

TWENTY-ONE

HER NAME WAS FLOR

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I had originally planned to write a very academic piece for the *Wagadu* special issue. I had initially intended for this piece to be rife with buzzwords that spoke of the systematic injustices that incarcerated women face before, after, and during their conviction and subsequent incarceration. I wanted to speak about the intersections between literacy and crime and make objective claims about the correlation between the two. The ambition was to make this piece all about empirical data and evidence. However hypocritically, I know what it's like to read statistics about drug abuse, economic status, domestic abuse, or sexual violence and its relation to the incarceration of women and think *well that does me absolutely no good* – except in some sort of nebulous way. In general the academics who read these pieces, and ostensibly those who write them are not policy changers. They do not give women hope or a space through which they may change their lives. These journals are not a cure for the nihilism that ails women who are or have done time and have been subjected to continual victimization.

As Cornel West said, there is no cure for nihilism. So, after months of ruminating and vacillating between wanting to write and not wanting to write I find myself in my chair, a cat in my lap (simultaneously hating and loving this privilege) trying to write something that I did not intend to write: my own memoir, a piece of my own familiarity with incarceration. During this process of helping the women draft their memoirs, I wholly admired them for their ability to share such damning and alternately courageous moments that shaped their lives, but I was also scared for them. There is such a stigma attached to the notion of incarceration and because of this I have hid my own story for years. Thus, I was left with the belief that if these women are strong enough to help each

other and help other women then I should also be willing to tell my story. The purpose of this special issue, in my view, is to peel back the veil of the single story and allow women their own voice, their own narrative, the ability to *tell their own story*. So, I am offering my story as well with the same goal that many of the other women had and stand with them in solidarity in the hopes that another woman will read this and it will mean more to her than a data-driven think piece, and maybe, just maybe, she can cast off the belief that incarceration and victimization is her single story.

I have been incarcerated. I know what it is like to do time – not a lot of time, I never spent five, ten, twenty years, or my entire natural life behind bars. If I had, I more than likely wouldn't be writing this piece to submit to academic journal in the hopes that it will aid me in getting into graduate school. But I digress, I have been incarcerated. I have had no hope for the future or for myself; I have felt the absolute resignation that comes about from being consistently and constantly hemmed up by the system. Sitting in a concrete box, indigent, no commissary, no visits, and no one to call – this is how I learned how to “do time.” By closing yourself off from the outside world – you can't do time and be worried about the outside. I did my time by reading books, making make-up from colored pencils, and hair spray from jolly ranchers, watching too much TV, and playing Gin Rummy to a 1,000 with my celly, an older woman pushing sixty, who had spent a lifetime sporadically incarcerated.

She took me under her wing and taught me skills so I could make it with no money on my books; I learned how to thread eyebrows – two packs of ramen, I braided hair – ramen, candy bar, and a soda for good measure, tampons – for these I never had the heart to charge, some days you just really need a tampon. These, she taught me to make from maxi pads, a highly marketable skill I might add. This is Jail House Economics. If you're not gonna sling dope or sell your meds you need skills... “You learn, or you don't have nothing nice, *mi'ja*.” In hindsight, I can't help but reflect on the irony of having “nice things” in jail. But it's important; even if

you're locked up you still want things, the "nice" just becomes relative.

Late at night, we would talk and she would tell me stories about her life, her husband that beat her, her daughter in prison, and her addiction to pain pills: Lortabs, Oxys, and Zanny Bars were her most desired. She loved being high because she could get everything done with gusto. I always pictured her lifting the couch with one hand and industriously vacuuming under it with the other. I know the medicine just numbed the edges of her reality... and honestly why wouldn't she, you, or I want to numb the glorious edges of being a woman in the world? We spent months together night after night softly whispering. White t-shirts firmly wrapped around our eyes to keep the flickering fluorescent light out. She told me story after story. Her emigration from Mexico when she was a little girl crossing the Rio Grande on her mother's back and how all she could think during this treacherous swim was whether La Llorona, the Mexican weeping woman, would kidnap and drown her. She riveted me, and I was grateful to her. Still to this day I have never known a woman who was this benevolent, this generous, but also with a backbone made from steel. I never saw her cry, but I would see her lips consistently lie flat and hard across her teeth, forcibly holding back what could have been an audible sob. I wonder if she thought that if she began to cry, she would never stop – a primal scream for the ages. I wanted her to teach me how not to shed tears, but this she never did. Instead, she taught me that laughter is Big Medicine, the comfort of silent camaraderie, and how to tell when one is better than the other.

My twenty-fifth birthday was one of those days. I cried in the shower, tendrils of nihilism snaking up my abdomen – fifty pound sacks of shame. I vomited. This is my life now. Standing in a shitty shower with water pressure similar to a fire hose; I wanted to die. I had wanted to die before, but not in such a tangible way, previously it had been a nagging sensation in the back of my brain... *I could just let my car drift into that bridge or maybe stepping out into traffic wouldn't be that bad.* I stood there in that shitty shower, holding a shitty razor and wanted to die with more

conviction than I had ever felt, really about anything up until this moment. I stood there struck by my veracity, shocked by the vehemence within me; and one small thought reached around tiny and unassuming, but with the potency of venom... *you should want to live as much as you want to die*. I cut the shower off sobbing audibly now, my hands pressed hard against the cracked and mildewed tile, razor clattering to the floor. I felt small and insignificant. I was small and insignificant. I still am small and insignificant. But in that moment, someone noticed me, I felt a towel wrap around my shoulders and small work-worn hands firmly cup my shoulders leading me out of the shower. I kept my head down, not willing to meet her eyes, my eyes, or anyone else's eyes. Palpable silence rolled out and spilled into the pod. My neck was no longer capable of holding my head high. I wanted to dissolve into the floor and become a nonentity. She walked me back to our cell and as I cried and cried and cried and cried and cried some more – she said nothing. But she was there, her body manifesting light. And in that moment she knew, everything that was unspoken – my life, my tragedy – *she knew*. I knew unreservedly that in this moment she was my Demeter; I didn't need words telling me not to die, I needed exactly what she gave me: permission just *to be*.

We never discussed it. I picked myself up off the floor; washed my face and shaved my legs in the sink. We went on with our game of Gin Rummy playing to 1,000; and later on in the day we watched *American Idol*, the epitome of American normalcy. I got through that day; and the next day I didn't want to do die as badly. I found a tiny kernel within myself that wasn't lifeless. Maybe it had always been there buried so deep that I couldn't find it, maybe it was sparked into existence – a cosmic boom of wretchedness, or maybe it didn't exist at all and was a manifestation of my fear. But what I know is that she saw it too and I began to nurse it. I cradled it gently within myself. I whispered to it and blew on it gently. It flickered. I may not know much, but I have an unflappable conviction in regards to the fact that I am still here because someone showed me kindness. She saw

me, and not in that romantic comedy sort of way, but in the recognition of my humanity sort of way.

She was released not long after that and I was sad to see her go. I had a series of cellies after that, mostly ladies doing short bids, a week here, thirty days there. A few months later I got out too. I had the clothes on my back and twenty-seven dollars to my name. I had no home and no real future that I could see, but I had a little bit of hope and it was enough to see me through the next few years. So, in a way I think Cornel West is both right and wrong; there is may not be a cure for nihilism, but it can be treated with kindness. For me, incarceration ended on a note of possibility and I gained a lifelong belief that everybody deserves kindness. However, I didn't learn this from the justice system, being imprisoned, or even from becoming a productive member of society. I learned this from a woman who had lived hard, been marginalized, and never ever got a break.