

# I Close My Eyes to be Free

by Kelvin Lazaro

*This story was written when Kelvin was completing his undergraduate degree in criminology, in a Youth Writing for Justice workshop where high school students came onto campus each week to write side by side with college students to create justice narratives.*

*Kelvin spent an entire semester creating this story, once he decided that it would be most effective to begin it with a dream and then have the reader discover him waking up to his new reality in isolated confinement. He worked hard with the high school students and his fellow college students posing as his imaginary stranger readers, to make sure that he kept us in the moment rather than explaining anything. When he was finished, he decided that he wanted to make his story public, to help with two campaigns that were current in New York State, one to raise the age at which 16- and 17-year-olds were arrested and incarcerated in the same manner as adults, without separation, and another to end isolated confinement. He read his story many times in many different venues, and we like to think it played a part in the eventual success of the Raise the Age Campaign in New York.*

*This story has been used by Herstory facilitators over the years to inspire writing just beginning to shape their memoirs behind bars. It allows people to think deeply and organically about narrative structure in a way that is simple and accessible, without depending on formal education or literary background.*



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I was having breakfast with my family, which we did every week, it was a Sunday morning. It was nice and it felt warm being with them. We talked, ate and laughed, then, I awoke, pulled from my dream, once again. It was morning and the sound from the cell door opening awoke me.

I had to be ready for breakfast, if not I would have to wait six hour till lunchtime. It's been a month so far, Riker's Island, my summer home for the next three months.

I stay in my cell for about 22 hours a day, am only let out to eat and shower. Time goes by slow, really slow when I have nothing to do in my cell. I have no books, no paper, and no pen, nothing to pass the time. Therefore, I workout and sleep for most of the day.

I sleep a lot because dreaming is my only way to free myself from reality. In my dreams I feel alive and safe, but most important, I can be myself, the real me. I don't have to pretend to be someone I'm not. There is no fighting, no screaming, just happiness.

It hurt to wake up in the morning. I can't explain the pain I go through when I'm sucked back into reality. In my cell, all around me I am reminded of the dangers that await me

outside my cell. I have no name here—I am state property, a number in the system. When my cell door is fully opened, I am called by my number, “36.” When I step out of my cell, I look to my left and right, same faces, no one new this morning. All I see are kids, ages 15 through 18. Many of them look too young and a few of them are older, past the age of 18. We form one line and slowly walk down the hall to get our breakfast. When my turn comes, I wait for the older inmate to give me the tray of food. I walk back to my cell because that’s where I eat in the mornings.

It’s still dark outside and I look at the night sky through the barred window while I eat. While eating I start daydreaming about my home, a small apartment in Brooklyn, I share a room with my older brother and younger sister, I sleep on the floor with only a pillow and blanket. In the summer, when it’s hot and humid, we all sleep in my parents’ bedroom to stay cool, all five of us in a single room. We don’t have much but we have each other. A knock at the door lets me know my time is up, so I slide the empty tray under the metal door. I keep the apple for later.

Here, I have no family. All I have is a cell with a bed and a small sink. I never felt this alone in my life. My day has just begun, but I force myself to fall asleep again. I lie in bed and start thinking about what led me here. My charges were not explained and I have no idea when my next court day will be. My days and nights are the same. With no way of telling time, I am stuck in a never ending cycle. Getting bailed out

is not an option, my family, they cannot afford it. I should have stayed home that night but it was my seventeenth birthday and I wanted to go out and have fun. A fight in the streets led me here. Now, I am a registered gang-member with many other charges that were never explained. My side of the story didn't matter because if you come from my area, the police think you're an automatic gang-member.

When lunchtime comes around my cell door opens. I walk the same line to get my tray of food, but this time I eat in the dayroom and I am scared. I don't like being in the open unprotected. I take my tray and sit with my back facing the wall. The dayroom has six tables and forty inmates. We are segregated and I am forced to sit with my own kind—Latinos. Five of the tables are for blacks and one table is for Latinos. I hate sitting here, they don't speak English and they are much older than me. They lied about their ages thinking it would keep them out of the system. At the table, I sit with four of them, their ages past twenty; the oldest is 23. They hate me because I only speak a little bit of Spanish. They only let me sit here because I am able to translate for them.

I stay alert and awake. I really hope I don't have to fight again today. I don't speak to anyone anymore. I stay silent and keep to myself. At first I tried making friends but that didn't go well. When I first came here, no one told me the rules. Everything I did, I did wrong. And for that I had to fight to solve every problem. At first I tried asking the COs about the rules but they would simply yell at me, and then

came the beating from the inmates. I broke an important rule—never talk to the COs and never ask them for anything. After an hour I go back to my cell. Now, I wait, again. Dinner is six hours away and I am happy to stay in my cell and dream of a better place.

Thirty minutes later, my cell door opens. I am called and told I have a visit. What day is it? It must be Sunday, I am excited, that means my parents came to visit me. I walk down the line to the pod and the CO gives me a piece of paper and I wait for another CO to take me to the visiting room. There are four of us in total that are being taken to the visiting center. The main door opens and we enter. It closes behind us and the door in front of us opens. We walk up the stairs and one more metal door is locked. We wait for it to be opened. Now, we are in the main hall, it's huge, with so many inmates. We walk down the hall in one line, and while walking I keep my eyes open for my friends that I came in here with, but no luck, all I see are grown men walking passed me in orange jumpsuits. When we get to the visiting center, I wait for about an hour to get called. I stand waiting for my turn. I stay away from the older inmate wearing a red ID card

because red indicates violent and green indicates something to do with drugs—my ID is white. No matter our age, we all wait in here for our turn. When I am called I grab a small bin and put my shirt and pants in it. I grab and put on an orange

jumpsuit, I hate wearing this thing—it is always too big on me.

I walk into the visiting center looking for my parents, looking to my left and right but with no luck, I am unable to spot them. I keep walking and I see my brother and he is with his friend. I walk up to him and hug him and ask him about my parents, where are they? Are they in the bathroom? He tells me no, today is Tuesday and they had to work. I want to cry now, since I've been here I have only seen them once and that was on a Sunday when I was scheduled for a visit. I sit down on the chair and we talk about my case and bail. My brother tells me my parents have enough money to bail me out but the money that would be used is the rent money. I ask him why? And, where would they go? He tells me they would move in with my aunt and uncle's family while they save up again for a new place. I told him no, I would stay in and wait for my next court day. I don't want my family giving up their apartment just to bail me out. I hate it here but I would hate it more if my family had to give up their apartment just to bail me out.

After an hour, I walk back to the waiting area. This time I had to get naked in front of the COs so they can make sure I had no contraband on me. I squat and cough, then I take my cloths and dress real quick. They give me a bag my brother left me, inside is a new shirt and new underwear. I walk back to my cell. All I want to do now is sleep and dream about my parents.

Near dinnertime I wait for my cell door to open and for my number to be called. In the dayroom, I eat and watch TV from across the room. A new face tonight, I wonder what his story is. After dinner, it's shower time, we go into the shower room ten at a time. The new face is here, he starts to shower and the others start gathering around him. Then he is punched and kicked, he falls to the ground and starts getting the beating of his life. He now learned two rules in this house: you never shower without having your boxers on, and the new person always gets jumped when he is new to this house. I start thinking about him, I feel sorry for being a part of his beating, but if I didn't help in the beating, I would be the one getting punished for not following rules. I never learned his name or his story but it doesn't matter because we both share the same story now. I was him in the beginning, now every day I lose a bit of who I am and become something I hate.

Back in my cell I start getting ready for bed. I lie down and close my eyes to dream, to see my real life. I close my eyes to escape the real and be a kid again who is not afraid to hide and cry. I close my eyes to be free and live again.