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The Educated Loner  
Allen Ivanov  
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I let out an audible exhale, finally catching a break from my studies. My desk looks like the epicenter of an academic hurricane: mounds of paper form peaks and valleys, and books lie splayed open like casualties. I've lost track of time, and before I can get up for a much-needed break, a sheet of paper dangling off to the side catches my eye. *Call for Submissions... Reclaiming Identity Through Learning... How has education changed how you think about or view the world around you?* I hadn't seen this paper before--much less a clue to how it ended up on my desk--but the question had seized my mind as I went about my day.

I'm a college student--in prison. Education has reshaped not only my understanding of the world but also my place within it. It's given me the courage to confront my past and the hope of a future not yet written. Studies show time and again that education is the strongest factor in slashing recidivism. But rarely do we speak of the hidden toll--the silent burdens, the unseen costs--of pursuing a postsecondary education in a place like this.

Higher education has rendered me a minority behind these walls. While the physical distance between me and other prisoners hasn't changed, I've never felt more detached, more estranged from the world around me. Gone are the days when gambling over sports or playing cards brought me joy. The once delightful ritual of cooking elaborate meals with the guys, meals whose levels of added sugar and sodium would make even the most lenient of dietitians nervous, lost its charm after an introductory course in nutrition. I've also grown disinterested in participating in the frequent bouts of storytelling, where misogynistic tales of abuse and degradation of women are met with collective laughter and approval. I can't tell you, however, how hard it is to find someone who shares an interest in analyzing Shakespeare. It turns out that discussing *Hamlet* while strolling the yard apparently isn't a popular pastime.

But that's the whole point: in prison, intellectual pursuits aren't particularly valued. I've been told that I'm merely "book smart," too smart for my own good, and that my life sentence

renders education futile. And it's not just other prisoners who view my efforts with disdain: corrections officers often perceive it as some kind of threat, finding it necessary to remind me of my predicament. As I work towards my bachelor's degree--knowing it surpasses the educational attainment of most of them--I'm constantly reminded that no matter how educated I become, I will always be seen as a murderer. There's no prison quite like being shackled to the past.

The present isn't so much better. On most days I feel a heavy weight pressing down my chest and a scream trapped in my throat. The more I learn about systemic injustices, inequalities, and historical and present-day oppression, the more unbearable the pain becomes. The pain follows me to sleep, where I often wish I could unlearn what I've discovered. When I'm awake, it hangs in my clothes and casts a shadow over my days, leaving me in a tug-of-war between the adage that knowledge is power and the notion that ignorance is bliss. And when I survey the world around me, I see an existence steeped in indifference, where the most pressing matter on any given day seems to be which team scored the last touchdown. And then there's the laughter, which echoes through the walls and fills the housing unit with a sense of ease I can no longer share. The truth is, I've come to secretly envy the comfort of that ignorance. I wish I wasn't so serious all the time.

Of all the lessons education has taught me, the hardest is that growth comes at a cost. It peels away old illusions and unearths uncomfortable truths. But if it's to be a weight, it's also a set of wings. Education has carried me beyond these concrete walls, beyond the labels imposed on me, beyond the life I've once lived. It's given me the power to rewrite the narrative of who I am, and even if society refuses to turn the page, I will continue to hold a pen and, with quiet defiance, spill its ink. And that, in itself, is a kind of liberation.

Allen Ivanov is a writer incarcerated in Washington.

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