

The Black Robe

1

As the floating Black Robe began to sink down behind the wooden pulpit, my brain needed so desperately to be disimprisoned from all the complexities of an impending doom. Life, as I knew it, was over.

I could barely hear those bone-chilling remarks from that dark, ghoulish-like creature, as I wondered, if it was truly a man.

"Mr. John Earl Willis, on count number one, charging you with the crime of murder in the first degree, I can only sentence you as the mandatory statute allows. That sentence is death by electrocution until you are pronounced dead."

I knew then, that I was a goner, and that there was nothing that I could do about it. No instant replay. No re-do.

It leaned forward with such an ossified stare, that no one dared to make a peep. The sound of even a cockroach sneaking across the floor, would have surely disrupted the administration of justice. Some may even call it the demon illustration of the practice of justice. In any event, it continued: "The current of 24,000 volts shall pass through your body and remain so, until a doctor has pronounced you dead.

"On count number two, charging you with the crime of murder in the first degree, I can only again sentence you as the mandatory statute allows. That sentence is death by electrocution until you are pronounced dead.

"That the current of 24,000 volts shall pass through your

body and remain so, until a doctor has pronounced you dead. This sentence is from and after the first death sentence that I have imposed upon you."

"This guy is nuts. He's insane. TWO DEATHS! IN A ROW! How many times does he think that he can kill me? AGAIN! AND THEN, AGAIN!"

"Now, Mr. Willis, as for count number three, charging you with the crime of armed robbery, I sentence you to a term of YOUR NATURAL LIFE, from and after the two death sentences that I have just imposed upon you. You are to serve that life sentence at MCI Deadwell."

The Judge mashed that mallet so hard as if he was trying to crack the head of an annoying bug.

Then he said, "Bailiff, take him away."

Those words were so shocking, so insane, so unbelievable, that it felt as if I was hallucinating, dreaming, or just going into a nod. I couldn't feel a thing. It all was coming in slow mode. My brain was frozen. My wrists were bound. My feet were stuck. I couldn't move. I thought to myself, WHAT THE HELL IS WRONG WITH THIS PICTURE?

That was about three weeks ago. Here we are now, looking around at these dingy, creepy walls. I can now see why they call this dump, Deadwell. It's like being dropped off into this godforsaken place, left for dead.

All of a sudden, a strange feeling came over me. I began to realize that I'm going to die at a specific time, in a specific place, and by a specific method. Now, that is just crazy.



Isn't it truly an ugly thing to be able to predict one's future?

2

They have finally moved me out of isolation into an open cell on death row. On my bunk was a set of non-descript grays, a pull-over top and a pair of pants with an elastic waist. The top had a con number on the pocket, 407-16. This number has great significance within this prison system. First, and foremost, 407 is the number of individuals that have past through these walls slated for execution, including myself. Second, the last two numbers represent the particular cell that I occupy on death row. Third, those same two numbers represent the order in which I will be put to death. Finally, the whole number must also be used to identify everything that belongs to me: my mail; my books; my radio; and my clothes.

The Department of Corruption just loves to try to dehumanize you by taking everything away: your name; your personal property; your whole life. They want you and everyone else to know that you now belong to them.

As I was in deep thought about my predicament, a faceless voice interrupted me.

"Hey Buddy, what's your name?"

"John," I responded.

"Mine is Brian. I'm next door. We'll talk a little bit later when you get settled in."

I guess he knew right off the bat that I wasn't in the mood for any chit-chat at the moment.

These first few weeks were difficult. Just having to stand

up in front of one's cell seven times a day to be counted as one of the living takes a great deal to get use to. Not being able to take a shower or eat or sleep when you want destroys all the freedom you once had or thought that you had.

Brian said once, "You will realize that there is a big difference between 'privacy' and 'loneliness.'"

I said, "What do you mean?"

He said, "Privacy is when you are seeking those personal moments, those special times when you attempt to find that inner peace, that personal space where it's just you and your thoughts. God might even be in there too.

"Loneliness, on the other hand, is a feeling of separateness, a discernible connection from everyone: your family; your friends; your community; the rest of society. You are, for all purposes, ALONE. You may even believe that God has forsaken you. The trick is to keep up the faith. You must make yourself believe that you can do this, that you can, in fact, survive."

Well, I have taken his advice to heart. I've been maintaining and surviving. A day in Deadwell is eight hours long, from 7:30 A.M. to 3:30 P.M.

There are two sets of doors on every single cell; one with bars and one solid with a little peephole. When both are closed, that's it. Everything that you have to do must be done when the solid door is open. After that, there is no yelling or talking back and forth. Everyone remains faceless, because no one comes out. You are locked up twenty-four seven. The only comforts that you may enjoy are the few pictures of family and friends and a cheap see-through AM/FM radio that may pull in a few good



stations if you aim the antenna right. And yes, music does sooth the convicted beast.

There were thirty-six men on death row, two tiers separating them with eighteen on each level. When the doors are open, everyone seems to get busy moving stuff back and forth. They call it The Rope System.

This is an ingenious system of transport where food, cigarettes, cosmetics, books and stamps are moved from one cell to another. It's simple. All one needs is a halfway decent mirror, some string or the sides of a sheet and you're good.

You stick the mirror out through the bars to see your target and judge the distance. Tie the item securely to the string and then flip it to the cell where you want it to go. It may take you two or three or four tries before you get the hang of it.

Many times to move the item along, you may need the assistance of other inmates. In this environment, we need all the help that we can get. The one thing that is evidently true is that the bonds that you forge here can only be broken through death.

3

I had several dreams or shall I say reoccurring nightmares. Those terrifying phantasmagorian scenes kept bolting across my brain shifting the perspective of my impending doom. I felt helpless and alone and afraid.

One such episode began on a cold winter night. I was being ushered down this dead-end street where people on both sides were yelling for someone to die.

They were saying: "KILL HIM! KILL HIM! KILL ... HIM!"

It was scary. I didn't know what to do, but I knew that I



had to keep on going.

I looked around trying to figure out who they were talking about. It dawned on me that they were talking about me. There I was, all shackled up from head to toe and dragging this humongous beachball that was attached to the back of my feet. I was barely able to stay on my feet, because the wind kept lifting the ball up and dragging me along the ground.

To top that off, every few steps that I took, someone would jump out of an ally and whack me on the back of the head with a brick. HARD. After the fourth or fifth or maybe the sixth time, I couldn't help but fall flat on my face.

Finally, a strong gust of wind came and picked that beachball up so high that I couldn't regain my balance. I fought desperately to get back up on my feet before I hit that wall at the end of the street. But, it was just too late. I went smack dab into it. Then, I woke up.

The next time, I started dreaming about six headless officers. Can you imagine that? Six of them. They were all standing in front of my cell. One of them had this brass key trying to open my door. The key started to get bigger and bigger and bigger to the point of no return. It got so big that all six officers had to hold that key in order to turn it. Now, that was weird.

The door finally swung open and an officer stepped in. Her head began to grow out of her neck. This was like something out of a science fiction movie. It was terrifying. I backed up against the wall of the cell for safety. All of a sudden, like a shooting star or maybe more like an oversized balloon popping



out of someone's skin, the head just shot up into the air in a zig-zag formation. It settled down on the floor on the left-hand side of the cell.

I waited for a few more seconds just trying to muster up enough courage to face that demon. Then, I walked over there and pick up that flimsy piece of flesh by the hair. Its reddish-orange eyes began to glow. Its droopy lips started to speak.

"Johnny. J-O-H-N-N-Y. Johnny Earl. It's time to cook the bacon. It's time ... to cook ... the bacon."

I WAS THE PIECE OF PORK THAT IT WAS TALKING ABOUT.

Now, maybe you thought that both those dreams were a little to far fetched, but you really haven't heard the worst of it. Just listen to this.

Two female officers came to my cell. Both of them had these big green eyes and a Joker-like smile. How could I be so dumb to think that they were there to help me?

Anyway, one of them said, "John Earl Willis?"

"Yes," I replied.

"We're going to sneak you out right now."

They sounded sincere at that point, but I still felt a little apprehensive.

I said, "Wait a minute. Let me think about it for a moment."

The one closest to the door looked out of the cell and then back in again and said in a low voice, "We can't wait. It's now or never."

So, I got dressed as fast as I could and went with them. I figured that if there was any chance at all, I wanted to take

the shot.

There was no one up and about that night and it seemed as though it took forever for us to reach the front gate. Once there, all hell broke loose. People started coming from everywhere: from behind the cars in the parking lot; from around the back of the building; even from out of the dumpster on the side of the road. Those two officers were nowhere to be found. They just simply disappeared. But, the mob was there and they grabbed me.

I tried to fight my way free, but I couldn't do it. They had me. They threw a thick, wet rope around my neck and pushed me up to the hood of a car that was strategically aligned under a huge tree branch.

I noticed that one of those female officers that had previously disappeared was now in the front of the mob yelling, "String him up! String that drity murderer up!"

The other officer was there too. She was actually the one that was throwing the end of the rope up over the hanging branch. Everyone was fighting now over the rope tugging it. They were pulling it so hard that I thought that they were going to yank my head off. I had no choice, but to allow them to drag me up on top of the hood of the car. I ended up on my tippy-toes gasping for air.

A smartly dressed man in a three-piece suit stood there smiling. He was extremely happy at all the events that were unfolding. The man jumped into the front seat of the car, turned the ignition on, and began to back up from under the tree.

"Could that be the Warden? It looks like him."



My feet were dangling. My whole body went numb. I felt a continuous tug that was shutting off my air. That wet fiber was squeezing my throat. I no longer heard those deafening cries of the mob yelling and cheering me on to die.

I'm going. I'm going. I'm almost gone. But, just before I passed out, I heard the voice of an angel.

It said, "COUNT TIME! COUNT TIME! EVERYONE STAND UP FOR THE COUNT."

And then, I woke up. Or did I?

4

The Prosecutor's eyes were blood-red and he was screaming at the top of his lungs.

"No! Noooo! No way! Your Honor, no. I object. I object to the decision by this jury. They got it all wrong. They ignored all the evidence. They ignored the facts of the case. This Defendant is guilty and they know it. I can't believe this. This just can't be happening. I must appeal this farce, this travesty of justice. They have perpetrated a fraud on the judicial process and I won't stand for it.

"Your Honor, I must now make a formal request to this Honorable Court to nullify this jury's verdict. This man is guilty and should not be on the streets. He's a danger to the Community. Your Honor, this guy is faking."

Everyone, all of a sudden, turned to look at the half-baked chocolate corpse lying in the middle of the courtroom floor. They all turned back to look at the expression of the Black Robe behind the wooden pulpit. As it began to swell with the calma-



tive stature of a judicious king, it stated in no uncertain terms the validity of the jury's verdict.

"I must reject any implication of a less than fair examination of the evidence by this jury. You have failed to prove your case, counselor. The evidence presented by both you and the defense counsel must be decided by impartial triers of fact. They, and they alone, must decide the validity of the evidence in this case. I am extremely confident that they have done just that.

"And, as far as 'jury nullification' is concern, the law is clear. In order to use such an extraordinary process as that, the jury must knowingly and deliberately reject the evidence or refuse to apply the law either because: 1) the jury wants to send a message about some social issue that is larger than the case itself; or 2) because the result dictated by law is contrary to the jury's sense of justice, morality, or fairness. I must say, I see neither in this case. Therefore, your request for jury nullification is denied."

I heard a sweet, maternal voice in the distance getting closer and closer and closer until it almost seemed as if someone was whispering loudly in my ear.

"John! John! John Willis! Are you alright? Are you ok?"

"Yah! I think so."

"Drink this, slowly. Easy now."

I realized that it was Janice offering me a sip of a cool bottle of water from her private stash. Pouring a little bit on a dainty wipe, she dabbed it gently across my forehead.



"Take it easy now."

As she looked up at the Black Robe while cradling my head in her lap, she called out: "Your Honor. I don't think that my client has heard the pronouncement of the jury's verdict. Should we have the foreman to repeat it?"

One of the Judge's tentacles reached out from under his robe as if to stop all traffic.

"No. I don't think it will be necessary."

I started to regain my senses. I didn't realize that I had passed out from heat exhaustion.

"Was I dreaming? Man, that was a weird trip."

I began to raise my head, as I looked over at that larger than life character. I could have sworn its head rotated completely around like the Exorcist, but it only turned half-way to address the stenographer.

"Ms. Incline, would you please read back the portion of the record that pertains to the verdict?"

"Yes, Your Honor."

She started going back over her notes, stopped, and then began to read.

"What say you, Mr. Foreman, on count number one, charging the Defendant, John Earl Willis, with the crime of murder in the first degree? Is the defendant guilty or not guilty?"

"NOT GUILTY."

"On count number two, charging the Defendant, John Earl Willis, with the crime of murder in the first degree. Is the defendant guilty or not guilty?"

"NOT GUILTY."

"On count number three, charging the Defendant, John Earl Willis, with the crime of arm robbery, is the defendant guilty or not guilty?"

"NOT CUILTY."

"Members of the Jury: Harken to your oaths, do say that upon each of these charges, that the Defendant, John Earl Willis is not guilty. So say you, Mr. Foreman; So say all of you, members of the Jury."

"Thank you, Ms. Incline."

The Black Robe looked back at Janice and then at me and said, "I hope that this will satisfy all your concerns, Ms. Wilson."

"Yes, Your Honor. It does."

The Prosecutor stormed out of the courtroom saying: "I'll be back. I swear that I'll be back."

I smiled. Then I began to chuckle. That chuckle grew into a laugh. I burst out into an uncontrollable laughter. I just couldn't stop. I felt elated, yet totally insane at the same time. I laughed so loud, so hard that it began to hurt.

Suddenly, I felt a sharp pain in my chest. There were indistinguishable voices all around me. I couldn't move, couldn't speak. I couldn't do a damn thing, but lay there in pain.

Someone shouted.

"CLEAR!"

Another sharp jolt of excruciating pain.

This is just not funny anymore. I still can't move. Still



can't speak. My eyes squinted from the intense, glaring light. I lurched forward, but strong hands restrained me.

"Take it easy," said a raspy voice. "You been shot and we just brought you back from the dead."