

### I Shout, Ergo, I Be

August heat and hatred swirled around me. Men hollered between cells, filling the bricks and concrete of Attica with vented steam. They had few outlets except shouting, or fighting.

"I'll stab ya face, punk."

"Come over here 'n say that, you bitch ass nigga."

"Hey yo, last nigga talk to me like that was part a my indictment."

"You don't like it? Pop, nigga."

I sat in my cell with the 'Arts and Leisure' section of The New York Times that I had stolen from the prison library. I was allotted a lousy thirty minutes of access each week to the cramped library, nowhere near enough time to digest seven weekly issues of the paper. Scanning a list of the 2012 Tony nominations, I was hoping to see a familiar name. The life I had detonated and set fire to was over, but I sometimes relived intoxicating New York nights, basking in the glamour of Broadway house seats, adrenaline pumping from a crazed dash through midtown traffic to reach the theater before the curtain rose.

The chaos I orchestrated, surrounded by glitterati, had created a drama to which I became addicted. I was late to every premiere, concert and performance. The frantic sprint before each event filled my veins with a jolt of endorphins, providing a rush that my ego craved like a junkie. I filled every waking moment with tension to feel alive. The show could not go on without me.

The house lights flickered twice. 8:04 pm. Two minutes to curtain rise. A clammy perspiration dampened my Hugo Boss tux. It was opening night of 'Wicked,' a lavish Broadway musical that my friends Stephen and Winnie had written. Although Stephen hadn't scored Broadway hits since 'Godspell' and 'Pippin,' I basked in his neon glow like a sunbather on the Cote d'Azur. Living Stephen's charmed life vicariously, I feared the failure of his

musical score for 'Wicked' would crush my ego. The Gershwin Theater slid into darkness.

My cell neighbor cranked up '106 And Park' on his TV which was hot-wired into his stereo. Rap lyrics assaulted me.

"Word to my unborn.

If a nigga front on me,

I'll have his ass on the front lawn.

Sneaker on the front porch,

Blood on the mailbox,

Guts on the sidewalk,

Soul on the skybox.

Nigga rock big jewels,

Sledgehammer, big tools.

Over there, talk is cheap.

'Round here, price is steep."

I looked out the barred window at a steel-gray sky. The thwok-thwok of a prison handball game was punctuated by heated shouts of "mothafucka" and street Spanish. **Pendejo. Mamabicho. Cabrón.** Even when Hispanics aren't mad, they sound angry. Their everyday conversation is a rapid-fire tirade. The Spanish language has a word for someone who talks like that. **Ametrallador:** machine gun. But in prison, just about everybody sounds like that. Loud. Irate. Spitting insults.

"You got my shit? mothafucka."

"Fuck you. I'll stab ya black ass, nigga."

I had trouble distinguishing between banter and brawling. Many times I thought guys were about to punch each other in the face, only to find out that they were homeys showing love. Why cloak friendship with rage? What were these tough-guy prison gangsters so afraid of?

I gulped a plastic tumbler of instant coffee and powdered creamer. Dressing for the yard, I tried to find a tee-shirt with the fewest rust stains from the ancient iron dumbbells that littered the weight pile. I was rushed, and I would have

to safely pass a phalanx of hostile prison guards with batons in order to reach the yard. Any one of them could end my hopes of working out by sending me to The Box, bloodied and battered, for the slightest disrespect. A twitch, a grimace, an anxious look could be mistaken as a threat.

I longed for the days when I worked out at Reebok Sports Club, overlooking Lincoln Center. Opera fans drawn to Puccini arias disembarked from black Towncars. As I emerged from a stainless steel elevator that whisked me to the Reebok locker room, an Elle cover model, slumming as a receptionist between photo shoots, greeted me. With a Julia Roberts smile, she handed me a terry towel thick as a mattress. Upper westside yuppies and ABC executives bantered while I changed clothes. Sam Champion and Regis Philbin chatted about upcoming guests on his morning show. "Give my love to Kelly, Regis."

While waiting to go to the prison yard, guys stood at their gates, spitting lyrics. Hatred smoldered, poisoning the air.

"Nigga I'm a monsta,  
Not whatcha used to.  
No retreat, no surrender,  
Nigga I refuse to.  
Malice in that nigga heart,  
Break that nigga ass apart.  
Got a brick a good yuk.  
Now I just don't give a fuck."

The bells went off. Two short blasts. Somewhere a fight had broken out. If the fight was in one of the yards, it would end with the combatants beaten by officers using black batons. The convicts' bloodied bodies would be tossed into cells, keep-locked for days. No medical attention. No food. No nothin.' I could easily be one of the battered losers.

Other guys on the gallery, also dressed and waiting to go to the yard, were now frustrated and impatient. There was a good chance there would be no yard, to punish all of us. To

pass the time, guys stood at their gates and shouted at each other.

"Hey yo, son, ya hear me? I'll punch that nigga in the face. He's a piece a shit. I tole that nigga to send me the brick he owe me. Son, I ain't the one. I'll stab that motha-fucka. Ya heard?"

"Hey yo, son. He's a dirtbag, ya hear? He don't pay nobody. Somebody oughta cut him, teach that nigga a lesson, ya heard?"

I lay on my bunk with a copy of García Márquez's Cien Años de Soledad. Because I struggled with Spanish, reading in that language blocked out conversation in English. My prison-addled brain couldn't think in two languages simultaneously. Grateful that I had only three and half pounds of gray matter, I travelled to **Macondo** and witnessed the discovery of ice, brought to the village by **los gitanos**.

While I had languished on Riker's Island awaiting trial, my ex-wife had sent me a copy of El Amor en los Tiempos del Cólera. It was my first encounter with Márquez. I had never heard of the Nobel laureate. With nothing to do but watch gory movies like 'Saw' in the cavernous day room, I retreated to my cell and tackled the novel using a hefty Spanish/English dictionary that my ex had wryly included as a Márquez starter kit. A native Ecuadorian, she had pestered me for years to improve my high-school Spanish. At first, I couldn't get through a single sentence without cracking open the dictionary. I could hear my ex-wife cackling from her coven in New Jersey, "I'll get you, my pretty." She knew my ego would refuse to accept defeat. As the paragraphs accumulated into pages, I became addicted to the serotonin released as I started to think in Spanish for the first time. I read Spanish more frequently when I realized it served as a potent antidote to my raucous neighbors.

After nineteen months on Riker's Island, the glacial pace of the judicial system finally resulted in a plea bargain: twenty years. I was thrilled to leave purgatory. At three in

the morning, with all my possessions in two plastic garbage bags, I was tossed, cuffed and shackled, onto an aged Corrections bus. Through the steel grating on the windows I watched fat, puffy snowflakes land in the parking lot and melt on contact. The snow was a harbinger of my destination -- Buffalo, the land of legendary lake effect snowstorms. The final stop: Attica.

True to its reputation, the prison was violent, and ugly. I witnessed cuttings and stabbings in the yard. They erupted with no warning, like lightning. At night, in my cell, I heard the screams of men being beaten by the guards. My appearance often saved me from problems. Older, pasty white and graying at the temples, I had not a single tattoo. It was obvious that I was no gang member. But despite that, the block's reputation and repressive environment made it difficult for me to attend programs like meditation or AA. Even a visit to the library was a challenge, requiring negotiation of six officer-manned electric gates, six different attitudes. Some officers resented prison education; some resented the fact that I breathed.

After two years of frustration, I qualified for the honor block. I liked the freedom of movement it offered. But ironically, because we were allowed to congregate on the galleries or in the day room, it was even noisier than the block I had left. Just outside my cell, men played dominoes by slamming the plastic tiles down onto a Formica table. The man whose tiles reverberated the loudest was evidently the most macho. Shouts of "chinga tu madre" and "hijueputa" caromed off the tile walls and terrazzo floors. The day room was a battleground with heated poker games and a contact sports version of ping-pong. Even chess games erupted into physical combat. I blocked out the noise by employing industrial earplugs and rereading Márquez's Cien Años de Soledad, gaining a deeper understanding of his work, an awe for his talent. I was certain I'd recognize his characters if they passed me on the street.

I also identified with the frustration of his protagonist, Juvenal Urbino, in his poignant love tale, El Amor en los Tiempos

del Cólera. Juvenal wrote long, plaintive letters to the love of his life, Fermina Daza. But she imperiously refused to answer them. My ex-wife, once again mad at me for some unspecified transgression, had stopped answering my letters. I hadn't heard from her in months. She finally wrote to say she couldn't help me out anymore. The rent on her Easthampton beach house had gone up to \$40,000 for the summer. A pound of lobster salad at The Barefoot Contessa was now \$42.95, plus valet parking. She said that in the fall, once she had put the cover on the pool, and laid off the pool boy (i.e., stopped fucking him), she might be able to send me a little something for instant coffee, or whatever, at commissary.

Two guys outside my cell were beefing about their shorties.

"Hey yo, hometeam, get ridda that bitch. Ya hear me? Getcha self one a them Internet shorties. Check out this photo of one I just got me."

"Hey yo! Check out that ass. That bitch is thick, son. Ya heard?"

The disrespect prisoners showed toward women often shocked me, angered me. Márquez's novel, Love in the Time of Cholera, depicted the lost art of romance. I admired Juvenal Urbina's determination to win Fermina Daza's love. He worshipped her, despite having to pursue her for thirty-five years. Men in prison knew nothing about lifetime loves. To them, women were bitches, usable and then disposable. But I was no marital expert. I had let my unresolved anger destroy the twenty-two year relationship I had had with my wife -- my soulmate.

I awoke after a restless night of tortured dreams. Drizzle oozed from a pewter sky. Because of the weather, only two of us went to the honor block yard. Guys from the 'hood, gangsta's, guys that would shoot another man in the face for showing disrespect, were afraid of the rain. I thought of Margaret Hamilton's final scene in 'The Wizard of Oz.'

When it was nearly deserted, the honor block yard was a tranquil oasis. Bordered by red tea roses and a vegetable garden,

it served as a refuge from the pandemonium that surrounded it. Oregano and mint sprouted in wild tufts. Strawberry patches and zucchini plants heavy with orange blossoms received tender care from doting convicts. The aroma of fresh cilantro hung in the morning air.

Eddie sat on the rusted workout bench next to me. Dark-skinned, with soulful eyes black as olives, he had the torso and face of a pugilist -- brawny shoulders and broad cheekbones. Many days he pounded the punching bag hanging from a bracket that shook the brick wall, resounding throughout the block. But on that day, he was doing bench presses. The barbell held steel plates suspended like two rolls of quarters.

"Hey yo, Eddie, what's up?"

"Ain't nothin'."

"I wish it were like this out here every day. Don't have to fight for the weights. Nobody shoutin', arguing."

"Doesn't bother me. If I'm not listening to guys arguing out here, I'm listening to them at work. That's all we get in the grievance office -- complaints, and arguments." He looked off in the distance at the massive concrete wall surrounding the prison, seeming to accept it, and whatever else came his way.

"I wish I could be that way. All the hollering and noise gets on my nerves. Guys are shoutin' at a man standin' two feet away. Everybody's mad all the time."

Eddie turned toward me. "Mad? They're not mad. They're scared."

"Scared? Scared of what?"

"Being locked up." He returned to his workout, lifting the barbell off the benchpress. The weight of the plates arched the Olympic bar. He finished his set without the slightest sign of being winded. With his elbows on his knees, he looked directly at me, his head framed by a white knit kufi in sharp contrast to his skin.

"Dean, you didn't grow up in the 'hood, so you don't understand."

Annoyed, I interrupted him. "Eddie, I hear that a lot, and it kinda pisses me off. Just because I'm not from the 'hood doesn't mean I don't know about pain and suffering." I could feel my face getting hot.

"Okay, fair enough. But I'm not criticizing you. I'm just trying to explain where these guys are comin' from."

"All right. Sorry." I felt bad for getting mad at Eddie. I had a lot of respect for him.

"Listen. Most of the guys here have been told all their lives that they're pieces a shit. That they ain't never gonna amount to nothin'."

"Eddie, do these guys really believe that?"

"Well, sure. Most of them grew up with no fathers, no role models. Nobody gave them good advice, told them they were smart, to stay in school, get a job."

I could identify with that. At AA meetings I learned I was an egomaniac with an inferiority complex.

"They're afraid they're stupid, worthless pieces a shit."

Eddie's words reminded me of my father, his constant harping. Nothing I ever did was good enough for him. In school, if I got an 'A minus,' he wanted to know why I didn't get an 'A'.

Eddie continued. "They're afraid of the truth. And when they get locked up, they're afraid they're gonna be forgotten -- by their families, by their homeys, by their baby's momma." He exhaled. "It's the fear of no longer existing. The fear of death." He leaned back, placed two beefy hands on the barbell, and did another set.

I stared at the brick wall behind the bench press, a little stunned. "The fear of death?"

"Yeah. We cling to things because we're afraid to let go, to let go of everything -- freedom, life, everything. It's fear that creates our suffering."

"Suffering? That sounds like Buddhism."

"Yeah, it is. We create our suffering by clinging to things. You get aggravated by this place, by the noise and chaos, because

you're clinging. You're refusing to accept what is. You want quiet in a noisy place. Stop resisting. Let go."

He was right. I wasn't at home in my living room anymore. I was in prison.

"Don't expect guys here to act like you. They're scared, and they're doin' the only thing they know how -- fighting. Fighting each other, fighting for survival."

Eddie went back to his workout. I looked out at the garden, the neat rows of herbs and vegetables. The resentment and anger I felt toward all the noisy guys on my gallery started to subside. They were scared, just like I was, of spending the rest of their lives in prison. Out of sight, behind the wall, they were afraid of being forgotten -- of ceasing to exist.

The door to the honor block yard opened. The workout was over. Eddie and I returned to our galleries, to the noise and chaos.

Just before I exited the stairway, I said to Eddie, "Hey yo, good workout."

As Eddie lumbered up the stairs to the next floor, he said, "Yeah. Good job, bro."

The day room was cluttered with men signing up for chow, and waiting for mail call. I didn't feel like dealing with the mess hall, but I stopped for a minute as the officer read the list of men with mail. When he finished, I returned to my cell, empty-handed, amid the other men who received no letter, no birthday card. To cover up our disappointment, our pain, we joked with each other.

"I'll kick your ass, you piece a shit."

"I'll cut you, mothafucka."

We donned our masks of indifference, our attitudes of "I don't give a fuck," and pretended we weren't crying inside. I took off my boots, changed clothes, and lay on my bunk with a copy of John Banville's novel Ghosts. Holding the slim book in front of my face, I retreated to a quiet island in the North Sea. Circling seagulls filled the air with keening cries. The salt

spray stung my eyes as I thought about the protagonist, just released from prison, who felt like a ghost.

Novels provide my escape from Attica. It's hard for me to admit that I belong here, that this oubliette is my destiny. Before I came to prison, I surrounded myself with celebrated, glamorous people. At parties filled with models, actors and singers, I was successful and talented. And to further ingratiate myself with the A-list, I created a refuge where I could lure them: a laser treatment center. While I erased their wrinkles and scars, I fawned, pampered and praised them. And as they became dependent on my cosmetic treatments for their enduring beauty, I wormed my way into their homes, their parties, their opening night galas. I escaped my misery by usurping their lives.

Like guys who grew up in the 'hood, I was empty inside. I was raised with little love, told I was a no talent bum, and suffered abuse. To hide my pain, I created a world teeming with glamour and riches. And as the money rolled in from my business, I spent it on drugs, restaurants, nightclubs, and exotic trips to chic getaways. I wrapped myself in designer clothes, transported my pampered self in expensive cars and housed my empty soul in a decadent, rambling mansion where I wandered nocturnally from room to room, twisted and high, searching for a glimmer of happiness that never materialized.

When that life imploded, and I found myself shuttered in prison, I thought I was different from those who surrounded me. But Eddie showed me we had so much in common. I had the same fears: of suffering, or being forgotten, of facing death alone, in prison.

On a Saturday afternoon, I sat in the day room, waiting to go to the honor block yard. Cold rain fell from a leaden sky. But I didn't care. I needed to escape the noise that roiled outside my cell. An argument had erupted among the block's football players over the morning's game in which they had lost.

Accusations were made. Epithets were hurled. Because of the ugly weather, I looked forward to a quiet workout in the peaceful yard.

I drank a tall cup of tepid coffee while reading a story in The New York Times about an art show at the Metropolitan Museum of Art: 'The Steins Collect.' The museum had organized a show of Picassos and Matisses that Gertrude Stein and her brother had amassed when they lived in Paris. An eclectic collection of Cubism and Fauvism, the show was a hit; thousands flocked to see the paintings. I longed to sit on the steps of the Met, gaze down Fifth Avenue, watch museum goers come and go.

I looked at my watch. The honor block yard should have been announced twenty minutes ago. I returned to The Times story and stared at the Picasso portrait of Gertrude Stein, sitting in a chair, monolithic, in her Paris atelier. She looked so content, serene, surrounded by her art collection. I knew that Alice Toklas sat not far away.

The company officer left his post and walked past me. Without a word, he slammed shut the day room door that led to the yard. His shift was over; he headed home.

I stared out the day room window at the empty honor block yard. It was time for me to return to my cell. There would be no yard. I felt forgotten, invisible, like a ghost.

- September, 2012