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Brothers Behind Bars: Salvation, Insult, and the College Education

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Abstract:

A group of University of Virginia undergraduates read and discuss Russian literature with residents at Beaumont Juvenile Correctional Center every week. They not only learn about each other's lives, but also about the contradictions within their conceptions of themselves as young people in America. In fleeting moments, through literature and friendship, they find solace and maybe even transcendent meaning in one another.

“I’d been in solitary for days. You know, you start to think to yesself that you dead. Total lockdown. And then through the tiny window I saw this deer. Antlers and everything. And I started jumping up and down, like holy shit! Look! It’s a deer, It’s a deer!”

Douglas¹ was explaining to me why he believed in God. In those moments, when you see it—life—you just *know*. We were discussing Leo Tolstoy’s *The Death of Ivan Illych*. In the story, a wealthy and comfortable man named Ivan begins dying of a strange injury that he sustains while hanging new curtains in his apartment. After his death, no one mourns him. He is forgotten.

“But you know when someone dies, you know they gone to a better place.”

Embarrassed by my godlessness, I manage to mumble, “I don’t think I’m going to a better place.”

“What-- you blown someone away man?”

“Nah, No!” I laugh nervously. “I just. I don’t believe that there is a heaven or a hell beyond this earth.”

“So how d’you deal when something happens? Like when yo boy got killed?”

I wasn’t sure how to answer—Douglas nodded knowingly. He might have given me one of those hugs that brothers share if the guards would allow it.

We were sitting around a square table in the Beaumont Juvenile Correctional Center. My University of Virginia classmate Victoria and I shared the table with three young men-- residents¹ of the facility-- Carlos, Ali, and Douglas. Every week, in a college class called Books

¹ I am tempted to use scare quotes around the words “Correctional Center” and “residents,” because they are such shamefully transparent euphemisms for “prison” and “inmates.” Yet Carlos, Ali, and Douglas themselves often used these terms, so I attempt to use them as well throughout this essay without irony.

¹ The names of young men in this essay have been changed for their privacy.

Behind Bars, we visited Beaumont for a few hours to start conversations, using classic Russian literature as our starting point and our guide.

On our first day at Beaumont, the three guys noticed our nervousness—probably because we had to figure out how to start talking about Pushkin’s “To A Poet” to incarcerated juvenile delinquents we had only met in the last five minutes. Carlos joked, “Don’t worry! We ain’t sex offenders or anything. We pulled some robberies-- but who hasn’t?” We laughed, and started talking about poems. Every week they asked us for extra poems to read.

Ali’s favorite poem was “Native Land” by Mikhail Lermontov, a love poem dedicated to the cold and dreary land of the Caucasus. After discussing “Native Land,” we wrote our own poems in response. Ali writes, “This is what I love/ this is where I’m from/ This is where I learned to stand and fight and never run/ I love this city/ I love these streets/ I love the cold/ I love the heat.” Ali was hit by a car as a kid. He witnessed shootings in his own home when he was a toddler. His father is in prison. “You know my man over here, Lermontov, he loves the drunks. Even though he encountered some problems, like me, he loves his land. Where I’m from there’s a lot a crackheads-- but those same crackheads gave me knowledge and wisdom that I still got in my brain to this day.”

Instead of really listening to Ali, instead of gaping in awe at his strength, I mentally stocked Ali as fleshy proof of a liberal structuralist postulate I learned in school. That is: Having gunpowder and blood splattered onto you as a child (somehow) causes your incarceration (someday). As a black adolescent, Ali has more than a ten percent chance of being in an adult penitentiary before he turns thirty—and coming from a low-income, inner-city neighborhood, the numbers look even worse. I asked Ali if he thought his destiny was, in some ways, written for him. He responded with an alarmed, painful look in his eyes. He was both defiant and *begging* me.

“Just cause my dad will be in prison his whole life don’t mean I’ll be. I’m here because of my own choices, not because of anything he ever did.” Even God doesn’t know what’s going to happen next, he said.

Ali reclaimed his power from my words that I never knew could be so hurtful. He insisted on carrying an enormous burden that I claimed was never his to bear. When Ali leaves Beaumont in a few months to return to his native land, there will be gangsters waiting for him, looking for their money. His baby daughter has also been waiting at home. Somehow, Ali completed high school at the detention center so that he can provide for her upon his return. When my classmates and I leave Beaumont at five in the afternoon, we sometimes complain about the traffic.

I asked Douglas if the tattoo on his arm, 757, is the area code of his hometown. Douglas nodded. “But that’s not really the point.” His first name has seven letters, his middle name five letters, and his last name has seven letters. “Home is on the inside. When you’re locked up in here, you can’t find comfort in nobody but yesself.” After four years of incarceration, without being able to trust almost anyone, Douglas somehow manages to emit a supreme inner peace and confidence. Whenever he speaks, everyone in Beaumont Correctional is silent. He writes, “Where is home? Is it somewhere / you rest your head? / Or is it really just a place where your head / rests instead?”

When I can’t remember the name of a character in a story, Douglas reminds me. And when I stumble over a sentence in conversation, he laughs, as he notices me trying to pick my words carefully. Douglas says that if I ever get myself into trouble, he’s got my back.

He reveals to us that he waits patiently all week, counting the hours until Thursday at two-thirty when we get to talk about literature. He calls Victoria and me “signs of life.” Proof that something exists on the Outside. Anyone who isn’t an immediate family member can’t visit.

They can write, but no one writes anymore. They want to know everything about where we party, what we like to drink or smoke, what our campus looks like, how many friends we have, what kinds of classes we take, and how hard they are. I try explaining to him that we don't really work that hard, but I couldn't help refashioning my words into a cute joke. The naked, honest statement would have been a terrible insult. Ali likes to sleep all day, because in his dreams he isn't still trapped in Beaumont.

We read a short story, "The Overcoat," by Gogol. For me, the tale was a classic example of a culture and economy that have forgotten the inherent dignity of every human person. In the story, a low-level clerk named Akaky freezes to death after his overcoat is stolen. Akaky is so underpaid that he must starve himself so that he can buy a new coat. He lives and dies forgotten.

But the guys, unanimously, didn't feel bad for Akaky. In the jungle, they said, the lions kill the antelopes, and the hyenas have to steal the meat to survive. In the jungle, you have a responsibility only to yourself and to your family. If you're underpaid and disrespected and *freezing cold*, and you only have two options. One is Akaky's: you can whine, and complain, and die. The second option is to propagate the cycle of violence by stealing a coat for yourself, because we are not men, but hyenas. "When I get out of here," Douglas said, "I'd wanna go to college, but I also am going to provide for my mom. She's with men who provide for her, but they disrespect her. Now, I don't want to go to prison, but I sure as hell am never gonna let another man hit her." Looking into Douglas' eyes ablaze with a courage unlike I have ever seen, I remembered what we were told on our first day at Beaumont. Excellent university students like ourselves would be great role models for the residents.

In Gogol's story, the ghost of Akaky follows one young man for the rest of his life. The image of the humble clerk repeatedly asks the young man a question: "Why do you insult me? I am your brother." Bearing witness to Douglas, Carlos, and Ali's lives still haunts me. They

make a mockery of American meritocracy. These young men are more hard-working, honest, and intelligent than most people you would ever meet on the Outside. They embody the lessons in Tolstoy's works. Held captive by the limitedness and mortality of everything, they smile, they stand, they fight, and they create meaning from suffering. Yet they are insulted, punished, and forgotten.

If upon reading this you wish to claim that I am naively romanticizing and idealizing these young men—and perhaps I am—consider this: Carlos lived his life moving from foster home to foster home, essentially raising his two younger brothers by himself. He was later arrested for avenging the assault of his pregnant girlfriend. She was jumped by a gang, and in the beating, her unborn baby was murdered. In an altercation the next day, Carlos wounded the man who was responsible with a knife. Carlos has now completed his GED behind bars, and he is dedicated to returning home to make sure his brothers don't wind up in Beaumont. Carlos' story demonstrates that he, like the rest of us, is far from perfect. Yet the truly guilty party in this case is clearly the cruel system that trapped and caged this young man in the first place. This system is not without a human face. In Beaumont, Victoria and I were its ambassadors.

Several students in our class, with the best intentions, were intent on trying to *save* the residents at Beaumont. They wanted to save them from repeating crimes, from reincarceration, from a life of underclass below-ness. But the first thing and last thing I learned in Beaumont is that these young men do not need saving. It is *we*, the college students, who need salvation. It is we who built the prisons. Not Douglas, or Carlos, or Ali. We who escaped to the suburbs. We who sat on our hands and shrugged when we saw our fellow citizens underemployed, landless, sick, tired, abused, or abandoned. We who believe that we are not responsible for their world, because it is not our world.

I wrote Douglas a letter. To ask for forgiveness. To thank him. He was the deer in my window-- a symbol of hope, a sign of life for those of us in a dark and scary place. And perhaps a vessel for the God I no longer believed in.