

PTSD –Empathy = Decade of Decadence

by Justin Rich

The following story emerged from a workshop attended by about twenty-three writers at Fremont Correctional Facility in Colorado. This group was possible through collaboration with the University of Denver Prison Arts Initiative (DU PAI) and met for three hours on a single Friday afternoon.



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Everyone loves Thanksgiving! 😊 That year was a 2 tray, Styrofoam, through a slot in the door special...even in the hole they went out of their way to get us sliced turkey...A cold blob of cranberry sauce, mystery stuffing and instant mashed potatoes with cold watered-down gravy...it was the thought that counts, right? I just couldn't bring myself to eat it. Hours ticked by and those two Styrofoam trays sat there like ghosts, bright white reflecting off the soft count light that NEVER went off. I kept thinking "Michael and Aimee and Laurel can't eat Thanksgiving dinner..." 😞

I couldn't wrap my head around it and what normally would have been a "wolf down," smash everything, 2 tray feast of rarity was now molding in the dark corner of my cell. I couldn't even look at it. I would never eat again.

The Hole in 2006 was different. I had been there for maybe 4-5 months already? Who knows when you can't see the sun and your only window is covered with metal. The pigeons seemed to love it though and the personal war every morning when they would wake me up was getting real old-real fast.... but that Thanksgiving morning it wasn't the pigeons that woke me, it was a rude-ass guard pounding on my cell door yelling "cuff up, Rich" and rattling open the slot in my door to cuff me up behind my back. I rose like a zombie and knelt down with my hands behind my back and he

reached in and put cold, hard steel handcuffs on my wrists. What a way to start Turkey Day, I thought as he led me down the hall, me wondering where and why I was going this early. Internally I was taking inventory of my recent past and what P.O.R's I had broken and thought, coffee in my laundry? No -- miscellaneous contraband in my room? No -- I couldn't come up with a reason and my heart was racing too fast for this early in the a.m.

Suddenly the guard yanks me to a stop in the middle of the hallway and I look and notice the sign on the door: "Chaplain's Office"?

We go in, the guard uncuffs me and puts the cuffs up front and a chaplain coldly barks for me to sit down and hands me a telephone. The voice on the other end was cold and distant, strangely professional but un-emotional. "Mr. Rich?"
Yes, Sir.

Who's Michael Rich?

Who's Aimee Roberts?

Who's Laurel Roberts?

"Michael's my son, Aimee and Laurel are his mother and sister..."

"Well, this is so and so, KY state trooper. We found your prison I.D. on Michael's body. He and Aimee and Laurel were all killed in an auto accident. We will send your ID to FCF. Thank you, Mr. Rich."