

MY HUMANITY RESTORED MY HUMANITY STOLEN

By Matthew Guajardo-Thomas #1430510

Slowly scrubbing my black hair from my eyes I reluctantly hung up the old fashioned clunky black receiver tethered to the blue phone bolted to the wall. Sitting a moment longer on that cold cement, thinking. It wasn't a great call; not even a good call. Eventually, ponderously, leveraging myself off the floor, I reached over to the unforgiving metal bench, grabbing my shower bag from where it protruded underneath. Striding quickly now for the metal stairs in the middle of the dayroom, I clumped up them, metal ringing faintly with each step. Rapidly making for the shower at the end of 2-row, I could feel the beginning of tears pooling in the corners of my green eyes. Tearing off my shorts and tee-shirt, slamming my finger on the button for the hot water, I was finally able to let myself go. Tears tumbling, mixed unnoticed with the water sluicing in rivulets over my fair skin. This was the one place I had a modicum of privacy: this bare concrete unpainted shower box away from the others.

Never, never allow them to scent a second of weakness!

But damn! It is so hard! In whom do you confide? Who do you trust? Who deserves the one last small sliver of humanity trapped within? That one last spark truly your own?

What one word describes my prison life? It'd have to be "ALONE". I doubt there's anywhere else on planet Earth one can be surrounded by hundreds of people, the constant susurrating undercurrent of raw sound and emotion, yet feel there's no one in your corner; no one cares, no one empathizes or sympathizes.

ALONE. At Connally Unit my friend, my judy, my ride-or-die had my back, always. Or so I thought. We shared everything together. The moments of despair, family issues, overwhelming depression, pain. I trusted her to allow me to let go, cry on her shoulder, free those closet skeletons, regrets, fears. All came tumbling down one grey December afternoon during a literal knock-down-drag-out fight. Soon I heard those secrets, fears, my shared spark of my shred of humanity spew from her angry mouth as poison, reverberating, crashing off dayroom bars, echoing from metal furniture, and in the knowing side eye glances of those around me.

ALONE. After I was booked into Smith County Jail my mother came to visit. Once. The only visit ever. Scarred window glass separated our faces, blotting through the tears, the speaker grill obscuring her quiet words, "We're not going to help you, Matthew." She: all proper in her blue dress, jewelry adorning her neck and wrist, hair done just so. Me: disheveled, battered hair sticking in clumps from 2 nights in holding cells. I had just been housed on the block with no more than a Styrofoam cup and a flimsy plastic spork. The visit was over, cut short by her hard utterances. I trudged the steps back to the block, the door

clanging shut behind me with a finality I felt more than heard. Beaten. Broken. Defeated, I crawled into my top bunk, faced the wall and let the hot tears fall with racking sobs. Laughter and taunts rang out behind. From that moment on, for the rest of my time, I was "Llorona" — Crybaby — in that jail.

FORGOTTEN. You learn quickly you're alone. You belong to the State. No longer "Matthew" but "TDJC Number 01430510". The clanging doors, the razor wire topping chain-link, the red brick walls are constant reminders. You're just an inventory part number for a cog in the machine. Out of sight. Out of thought. Desparacido: The disappeared, the vanished.

Suicide: a constant whisper.

Sleep: numbs the days and gives the illusion they pass quickly.

Drugs: OMG! Takes away so much pain through the pain. It feels so great!

Abuse, fights, anger, despair, depression all mingle together in a rattling, crashing symphony of ALONE. Not permanently. Barely even temporarily. Know what does help? Not being alone.

Years ago I scraped together my pennies. I searched the dark corners of my commissary account and posted an ad on WriteAPrisoner.com catering to the "system impacted". My cell door opened. My erasure erased. No longer alone, I relit the pilot light to keep that long dormant spark of my humanity alive!

Not all the penpals that came my way were quality. Some were psychos, whack jobs. Some begged me to tell them of my crimes, sex fetishes, or wrote long desperate letters of what they wanted to do to ME! No doubt, many thought because I was alone I could be their toy in the damaged-goods bin. A few even wasted a stamp to write to tell me what a piece of shit I was; why they wouldn't write me. Seeing as how they had to initiate the contact, I realized there were those who must have a sadder existence than mine. To me, stamps are dear. They are very expensive.

Eventually some wonderful people trickled down through the bright static and dark shadows.

There's Rick, who answers the phone even when he's napping with his cat on his chest. We share long letters regarding the origins of consciousness, whether We Be or Not to Be, artificial intelligence, ethics, and what it means to be human versus animal. He's taught me to think outside the box, about science and great thinkers. Rick's encouraged me to read Buckminster Fuller, Gore Vidal, Richard Feynman, and taught me about the Theory of Everything. We've discussed Idealism versus Dualism versus Self-Identification and Free Will. With Rick I can talk about my prison experiences. He's been behind these walls as well. He shares his life with me, his successes, his failures, the ability to live vicariously through him. I'm grateful for his non-judgmental attitude, accepting me fully for myself, my faults and my joys. He encourages and supports my writing efforts, willingly transcribing my scribbles into beautiful text. Rick may have begun as a penpal, but over the years he's become my family.

SPARK. The request came from a professor of sociology unknown to me. She requested I write a story for a prison anthology she was putting together. Thus came my first published piece, "Ode to a Ferguson Firstday" in This Side of My Struggle. Dr. Nandi said she couldn't believe "what a gem she'd found" from a prison penpal website. She saw the humanity within.

Jimmy's first post card asked me to tell him how it felt to receive it; that he cared about me. This wonderful man has spent years writing me, encouraging me in every aspect of my life. Most importantly, he taught me that I am worthy to be loved and cared for. Jimmy taught me about morals and values. He told me the most important thing I could do was to listen to others, for each has a story. Always think bigger, better than what you have, he said. Another time he taught me about the auras and positive energy that surround us when we're happy, satisfied. Wow! I could relate to that one! I eagerly await Jimmy's extra big envelopes to arrive with his 16-point Arial font, double spaced thick text, front and back. One thing Jimmy always wants me to consider is: "How does receiving this letter make you feel?" To feel good, to realize I am loved by himself, the universe, and those around me. Jimmy taught me about empathy.

About 7 years ago when I first met Jimmy I was beginning to find my voice as an advocate for myself and other prisoners. I became fairly competent in the law library, learned to fight against the system that oppressed us. He constantly encouraged me, bought me a typewriter to make it easier to write nice looking grievances, legal briefs, and parole packages. Then one evening as I unfolded the flaps of one of his large envelopes, Jimmy gave me a future! He offered to sponsor my paralegal diploma with Blackstone Career Institute. Not only did this increase my knowledge for helping prisoners, but it ensured my employment upon my release. I've also completed continuing education courses in advanced criminal law and civil litigation, thanks to Jimmy. I know I'll be able to find an excellent job upon my release.

Jimmy gave me a future the State never wanted me to have. He gracefully taught how important it is to care for others, to listen and help them to spread their stories, as well.

SPARK. I was contacted from my penpal ad by the producers of a LOGO-TV show with Laverne Cox. They wanted to interview me for a documentary to be released about prisoners and penpals. It was important, as it was about those who were marginalized, those who were gay or transgender. I was interviewed for the show on camera and my voice was heard. They valued me as a human being. The truth could ring forth from these dark walls, a spotlight shining briefly with my words escaping to the free world.

I came to the penitentiary identifying as a gay man. I never felt that was quite right. As I built confidence in myself over this sentence, thanks in part to the penpals who so lovingly gave of themselves, I began to grapple with my gender. During the covid pandemic, during a time of my greatest vulnerability, I received a new panpal, Lindsay. They too are non-binary. As I was already beginning to identify as non-

binary, they were a god-send. Lindsay answered questions for me, gave me courage and the confidence to step out and embrace the truth of myself; to live my truth. If you think it is hard enough to be in prison and gay, well ... Lindsay is an absolute joy! They constantly encourage me to my best self. They love to listen to all my gossip from behind these walls. We both love to read mangas, talk about anime, novels we've read, share book reviews with each other — recommendations. We find humor in relationships and the length guys go to in their pursuit.

Yet, as much as Lindsay encourages me, I feel I encourage them too. We talk about hopes and dreams, cry on each other's shoulders, talk about family, friends, boyfriends, and all the other messy stuff. I am so proud of them after they were accepted into a prestigious social work program. Most importantly, I feel I have had a chance to give them firsthand information about the ills plaguing our society, the underlying reasons for systemic racism as a basis for the ever-expanding prison punishment system. The poverty, despair and slavery hidden right behind these walls in plain sight. We've empathized with social justice issues and cried together when George Floyd was stolen from us. We experience the world together, commiserate together over the downward spiral of tragedy, anguish over ways we can make a difference. There's not much more I look forward to than a letter with their scrawl on the front, folded sheets of notebook paper scribbled with blue ballpoint. I am never allowed to type a letter to them; always it must be written in my loopy scrawl. Together, we are not alone.

Despite the unrivaled allure of mail call, the joy of seeing a white envelope with my name typed or scribbled upon it, the known benefit of having someone who cares in my life when others are absent, that aspect of rehabilitation on the other end of a stamp, TDCJ wants to take that away from all sex offenders. The Texas Board of Criminal Justice has made it a disciplinary offense for a sex offender to have a penpal ad, whether they or someone else posts it. This discrimination, despite the fact an identical bill was defeated in the Texas Legislature. Despite the fact that such a rule violates the First Amendment right of both the writer and receiver of letters. Despite the fact the ads are vetted, with criminal offenses posted by the company. Despite the fact that the sender has to initiate the contact. Despite the fact that Texas acknowledges the importance of contact with family, friends and others on the outside. Despite the fact that sex offenders are often the most ALONE and dehumanized group in prison who benefit the most from outside contact. Despite all this, why? Because, Texas wants us to be ALONE.

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