

OLD, NEW, BORROWED, BLUE

Most guys are ashamed to admit to liking prison and getting a little homesick for it when on the outs, but I will cop. I like the clean purity of an all-male environment, of dangerous worlds where you measure your companions in terms of their courage and fight. I like the calm order of it all, the end run around pesky existential questions. And I like the company. No denying that there's never a scarcity of company Inside. And there's nothing like the kind of company you're with 24 hours a day, every damn day, for the duration.

I've never been much for reunions, but if they had one for my crowd at the main yard at Chino, I'd show up. We were clumped together by race and general type of crime while being processed through to the real joints. It was a great bunch of guys with a camaraderie I really miss. Dusty slept in the bunk above me and he wasn't as big on pranks and jokes and feats of badness as some of us, but he was a main part of the group for some reason. He was a lanky, freckled biker with a wispy beard and the stringy build of a speed-powered motorcyclist. Everything about him said, "Methamphetamine MC". But he was quiet and decent and likable, maybe what you'd call recovering. He was looking at eight years and a fairly high classification stemming from a contretemps in which his future ex-partner double-crossed him and Dusty filed an objection in the form of a Harley Davidson drive chain slashed around the face and

future ex-ears. I got pretty tight with him after a few weeks.

Tight enough that he offered to show me his wife's picture. You learn to accept pictures of other men's women without showing anything in your face. I don't know how well I did when he handed me the polaroid of his wedding. Front center, staring into the camera with dogged optimism, was a nice-looking blonde, maybe nineteen, in a cheap off-shoulder white sundress that came to mid-thigh. Behind her was the witness, a large Black official with striped pants, large pistol, and "Smokey" hat. The groom was lovely in a bright orange, one-piece, paper coverall; bright stainless steel handcuffs; iron foot manacles; and a very oblique grin. Your basic civil ceremony.

Having seen the picture (and praised it without expression), I was set up for extra pathos when Dusty started suffering whenever his new bride was late in showing up for boneyard visits. The boneyard is different in every joint, a generic term for the anonymous rooms in which inmates enjoy conjugal visits. The derivation of the term has not been academically established.

The wisdom of the state recognizes the sanctity of marriage at least so far as realizing that permitting it provides a little leverage over an inmate's behavior. So being married counts heavily in lowering classification points. The lower the point total, the lighter the joint. This could be seen as a good reason to be married when in prison, even if it means a double cuff ceremony. A more visceral motivation is that only legally married

wives can enjoy conjugal bliss in the boneyard accommodations; no "ol' ladies" or common law consorts accommodated. It may just be a piece of paper, but it's all the difference in the world to a man and his bone.

Despite my cut-rate cynicism I think Dusty entered the bond just for being a kid in love and wanting to nail it all down. You can decide for yourself.

Nobody likes it when the wife doesn't show up with cheer, cigarettes and fleshy delights. But Dusty got completely out of hand. His usual calm would dissolve into temper tantrums, moody sulks and nasty remarks. We'd chide him, reassure him, tell him to put a freaking sock in it, but he'd crawl the walls (psychic walls, not the real ones with the machinegun guys) until she'd show up with a perfectly good reason for why she hadn't been in two days before. It was his one big tic. Can you blame him?

Still, it sort of shocked me when he went into a petty snit and wouldn't talk to me for three days. I'd been hanging and eating chow with Dusty and the usual suspects, but I suddenly got into a complicated series of financial deals with a Berkeley coke dealer we called the "Chicken Hawk" because he stole food from the chow hall and smuggled it back to the bunks. I'd been spending some time with his clique, snacking on contraband chicken and the coffee he swiped in plastic bags, and working on a rotten scam for when we got out. I didn't associate it with Dusty's snit until he refused to answer a question that night, then poked

his disheveled head over the bunk, peering down at me with real spite, and said, "Why don't you ask your little friend the Chicken Hawk?" I mulled that one over, aided by knowing that a lot of criminals are dealing from some really thwarted emotional sets. Listen to Crips rap for awhile and see if they don't sound like a bunch of grade school girls. So I sat with Dusty at breakfast and sort of hung around and jollied him up. When he started talking to me, I introduced him the Hawk, who slipped him some pilfered cookie dough. Things got back to normal and I didn't even connect Dusty's frenzies about his wife to his weird little jealousy over the Chickeneer.

Until a week later, when Dusty showed me a picture of his sister. She was a young blonde, looked a little like his wife. He showed me a letter she'd sent him, read it three or four times before filing it away in the usual manila envelope prison luggage. I asked the usual polite drivel about his sister and somehow he let drop that he had only met her a year before he got arrested for the "chain of fools" number. How so? Well, he'd just walked into a K-Mart in Bakersfield...first time he'd seen her since they were little kids. Turns out they'd been raised in separate foster homes and met by complete accident. It took a couple more innocent questions before he started telling the tale on his own. He'd been one of four kids, but one day when he was in third grade, he and his sister had come home from school and found out their parents had moved out. Quite the little surprise. They'd taken the two older children with them,

but for whatever reason Dusty and his kid sis hadn't made the cut.

They bumbled around the house for awhile, then went to a neighbor who called the authorities and started the process that led to institutional care (there's a good one for oxymoron collectors). After graduating from the state homes and kiddie jails, Dusty had lost all track of his sister, among other things. Since then he'd mostly been alternating lock-ups and scooter gangs. So I got to put all the pieces together for once, and Dusty made some sense to me. And all I could do with it was to avoid jilting him again. No big deal.

I never get to know how my work affects people. Maybe you have no particular reaction to Dusty at all. Or maybe you'll just lump him in with the all biker/felon scum. Or retain a rough image of what it might be like for a motorcycle chain to slash through the tender tissues of your face. But if you can see a nine-year old boy standing in an empty house trying to realize why he was discarded, then you have to wonder how it would feel to you. And what you might do about it.