me tight and his frame went limp in my arms and like that he was gone. I had shared Bible verses with him and he enjoyed listening to me read him the Bible but I don't know if he truly believed was he in Heaven? His long list of victims probably thought he should go to Hell. Did they feel better now that he was dead? Did they even know he was in prison? I can't say.

I only know one thing, that this murderer, a drug-dealing rapist, unrepentant illegal had told me something that not even my own mother or father had ever told me. I was sent to prison for murder sentenced to die by serving the rest of my life in prison, but it was behind these very walls that a Mexican, speaking broken English, had told me something about myself that I didn't know if I believed. Tejas told me with his dying breath, "You are a good man, Kyle"

This wasn't what I expected to hear in a place full of "bad" people but it was true for Tejas and I had to accept it as truth for me. If you had one breath and could say one thing what would it be? Tejas chose to speak truth into my life something Death couldn't take from him or me.

*all my best,
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