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# The Colonel

Leo Cardez

Photo by Robin Kutesa from Pexels: <https://www.pexels.com/photo/monochrome-photo-of-a-person-s-hand-reaching-8739474>.

I felt convicted.

The Colonel (no real names were used) was watching as my crew shared a pizza and Bomb Pops during a marathon Scrabble game in the dayroom. The Colonel sat in the corner, as usual, trying to blend in with the wall. I caught him side-eyeing us as I stuffed my face and felt a pang of guilt and shame wash over me.

But first some context.

The Colonel lived in the cell next door and was a state baby. He had no money coming in from loved ones and was too old to hold any prison job. He lived off the state's measly ten bucks a month for everything from soap to snacks. Don't get me wrong—the state feeds us enough to prevent starvation, but being broke in prison is a hard time.

I, on the other hand, had it pretty good.

My family sent me a monthly allowance, and my prison job was well-paid, relatively. Plus, the Colonel was kind of a dick.

He was a grump, a creep, an old man with rotted teeth and one of “those” cases. He had an X on his back—a social pariah even in our world. But still, I felt convicted.

I had done nothing wrong, I reasoned, but I still felt uneasy that night in bed. I was not rich, nor was my family—the money they sent me cost them. The money I made here was hard-earned. *I have no responsibility to this man*, I told myself, but I wasn’t sure whom I was trying to convince. I fell asleep.

The next morning, I received a message: *Feed him. Help him.* It was as if a shroud had been lifted. I don’t know how else to describe it. I felt it deep in my bones, with such clarity and force that I could not deny it.

I got up and made myself a cup of coffee. I took a Danish from my storage box and walked over to his cell and knocked.

Me: Hey, Colonel, what’s good?

Colonel: (grunt of acknowledgement)

Me: Hey, you want this Danish? I’m not gonna eat it. I’m trying to cut back on my sweets. You would be doing me a favor. I don’t want anything in return.

Colonel: (skeptical grunt, looks around, takes the Danish from my hand, closes the door in my face)

Me: (to the door) Well, fuck you very much.

Still, after that every time I opened a bag of chips or made a meal, I always made sure to leave enough to give to the Colonel. Slowly, he began to acknowledge me and even began to chat. He shared bits

about his life (spoiler alert: hurt people hurt people) but was careful to never get too friendly. He understood the convict code dictates: Being associated with him could cost me street cred.

And it did. It started with my own crew.

Bolo was an old-school con with a double life sentence. Bolo was hard and would gladly kill you if it meant going home.

Bolo: I saw you giving that chomo some nachos, what you on? (Translation: Are you running a con on him?)

Me: They’re just nachos, man. I had extra.

Bolo: Don’t give that dude shit. I’d rather throw things away than give him shit.

Me: Listen, something told me to help him. When the universe talks that clearly to you, you listen. I don’t know what else to tell ya.

Bolo: (with the confused look a dog might give you when you open a can of soda) I guess.

Soon, word got around...as it always does. The Bible thumpers were quick to explain that it was God working through me. Maybe, I said, but I couldn’t tell for sure. Still others were sure I was working the long con. Most thought I had gone soft. I didn’t care. I could have never prepared myself for what happened next.

It started with Mad Dog giving the Colonel an old thermal that didn’t fit him anymore. Then Smitty gave him a stack of bar soaps he didn’t need.

Every day, it seemed, someone else was dropping off something for the Colonel. The old fart was moving with pep I had never seen before. He wasn’t mean-mugging anymore. He walked around and waved at everyone. One day, I came over with some

Kool-Aid and he refused it.

Me: What's up?

Colonel: Liam just gave me a full box of thirty. I have nowhere else to keep this stuff.

Me: All right.

Colonel: Why don't you give it to someone else who needs it?

Me: (handing it to him) Why don't you?

And that's exactly what he did.

Guys came out of the woodwork. Guys I had never seen before were lining up outside the Colonel's cell for T-shirts, flip-flops, shots of coffee, and noodles. *Where the hell did all these guys come from?* I wondered. I'd had no idea so many of my fellow inmates were hungry and cold. I felt awful that I had never noticed them before, or maybe I had simply ignored them.

I felt ashamed.

Then...

The Colonel was granted parole on a crisp fall afternoon.

Before he left, he came to my cell and gave me everything he owned.

Me: What's this?

Colonel: My stuff. I know you don't need it, but try to make sure it goes to some guys who do.

Me: (nodding as I looked at the piles he'd collected) I got you. Good luck out there, man.

Colonel: (extending his hand) You're a good man. Your parents must be proud.

Me: (shaking his hand, speechless)

The Colonel turned away and walked toward the front door. I caught up to him in the dayroom.

Me: (handing him a piece of paper) This is my family's info. If you ever need anything, call them.

Colonel: Okay.

Something broke in me, and before I knew what I was doing, I gave him a great big hug.

Me: (loud enough for everyone to hear) I'll miss you, buddy. God bless you.

Again, words and actions had been sparked in me, much to my own surprise.

Fast-forward...

Bolo and I are in a heated Scrabble battle. We are sharing a bag of chips and a bag of cookies. Bolo picks up the bags and walks over to someone's cell.

Me: Where are our chips and cookies?

Bolo: (shrugging) You aren't the only one.

He drops a triple-score seven-letter word worth over a hundred points: *quixote*.

Me: What the hell is that? (trying to gauge whether or not I should challenge his word)

Bolo: It's you, man. Don't challenge.

Normally I might have thought he was playing games, but something told me to leave it alone.

Spoiler alert: He won.

That night, I looked the word up in the dictionary.

Before prison, I had been called a lot of things—scumbag, loser, asshole. During my trial, the state had referred to me as a monster. This was my first genuine compliment about my character.

I'm not special, I know that. I know I didn't do anything unique or wonderful. Not really. I simply listened to a voice that I'd hidden away many years ago. Now I do my best to listen for those whispers from the universe (or God or whatever). They aren't always easy or as clear as the last one, and I don't always succeed, but I am trying.

I hope the Colonel would be proud.