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Date 01/06/2022
Word Count-617

Hope Before Facing Fate

These are difficult times, no doubt. And even though new Covid variants are springing forth, which in turn has caused state requirements and sanctions that were previously lifted to be put back into effect, certain things remain the same.

Restaurants are open for indoor dining; museums, theaters, arenas, and stadiums are open to the public; and contact visitation is allowed in hospitals, nursing homes, and special care facilities. I stay informed about the free world through family, but I receive a greater amount of information through the broader perspective of daily local and world news and monthly magazines and journals.

I recently read an article that New York state prisons have reopened their libraries, churches, and contact visitation to inmates. In fact, many state prisons across the country have.

But not in Arkansas.

I am warehoused in Cummins, Arkansas, state prison. The very prison that the movie Brubaker, starring Robert Redford, is based on. The library and law library here are not open to check out books and research law work. The church doors are closed to the population; services have not been held for a year and a half. Visitation, however, is now open, but with very strict rules.

Visits are now noncontact, and masks are mandated, which are in fact enough protection, consequently making the newly introduced plexiglass partitions separating inmates from visitors undoubtedly excessive. Or, rather, making the required masks undoubtedly excessive. Either way it is obvious to everyone that the requirement of masks and plexiglass partitions are designed to dissuade visitation altogether. Case in point, we, the inmates, on a daily basis, at any given time throughout our day, interact within feet of and often times find ourselves reluctantly needing to converse directly with ADC staff, some of whom are not vaccinated and have made it abundantly clear that they will not submit to the vaccination shot. It is not the visitors who brings in the virus. Visitors also must now call the prison's visitation clerk beforehand to make an appointment for a visit, opposed to when an appointment was never needed. Many of us have people who travel several hours to come see us, and visitation had always maintained a maximum duration of four hours, but now it has been unjustly reduced to a maximum duration of one hour. And no matter who is on an inmates approved visitor list only immediate family are allowed to visit. Did you know that grandparents are not considered immediate family? I didn't. And I'm still finding it extremely hard understanding why grandparents are not considered immediate family. My grandparents, Mam-maw and Paps, helped raise me during the first few years of my new life, and again during my mid-teens.

They have been my one true constant throughout my youth and incarceration. For more than two decades they have made great efforts to try to visit with me at least once a month, yet they are no longer allowed to come see me. Mam-maw just had her 81st birthday. She's not as physically capable as she once was, having to depend on a walker and oftentimes a wheelchair. She experiences pains I know she downplays just so I don't worry. But I do worry. Because even though we've talked about it, me, Mam-maw, and Paps, about the inevitable fate we all face, and they are both at complete and total peace with themselves, the one thing the three of us want most before that time comes is to be able to actually see each other again. And also perhaps if we're especially lucky, to embrace.

I hope.

Bio

Jeremy Keith Phillips writes fiction under the name Jeremy Mac, with five books and one short story collection to his list of credits. He is currently warehoused in the Arkansas Department of Corrections, Cummins unit, serving a life sentence for first degree murder.