

My Own Pearl Harbor

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December 7, 2005 was my own personal Pearl Harbor: the moment that defines the ‘before’ and ‘after’. The morning started out normal enough. I had plans to stuff some holiday cards for my job and then stop off at a sporting goods store to pick up a gift for my brother-in-law. After that, I was going to babysit for my sister, which I really looked forward to.

After some mundane hours in the office, I looked up for a second and a few men were in the doorway of my cube. “*Daniel McGowan?*,” they said and before I knew it, I was standing, spun around onto the desk and being cuffed. “You’re going back to Oregon” is the phrase that sent me spinning. And like that, the past had caught up with me.

Nowadays, when I smell Christmas trees, especially when they are sold on the street, I am right back there on Court Street, being led handcuffed to their waiting federal car. A brief stop at the Brooklyn Federal court happens, giving them enough of a chance to tell me that the U.S. Attorney is in town and I have a short window to make a deal.

They ask me if I know of a young man who got charged with similar actions. He pleaded out because he was hit with a 30-year mandatory minimum. I stare off into the distance, annoyed by the car heater and remembering that shit is going to feel dark before it gets better. Time to shut up and let these guys talk.

It’s late in the day and Brooklyn court is ending hearings soon. They take me to MCC in Manhattan ☒ a disgusting prison that is now closed in the aftermath of the Jeffrey Epstein suicide. Years of complaints about conditions and brutality had no impact on MCC, but a billionaire kills himself, a guard falsifies documents, and the place is closed within a few years.

The Feds park on Centre Street and walk me to the federal building. It’s 30 degrees and I have a t-shirt and vest on. They walk me through Foley Square ☒ a site of many huge protests in lower Manhattan and a place my supporters will rally for me a year later. I am placed in a holding cell with a thick, bound briefing book within eyesight. There is a photo of me on it ☒ presumably put there to shock me. It’s a photo I do not recognize and I am shook.

I lawyer up, giving them the name of a lawyer who represented a friend on a protest case. He got a favorable outcome so I ask for him and the feds do not ask me any questions. They put me on the phone with the lawyer, who tells me he will come down to visit and reminds me not to talk. After the lawyer chat, where I am told I will be in court for a ‘removal’ hearing the next day, I am taken across the street, through the cold weather to MCC.

What a disorienting process. I had been arrested before for protests but nothing real. They are barking at me, “What’s your register number”, as if I am supposed to know. I tell them I have no idea. “Strip!,” they yell, and I do. Apparently, my clothes were sent to my family weeks later and completely shocked them. They felt like they were getting clothes from someone who had died. And in some ways, that’s what it was. I was not dead but my old life died that day. I was no longer an activist working on various projects in NYC. I was now defined as a ‘terrorist’.

I am brought to unit 9S ☒ the so-called terrorist wing. We stop at the 9th floor then walk up a small staircase and down a long hallway. They pop me into a dry cell next to a loud generator and lock the door. There is a camera in the cell. The water does not work. It is cold and the tiny opaque windows are covered in snow. A few times a day I hear the Muslim men praying over the generator. I feel utterly and hopelessly alone.

This is the thing prison does. It distorts your reality. In that cell I felt as low as I had ever felt. Yet the next day, I walked into court from the holding cell in the back and to see rows of family and friends there supporting me, meeting my eyes with looks of love and support. The juxtaposition between those two realities is stark. I use this lesson often throughout my custody ☒ you might not see your people, and you might feel alone, but you really aren’t. It practically becomes a mantra at times, especially when I got sent to an isolation unit or was being transported from prison to prison, an experience that happened way too often.

As dark as I felt, there were moments of humanity in that hellhole. I got taken to a new, unoccupied cell for some reason. It is always hard to say why the cops move you and on what schedule. I peered out of the tiny window of my cell and saw a man across the row in his cell. He smiled and held up the *New York Times*. "This you?," he asked. I nodded yes in response to the article about my arrest and that of six others that day around the country. I was doing my best not to cry, to just hold it together, although I had no way to communicate with my family and my requests for a phone call were ignored.

The man in the cell across from me (who held up the newspaper) told me to go to my radiator in the back of the cell. In the tiny space between the radiator and the wall my neighbor passed me a tiny golf pencil, paper and a stamped envelope, and a paperback novel. I was able to write my family that night with that paper, pencil, and envelope, a task that would have taken weeks to do without his help. That simple donation of a stamp and envelope, from this man who did not know me, mattered so much to me in that moment and allowed me to write my family and let them know I was okay. These little actions gave me faith in people and helped guide me in how I wanted to do my time.

As it turns out later, I knew of this man's case. He was a translator for a legal team and was accused of passing messages to the media from his client. He received a stiff sentence and only recently got out of prison, years after our paths crossed at MCC. He did not know me nor did he know that I was a member of the same political community as his codefendant. But it didn't matter: kindness and solidarity with another person is all that mattered at that moment.

It was the most traumatic moment of my life. Like Americans in 1941, the day has been burned into my memory. Nothing was the same after that day. My own personal Pearl Harbor.



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