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Perez Transcript

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Hey, my name is José Perez, and I had the pleasure of being one of the judges on this year's Project Mend. And I'm so delighted and grateful to announce that Leo Cardez as one of the winners in his piece "The Colonel." I want to give it up to you. You are so dope. Your story was amazing. I read all those pieces and all those were great but yours stood out the most to me because it really showed how human we need to be. Sometimes we are human, but sometimes we have to be more than human. Sometimes you have to take the risk and for us who in chains, for us who are in oppressive states, in cages, oftentimes, most of the time, we are demonized and looked at a certain way, but then we get into our own social networks and then we demonize each other. We put these hierarchies of who should be, who should have access to food, who should have access to packages more than others. I really appreciate this story, The Colonel, because it really tells the story of how humanity shows itself within ourselves. Sometimes it takes a real brave person to go and defy the rules and regulations that the prison ambassador has bestowed. All it takes a bag of nachos to share with someone and just lift someone up and bring out the humanity in someone, you know, that gesture right there for me could cure a whole generation. I just love the fact that I was able to read that. And love the togetherness, the humanness it took for this person to really hone in on their own humanity.

Leo Cardez, you are winner.

Leo Cardez (a pseudonym) is a two-time PEN America award-winning and Pushcart Press Prize-nominated writer. His drama has been produced in New York City, Los Angeles, and Chicago. Mr. Cardez's nonfiction has been published in *The Harbinger* (*NYU Review of Law and Social Justice*), *The Abolitionist*, *Trajectory*, *Evening Review*, and *Under the Sun*, among others.

Man, what a resume. What a resume. I would also like to read this piece in its entirety and I hope you guys enjoy. It.

The Colonel by Leo Cardez.

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.

Thank you.