

ATTICA DAY

MIGUEL LOPEZ

13 September 2021

Hi Elizabeth,

Today is “Attica Day.” It was exactly 50 years ago that the National Guard opened fire on prisoners and corrections officers in A-block yard.

I have not heard anyone mention it today. I went to breakfast, and did not see anyone without a tray in front of them. It used to be that prisoners were supposed to march to the mess hall in their state greens, but take no food, only their required spoon. This was meant to be an act of solidarity amongst prisoners, acknowledging the price paid for the benefits we now have. At least that’s how it was explained to me when I was still fairly new to the state in 2006. Yet I can’t honestly say that I ever saw such a demonstration by the population. People were more worried about being seen eating or going to the mess hall. The point was not so much about fasting that day, but showing a cohesive act . . . that it was still possible.

That was about 34 years after the Attica riot, and I used to not eat in the mess hall on that day. Others still observed it back in Green Haven. But as I went to other prisons, and saw more and more of the disunity in purpose, I began to disregard the not eating party. I enjoyed my breakfast this morning as I thought about the table next to me. My neighbor and another younger prisoner, a gang member, were eating their breakfast. My neighbor has been in prison something like 42 years. He’ll be 71 this month on the 21st. I met him last week when he shared this with me. I told him I would be 75 at my first parole board. He responded, “I’ll be dead,” and we both started laughing. I didn’t get to ask my neighbor about his thoughts on Attica Day, because the younger prisoner was talking to another about a rival gang member who has just arrived in the prison. They were debating who would see him first, and that it would take more than one to take that person down. I turned around to my cream-cheese bagel, and made believe I was drinking real coffee. So much for demonstrating solidarity amongst ourselves. I remained in silence until it was time for us to go.