It’s Going to be Okay

When Josh realized Gilbert was going to be his new cellmate, or celly, his heart sank. He was in the home stretch of what started out as a life sentence and was soon to be paroled. He was a changed man. As an inmate, however, your release date, or simply, your date, is best kept to yourself. Some guys will mess with you just to trip you up, keep you in. Luckily for Josh, he did keep that to himself. But why would the prison staff place him with Gilbert? Gilbert’s reputation for violence was earned, and Josh knew he hated gays. Josh was gay, but even if he wasn’t, he wouldn’t want Gilbert for a celly.

Gilbert was raised on a reservation in Arizona, but then moved into the Compton area of LA when he was nine. Soon enough, he was adopted into gang life, trying to fit in, trying to impress the older members, to earn his place. Not a large person, he was well short of six feet, Gilbert was the first to do anything: graffiti, violence, whatever, to earn his place. As he grew older, he became a familiar fixture with law enforcement. Tatted up and exceptionally violent, Gilbert was a ringleader, a key piece in the gang problem. A repeat offender, he became one of California’s first three-strikes convictions. 25-to-life. No exceptions.

A violent reputation can be a matter of personal safety in prison, and Gilbert quickly established one behind bars. He was dangerous, and people knew it. Nobody messed with him. By the time he learned about Josh, however, the years were piling up; Gilbert had been inside for over 10 years.

When it comes to criminals, many people don’t appreciate how much a person changes between their late teens and their thirties. For sure, your body is different, but more importantly, you think differently. Your brain is fully formed by your mid-twenties, and you assess risk differently. People serving long sentences are often not the same person who committed the crime, and this was slowly becoming true for Gilbert as well.

So when Gilbert learned that Josh was his new celly, he decided that he was going to try to get along with him. His trigger softened with time; he was not as quick to react. When the two men were placed together, they kept to themselves. Each had his own area and they tried not to interact much. And it worked for a little while, but as time passed, there were things about Josh that were starting to annoy Gilbert. Old habits can be hard to shake, and Gilbert knew a reckoning was coming. He would need to put Josh in his place since subtle corrections rarely take root in prison. Josh was sensing it coming, too. You don’t spend that many years in prison without developing a sense for which way the wind is blowing, especially in such tight quarters. When it seemed that things were close to their breaking point, however, Josh did something he swore he could never do, but he had no alternative. He was desperate. “I’m about to be released,” he blurted to Gilbert. “Next month. I don’t want any trouble. You can have all of my stuff. I don’t want any of it. Just please don’t cause any trouble for me. I’ll stay completely out of your way.”

Gilbert was dumbstruck; he knew Josh was a lifer. How was this even possible that he was coming up on parole? The revelation disoriented him. He no longer cared about whatever infraction or disrespect Josh had committed. He just wanted to know how he got a parole date, so he asked him.

Josh paused, trying to figure out what just shifted. He started slowly, “I changed.” Then, sensing genuine curiosity from Gilbert, he started to relax. “I started going to classes. I started going to church. I even got my degree. I didn’t want to be the same person anymore. I was tired of who I was. I started trying to care for others - I mean, like, really caring for others. I wanted something more for my life, even if the rest was to be spent here, behind the walls. That is when things started to change for me.”

“That is when I decided I needed to change, too,” Gilbert told me, a volunteer prison chaplain, several years later. “I wanted to get out so badly,” he said. “I signed up for classes, and I even started attending Christian church services,” which were completely foreign to him because he grew up with tribal religion on the reservation. But, as he told me, none of it really stuck, because he was doing it merely as a means to an end. He didn’t want to change so much as have the appearance of change in order to earn a release date. But it didn’t seem to be working. “I was still involved in the same BS, the same patterns. I was mostly the same person, just pretending to be someone else.” He knew he was no closer to parole than when he started.

In the midst of this, Gilbert reached out to a cousin he once knew on the reservation. They were both nine when they last saw each other. He told me that he wasn’t checking in to see how she was doing so much as seeing if he could get her to send him stuff in a care package. He admitted he wasn’t beyond using people, but he wasn’t prepared for what happened next.

After initially exchanging correspondence, she called him in the prison, and they started comparing life notes. They had a lot of catching up to do. In that conversation, it soon became apparent to Gilbert that she was one of those nauseating Christians that seemed grateful for everything, like she thought God sprinkled her life with magic fairy dust. He regretted reaching out to her. No care package is worth this, he thought. But the further the conversation went, the more he started to sense something different unfolding. Like him, she had a rough life after leaving the reservation. She also got mixed up with the wrong people and tried to fit in. It started with drugs, but soon enough she was caught up in prostitution to make ends meet. When you have so little, selling yourself isn’t so much a choice as a means for survival. Her life was spiraling with no end in sight.

Then, late at night during a torrential downpour, with nowhere to go, she took refuge under a parked car on the street. A while passed before she heard footsteps coming through the rain up the street, toward her, and she prayed to whatever God that was out there that the person passed her by, left her alone. She had never felt so alone, but loneliness was preferable to the people in her life. She was scared, and tired.

The footsteps stopped next to the car. “What do you want?” which she knew were the code words asking the price of her sexual favors. This guy must be desperate to come out tonight, she thought. She was only sixteen.

But, in an unexpected twist, that wasn’t what he was asking. He was actually asking what she wanted, as in life. The man turned out to be a pastor, and he took this cold and lonely, soaked waif of a sixteen-year-old girl home to his wife. They opened their home to her, enrolled her in school, and took her to church with them. Out of the blue, and for no reason at all, they gave her a family. Through them, she began to know love for the first time in her life.

When she had her first conversation with Gilbert, she was married and starting a family. But that conversation was pivotal for Gilbert. Through it and subsequent ones, he saw, for the first time,

a real vision of love, its shape and contours. It became the pearl of great value for him, and he was willing to sell everything for it. He doubled down on his education. He started pursuing God fervently, seeking the transformation his cousin showed him.

By the time I met Gilbert several years later, I would never have suspected his past were he not still in prison. He has a laughter and playfulness in his eyes and demeanor, and a gentle soul. I consider him one of my good friends and one of the most enlightened people I know. It would be nearly impossible not to love him.

Gilbert and I were passing acquaintances until one day when my church service on the maximum security yard was cancelled unexpectedly, so I had an hour to kill. While I enjoy leading worship in the prison, I felt grateful for the turn of events. It gave me the time to hear Gilbert's story. I'm not one of those people who thinks everything happens for a reason, but maybe this time it did.

A couple months later, Gilbert told me the review board denied his parole. The medical professional who evaluated him for the review was new to her job and couldn't reconcile his violent past with the person now seeking parole. Even the guards were perplexed that he was denied. I try not to show my opinions of prison business with the inmates because I don't feel that is my role, but I also struggled to understand Gilbert's denial. While I understand and appreciate that many of the guys I meet need to be there at this point in their lives, there are a few that leave me shaking my head, feeling that society needs these people out in the world because they have become beautiful people. We need them outside.

Gilbert, seeing my shock at his denial, just smiled. "It's okay, Garrett. It really is. I got love in my heart. That's all I need. It's all okay." I immediately teared up, because he meant it. I'm tearing up writing about it months later.

And maybe that is all any of us need. With love in our hearts, it is all going to be okay.

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