Aunt Ruby’s Jurisprudence

Aunt Ruby tried to save me at the courthouse, but I don’t think her evangelism had the intended effect.

The courthouse is a three story, art-deco structure built in 1921. This significant fount of my salvation protrudes out of the middle of Mount Zebulon’s main intersection. A historic marker by the entrance denotes the site of the largest known, yet noticeably absent, tree in the state, greeting taxpayers with the over-wrought enthusiasm of a junior-high guidance counselor.

The county judge expressed concerned that if the courthouse ever caught on fire (as rural courthouses are prone to do) then the county’s troublemakers would find their new home six feet underground. This was because the third floor was the old county jail and the only access was a curved narrow stair in front of the second-floor courtroom. Two people meeting on the staircase

cannot pass without embracing each other. No one remembers why the staircase had been built so narrow. I assume only that the architect and builders believed such a narrow passage would make jailhouse escapes much more difficult. Thus, after a fierce debate with the more reform-minded citizens of the county, and perhaps the ACLU, a bond-issue was approved and quickly followed by an increased property tax.

This did not settle well with my aunt, whose only known support of taxation involved a concern over President Eisenhower’s support of Social Security.

“A fire would wipe them out once and for all, anyway. I don’t see what the problem is with using the third floor jail,” Aunt Ruby said to my father. She made it clear that she did not want the county commissioners to approve the construction of the new jail. “Besides, our school library needs those funds,” she would argue. Sometimes, it was the hospital. Other times, it was the city streets. Regardless of where she thought the money was needed most, or to whom she complained, my aunt failed to recognize that the new jail was going to be built.

“Now, *Tulip*,” my father said (it always irritated my aunt for her brother to call her that), “if the courthouse burns down with an occupied jail, then the Mount Zebulon Church of Christ will lose half its members.”

“*Moreover*,” my father continued over her protests, “the

presiding sheriff—a member of your congregation might I add—would have a hard time getting re-elected, as half the voters in the county would be related to those held in the jail that burned to the ground.”

Although I always thought she sounded like the goose in my grandpa’s pond, Aunt Ruby was the lead alto in the Mount Zebulon Church of Christ Ladies’ Choir and Garden Club. My dad, having married a woman “outside the Church” as Aunt Ruby once described it, was Methodist.

The judge won his argument and a new jail was built in 1956. Shortly after construction ended, the sheriff was smitten with excitement at the expanded capacity to keep the drunk and belligerent. He created his own Sting Operation against all county bootleggers to demonstrate the county’s prowess at housing the criminally minded.

“*Tulip*,” my father had asked over one Sunday dinner, “how is your sheriff’s *Operation Moonshine*?”

“Humph,” grumbled Aunt Ruby. “At least he’s taking action instead of just talking about our problems. He’s *your* sheriff, too, you know.” She paused for a sip of sweet tea. “Besides, that’s not what it’s called.”

“*Really?*” said my father with the same tone he used when I once implored with him that the teacher just imagined my unexcused absences from school. “Just how effective does the

sheriff think he’ll be if the lead alto of the Church of Christ Ladies Choir knows the details of his plans?”

My aunt looked at my father the same way she always looks at me. “It’s Ladies Choir *and Garden Club.*” She took another drink. “Don’t criticize what you don’t understand. He’s a good *Christian* man.” Aunt Ruby liked to emphasize words.

“Oh yes,” my father mumbled. “I forgot that he’s been known to counsel lonely wives at the cemetery late at night.” I’m not sure what my dad meant by that, but Aunt Ruby did not discuss the religious virtues of the sheriff again when he ran for re-election.

After Operation Moonshine, the deputies filled the cells so quickly (most of the bootleggers were easy to find, the deputies having only visited them the weekend before) that they forgot to leave room for Victor Bertranelli, who was scheduled to be re-tried before a new jury in Mount Zebulon’s district court. “Mr. B,” as he was more fondly known, was on trial for “running an unlicensed gambling hall” and “keeping a disorderly house.”

I was ten years old when Mr. B was caught, and stayed up for three nights in a row, cleaning my room, until my father told me that a “disorderly house” referred to the cleanliness of the women in the house and not the rooms.

“As long as your Aunt Ruby and your sister bathe regularly, you will not be arrested,” he spoke softly as if that reveal had

to remain secret.

The newspaper headline read: “Too Much Booze for Sheriff?” Aunt Ruby attributed that phrase to my father, despite the fact that he did not work for the newspaper and did not know anyone who did. Mr. B was brought from Garland County into Albert County for trial, the sheriff decided, instead of releasing one of the bootleggers, that he could risk holding Mr. B in the old jail at the top of the courthouse next to canceled voter registration cards. This was the last time a prisoner was held in the third floor jail.

This is where my path to heavenly grace and Mr. B’s path to prosecution would collide. Aunt Ruby took the opportunity to instill part of her moral virtues in me, and decided that I should miss school and sit with her in the courthouse to watch Mr. B’s trial. “You need to observe first-hand what happens to the scourge of society,” she stated, “when they fail to adhere to standards of Christian moral decency.”

It was my sentence for putting a frog in my sister’s doll crib. Aunt Ruby wanted me to miss school and sit in court in rigid benches that rivaled any church pews. My aunt considered it punishment. I was happy to be out of school, even if the price was a sore backside.

Mr. B was a portly Italian from Hot Springs (or Chicago, depending upon the time of year) who, according to the paper, at

the sprightly age of seven, had the fortune to survive the Titanic’s fateful journey.

“You would think he’d have been brought to Jesus by nearly drowning,” Aunt Ruby sighed as we walked to the courthouse. “Yet, some people are bound to relent to their moral flaws.” I had no idea at the time what it meant to “relent” to one’s “moral flaw,” but I suspected it had something to do with why my aunt was escorting me to the courthouse instead of sending me off to school.

We arrived at the courthouse and proceeded past the clerk’s office, its shelves full of mysterious three-foot tall, red-leather books, and up a curving staircase to the second floor. Wide timber planks framed the courtroom walls, probably made from the last primeval megaliths before cotton migrated like a weed through the flats of southern Arkansas. Aunt Ruby chose our spot in the public seating area beneath one of two massive bronze and glass chandeliers, resembling dim yellow eyes of a giant grasshopper, watching me in the sweaty, cavernous jungle. I vowed then and there, if I survived the battle between relenting versus decency, that I would use crickets instead of grasshoppers to catch perch in the creek.

On the second day of trial, Aunt Ruby and I stood outside of the double doors leading into the dark paneled courtroom waiting for a breeze, when we heard the sliding of metal pins

and squeaking of hinges somewhere overhead. We turned to see two deputies bring Mr. B, dressed in his zebra-stripe jumpsuit and handcuffs, down the narrow staircase from the third floor to the courtroom after his noon meal.

“He ate a whole fried chicken, two helpings of mashed potatoes and fried okra, four biscuits drowned with a cup-and-a-half of gravy all washed down with three quarts of sweet tea,” I had heard a lady in the clerk’s office whispering to Aunt Ruby, when we returned for the afternoon session.

“Can you believe... when children at the orphanage...” my aunt gasped, unable to complete her sentences. Somehow, to Aunt Ruby, any excess was only fully appreciated when compared to the plight of an orphan. Even if Mount Zebulon itself did not have an orphanage.

The wooden stairs groaned under the weight of Mr. B’s tree-trunk legs as he slowly waddled down each step, with one deputy in front and one deputy behind him. After four steps, he wedged himself between the wall and the railing.

“He did THAT on purpose!” decreed Aunt Ruby as she clasped my shoulder.

The white-haired deputy, whose most exciting moment as a Court Security Officer had previously been an attempt to rescue a stray coon dog from a collapsed Nativity scene in front of the courthouse, stood three steps below the Italian and tried to

pull him free by his handcuffs. “You push and I’ll pull,” he said.

The other, younger deputy, who had received a medal of honor for rescuing a deputy and a stray coon dog from beneath a collapsed Nativity scene and was the Hero of the Year for my second grade class, stood two steps above the Italian and tried to push him forward. The five minutes of pushing and pulling forced Mr. B into a position between the rail and the wall where he was bent over at the waist with his arms straight out in front of him, pointing down the stairs as if he were ready to dive into the Little Missouri River.

“I do believe he’s stuck, Earl,” said the white-haired deputy to the other. Rolls of fat bulged over the railing, as a series of creaks and pops rattled out from the stairs like a string of Black Cat firecrackers. I feared the entire staircase would disappear and merge with the first floor.

Mr. B’s wife, or Mrs. Bertranelli, a wiry pale woman whom I had not seen until that very moment, began yelling and crying, to which Mr. B responded with his own yelling and crying. They might as well have been speaking in tongues at a revival, as no one in Albert County (much less Mount Zebulon) could ever have understood them: regardless of their language of choice, they spoke far too fast for any native resident to comprehend.

The older deputy stood below Mr. B, scratching his head,

while Deputy Earl continued to push. Sweat dripped from Mr. B’s balding head.

The initial audience of three spectators below the stairs – myself, my aunt, and Mrs. Bertranelli – grew to include another Court Security Officer, four attorneys, the county clerk, the judge, half the jury, two other schoolmates of mine, and five men from the lumberyard who had apparently heard about the foreigner stuck in the courthouse staircase. Everyone gathered to see the two in-artful deputies attempting to dislodge the overweight Italian, screaming and arguing with his wife in some unknown language.

Shortly thereafter, the ladder truck, accompanied by the hospital’s only ambulance, arrived with the full volunteer fire department force, resulting in the addition of six firemen and a dog to the crowd on the second floor of the courthouse. If this was punishment for my misdeeds, then I surely was in heaven.

“Judge is callin’ the doctor,” muttered someone in the crowd. “He’ll know what to do.” Even my aunt’s preacher appeared and was ushered to the front near where we stood. He nodded at Aunt Ruby and added his hand on top of hers, still on my shoulder. My arm tingled from the loss of blood as Aunt Ruby squeezed the significance of her lesson into me with her fingers. If anything, I was going to relent to Aunt Ruby’s biting grasp and not adhere to any standards of decency at all.

Finally, one of the men from the lumberyard, who couldn’t stand the extraordinary display of futility any longer, yelled: “Saw through the guardrail!”

“Sounds good to me!” someone shouted.

“Why not?” said a female voice.

Another added, “He may be right.”

My friend Timmy, the barber’s son who always appeared when anything unusual happened, was sent across the square for two hacksaws from the hardware store. When he returned, Timmy was brought through the crowd with the saws up to the older deputy who rested one saw on the Italian’s back for Deputy Earl to retrieve; they quickly sawed through the wooden rail.

Meanwhile, Mrs. Bertranelli banged her clenched fists on the chest of the third deputy, acting as a supervisor of the crowd, as she tried to rush past him up the staircase for some unknown reason, thereby adding to the traffic jam. I crossed my fingers, secretly hoping she would succeed.

CRACK!

Suddenly, the piece of railing popped free from the support posts. As it flew across the hall from the release of tension, the piece of wood struck Mrs. Bertranelli on the left shoulder and knocked her onto the floor (to the grace of the third deputy), where she sat, muttering and cursing to herself. As the crowd of spectators broke into applause, Mr. B, newly freed

from the narrow railing, slowly fell forward toward the white-haired deputy, his arms still outstretched. The older deputy quickly turned and hobbled down the last few steps while Mr. B slid behind him in slow-motion, almost like a runner into home plate. My aunt sighed heavily. The doctor, already at the courthouse, thus had two patients to tend, Mr. B and his wife, and the judge recessed court until further notice.

Aunt Ruby never took me to the courthouse again.