

CONVICT CHRONICLES: aromatherapy

by Leo Cardez

After Yard, I sprinted into an open shower stall and was transported to a tiny green bathroom on the second floor of a three flat on the Southside of Chicago. The scent of the Dial bar soap took me back 40 years to when my father taught me how to shower like a big boy instead of playing with my G.I. Joes in the tub until I was shivering.

I have read that our sense of smell is the sense most closely tied with our memories. And now I find myself dumbstruck, lost in a memory of my father's impossibly large calloused hands, the rising hum of our old house's pipes, and the feeling of fear I often associated with an absentee father. In that moment I can see everything clearly like I am watching it on video.

I remember our black and white stove my mom once thought she saw a mouse behind (it turned out to be a plum pit) and screamed to high heaven. The beige carpeted living room once dark with my blood when my mother bucked me off her back and my head caught the corner of our wall. The dingy back wooden

door my mom tied a piece of string to in an attempt to yank out a stubborn molar--the string simply slipped off my tooth.

The smell of that soap completely engulfed me with memories I thought I had forgotten. I did not want to return to those days. I wanted to forget that lanky kid with ears like two open car doors. The kid who was bullied and beat-up at school. The kid who still needed a nightlight; who was bad at school, who couldn't swim, who feared his father's voice. I did not want to return to those memories of my parent's fighting or mother getting assaulted at knifepoint in an alley. No, I did not want that.

But it wasn't all bad. Not really. I wouldn't mind ^{being} a child again, having my whole life ahead of me, ripe with opportunity; where anything was not only possible, but likely. It would be nice to return to when my parents still coddled and played with me, saw me with hope. Even that memory in the shower with my father is not all bad. He taught me how to shampoo and soap up, how to scrub the hot spots and clean between my toes.

Yes, of course, I would like a chance to go back and do some things differently. Maybe just go back and relive some beautiful innocent moment for the first time. How might it feel to hold a girls hand for the first time again or feel the rush of your first kiss?

It always strikes me how aging in prison is so surreal--time moves so differently here. I look in the mirror and barely remember who I was before this place. All those decisions I'd made pre-warehousing: Army, college, ~~travel~~ career....How I would trade them all to feel my baby daughter's heartbeat on my chest.

My father was around the same age I am now when he taught me how to shower. His voice deep and stern-sounding. In those days, I saw little of him. He worked second shift and on the weekends he was the enforcer of discipline—when he wasn't working on the lawn or his cars.

Today, I am so removed from what he would have wanted for me and like so many children of part-time fathers I promised myself I would be different with my own children and yet, I ended up being worse. I left my daughter to face the world alone and worse, with the stigma of having a convict dad. I never saw her graduate or walked her down the aisle.

I don't remember what else happened that day so long ago. What I ate? Did I play soccer with my best friend Hector? All I remember is the warm water on my back as I took my face towel and scrubbed it against my skinny body and now, galaxies away, a thousand years later, I still smell the soap and feel the towel against my skin. I can see what's to come. The inevitable failures and addictions closing in too quickly. I can see the clouds gathering, the sky darkening. I want to scream for that kid to never grow up, but he won't hear me. He can't.

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