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# Looking Down To See Up A Prison Epiphany

Open 7!" The guard grunts to his fat companion sitting in the control booth of the cell block. With a flip of an unseen switch my cell door grinds open. "Welcome back, Ortiz," the guard sneers with a crooked grin I want to kick down his throat. "Didn't last too long, did ya?"

Without a word to him, I enter my own personal hell, a hell that's been chasing me, housing me, teasing me into action. It's different now, though. Then I was lacking a conscience. Now hell is having to awaken from being emotionally dead for so long only to realize the past is set in stone and you can't take any of it back. "Close it up," the guard yells breaking my thoughts. I see that grin one last time before my cell door slams shut.

Once again I'm alone. I've been isolated so many times for so long that being around people almost seems unnatural. I've never felt so drained, so alone and the weird part is I don't know myself well enough to understand why. I've lived so long on the surface, just riding it out, never letting anything sink in, living my own way. I've lived the better part of 20 years without a soul, without compassion. Now it seems like I got something inside, a spirit I just can't connect with because I don't know how to ask for direction.

Holding my "welcome back to prison" pack of bedding and hygiene, I step to the bed in time to hear acquaintances from the past call my name. "Cutthroat, Cutthroat, come to you door, Ese." I hear the whispered questions and sly comments: "Where's that vato from?" I lie down and close my eyes in hopes of shutting out the world and my own chaotic thoughts, only to take a peek a few seconds later and see my two worst enemies, Mr. Cell Walls and Mr. Memories, creeping up on me.

"Cutthroat, are you ready, Ese? That's vato coming and he has the money," my best friend whispers to me from the waist high oleanders. "Don't cheese up on me, Ese, we're about to get rich." I'm stuck in a time when I would kill for money. To get ahead was my only objective. I just never thought I'd lose a best friend to a bullet that had my name on it in an armed robbery gone bad. I relive this moment over and over. I try to wake up. It seems so real, like I'm still there. I can feel the manicured grass under my feet. I can hear the cars on the

freeway less than a block away. I can see the effect the hotel's neon lights have on my skin and the surrounding cars.

I'm not supposed to be here. I'm not responsible. It wasn't my fault. These thoughts race through my mind before blast of the .44 magnum shatters the night and my partner's guts. From a different vantage point I watch as we run back to the car, not knowing exactly when I actually notice my partner's life seeping into the stolen car's passenger seat. By then it's too late and he dies before we're out of the parking lot.

Why me? Why this path? Seeing all this I question God or whoever pushes our buttons behind the scenes. Did I have to learn like this? Instead of receiving an answer I drift to a different time in my life.

"Adam, honey, how did tryouts go?" Looking through my mother's eyes, I see myself without tattoos and answering to my real name. "I made the team. I'm a panther!" I see myself say with the enthusiasm only kids can produce. "Where shall we celebrate?" my mother says, her chest filled with pride and love. "Ricardos," I see myself squeal with immeasurable happiness.

It feels like those last of the happy days were just the other day. Then the image shifts before I want it to and I'm to a different time and place...

"Hey, Wetback, I didn't know your mom could afford new Nikes," the biggest of the three boys says. I'm 13. I look different now and my last name's Ortiz, not a good combo for a Mormon jr high school. I've always known I was of a unique heritage, coming from divorced bi-racial parents, my mother white and my father Mexican. I just never thought I'd be hated for being different.

Angry and hurt, I feel the blood of my Mexican ancestors pumping in my ears. Is this the way they felt before their own battles? I see myself fill with rage and unleash it on the first boy who I wrestle to the ground, swinging fists as fast as I can because I know it's only a matter of seconds before his friends will jump in.

Looking at this fight through a bystander's eyes, the Chicano in me says this is where the struggle with self began. A struggle with not being able to establish an identity. Always being pushed and pulled from different directions, never being able to establish a vision of who I wanted to be. Seeing all this unfold, I realize this is a major gateway to hate I'll carry for a long time to come.

The scenes of my downward spiraling life are painful to watch: my mother crying over my wasted life and wondering if it was her fault I found so much failure. The drugs I so relentlessly pursued, regardless of consequences. The kid who became a man in the system, looking up to the old gangsters in creased khaki suits and slicked back hair who I forever tried to emulate. I see all these as scars I'll bear forever, and some open wounds I still can't seem to close.

"Crack!" I wake up to the loud popping of my now open door and discover it's dinnertime. I've been asleep all day. I can't believe I'm back in prison.

To start the process of doing time again seems unbearable. I think back to my first trip to prison: a wild 18-year-old kid doing two years for burglary. Things seemed so different. I had no ear for advice, no brain to realize when to slow down, no conscience to tell me “no.” Maybe it’s looking uphill at six years for stealing a car that has broken something inside of me. Maybe it’s because prison isn’t everything the movies told me it would be.

It’s clear to me I’m finished with prison. I’ve found an identity, something I can believe in that won’t confine me and deny me my freedom to express myself. Because of this I just can’t sit here and let my chance pass me by.

As I step out onto the tier, I see the faces—some I know, some I don’t—of a culture gone mad, a culture where power shifts daily and the rules are set in stone, no give, all take. I thought this is what I wanted, to be a famous name in prison like the Old Gangsters I looked up to. Now I realize they’re probably more scared of the outside world than the outside world is scared of them.

That’s it. I’m through. I have to use what’s left of my brain and leave all this behind. I have to re-educate myself so I can live the life I so aimlessly took for granted. I want my mark on the world to read big: ADAM WAS HERE! Not to die in a cage with my only mark the graffiti I carved on the cell wall.