

Hymn to the Innocence

Ye been the salt of the erthe and the savour.

—Mathew 5:13

The road to a private prison in Texas from San Marcos, California where they'd all been arraigned on charges associated with being homeless was not paved with anything that even resembles gold. No. More akin to that cheap metal that turns your skin green, that which is used in the fabrication of costume jewelry. The stale scent of urine, sweat, and bodily fluids biologists have yet to discover has been fermenting since the bus had left County jail. To René, the bus ride in this prisoner transport bus seems as if she were aboard Charon's skiff traveling down the River Styx to Hades, and, in a leaky boat no less—I'll get to that.

With the women's wrists all shackled to the bar on the back of the seat set before them and preventing them from tending to themselves, relieving themselves of the myriad of stings and itches and tickles of the minuscule feet of unknown varieties of insects known to take advantage of such situations, it would seem even to those, those of whom don't normally attach anthropomorphisms to bodily organs, that indeed the temptation to do so may become paramount. It did. Oh, the opportunistic and despotic bladder! It's as if the mind—of questionable integrity—cannot satisfy its craving for revenge, so it either intimidates or even commands the body's organs into retaliation. So it may seem. After all, the meager rodent of feelings doth reign when in the event of the feline of critical analysis is away.

One such reputable bladder has partnered up with quite another irate associate organ, one that's nursing a burgeoning regiment of armed yeast organisms as well—I'll get to that. As if this weren't enough punishment for the crime of making homelessness a crime. This hymn to the innocence is rendered dispassionately, yet most generously apportioned, to all these women by the process and intent of a presiding, indifferent, despotic carnival of events, both randomly and intentionally made manifest upon them within the last twenty-four hours. Together with this long, long, torturous drive through some of the most criminally hot areas of the southeastern

states sporting triple digit temperatures causes the mercury to rise within each as quick and intentional as some pervert's appendage on Viagra. California to Texas, a thousand miles of dried shit-stained landscape. At one point, several hours after they've departed San Marcos County Jail, the young woman shackled-in next to René, Keisha Johnson, a young black woman approximately the same age as René, wets her pants—

“I'm sooo sorry, I . . .”

The urine—hot, sticky, smelly—runs off her side of the seat carrying along with it enough *Candida albicans* to infect a corps of pussies. René's reaction, of course, is to stand or at the very least render an attempt to. However, the bus, in making a sudden and sharp left-hand turn, leaves René's orange jumpsuit to sponge up the runoff as she slip-slides back into the puddle of yeast infested piss. Did I mention the ankles being shackled as well? This is when René and Keisha both break down. With tears streaming, eyes burning from the salty mix blended not stirred—forget the olive—and with mascara and hair oil—such a mess—together with their wrists being shackled, they can't even wipe away this cocktail of excretions that's the resulting factor of a conflagration of confused and collating emotions.

But of course. Anger—surprise, surprise—confusion, shame, guilt . . . Compassion? Empathy. You wipe your's on my shoulder, and I'll do the same on your's. This is not stated, but pleaded in the expressions shared of utter humility and need. The necessity to wipe away something incoherent and intangible, yet nevertheless articulated in its effect, is so terribly, terribly, overwhelming. This is what they'd resolved to do, and did. And in this process, if I may call it so, the conflagration that had erupted from somewhere deep within the crust that burned its way to the surface turns the magma of antipathy into solidarity. Now reconciled, cooled down and is becoming solidified into solidarity by tears of relief. It's this sharing, of a sort, the sharing

itself of pain and torment, that somehow has the ability to release a polemic emotion that is completely wholly inconsistent, indeed paradoxical to their predicament.

Empathy reigns, then quickly morphs into laughter. From the depths of an artesian well flows the cool healing powers of redemption. This laughter, now uncontrolled, like cool, cool, water under pressure, bursts through the stolidity of isolation caused by desolation and shame. Laughter of the type that—they're just girls now!—is so utterly instantaneous and complete that it spreads to most of the others in the bus as well, not unlike gossip in a high school study hall of who's screwing who as the monitor or teacher leaves for just a brief yet opportune, pressurized, moment. This may be just the beginning. From the conception of pain and torment of those marginalized, indeed victimized, by the social construct, rises that which was inadvertently, yet intuitively sought: redemption.

As the laughter fades out, what's left behind in its absence could be likened to the ring around a bathtub after the dirtied water has been drained off, that which is comprised of the resolute grime of being exploited, the sum total of the residual emotional countenances leftover, thus creating an oppression that has effectively stained the atmosphere of the interior of the bus itself, not unlike the residual stickiness and smell after the wetness of urine has evaporated. The quality of the sum of forty-two women, prisoners of inhumane jurisprudence, held captive in a *tub* darkened by the filth of those injustices served upon them all back in San Marcos, together with the joint anxieties of what may lie before them in the immediate future, the cleansing of mirth might have spit-shined them, for the moment anyway, that is, all but a few—two in particular—a momentary glow, just enough to cause what may be analogous, to some extent, a governor's death-row twenty-four hour stay of execution—if there is such a thing—is one that

incites conversation. Yet, however provisional the causal of this cleansing that was produced and sustained, rather preemptively I might add, by the dubious effect of nervous prattling.

“Can you sew, asks Keisha?”

“She better be able to,” shouts another.

“What the fuck!” René exclaims.

Keisha, laughing, tells her about how private prisons use them as labor, outsourced to various corporations. “We might end up sewing teddies and baby dolls for Victoria’s Secret,” she says. “That’s why we’re here. This is what I’ve heard anyway. Anyway, they gotta pay us minimum wage. So I figure we won’t be but a couple weeks or so.”

“You bet,” a voice from the back of the bus adds, “cause it sure ain’t because we’re really hard-assed criminals you know.” And laughter picks up again, all despite a low murmur coming from two seats, three seats in front of René and Keisha.

“You mean, we’re not public enemy number one,” laughs René—not a question.

“Bad girl, bad girl, what’cha gonna do . . .”

It doesn’t take but a few seconds before they all chime in. “Bad girl, bad girl, what’cha gonna do, what’cha gonna do when they come for you, bad girl . . .”

Someone else rings out: “What’cha gonna do, we gonna sew sexy lin-ger-ie, bad girl, bad girl!” And this causes more laughter.

Mona and Linda have had about enough of the mirth. Mona, thirty-six years old, and Linda, thirty-four, are veterans of penal institutions. Mona was incarcerated twice for prostitution in a private facility, also located in Texas. “Texas is one of the worst,” confides she to Linda, “second maybe to Idaho,” she, who was also convicted on her second offense for prostitution, along with having done six months for possession of a controlled substance. However, she has

yet to have ever experienced what she's about to experience. "See, the difference is once you're sent away to a private for profit prison, you don't know how long you gonna be there, hon. There ain't no one to oversee your sentence. These bitches don't know shit! Minimum fucking wage? No way! You get anywhere from fourteen cents to forty, depending upon what they wanna give ya. An there ain't no fuckin body gonna side with you. Ain't no advocate for your ass because you outta state. An you be there for just as long as they wanna keep ya. I was given a fine, no jail time—which was bullshit—just a fine, they say, but how you gonna pay the fine? An that fine was put up by the system, an I mean the system that's makin bank off you. You lucky to pay off the interest on that fine alone much less the fine itself, specially at those wages they given you. Like I said, anywhere from fourteen cents a hour, to forty is all. An you workin your pretty little ass off. Speakin of which, they can strip search you. They can do whatever the fuck them male or dikey female guards wanna do to you, an you ain't got nuthin to say about it either. I mean who you gonna talk to? Your advocate is back in California, ain't no one in Texas for you to complain to. Oh nooo. You bitch, an you end up in solitaire, an you don't wanna be there, hon. Better to let them have they funny way with you than to end up in solitaire. I mean it. They have they way with you either way. Been there done that. Know what I'm sayin? You know, I be tellin you cause you been around some. Oh, not no private hole, but you done time, you know how it be. They don't. Part a me gettin so I wanna blow they cool by tellin them just what to expect, ya know? But then . . . well, I'm a thinkin maybe I just let them be in they ignorance. Leave them be, you know. They all find out soon enough. Soon enough. Yes. Why make they road miserable now. There's gonna be enough misery soon enough, you bet, be enough to last a lifetime. Who know, some of them may never make it back, specially those that be young and

pretty. But you know, that's to our favor. They keep them young ones and let us out early I'm a thinkin. So why spoil it for they now. You get what I'm a sayin?"

The stench from dried urine, stray farts, body odored cheap perfume is overwhelming and does nothing for maintaining any semblance of the rescindment expressed in song. The, "bad girl, bad girl, what'cha gonna do," dies down. What creeps up upon them now is the ever regurgitate choking reality of their predicaments.

"Is that puke?"

"You bet it is," said the woman strapped in next to the woman who couldn't put up with the stench any longer. "Driver, open a window. Please open a window?"

"You bet," another belts out.

"What the fuck! Driver!" They're all chiming in now.

"Quiet down back there," he yells back. Then adds: "They don't open."

Only two women remain silent to the masses. "Yeah, right, pranks." Linda's addressing Mona. "He up there in his little cocoon with the air blowin out the stench. He don't give a fuck 'bout us no how."

The rest are wondering how the driver can put up with the ever-mounting stench.

"Surely he must be about to puke himself," René says to Keisha.

"No," she answers. "He's got a fan and an open window—ventilation. He doesn't have to put up with the shit we have to."

Since the Reagan Administration essentially *liberated* those receiving board and care, as well as the dispersal of necessary medications, in all of the state and federally funded Cuckoo's Nests spread out across the GMO fruited plains, today, when schizophrenics get out of line, they are now essentially fair game for the private prison industry. Within this economically blighted

landscape, from sea to shining sea shone with discarded plastics, “Reagan’s Kids”—not to be confused with “Jerry’s”—neglect to take their various forms of meds, simply because there is no Nurse Retcher, Ratchet, or Nurse Otherwise, to ring the bell and hand out paper cups—two each, one with water, the other with colorful little pills. Keep in mind, many of “Reagan’s Kids” need meds strong enough to turn a horse into a winged unicorn or to make some convincing Kafkaian transformation from a two-legged human primate, of dubious mental and/or emotional countenance to begin with, into a simulation of some antediluvian insect, or rather to give either recipient some delusion thereof. Today, it’s essentially all about how to turn a problem into the blessing of a cash cow. Some would say this concept of human exploitation is a legitimate fundamental policy of a predatory capitalist paradigm, and furthermore has its roots in Christianity, in fact, to have biblical origins. Mathew 12:25 *For everyone who has will be given more, and he will have an abundance. But the one who does not have, even what he has will be taken away from him.*

All told, there are eight such Kafkaian creatures aboard, and as the others settle into various states of darkened emotional rigor-mortis, those *others* come alive. Thirty-some minutes into this is all it takes. It’s been said that if you put a sane person in with his/her compliment, it won’t take long, like liquid seeking its own level, for the influence to assert itself, and since the dubious science of psychology has never healed, or perhaps I should say rendered insanity sane, the influence of chaos upon logic doesn’t help to cleanse the “ring around the tub.” If it weren’t for the saving grace of anger, depression would have victimized all aboard with insanity reigning supreme.

“Shut the fuck up!” shouts one who has just crossed over the threshold from dark to light, from self-pity into the sunny-side to bask in the light of anger. This causes a domino effect of

bursts from others who have just had enough, while Mona and Linda both seem to not only take this cacophony of schizoidal burstings mixed with angered reactions in stride, but seem to be mildly amused by it all as well.

“Too bad we don’t have no popcorn to go with the show, huh Lin?”

“Ya, an maybe a bottle a wine to go with it.”

“Now you talkin, girl. By the way, you suggest a chenin blanc, or would a red wine go better with popcorn?”

“I know a good ménage à trois.”

“Oh, you bad, bad girl, you.”

They both laugh and start singing: “Bad girl, bad girl, what’cha gonna do; what’cha gonna do when they cum for you . . .”

After a few bars of this Mona says, and very conspiratorial: “Oh they cum awright, an you know I mean with a “U” they be cumin, but more for them young ones instead a us. They sweet little heads be bobbin up an down on them men guards, them female ones as well. Hell! I bet some a’those dykes even got somethin to bob up an down on!” They both laugh at the insinuation.

The driver, on the other hand, has his I-phone and is listening not to the show in the bus, but to a collection of 70’s rock music. It’s not that he’s unaware of what’s transpiring, he’s well aware, which is why the I-phone. He’s made several trips like this and knows very well the necessity to let this transpire. It’s a vent, but of course it is. All puns aside, it’s not like it can get out of hand when their hands are cuffed, so, let it be, it passes the time, and vents the pent-up emotions.

“You okay?” asks René to Keisha.

“Yeah,” she answers, then adds, “How bout you, you awright?”

“Yeah,” René answers, “since he let us change our clothes and clean up some in the bathroom. I didn’t care for him lookin on though.”

“Me either. The perv,” states Keisha.

“Just what the fuck did he think we was gonna do, make an escape down the toilet drain?”

Keisha laughs at this, and this causes René to laugh as well, at her own riposte.

You have any children, Keisha?”

“No. You?”

“Yeah.” René tells her about her child being taken away to Child Protective Services.

“Child Protective Services, they call it! Just who are they protecting her from by taking her away from me like that. I’m her momma for chrissakes! And just because I’m guilty of sitting on a sidewalk and . . .” René tells her all about her court appearance, the prosecutor, and the failure to appear charge, as well as her sponsor’s failure to appear and help her out.

“I thought that sponsors were supposed to help,” says Keisha.

“Me too. I thought . . .” René can’t finish, as the tears start. She looks to Keisha and Keisha looks back at her. What is being transferred is what is in the essence of a hug. They both seem to realize this as their heads come together, foreheads touching.

“You’ll get her back.” Keisha whispers. “You will. I know you will. We won’t be gone long.”

René cries, softly. Her tears fall upon Keisha’s face. A few run down to Keisha’s lips, and it’s automatic, without even knowing why, a spontaneous gesture, unbeknownst to René, is

certainly one of condolence and empathy, Keisha licks René's fallen tears absorbing some of René's grief.