

I May Have a Life *
Joe Lekarowicz

“**W**ould you please leave the blanket?”, the American Airlines steward asks me in a friendly-bored voice as I am leaving the airplane. “I’d love to”, I reply, “but how could I?” Now his eyes are on me, observing that I have neither bag, nor coat. “I’d love to”, I repeat, “but it’s freezing outside and these clothes”, I continue, pointing at my short-sleeved summer shirt, “these clothes won’t do a very good job in keeping me warm”. He gives me a critical look but lets me pass. So I pass, only to be welcomed by the federal police.

“Lekarowicz?” one of them inquires, “Dr. Joe Lekarowicz?” “Yes”. “We have been notified of your arrival by U.S. Immigration and Custom Enforcement. We have received your passport from the pilot. Would you please follow us?”

With a scarlet AA blanket tightly wrapped around my emaciated body, I follow them. Where I come from, the one hour I was entitled to by law to spend outside has been enough to give me a profound suntan. Where they sent me to, deported me to, is Northern Europe in winter, and even here, in the artificiality of the sterile and antiseptic airport building the cold seems to bite through the blanket and to penetrate my shivering body. We have arrived in the Feds office where they are checking my passport and the documents they have received from their U.S. colleagues. They are neither friendly nor unfriendly, rather amazed. “And for that they threw you in jail?”, one of them asks me. Focusing in on his federal police badge, I keep quiet. “And then deported you”, he continues, more to himself than to anyone else. And, looking up, “So you are a professor, university professor you are?” “Yep”, I reply, relieved to receive my passport and eager to leave the Fed’s office. “I have no axe to grind with them guys”, I think, “but neither do I have anything in common with them”. “So that’s how it’s gonna be, Joe?”, I think to myself. “From now on it’s gonna be ‘we guys’ and ‘them cops?’” “Shut up”, I snap at myself, not sure whether in thoughts or in words, “Shut up. This is not a fancy kind of intellectual game you are playing. You have been deprived of everything that has ever been important to you. You have been deported from the country of your choice, from your job and from the people you once surrounded yourself with. So shut up. You are under shock. All that counts now is that the shock doesn’t take over. Steady yourself. Steel yourself. Apply the lessons you learnt in jail. The here-and-now is only about survival. Not more and not less. No time for intellectual hair-splitting. So fuck the Feds and get your own ball rolling”.

“A bank”, I think. Next thing a car rental. “No, honey, I won’t return the car at this branch. 500 miles up north, rather”. Get down the highway at 120 mph. This is a country without any speed limit, where tail-gaiting is not an offence, but a part of the game in this small and overcrowded stretch of land. Up north, to the city where I used to live years ago, the city that used to be so familiar. Upon arrival I return the rental car. Where to go now? Where to turn to now? The city is so familiar, yet so strange. This used to be my life. I know every alley here, every back yard, every single cobble stone. But it all feels so remote. Why do I have to be here? Why? Why?

“Joe”, she says, as she opens the door, “Joe. What the hell are you...” but stops mid-sentence as her eyes find mine. “Come in” she says in a soft voice, “do come in”. She is good. Good and very intuitive. She doesn’t know what has happened – how could she? – but seems to understand all there is to understand. Never taking her eyes from mine, she leads me to her bedroom. “Come” she says, and undressing me, undressing herself, she leads us to her bed. Her warmth. Her smoothness. Her womanliness. And I, resigning myself to the generosity of her body. Waking up in the morning, she kisses me. For one fugitive moment her lips are on mine. Knowing nothing, she is asking nothing. “I can see that you have to go now, Joe. I can see it in your eyes. Come back if you are in despair”, she says, and kisses me good-bye.

“She has been good to me” I think to myself, walking the early-morning streets of an awakening city, “she has been good to me. It’s only that I have lost the right to goodness”. An ex-con, condemned by society, locked away by law enforcement, not entitled to goodness. Standing in the cold morning wind, seeing nothing, feeling nothing. Staring at the blinking neon signs until the letters start to blur. Blurring and giving way to another world. The unbelievable brutality of a Mexican border town. The fatally dangerous police patrols. The arrival at the U.S. border and the relief of being back in my country of choice. My groggy mind hardly noticing the ID check and the custom officer’s questions. And then, all of a sudden, everything going wrong. An interrogation cell now, and me being searched, yelled at, accused. Still thinking that all this is just a misunderstanding, that a simple computer check will bring up my passport, my employer, my valid working visa. I see myself being brought to a holding cell, being handcuffed to the wall. Hours later two officers come to get me. “Where are we going?”, I am asking. “To the camp”, is the only answer I get, “to the camp”.

And the camp it is, every single day, and every single night for the next weeks and months. Though ‘Immigration Detention Center’ is the official name, it is nothing more than a jail. The brutality of the concrete and barbed wire architecture matched only by the brutality of incarcerating and incarcerated men. And being in jail, you learn to do the things you have to do in order to survive. Things you have to do to in order not to submit, not to break. Break like some of the other men. But you don’t break. Not in there, at least.

Forcing myself away from the tormenting memories, I am heading for the university. My former university, the best professional and personal environment I ever could have asked for in my early years as an emerging applied linguist, before I left it for good. Back now, I meet my former friends and colleagues. “Look Joe”, one of them says after having listened to my brief account of recent events. “This”, he says, with outstretched arm and index finger, “is your office, your computer, your keys. From this day on and as long as you will need it”. Five minutes later I am sitting at my desk, beginning my 14-hours-a-day-be-a-good-linguist thing. Accessing information, building knowledge, struggling for understanding. Later on, my American friends and colleagues will send over all my digital files. But right now, I just sit down and from memory I continue writing my most recent research paper at the very sentence where I stopped it before. Before one stupid slip of the tongue entitled a law enforcement regime to lash out at me. Before one ill-considered false word set off a whole avalanche of traumatizing events. Before everything turned into garbage.

The university is my Monday to Friday refuge. “You look very tired”, my friend and colleague would occasionally say, or “you have lost weight”. Most of the times when we meet, however, he says things like “you are all smiles and laughs, Joe. How can you be so positive, and so confident?” And me, I don’t know what to answer. To my mother who experienced World War II, I say “It was not you who destroyed the cities. It is what others did to you. But neither did your mourning rebuild all the houses”. And then, yesterday evening, I find myself on a bus, on my way home after a day’s work. As people turn their heads and watch me I am becoming aware that I am joyfully singing and smiling. Now how can I smile, in my situation? I lost a country, a job, a whole life. And then I begin to understand. Yes, I have lost a whole life, but I have also survived jail. I am released, free. Free to work 14 hours a day, and after that, free to do whatever I like. Free

to go where I want to go. Free from being detained, locked-up, controlled, patted down, bullied, yelled at, abused and humiliated. I always knew that, stripped of all its fancy, superficial glitter and clutter, the bottom line is that life is about eating and drinking and clothing and housing and mating. But never before have I been so much aware that one of the most basic, most fundamental human rights is the right to one's dignity, to personal liberty. Freedom of movement. Nor have I ever been more aware what being deprived of these freedoms can do to you, to you as an individual, and to society as a whole, to a society that is too readily subscribing to the practice of incarcerating individuals in what they call correctional facilities. Facilities that alter everything in you, but correct little.

These alterations I now see myself fighting every day. During weekdays, the 14-hours-applied-linguistics-routine helps. But what after sunset, what about the weekends? How to confront the ghosts and demons manufactured by a post-traumatic mind?

One of these weekends, I am cruising the nocturnal city with my friend Gregg. The nth bar we enter is the Freedom. We have a gin, talk to the right and to the left, and meet Nathalie. Nathalie is sweet. Tall, slender, with a fine face, long black hair and a high voice. And lips so soft you couldn't imagine them to exist. Bending over, she kisses me, and asks Gregg "do you mind if I fuck your friend?" "No, go ahead as you please", he replies. "But sweetie", I say, "we can't do that now. Gregg has come over from far away just to visit me. I won't leave him on his own". "What about a quickie?", Nathalie suggests with this ever so sweet voice and these lips so tender on mine. "What about a quickie?", and presses her cock against mine. "Patience, sweetie", I reply, "not a quickie now, but a slowie next time". "Okay", she finally agrees, "next week, same place, same time".

And the same place, same time it has been ever since then. For the six months that I will spend in this city, the Freedom becomes my weekend home. But neither the quickie, nor the slowie ever happens. Not for lack of opportunity, but for a surplus of respect. Leaning against the bar, I turn around and smile at Anastasia who is sitting next to me. Have I ever seen such a beautiful girl? A slim face with fine lines, high cheek bones, long platinum blonde hair, fine and slender fingers. I look at her and touch her, gently, as if she could break. But she doesn't break, she is just superhuman. Supernatural, she unites all the beauty of men and women. "You know, Joe", she commences, listening to the ancient Wurlitzer juke box while downing

another gin, “you know, I am not sure whether I should really do it. I have started this” – and with these words she points to her own body – “I have started this years ago. And now it’s nearly accomplished. But I am not sure whether I should do the last step. You never know. After the final cut I may not have any physical sensations, neither male, nor female ones”.

This evening, I begin to understand why I have found a refuge in the transgender hooker community. These girls know what it means to be in transition. Know what it means to live at the fringes of society, to be marginalized and discriminated against. I begin to understand that I use the Freedom as a therapy. After all, under the half morbid, half glamorous surface of the place, what are lurking in every dark corner are the same ghosts and goddesses that also reigned in jail: brutality, violence, money, sex and drugs. I am therefore not astonished to see that Nathalie understands. “Where did you come from, Joe”, she is joking one night, “I have never seen you around and now you are virtually living here. Have you been parachuted or something?” Looking directly at her, I say “I come from jail, Nathalie. Directly from jail”. And returning my look, never wavering, she says in a soft voice, her face close to mine “I am sorry, Joe. Very sorry. Jail’s not a good place”. And that is the one and only time that we talk about it. This one sentence is enough for her to understand and is enough for me to make myself understood.

Outside the Freedom and in the light of day, matters are more complicated. My friends listen to me and give me all the support I could ever have hoped for. But this readiness will be wearing off soon. Maybe they understand that these kinds of experiences are not just pronounced and spelled out once and then done with. They are certainly aware of this, but who could ever blame them for not wanting to listen to prison stories over and over again? What they are curious about, the more spectacular aspects of life in prison, those commonly displayed in the media, I am reluctant to disclose. The more persistent and intangible psychological implications of life in jail, they are reluctant to hear. So, perhaps understandably, many are extremely repelled by my weekend escapades. To them, the Freedom and all that it stands for is straightforwardly disgusting. And my eagerness to share it with them, to me a main part of the therapy, is taken as completely incomprehensible: a once so nice bohemian guy now pushing it way too far. While some try to keep their distance, Eric, another nice bohemian guy and one of my dearest friends, dissociates himself from me completely.

Eric is my most valued, most reliable support in my early days of post-traumatic struggle. Being a writer, he takes me along to an art fair vernissage. We drink, talk and flirt with the girls. One of them is doing fancy hair cuts for free. So I queue up, asking her whether I could leave and come back in half an hour, while keeping my place in the line. "Sure", she says, "no prob, Joe". Some time later I come back and sit down on the bench reserved for her customers. As the guy next to me gives me a critical look-over, I feel obliged to tell him that it is me who will be next in line, as this is what the hairdresser girl and I have agreed upon. "Where I come from", he starts at me, "if you give up on a queue you're gone for good. No way of reclaiming your place!" "And where I come from", I reply, standing now, legs apart and arms slightly spread out, "where I come from you fight for your place. So either you just fuck off, kid, or you will get hurt. And if you get hurt, you will get hurt badly". And the kid, as young and muscular as they come, backs up, terrified not by my narrow frame, but by the frenzy of hate in my eyes.

As the belligerence ebbs gradually away it leaves me as horrified as the kid I just scared off. I turn around and face my friend Eric. Has he eye-witnessed the entire scene? "Eric", I address him in a voice hoarse with desperation, "What is happening with me? Only a minute ago, I was utterly determined to get at the kid's throat. Without a moment's hesitation and in cold blood. I am afraid, Eric. Frightened of what I have in me. Can you help me? Can you please help me?" But of course we both know that this is not within his power. He leads me away to a quiet bar, and stays with me for the rest of the night, watching me drink, and I am so relieved, so happy that my friend keeps me company during one horrifying night. As the sun rises we get on our way home, Eric to his atelier and me to the Freedom. In front of the bar, he wishes me all the best for my future, takes his farewell and is gone. Gone and never coming back to me, as I understand later.

Six months after my arrival, my time in the city is coming to an end. A university in the U.K. has offered me a position. One last big party with all my friends and some of the Freedom girls, then I grab my few things and head for London. And London it has been for more than one year now. An academic environment as professional as I would never have dared to ask for. The wheels well-oiled, all procedures functional and in place, the whole institution designed for high performance. And a private life as empty as it can get, devoid of most feelings of joy or passion. But I will get there.

Yesterday I have switched the spellchecker of my word processor back from ‘U.S.’ to ‘U.K.’. Today my first non-linguistics piece has been accepted for publication. The sun always rises. Nothing is accomplished yet and a long way of healing lies ahead. But after all, I may have a future. I may have a life.

ENDNOTES

- * Editors’ note: It is with profound sadness that we inform you of the sudden and unexpected passing of Joe Lekarowicz. He passed away from complications arising from an infection on September 3, 2009. We first met Joe in the summer of 2008, when he submitted his first *JPP* article, “Bush”, published in Volume 17(2). During the short time we were fortunate to know him Joe impressed us as a compassionate and insightful author with an amazing talent for narrative writing. His two contributions to the *JPP* are simultaneously powerful explorations of the disorienting and transformative effects of incarceration, and testaments to the strength and resilience provided by the bonds of friendship. While the hopeful tone with which he ends this article adds to the tragedy of his passing, it also serves as a fitting illustration of his spirit and positive outlook. As he says, “the sun always rises” – even when we are no longer there to rise with it. Joe will be missed.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

At the time *Joe Lekarowicz* (pseudonym) became arrested and detained in a United States immigration detention center, he was employed by an American state university, and held a valid working visa. He has described his time in the center in a story entitled “Bush” (see *JPP* Volume 17(2) published in 2008). Shortly after his release from detention he returned to Europe. At the time of writing, Joe had been working as a linguistics professor at a university in the United Kingdom.