

Wilderness House Literary Review 13/1

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Garlic Boy

The screams and cries are loudest at night and aggravate the inmates who encourage the predators and fantasize about the fate of the prey. I chant "Om Mani Padme Hum and peace replaces terror. It's my final night after being incarcerated at Corcoran State prison for five years.

The tiny plastic mirror above my combination metal sink and toilet reflects the transformation of a slightly built eighteen year old into a formidable man with prison tattoos. The tattoo on my forearm reads, "El Chico de Ajo" which translates into "Garlic Boy".

Soon after my incarceration, I visited the prison library and randomly selected "The Teachings of Buddha". Reading it removed the hatred and vengeance consuming me. I wrote to the Buddhist publisher and thanked them for transforming my life and was forwarded additional copies and other Buddhist publications. The transformation I found in Buddhism spread throughout the cell block and I became a revered Buddhism counselor to the hardest of criminals and their jailers.

Its daybreak and the Warden escorts me to the bus which will take me home. The only possession I took is a copy of "The Teachings of Buddha." He hands me a pencil drawing of a family of spiders nestled in their web. The drawing is titled "Peace and Gratitude" and the Warden tells me "Charlie" meditated and gave it to me as a gift. I tell him to sell it and buy Buddhist publications for the library.

Gilroy California is a farming community known for growing garlic. Our family lived in a trailer home located downwind from a garlic processing plant and gave my family the permanent stench of garlic. There are two social classes of Latino's who live and work in Gilroy: wealthy landowners tracing their lineage to Spanish land grants and migrant farm workers harvesting their crops. My parents are migrants paying the wealthy land owner rent and a percentage of their crop sales. I'm an only child, and was a lonely, quiet, studious kid with dreams of attending college to study agricultural science and one day owning our own farm. My garlic stench made me an outcast teased and bullied with the exception of Andalina, a quiet, studious girl, exchanging loving glances with me in school. Andalina's parents own a beautiful ranch home on hundreds of acres. A relationship was never possible given our economic differences. I received a postcard from Andalina in prison telling me she graduated from college and was attending graduate school. I was proud of her but too embarrassed to write back and tell her I earned my GED in prison.

My parents often sent me to the only minimarket/gas station in our neighborhood to buy groceries and I welcomed the errand because they included money for a "Slurpee". The owner of the minimarket is Ernesto. He was once a struggling immigrant but saved to open the new minimarket/gas station. He's considered a "Coconut" by Latino's and prefers to go by "Ernie". Ernesto was politically ambitious and a "law and order" businessman with aspirations of running for mayor. His minimarket/gas station has no competition for miles and he charges monopoly prices.

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I entered the minimarket and dashed for the Slurpee machine. I poured a tall Slurpee and grabbed the groceries. As I approached Ernesto to pay, a Latino gang entered the store which was empty except for me and Ernesto. One gang member stood guard at the entrance. Sensing trouble, I hurried to complete the transaction and get out of the store. The leader of the gang passed me and smelled my garlic stench placing his arm around me saying, "You're my garlic boy". His grip was firm and he approached the counter with me in tow. He held a gun to Ernesto's head demanding money. Ernesto opened the register and handed over the money begging, "Please don't kill me!" The gunman turned to me and said, "You stink man!" He hit me on the back of the head with the butt of the gun. I fell unconscious.

I regained consciousness to find Ernesto standing over me. My arms and feet were bound and I was being photographed by the local newspaper. Ernesto assumed I was a gang member and used the robbery as a photo opportunity for his mayoral run. Ernesto planted the pistol dropped by the thief in my pants. I was arrested and charged with armed robbery. The Public Defender ignored my plea of "wrong place, wrong time", and pressured me to accept a plea deal. I was sentenced to prison and Ernesto was elected mayor.

The bus ride home feels like a prison cell as it crawls up Interstate 5 surrounded by Central Valley farms. I'm anxious and clutch the "Teachings of Buddha". We pass a billboard reading:

Next Services 8 miles.

Ernie's Minimarket and Gas Station

The billboard reignites hatred and vengeance towards Ernesto but I hold the book close to my heart and chant, "Om Mani Padme Hum" which calms me. I'll get off the bus at Ernesto's minimarket and buy a bottle of champagne to celebrate our family reunion and treat myself to a Slurpee which I dreamed about in prison.

The bus stops in front of the minimarket. I enter and recognize Ernesto behind the counter. I pour a Slurpee and select a bottle of champagne. I approach the register and ask Ernesto, "Remember me?" to which he replies, "No. You all look alike!" The doors to the minimarket swing open and in the store mirror behind Ernesto, I see the "shark like" stare of a "meth head" quickly approaching the register determined to rob and likely kill Ernesto. I alone will determine if Ernesto lives or dies. I turn to the meth head rolling up my shirt sleeves revealing prison "tats" criminals recognize while giving him my "prison eye stare down." I hold the bottle of champagne like a baton. The meth head stops dead in his tracks saying, "It's cool man. No hassle from me!" He backs his way out of the store and runs to his car speeding away. Ernesto knew he "dodged a bullet" and holds out his hand to shake saying, "Thank you. How can I repay you?" I hand him my copy of "The Teachings of Buddha". I walk out of the store to my family reunion sipping the Slurpee like expensive cognac.