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The Potato Eater: The raw true story of Padric, a gay hustler from the Bronx who spent 1941-1965 in and out of 20 prisons

Alison Leslie Gold

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Padric McGarry was the surviving twin born in 1925 to the unwed 15-year-old daughter of Irish immigrants. Raped at the age of 7 by an older boy, he learned early during his Bronx childhood to use his wits and good looks to hustle and steal at every opportunity. He eventually did time in twenty prisons across the US, where McGarry improved his criminal skills and snatched moments of comfort with Miss Scarlet and other queens in the "Homo Blocks." The Potato Eater is an unsentimental biography that offers a stark, unembroidered view of the intersection of gay and prison cultures. For this unapologetic and often darkly comical account of a rootless life at the bottom of the heap, award-winning author Alison Leslie Gold drew on interviews she made with McGarry in the 1970s, as well as his letters and his own notes. McGarry died, with two years of sobriety, in a halfway house in San Diego in 1982. From an audio tape made in 1977 in New York City: "I was 16 when I was arrested for corrupting the morals of soldiers and sailors, blocking a public doorway, and disturbing the peace. In prison I began to grow up and learn. I learned how to pick pockets, how to open five kinds of safes, how to forge checks, how to work second story, how to boost. We'd practice there. I learned all the necessary things to spend 20 more years in different prisons. Riker's Island was my Junior High School. Sing Sing and Dannemora State were my High Schools. The chain gang and Leavenworth were my colleges. Immediately I had 'Homosexual, Degenerate, Cock Sucker' stamped on my records so I was rarely in population with the rest of the men. I was kept in segregation with junkie queens, wino queens, booster queens, prick peddlers, drag queens and some men who just preferred to be in the homo block where they were adored and given sexual comfort. Life in segregation with those mad sissies was like being caged with a mass of mad, screaming peacocks."

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