

## *Poptarts:*

*A Remembrance of a Life*  
By Frank Garcia

Growing up, I always liked giving people a hand. It feels good to help out. I've been an Americans with Disability Act worker for the past three years at Lancaster State Prison. In that time, I've assisted many individuals in need. I always feel sad to hear that one of my guys, whose wheelchair I have pushed, has died. I think of the conversations we shared, the hopes and dreams they told me about of what they would do when they got out of prison. But the cold hard reality is that these lifers will most likely die incarcerated.

When someone passes away in prison, it's talked about for a couple days then forgotten. Life goes on as if that person never existed. This hard, unforgiving environment breeds this apathy. In my experience, it's a coping mechanism inmates have developed as part of being tough and hard core, as well as the realization that they, too, will likely suffer the same fate. So it's best to forget rather than face the truth of what a life sentence really means.

One of my guys that I grew attached to was Gregory McClain. I would pick him up in the morning and push him in his wheelchair, which we called the Cadillac, to the pill line then off to breakfast. We would discuss our problems and vent our frustrations. We confided in each other about the people we used to be and our lives growing up, how hard it was to be away from family and friends, how it takes a toll on our souls so we adapt by being indifferent to our feelings. I particularly liked our conversations about religion and how his faith helped him endure.

Greg was diagnosed with cancer and given three months to live. This was over two years ago. He would tell me about God's plan. It really struck a chord in me. Although Greg was living with a death sentence, he remained in good spirits, for the most part. He never fell back on drugs or alcohol as I've seen many others do in times of crisis. He held steadfast to his belief in God.

He told me how he ended up in prison for robberies. He had served nearly thirty years. It seemed unfair to me. He wasn't a formal lifer yet was sentenced to so much time that it was equivalent to a life sentence. He filed for compassionate release so he could spend his last days with his family but wasn't granted. The apathetic state wanted every last day they could get out of him.

As the weeks went on, his health deteriorated. He would have trouble catching his breath when we talked. One day, I was attending a class and the building alarm went off. I heard later that Greg was taken out on a medical emergency to a treatment center where dying inmates live out their last days. Whenever anyone went there, it was never a good sign. I never saw him again.

Greg reminded me of something I'd forgotten. Hope. He had it even when they deemed his diagnosis hopeless. This sparked in me the will not to give up on myself. I found I was not irredeemable. Even though I was sentenced to life, it doesn't mean the end for my life, rather the beginning of a new journey.

While Greg was gone, I went to the canteen and bought him a pack of poptarts I owed him for sewing a pair of shorts, which I'm wearing as I write this. The months passed, and I'd keep buying the poptarts and putting them in the back of my locker. I'd eat one pack and replace it with another so he'd have a fresh pack when he returned.

I got updated about him from inmates who cleaned the building he was in. The last I heard was that he'd been transferred to another institution. I found myself lacking in the eyes of Greg, and this brought on my transformation. I received a newfound appreciation for life. That was Greg's parting gift to me.

Every morning I step outside the building and look up at the sky. I take a deep breath and appreciate the wondrous beauty that is our world. I see the sky, the clouds, the mountains with the awe of a newborn opening his eyes for the first time.

Greg also inspired me to search for my faith. His devotion to God made me want to seek my own spiritual journey. I thrived in my newfound hope. I watched myself as if I was outside of myself. I am doing things I never thought I was capable of. I broke down the barrier that was my comfort zone. No longer will I let my ego or fear get in the way of personal growth.

Gregory McClain died of cancer in January 2019. However, his life ignited aflame in me that may flicker but never waver. Onward. Greg, to God's loving embrace. I hope he has found true love peace at the end of his journey. I will continue to buy his Poptarts in remembrance of him. I will honor his memory by sharing this story so he won't be forgotten, so that he may live on through these words.

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