

Every Prisoner is a Political Prisoner

A Memoir

Kelly Rose

July 23, 2012

On July 19, Kelly Rose Pflug-Back was sentenced to eleven more months in prison for her participation in the 2010 G20 protests in Toronto. She remains unapologetic about her role in the black bloc that caused so much disruption during the summit, demonstrating that the forces that impose capitalism and patriarchy are not invulnerable.

To support Kelly and the millions like her who are imprisoned for the inconveniences they pose to the powerful, we are proud to present her eloquent and thought-provoking memoir of the time she spent incarcerated after her original arrest: “Every Prisoner is a Political Prisoner.” In this account, Kelly powerfully evokes the experience of captivity and the importance of understanding all captives of the state as *political prisoners*.

Our friends Strangers in a Tangled Wilderness are publishing a book of Kelly’s poetry as a fundraiser to benefit her during her incarceration. Walt Whitman argued that “to have great poets there must be great audiences,” but *audiences* is precisely the opposite of what there must be. To have great poetry, there must be people who are willing to act on their ideals rather than just watch from the sidelines. We are deeply grateful to Kelly for finding the courage to live her poetry as well as writing it.

June 27, 2010, was uncharacteristically overcast for mid-summer Toronto. My head pounded from the humidity as I walked alone down Queen Street, through a cityscape teeming with riot police, and still dusted with shards of broken glass from the day before. Construction crews had already set to work repairing the trail of wreckage, attempting to get everything back to normal before anyone noticed.

When I reached Jimmie Simpson Park, where people were meeting for the day’s scheduled prison solidarity rally, I saw only a small crowd of friends standing under the drooping honey locust trees: some debriefing or consoling one another, others speaking with the reporters who swarmed like gnats around the gathering. This sparse group of about thirty was all that remained after the preemptive kidnappings and mass arrests. I can’t remember if I felt any particular sense of foreboding—any eerie apprehension of why I too hadn’t been taken away.

As our diminished group walked from the park to the detention center where our friends were being held, I hoped to be able to find some news of what had happened to my partner, or to anyone for that matter.

The gray sky sprinkled rain upon us, but we were happy and smiling. We chanted, sang, played instruments and shared whatever food we'd brought. Cops surrounded us, jostling the crowd to step farther away from the chain link fence surrounding the prison. I'd been there about half an hour when the unmarked van drove into the crowd. A group of men jumped out and forced their way toward me, yelling for people to move out of the way. One of them said my name, and within seconds they had dragged me into the van.

I can't say I felt anything when my face hit the floor, but later in my cell I noticed a deep throbbing in my teeth and gums. The front ones were loose. My mouth tasted like blood.

One of the cops who'd pulled me into the van asked me if I was on welfare. He leered at my bare legs and told me I needed a razor. Another tied my wrists with zip ties and proceeded to rifle through my purse.

Inside, the building was a massive warehouse filled with wire cages, like some industrial chicken farm. The noise of other prisoners screaming protest songs and rattling the doors of their cages echoed off the concrete walls, making our numbers seem greater even than the 992 people occupying cells. They put me in a cage and locked the door. On the wall to my left I saw a guard scribble my name on a white board alongside the words "do not release." I sat down on the concrete and anticipated the worst.

The following day I was hospitalized after losing consciousness from low blood sugar. All we were given to eat was a cheese sandwich every 12 to 24 hours with no alternatives for those who were vegan or had an allergy. I was unable to walk to the medical trailer; the guards informed me that this constituted refusing medical attention. Another prisoner who overheard this screamed at a guard who was busy amusing himself doing tricks in an unused wheelchair, and they brought it to my cell shortly after.

A female guard snarled at me to "close my fucking legs" while I sat sprawled inside the medical trailer with an intravenous glucose drip in my arm. I'd been arrested in a short skirt and tank top, and they had refused me, numerous times, pants or a blanket. It was freezing inside the detention center. There was no way to get off the bare concrete. My teeth chattered constantly, and I never stopped shaking. It was too cold to sleep.

After they took me back to my cell, I could hear a man nearby screaming that he needed his medication. He screamed for hours before stopping abruptly; I pressed my face to the cage door and I could see him convulsing on the floor of his cell with his tongue hanging out of his mouth. "Get up," the guards told him, repeatedly, before finally acknowledging his unconsciousness. Then they dragged him away.

Countless people were processed and released, many of them with bruises, cuts and abrasions on their arms and faces from being slammed into the concrete. A number of the guards passed the time by spewing racist, homophobic, classist, and sexist harassment at prisoners, or threatening them with further brutalization. A number of women were threatened with rape.

Hours and hours passed, and it became increasingly clear that I would not be allowed to call my lawyer or let my family know where I was. As a matter of fact, I hadn't yet been informed of my charges. I spent over two days in my cell, curled in a ball on the concrete or pacing the small vicinity of my cage, sometimes yelling to other prisoners or joining them in hysterical, sleep-deprived bouts of laughter.

I was unsurprised to see a few old friends from Toronto's street community pass through the detention center. Were it not for the unfortunate situation, it would have been a welcome reunion. When an acquaintance of mine ended up in the cell beside me, we started talking about the circumstances that had brought us there. Only seventeen, he had spent the majority of his life being transferred from group home to group home. Since he had finally been appointed as his own legal guardian, his life had been plagued by poverty, class profiling, and prejudice in the court system. Although he didn't consider himself an "activist," he was obviously more steeped in the realities of social struggle than a large portion of the other detainees. We talked about our mutual experiences with police, shelters, group homes, and homelessness. We talked about how these experiences had politicized us, and how a person doesn't need to understand party politics to be political. Every poor person is political, we agreed, just by nature of their experiences.

I realized at that point that I probably had more in common with him than I did with most of the other protesters. Unfortunate as it was, life had already acclimatized us to be treated like shit by the authorities. None of this surprised us. We were used to being beaten, having our rights stripped away.

After most of the detention center had been emptied, I was transferred to the general population at the women's prison in Milton. While we waited to be processed in the holding cells, the other women and I laughed and joked, trading stories about how we'd ended up where we were. A lot of them were arrested and presumed guilty for unequivocal bullshit; for being homeless, poor, non-white, using drugs, working in the sex trade, or any combination of these factors. Others were arrested for crimes of necessity: for stealing food because they were hungry, or robbing a store to feed their young kids, for needing a way to pay rent. A few had been charged with assault after having fought back against abusive spouses. I told them my charges, and got a lot of hugs, high-fives, and congratulations. "Fucking right," people said, slapping me on the back. "Fuck the rich bastards! Fuck the G20!"

Some people had been unclear as to what the summit had been all about, and we got into a long conversation about it. We all laughed, ranted, waited, and laughed some more. If these were the women with whom I'd be surrounded, I thought to myself, maybe prison won't be all that bad.

My first days inside were largely spent adjusting to the prison environment, and as time went on, my new setting reminded me increasingly of the years I spent living on the street when I was a teenager.

On the streets, as in prison, you never get a decent night's sleep or a meal that resembles real food. There are always a few arrogant people who think they run everything because they've been there the longest, and people in uniforms can do whatever they want to you and get away with it. In both situations, your status as a human being is revoked. Humanity is a privilege awarded to those who help perpetuate capitalism, and once you cease to do that, you're a burden. You're expected to express gratitude to the system that ghettoizes you, doling out a few table scraps and a thin blanket.

The first range I was sent to was renowned for being the least hospitable. We were locked in our cells for most of the day. Each had one bed, though the high volume of prisoners meant that two people usually shared a cell. The only windows were thin slats of frosted glass too opaque to see through, and we were allowed outside only once a week. "Outside" was a small walled concrete enclosure with metal grating for a ceiling. Through a small crack underneath the heavy steel door, I could see grass. It depressed me to look at it. I tried not to.

This was the range to which people were sent as punishment, for getting into fights, mouthing off to guards, being caught with contraband or generally failing to comply with prison regulations. If you were “good” you qualified for transfer to a medium-security unit, where you could go to a real outdoor exercise yard, have your own cell, and see visitors without a thick pane of Plexiglas separating you.

A lot of the women on maximum security had been on the same range for over a year. I met one woman who had been there for almost two; she’d never had a misconduct, but there was a note in her file stating that she would have to serve her entire sentence on maximum security. She came from a mafia family, she explained. Putting her on a medium security unit would have been an open invitation for any of her high-up friends to come break her out.

After visiting the classification office, I learned of a similar note in my file. “Apparently I’m a terrorist,” I shrugged, when people asked why I hadn’t been transferred yet.

I won’t say that I instantly got along with everyone on my range, or that I was the most popular prisoner. I didn’t pay attention to the hierarchies that existed between other prisoners, and some people had a problem with that. I wouldn’t join in when others ridiculed or ganged up on the less popular women. It was a total pecking order, and it reminded me too much of a schoolyard.

I became close friends with a woman named Rachel¹ whom I met in the common area during breakfast on a rare day when we weren’t on 24-hour lock down. She was violently ill from drug withdrawal, and the nurse hadn’t filled her methadone prescription. Apparently, her cellmate was a complete asshole, so we snuck her into my cell after the doors were buzzed open. The next guard that came by on her rounds started yelling at us, but we assured her that the other staff had transferred Rachel and forgotten to do the paperwork. I don’t think the guard believed us, but she didn’t seem to care enough to do anything about it.

When Rachel wasn’t too sick to make conversation, we passed the long hours of our confinement playing cards, singing tuneless renditions of R&B hits, washing our dirty uniforms in the sink and talking about life in general. She lived near Niagara with her partner, their four-year-old son, and their newborn daughter. She struggled with addiction, but still managed to keep her life together and be there for her kids. Her dad had been in and out of prison most of her life, and her mom had been drunk all the time. She’d spent her early teenage years working as a prostitute, and the crown attorney at her bail hearing had used this to argue that she was unfit to reenter society. It seems that when 13-year-old girls end up hooking on the streets it’s because they possess some moral defect, and not because life has given them no other choices.

Our cells looked out onto the common area, an oval-shaped concrete room. It contained five bolted-down tables, four showers at one end, a shelf with a few bad paperback romance novels, and three phones, only two of which functioned. When allowed into the common area, I went straight to waiting in line for the phones. Some women didn’t have anybody to call or only had relatives outside of the country; the phones only transmitted collect calls within North America. Other women gripped the phone receivers with white knuckles, trying to explain to their young children why mommy wasn’t coming home. Rachel said she had told her partner not to bring the kids when coming to visit her. “They’re just too young. They would only be confused by the Plexiglas in the visitor’s cubicle. Being able to see their mother, but not reach out and touch her.”

I thought of an article I’d read once about animal testing laboratories. One method the lab technicians used to create symptoms of stress and depression in mammals involved removing

¹ All names have been changed to protect the identities of those mentioned.

newborn babies from their mother, then placing the mother in isolation. I looked up at the fluorescent ceiling lights within their shatterproof wire cages. Soon, the nurse came and people lined up to receive their daily doses of sedatives and anti-psychotics—a precautionary measure, prescribed to virtually everyone, like cutting off the beaks of factory-farmed chickens to prevent them from pecking themselves, or each other, to death from the stress of confinement and isolation.

My views of the prison system solidified: prisons are little more than warehouses for concentrating the poor. Rather than being populated by the people most harmful to society, they are crowded with those who have been the most harmed *by* society. Rather than being “correctional” facilities, they are a method of ridding the streets of those who act as living reminders of the crisis of poverty, the widening income gap, the future of hardship which may very well await many more in the coming years if something does not change. Prisons are a way of sweeping people under the rug. They are a way of pretending that nothing is wrong.

Very few of the women on my range had been imprisoned for any kind of violent crime, and most of those who did have violent charges had been defending themselves against abusive partners or assailants. Most of these women’s attackers had walked away without charges, free to roam the streets at their leisure.

The small portion of women facing violent charges not involving self-defense were often the survivors of past traumas; a history rarely taken into consideration by the courts that sentenced them. Much like the homeless community, a large portion of the women with whom I spoke were survivors of the lifelong onslaught of abuse perpetrated against poor and disenfranchised women by our society, particularly women of color. Many had been arrested for not having full citizenship, while others had been in the process of applying for refugee status. A disturbingly high number also lived with (dis)abilities like Fetal Alcohol Syndrome, Fetal Narcotic Syndrome, Schizophrenia, and ADD/ADHD.

These are women who have been bounced between abusive foster homes and youth detention facilities, graduating at 16 as wards of the Children’s Aid Society only to become wards of the State, criminalized for doing what it takes to survive the minefield of poverty.

As the days turned into weeks, I began to erase from my mind the hope of being released. The health problems with which I’ve been living the last few years became increasingly severe, and I often found it difficult to stand up or walk around without fainting. My ribs stuck out. My stomach became concave. I became depressed.

Was it stress, overly-processed food, or a general lack of fresh air and exercise that made me unhealthy? Probably some combination of all these things. Without even examining me, the doctor put me on a liquid diet, which in jail consists largely of juice crystals, water, and MSG-filled soup powder. When I was finally sent to the examination room I was told that nothing seemed to be wrong with me, regardless of the fact that I’d lost close to 20 pounds, felt tired constantly, and was in serious pain and discomfort.

I talked to my partner on the phone, but his voice sounded distant and crackly through the receiver. He came to visit me, and we pressed our hands to the inch-thick Plexiglas between us. It was almost harder than not seeing him. My mom sounded stressed whenever I called her, and I could hear my dog howling in the background at the sound of my voice through the receiver.

I needed to talk to somebody, but the prospect of being force-fed Thorazine dissuaded me from applying to see the psychiatrist. So I went to the prison Chaplain, for the sheer novelty. He was a square-jawed man in a gray suit, with the bearing of a Televangelist. He told me I was in prison

because I had sinned, and that I had to repent for these sins. I was in my current situation because the Devil had led me astray.

“But Jesus was a political prisoner!” I said. “The Devil didn’t tell me to do anything; I’m a political prisoner like Jesus!” He thought I was crazy.

I was released after about a month on conditions of strict house arrest and non-association with some of my closest friends. All I felt was numb. I walked into the parking lot with my family and my partner, squinting under the bright sunlight. We drove back to the house where I lived as a kid and I slept for days. At first I felt fine. I could leave the house, if I was with my parents, to take the dogs for walks in the last of summer’s warm weather. I drank coffee, read a lot. People I’d never met sent me stickers and zines and nice letters in the mail.

Two months later I started having panic attacks, insomnia, and nervous breakdowns on an almost daily basis. When I did sleep, I had awful nightmares. It seemed as though every past instance of trauma and violence I’d seen or experienced had been consolidated into a heavy, poisonous lump, slowly turning my insides black and rotten. I felt like the world was just too ugly to live in. I was suffocating under the weight of clear-cut forests and floundering, tar-drowned shore birds. When I closed my eyes all I could see was torture and war, droughts and chemical spills, napalm.

All I wanted was to move past the negative experiences I’d had and work towards piecing my life back together. But I realized that the pain I felt was trying to tell me something: I would not be able to forget and move on as though none of this had happened. In a way, I think the disgust and pain we feel when we see or experience something horrific can be the greatest catalyst for creating positive change. When we experience something firsthand we are better equipped to understand it—and with that understanding we can educate others and give real support to those who are also experiencing it. We can see its flaws and weak points, and we can use this knowledge to criticize, discredit, and eventually destroy it.

Although I never heard this said firsthand, others told me they overheard quite a few young people say they’d never go to another protest again after their experiences at the detention center. I felt not only disappointed that everyone hadn’t been able to see the ways to reclaim these experiences and use them as further motivation, but profoundly confused by this perspective. What we went through during the mass arrests at the G20 was only a small window into the everyday experiences of countless minorities in this country who suffer police profiling, brutality, and prejudice within the legal system on a horrifyingly regular basis. As hard as I try, I simply can’t understand the notion that anyone could propose to be an ally of any marginalized group, then give up and turn away when faced with a tiny microcosm of what that group puts up with everyday.

My experience in prison and the women with whom I shared it have reminded me of the reasons I became politically active in the first place. They’ve reminded me of the sorrow, the desperation, the heartbreak, the trauma, the unlivable realities of poverty that first spurred me to get my life together and dedicate myself to helping others rather than accepting the conditions in which I lived. Being in prison reminded me of the core of my politics. At the bottom of it, we were all inside that prison for the exact same reason. We were dangerous only in the sense that our existence discredited Canada’s status as a place of liberty and equality. We were a glaring reminder that this country doesn’t offer equal status and opportunity to everyone.

Some political prisoners are arrested for staging public demonstrations that address poverty, and some are arrested for living in poverty. Some actively protest social inequality, while others

turn to drugs or alcohol because they can no longer bear the brunt of this inequality. Some choose to publicly draw attention to injustice by their words and actions, while others are swept off the streets because their very presence is a public exposure of this injustice. Now is the time for everyone in our community to think about what it really means to say that every prisoner is a political prisoner. The next time we're shocked and outraged by an experience of being targeted, harassed, or otherwise mistreated by law enforcement or society in general, we should stop to recognize how much respect we owe to the people all around us who face much more than that every day of their lives. *Every prisoner is a political prisoner.*

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