

## True Texas Justice

My acquaintance with the Texas criminal justice system began at 17 years of age. At the time, I believed ~~in~~ that the system was basically good, that it sent bad guys to prison, set the innocent free, and that there was a such thing as justice. It didn't take too long to realize how naive I was. Maybe not naive, but ignorant for sure. I'd never had any serious dealings with the system, so I believed the lies the government, media, and society in general told me.

So there I was, 17 years old, turning myself in and writing a statement, telling the detectives every detail, answering every question as honestly as possible, believing I was doing the right thing, believing in the system, believing that I would be treated fairly. I knew I had done wrong, I felt extreme guilt, remorse, and even though I knew I would be going to prison, I was ready to accept my punishment. I believed, and still do, that a man should be held accountable for his actions. A man should take responsibility for the things he does. So, at 17, I was trying to be a man and live by the principles I was taught as a child.

See, only hours before I found out that I had killed someone. Another teenager. Not a friend, but not someone who was a real enemy either. I was mad at the guy, sure; I wanted to kick his ass. But I never wanted to really hurt him.

Where I was raised, we'd have disputes all of the time, get into a fight, and be friends again the next day.

No big deal, no hard feelings. That's just the way we did things.

The night before, drunk, I drove to his house with a couple of friends, looking to fight him. My ex-girlfriend had just made it pretty clear that we weren't getting back together, no matter how sweet my drunken ~~profess~~ professions of love were. In my mind, he was the problem. He'd been coming around ever since I'd started dating her. I knew all along what he was up to, trying to get with my girl. And now she was dating him. I felt disrespected. And the answer for disrespect was an ass-kicking.

In less than 5 minutes I was at his house. Unluckily for me, there he was, in his driveway, waiting on her. If only he wasn't home. If only he was inside the house when I pulled up. A thousand "if only's" and both of our lives would be completely different. I'm often haunted by the ghosts of those other lives.

Very few words were said. I knew what I was there for, and I was all about business. It was pretty much a one-sided fight. I was bigger and had lots more experience. The entire fight lasted less than 15 seconds. It didn't take long to put him on the ground. And when he was on the ground, I took it a little too far. I broke one of the rules of fighting; I kicked him. Not a lot, just 3 times total. Two in the body, but one in the eye. When I got back in my truck and left, he was still on the ground, but I didn't think he was hurt. I figured he'd have a hell of a black-eye, but my biggest worry at the time was that he was going to run in the house, tell his parents, and they were going to call the police.

The next morning, she called. The ex-girlfriend. That's when I found out he was dead. At first, I couldn't believe it. I thought she was playing some cruel joke to get back at me for beating her boyfriend up. When I found out that she was telling the truth, I felt sick. I felt like I was in a bad dream. My mind wasn't clear and I couldn't think beyond this huge feeling of guilt.

And that's what led me to turn myself in, no parents present, no attorney, and writing a statement. That's what led to a murder charge. Yes, murder, not manslaughter.

Murder with a possible sentence of 5 to 99. I would have pled guilty to manslaughter, if given the chance. The district attorney's only offer was 45 years for murder.

The trial was a joke: outright lies, half-truths, and exaggerations bigger than anything in Texas. Everything but the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. My attorneys were clowns. I found out later that they aren't even criminal lawyers. They do divorces and family law. The prosecutors were two of the best in the state. I broke another rule of fighting; I took a knife to a gunfight. By the time it was over, I would have given myself a life sentence. The jury agreed. They gave me 60. In Texas, that means serving at least 30.

Of course, I appealed. Everyone said not to worry. My case would be overturned. I never meant to hurt him. The courts would see that it was an unjust verdict and

sentence.

The appeals were as big of a sham as the trial. I don't know what the purpose of appeals are, except to maybe give inmates false hope and to ~~no~~ make lawyers rich, but it sure isn't to right wrongs.

Now, 20 years later, here I sit, wondering what's the point of it all. Am I supposed to be learning something from all of this? I'm a fairly intelligent guy. It shouldn't take 60 years to teach or rehabilitate me. If it does, it's not being done right. Is it all about punishment? I thought that the punishment should fit the crime. I accidentally killed a guy in a fist fight. Maybe I'm bias, but 60 years seems a little much. I see guys every day with way worse cases than mine, straight-up killers, with way less time than me. Maybe true, eye-for-an-eye justice would be better. Just take me out behind the courthouse and beat me to death. No, that would be too lenient for Texas. Let's mentally torture him for 60 years first, then, when he's an old man and his life is over, we'll set him free. True Texas justice.

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