

“Ostracism”

The murder happened 6 months after I got out of prison.

I'd been hemmed up over what I'd considered a petty amount of blow. Problem was, even since before the Fall and Great Revival, the state tended to view things different.

The sentence was five and half years. Bad behavior racked me up another three and change. A kind, if misguided, 18-year-old going in, I emerged a 220 pound, heavily tattooed and angry 27-year-old. I did learn to read though, even taught myself some big words.

The day I got out I met Charlene. She was the kind of gorgeous southern belle that made even the most hardened burnout start thinking of picket fences and compound numbers of children, the kind of woman any guy would be proud to call his baby's mama.

I met her, in clear violation of the terms of my parole, at the dive where she worked. Charlene's assets, a matter of considerable local pride and myth, were the chief attractions. Early the next morning we staggered out, arm in arm.

I got a job at the manufactured home factory a few days later. That weekend, we went to the river. I took a picture of us there. On our week anniversary, I gave her a copy of the photo and a dolphin magnet to pin it to the fridge with. Then and there she asked me to move in, across the street from the dive. Of course, I said yes.

Still tied in knots from those lost years, I was starting to wonder if maybe I could leave it all behind. Like, this whole not being in prison thing might work out.

There was a regular at the dive by the name of Justin Tamersie. He was hot on Charlene. In his thirties, not ugly or good-looking, he came across, well, creepy. He just didn't know how to talk to girls. Maybe if he'd looked different it would of been cute.

Charlene did not lead guys on, but loneliness and alcohol are pretty strong aphrodisiacs. When she smiled, some guys got the wrong idea. At the bar I avoided PDA. Still, I knew certain locals resented what we had. I was a stranger who'd wandered in and swept up the prettiest girl in the county. But, it wasn't like those guys weren't welcome to try. I didn't go in for that possessive bullshit. If she slept with someone else, well, my heart was not a prison, my love not a cage.

Tamersie wouldn't take a hint. He would sit there after everyone else was gone and stare hard. Charlene didn't like it. I laughed it off. "Puppy love," I said, "harmless, totally harmless. And, if he tries anything, well, I'm here, right across the street." I held her in my arms and promised to keep her safe.

One day I staggered home dead tired from a seventeen-hour shift. I didn't so much as pop my head in at the dive. I crashed out on the couch in my jeans and boots and all. It was a fine sleep. I didn't dream of the big yard and its politics and violence.

It took Charlene some shaking to wake me.

"What's up baby?" I asked as I rubbed my eyes.

She didn't answer. She just knelt by the couch, her face buried in my chest. I sat up and titled her head gently as I could.

Her right eye was red, it'd be black tomorrow for sure. Dried tears were caked in the seams of her cheeks. I might of lost it right there, but I couldn't. Charlene needed me calm and strong. I held her and said, "It'll be all right, baby."

I led her to the kitchen and cleaned up her eye. I got some ice and held it there.

After an hour of sobbing or silence, I asked "What happened?"

"I was closing up the bar, like usual. Justin was lingering. I told him he didn't have to go home but, well, you know. He was quiet, silent as the dead really, and the way he looked at me..." her lovely southern drawl was cut short by a shudder. Tears welled up before she turned away.

"He... he came at me, spitting and speaking about you and me, how's I's a little c---. He tried to kiss me, but I kicked him. He went off, knocking me down, booting me, spitting on me, calling me all kinds of terrible names and... he did things. After, he got up and stumbled out. I lay there till just now, I didn't even lock up. I can't go back, can't do it, those damn perverts, always leering."

She cried and I held her.

I got her to bed, took her keys, and said, "I'm going to lock up the bar. Be right back." She begged me not to go, but I had no choice. I knew what had to be done.

On the cold concrete floor of the holding cell, I played the scene over and over. I was still caked in the grime from work, with the addition of a fresh layer of blood. The sheriff had been real swell. When one of his deputies tried to get rough, the sheriff set him straight. I didn't hate him, the sheriff, and he didn't hate me. We both just did what we had to. That was the way of it.

Poor Charlene, too pretty-sweet for this dirt bag world.

The District Inquisitor couldn't of been more different from the sheriff. The sheriff was tall and ugly like the first men. His face was a pock-marked leather desert. He had too small eyes and a too big nose all crowded too close. He was upright and always calm, even when everyone else was running around like headless chickens. He told the God's honest truth in a dry, matter-of-fact way.

The District Inquisitor was short and dapper, with a fancy blonde pompadour and a big Yankee college boy grin. He talked like he was smarter than everybody else, which, if he was, he probably would have been smart enough to know not to talk like that.

When the sheriff tried to speak to motive, the District Inquisitor cut him off with a none-too-kind formal courtesy. Maybe that miffed the cool sheriff, but what could he do?

The way the District Inquisitor painted it, it sounded pretty bad. The way I figured it though, Justin got off lucky when he died--I was just getting started.

The District Inquisitor nailed my coffin shut with his closing statement.

“The defendant, instead of calling the authorities, hunted the victim, Mr. Tamersie. Drunk and defenseless, Mr. Tamersie was cornered in the yard of the Louings. The defendant picked up little Jimmy Louing’s baseball bat and proceeded to thrash Mr. Tamersie with it, in plain view of the neighborhood. Deaf to the victim’s cries, he stomped and stomped and stomped. The victim was so mangled he could only be I.D’ed through DNA. His mother, hell, his own dentist couldn’t recognize him. In a final, masterstroke of psychopathia, the defendant walked calmly to the curb, sat down, and smoked cigarette after cigarette. He has displayed no remorse.”

“This unconscionable act, in combination with the defendant’s extenuating and appalling record of violence and gang activity, leads me to ask the gentlemen and ladies of the jury to find him not just guilty of first degree murder, but to authorize a radical new punishment, Ostracism. Death would be too lenient.”

The District Inquisitor strutted back to his desk. My public defender had no answer. The jury came back in under an hour. I was, for the second time in my life, the property of the Theocracy.

Charlene burst into tears as they led me away.

“I just want to see her one last time, to say goodbye,” I pleaded to the Public Defender after the verdict, but before sentencing.

“That’s not going to happen,” he answered without emotion.

“What is going to happen?”

“The Archbishop has a personal interest in your case. Tameresie was his second cousin or something. They’ll get their sentence.”

“What’s that all about?”

“It’s brand new, discovered by accident in some military lab if rumor’s to be believed. They want a guinea pig,”

“Just my luck,” I said, shaking my head .

“Heard they oscillate your molecules or something, supposed to be pretty painful. They bombard you with sigma waves, and, bam, you’re phased out. You’re still alive, but no one can hear or see you. You can’t touch or feel anything. Somehow you can still stand and hear and see, I don’t know how it all works, but you can walk through walls

and such. You're in what they call a molecularly dilated non-entropic state. The Robes will summon you back from time to time and ask you to beg and confess and what not. Though, from what I hear, it can never be reversed."

The voices rang out like a twisted Gregorian chant. The precession of black robes ushered me down the marble hallway by a chain lead connected to a choke collar ringing my neck. The archbishop, the Red Robe, swung a brass censure in time with the chants. It was a fine smell, earthy and wet like a campfire after rain.

At the end of the hall, a pair of oversized doors groaned open. We entered a circular room lit by candles mounted on the walls. The column of black robes split. The one holding my chain forced me to my hands and knees with a cattle prod. He drove me through a gauntlet of black robes, each striking my back with a barbed cat o' nine tails. Since I was nude, save for the collar and cuffs, the barbs tore me raw.

In the center of the room was a pedestal. The Red Robe stood by it with his arms crossed, that soulless gold mask staring down as cruel and heartless as God himself. He spoke through some kind of digital filter. The voice was low and scratchy like an old blues song.

"You, Tatum Dogrell, have been judged by Christ and the Great Revival. Your brutality has forced us to enact the worst punishment ever devised on Heaven or Earth. Beg for mercy."

Having spent the better part of a third of my life in prison, I was no stranger to intimidation plays. Tatted thugs or the uniformed kind, it was all the same.

"I beg you," I said, "to shut up and get this over with."

“The sinner is unrepentant. Jesus, grant him mercy as it is yours alone to dispense. He shall find none here. Brothers, it is time.”

The Robes swarmed, forcing me into a large glass cylinder at the top of the pedestal. It shut and immediately I felt the air sucking out of my lungs. There was the whine of a dynamo. There was a burning sensation on the soles of my feet. It grew till it felt like I was standing on a bed of coals. I felt a shocking sensation in my fingers. Soon it felt like getting a hand massage from stun guns.

I fell to my knees, gasping for air that wasn’t there. I slammed fists against the glass. My body gave over and my muscles convulsed and quivered without rhyme or reason.

The Robes watched with frozen faces of silver, and one of gold. My convulsing got violent. The wounds on my back bubbled and cracked. My heart pounded against my ribs like an innocent man’s fists on the bars of his cell.

The last thing I recall was the Red Robe waving goodbye.

I walked into the bar. Everything was the same, same animal heads on the wall, same video poker machines bilking the same burnouts. Same sad story, save for the bartender. In the place of Charlene, radiant as the sun is to the cold dark solar system of barflies, bums, and broken dreams, was Maggie, a late thirty something “working girl” who looked like she’d been pickling in a barrel with cigarette butts since before I’d pulled my first hustle.

A few buddies from work piled in. They wore the grunge and smiles of men free from the factory for another two-day golden age.

“Billy, you old shit bag, how are you?” I said.

Nothing.

I tried everything, blocking the TV, waving my hands, hell, I even walked right through him. When they raised a toast to me, I couldn’t take it anymore. I stepped outside. I looked up and down that little drag that passed for the town’s main. I couldn’t remember what I’d ever seen in the place until my eyes came to the run-down old motel converted into an apartment building across the street.

It took a while to muster the courage to climb the stairs. I walked to the faded red door of unit 213, sucked in whatever it was I was breathing these days, and reached for the nob. My hand phased right through.

Our home was empty, save for a single picture pinned to the refrigerator by a dolphin magnet. The picture was of us at the river, that first weekend. I felt she left it there for me, but more likely than not it just been overlooked.

The furniture was gone, though recently enough that the carpet still bore the impressions. Empty as it seemed, it was full of memory, haunted. And I was the ghost.

I found no clue to where Charlene was. She had no family save her abusive father, and I knew she’d never go back there. I couldn’t ask anyone or search online. She was gone and, I guess, so was I.

After a couple weeks in that mausoleum to bygone domestic bliss, I couldn’t take it anymore. I jumped right though the wall. I flew a good twenty feet, but when I landed, it didn’t hurt. I weighed nothing on this plane.

I had to get out of Dodge. I went to the only other home I’d ever known, Jefferson Davis Theological Penitentiary. It took a week of walking nonstop. It was odd seeing

those walls from the outside. Most of my old partners, whom I had neglected to write when I got out, were still there. They were plotting and scheming, lifting meat from the kitchen for spreads, jerking off to whatever pulped image of female flesh they could get their hands on, and stabbing and being stabbed, all the same old stuff, nothing ever changing.

My heart raced as I phased through the electric fence. It made me sick to my stomach. No alarms went off. All the years I'd dreamed of escape and now I just strolled back in.

I walked the halls. I spied on my old partners. I did circles in the yard, still keen to the unspoken animosities and able to catch the handoffs. Had I been that obvious?

I heard the whispers, watched the secret throw downs in the unmonitored crooks and crannies. As guards watched inmates through screens and cameras, I watched them. It went like that for at least a year, maybe longer.

Walking through the hall one evening, I noticed a group of inmates crowded suspiciously outside the showers. Their shot caller handed a young prospect a piece of rebar worn to a point. Someone was getting shanked and, macabre as it sounds, I decided to watch. The young man was shaking, breathing real heavy. Had the others not been right there, no doubt he would of lost his nerve and soon enough found himself on the receiving end.

The young inmate crept into the shower. I followed. Inside, was my old gang's shot caller. Diggs, who had been my cellie for several years, never showered without a lookout. I guess he was slipping.

The reason for the attack was unimportant, just the latest round in a series of tit for tats stretching back to before I was ever incarcerated. Like one of those old time family feuds, probably no one remembered what *casus belli* had kicked it off. All that mattered now was that the animosity was kept alive from one generation to the next.

Diggs was not a nice man. He'd strangled his girlfriend after finding her in bed with some kid. He let the kid go untouched which he always use to recount with a laugh. He'd been sentenced soon after the Great Revival and gotten life. Vindictive and petty as he could be, he'd saved my ass, literally, many times. I couldn't just watch him get shanked.

Like a fool, I swung at his assailant, my fist passing through him harmless and unnoticed. Diggs' eyes were closed, perhaps remembering better days. The attacker crept closer and closer.

Sick, I turned to phase through the wall. I happened to pass through a light bulb. It flickered. I phased in and out of it, causing it to strobe, distracting the man for a second and, most crucially, getting Diggs' attention. I will spare you the ghastly details. Suffice it to say that only one of them left the shower alive.

The revelation of a means of human contact filled me with purpose. For the first time since that fateful night, I knew what I had to do.

Years I scoured the earth searching. I watched faces in crowds, going from town to town and city to city. I searched night and day, walking through people's homes, seeing them asleep, moving on. I gave up countless times and gave up on giving up just as many.

Finally, strolling through a little backwoods hill town in the Incorporated District, the small fiefdom that was the last remnant of the federal government, my diligence paid off.

She was older and heavier. Her face was creased by years of smiles and frowns, but it was her, my Charlene. She got in a car. I followed in bounding leaps, laughing and phasing in and out of vehicles and buildings, enjoying my massless state for once.

She pulled into a driveway next to a little craftsman, just like she used to go on about us getting. Two kids ran up yelling “mommy” in giddy excitement. She scooped up the littler one while the bigger one clung to her leg.

From inside a voice called out “That you baby?”

I froze. It shouldn’t of been a surprise. For all intents and purposes I was dead. Better for her to move on, to keep living, but I couldn’t let go.

If I’d been able to sleep, surely this I would dream, only with me as this man.

I watched her and him and them. He was kind and patient and had no tattoos. I tailed him. He provided, went to work and came straight home. My hate coagulated into a thick crust of bittersweet acceptance.

One night, the kids asleep in their rooms, him passed out in his chair, Charlene crept into the study. She pulled a book from the shelf and opened it to page 213. There was a faded copy of the picture of us soaked in sun, smiling like God on the seventh day. She laid a finger over my likeness and cried. Charlene. Better than a dirt bag like me ever deserved.

This was the moment I’d been waiting for. I wanted to phase through the lamp, to speak through flashes of light, to let her know I was there beside her.

I didn't.

Charlene lived to be old and happy with grandkids and great-grand kids and so on. Like that creep Tameresie had once done, I watched silently from a distance. I cried phantom tears the day she passed.

Whether the Cloaks ever used their machine on others I never learned. I never saw another like myself, but who knows how many channels there are in the universe. They called me back from time to time, but I never spoke, no matter the electric tortures applied. Silence was my prison and my resistance. Let them wonder.

The Great Revival came and went, as did the Incorporated District and the other scattered principalities and republics of the former United States. The day the mushroom clouds blossomed I watched with the detached sadness of a forgotten ancestor. I walked the slagged waste of the dead Earth for thousands of years. Finally, the leftovers of humanity regrew some primitive semblance of culture, albeit little more than a Paleolithic one. They worshiped the ruins of the lost age, the young disbelieving the fantastic tales of men flying in the sky, let alone visiting the Moon.

One day, they stumbled on the remnants of that small town. Miraculously, they got the machine running and so I was pulled over seas and deserts and fallowed cities, back to that small town's ruins.

After eons as a silent specter, I chose to speak, to reveal myself to the children of men and women. They prostrated themselves before my flickering likeness.

“Rise. I'm no god, though I am an ancient spirit who has wandered long and seen much. Best as I can tell, there is no Creator, just men and women doing evil and good,

JB Kronenfeld

living and dying. Gather round and I shall tell you of your ancestors, of our madness and cruelty, and teach you the ancient knowledge in the hopes you don't repeat our mistakes."

And so I did.