

“GINSU TONY”

by

BLAKE CROUCH

Spring 1999

Engl. 23W

Professor: Marianne Gingher

University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

July 14

Traveled 517 miles today from Kansas City to western Nebraska. Cool and clear this morning, so I put the top down on the Jeep and drove several hundred miles with corn fields extending to the horizon and a summer wind in my hair.

Hit storms at one o'clock and drove through blinding rain for an hour. When I came into sunlight again, the land had changed. The corn fields were gone, and there was nothing but prairie as far as the eye could see. It amazes me no matter how many times I encounter this vast open space of land and sky. It's the West. It's the feeling of something that's too big for man to tame, even in this age of exploitation.

I stopped for the night in Scottsbluff. It's a small town surrounded by parched, yellow grassland and red cliffs. The sun has just dipped below the horizon as I sit on the bed in my motel room and scribble down these words. It's eight o'clock, and I'm tired and hungry, but more than anything I just need a drink. Hope there's a bar in this town.

July 15

Wyoming. It's July, and yet I saw mountains today that glistened with snow under a summer sky. Wish I'd had the time to leave the highway and drive up into the hills of

this wild country, to touch snow while sweating in summer heat or to see the high, desert plain from a rocky peak.

Started late this morning. Last night is still a pleasant, throbbing dream. Got drunk and high and met a girl at the bar in Scottsbluff. She stayed the night with me, and I can only say that she was blond and had enormous tits. Good God! But I've a feeling that the obscurity of her face is a blessing. All I've got to remember her by is a half-smoked bag of weed.

I headed north today towards the Wyoming/Montana border, and the sky was cloudless and winter blue. For much of the day, the highway ran parallel to a distant chain of brown hills, separated from the highway by twenty miles of sand and sagebrush. There was rarely a sign of civilization in sight, just lonely, beautiful wasteland--my kind of country.

It's nine-thirty now, and I'm writing by the light of headlights. There's still a shadow of crimson on the western horizon, but it's useless for writing. That dying sort of light only shows the silhouette of things on the horizon, and there's nothing on the horizon here. I'm twenty miles into Montana, a quarter mile off the highway, in the midst of an immense prairie. Deerlodge is still many hours away, and I'm far too exhausted to make the journey tonight.

It's cold and clear. I'm gonna smoke a joint and go to bed. I'll throw my sleeping bag onto the grass and sleep under the stars tonight. So quiet here. No wind. Only the sound of my pen moving across paper.

July 16

A horrible, fucking day by anyone's standard, and I don't feel like writing about it. But I'm in a cheap motel room in Deerlodge, Montana, and I've got a fifth of Jack waiting for when I finish, so I'm going to get it down. Above all else, I am a writer, and I need to pour this onto paper while it's fresh. Nothing's worse than telling a story when it's rotten and stale.

It gets cold out on the plains at night, even in the summertime, and I woke up shivering this morning. My sleeping bag was soaked with steely dew, and the wind which had begun during the night hours, was blowing through the weeds, making them rustle at my feet. It was six-thirty, and though the sun was still below the eastern horizon, the first timid rays of light were stretching across the prairie. I threw the wet sleeping bag into the back of the rusty CJ-7 and set out on the road again.

I headed west for nine hours, watching the land change from prairie to foothills to mountains. I kept thinking about the girl in Scottsbluff--it was something to take my mind from my destination. It made the hours pass quickly, and I obsessed on our intoxicated encounter, remembering with growing pride what I had conquered.

I arrived at Montana State Prison at four in the afternoon. It was sunny and warm, and there were snow-capped mountains in every direction. They rose above the hunter green pines that covered the land. There was already a crowd gathering around the twenty-foot prison fence. News trucks were everywhere, and a small, religious group chanted, "Murder is murder." Many people were holding angry signs, and I saw one with yellow, lightning-shaped letters that read, "**HAVE A SEAT TONY.**" A young girl stood at her father's side across from the religious group. Her sign read, "**38 WRONGS DO MAKE A RIGHT.**"

I parked away from the crowd and put on sunglasses and a hat. My hair is long, and I have a beard, but my small, hazel eyes are unmistakably the same as my brother's, and as his face is known throughout the country, so is mine. I'm a celebrity of sorts, a symbol of my brother's crimes, and I dreaded to be seen on the day of his execution, when his face was on every front page and news channel in the country.

At the prison gates, a guard was waiting for me, and he escorted me into the interior of the prison. I was checked by security and given the option to see Orson in an open, guard-monitored room, or in a conference room, separated by thick glass. I chose the latter. They said I was the only person who had come to visit him, and that did not surprise me. Because it was late, we had only half an hour. There were preparations to be made for his execution.

The guard led me into the small conference room. There was a chair waiting for me, and I sat down and looked through the glass at the other half of the room which was presently empty. After five minutes, the door on the other side of the glass opened. Orson walked in, hands and feet bound in chains, with two black guards on either side. I was afraid to look at his face, but when our eyes locked, forty years of memories rushed over me, and I saw him only as my twin, not the monster.

He looked thinner than he had on TV. His face was drawn, and his small eyes seemed to have pushed further back into his head. We no longer looked like twins, and that was a comforting thought. His head was shaved, and I saw the long, straight scar that ran down from the top of his head. He had gotten that when we were five. I had pushed him down in Daddy's rowboat when we were out on Lake Michigan, and he had split his head open on the sharp, metal side of the boat.

He picked up the phone on his side, and I picked up mine. He smiled and chuckled to himself, then turned suddenly and said to one of the guards: "You staying?" His tone was prissy and demeaning, and though I couldn't hear what the guard said, Orson didn't like his response. "Fucking prick. What do you think, I'm gonna look at him to death?" The guard shook his head, and his chiseled face showed no emotion. He said something to Orson, and my brother turned back to me. "I'm sorry we can't have any privacy from these assholes."

"It's fine," I said.

"Oh, that's right, you're scared of me."

My stomach tightened.

"It's been awhile," he said.

"Fifteen years."

"Why haven't you come before? I've written you letters practically begging to see you. You wouldn't come to my trial. What do you think that says to a jury when a defendant's family doesn't even believe him?"

"It was obvious you were guilty," I said. "Everyone knew it. Besides you just disappeared from college. It seemed pretty clear you wanted nothing to do with us. What'd you expect?"

"A little loyalty."

"Well you blew it, not me."

"Why'd you want to talk to me behind a piece of fucking glass?" He said suddenly, his voice more hostile. "Think I'd hurt you?"

My hands began to shake, and sweat was running down my sides beneath my shirt. I tried to speak but my mouth had turned to cotton.

"Speak up. I can't hear when you whisper through the phone."

"No," I said.

"Well I wanted to tell you something, but I can't here. They're recording us."

"Tell me anyway."

"Are you fucking stupid? What'd I just say?"

"That they're recording..."

"Speak up!"

"That they're recording us."

"That's right. Say it again."

"Say what?"

"That they're recording us."

"Why?"

"Just say it!" He yelled.

"They're recording us."

"Again."

"What are you doing?"

"Say 'they're recording us,' William!"

"They're recording us," I said, and Orson groaned as a flicker of muffled pleasure spread across his face. He was distracted for a moment, and then he looked at me and smiled.

"Sorry. Small vices die hard, you know. You gonna watch me die tonight?"

"Yeah."

"The old fucks coming?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"I don't know. You'd have to ask them."

"Unfortunately, solitary confinement doesn't lend itself to interaction. What I was asking was your opinion about why they aren't coming."

"I don't know."

"Well what do you *think*? That's what an *opinion* is."

"They feel like everyone else. You're fucked-up. They'll be glad when you're gone."

"Will you be glad, William?"

"Yes."

Orson clapped his hands mockingly and smiled.

"I appreciate your honesty, brother. Does it scare you to know that you're part of me, and I'm part of you? Don't tell me you haven't felt it. That void, the rage. You're just too much of a fucking coward to embrace it. You think when I'm gone that black place inside of you will die. You hope, you pray that when I'm dead you won't have to think about it at night, lying in the dark, wondering what it might be like to give into that horrible desire. What's your fantasy, William. I like to cut throats. Tell me yours. The longer you put it off the stronger it will become. It won't die with me."

I took a deep, quivering breath and looked at my watch. "I bet people think you're me, don't they?" He said suddenly. "That's why you've got that long hair and nasty

beard." He began to laugh hysterically. "Tough to get a date?" He continued to laugh and tears escaped the corners of his eyes. "Maybe after I'm dead, you won't have to look like Grizzly fucking Adams." He stopped laughing suddenly and dried his eyes. A controlled rage came upon him. "You ashamed of me?"

"What?"

"What?" He mocked in a sissy voice. "You ashamed of me?" I thought of all the news clips I had seen and pictures of his victims with their throats laid open.

"What do you care? You just want someone to antagonize before they kill you? Is that why I'm here?"

"Am I antagonizing you?" He mocked. "Did I hurt your feelings? I'm sorry, William. I'm so fucking sorry." I set the phone down and stood up. Orson stood, too and punched the glass awkwardly with his chained hands as he stared in my eyes. The guards ran forward and forced him back into his chair, as he shouted words that ended where the glass began.

I walked back to the chair, and while I stood, picked up the phone. Orson had never let his go. "Orson, do you want me to stay?" I asked. "Do you wanna see a familiar face before they electrocute you?" Sweat was running from the top of his shaved head, through the crevice of his scar, and down the sides of his face. He nodded, and I sat down.

We said nothing for several moments. I stared at the ceiling as he stared at me.

"I met a girl coming out here," I said finally. "In Nebraska." Orson's face lit up.

"She pretty?" He asked.

"Yeah."

"She have big tits?"

I smiled. "Oh yeah."

"So did you get a little pussy?"

"I did."

"God, I'd kill for some pussy right now. I get thinking about it sometimes, and it drives me so crazy I wanna cut my dick off. What was her name?"

"Tina."

"Tina," he said slowly, letting the word ooze out of his mouth. "You fucked the shit out of her didn't you?"

I nodded. "She was incredible, Orson. You should've seen her."

"Did she scream when you fucked her?" He asked.

"Would it help your violent fantasy if I said yes?"

Orson rolled his eyes and sighed heavily. I thought he was going to slip into a rage again, so I asked him something I'd always wondered. "Would you have tried to kill me or Dad?"

"I wouldn't have tried to," he said. "I'd have done it...if I had wanted to. Is that the first thing you thought of when you saw me on the news?"

"Yeah."

"Well you didn't make the cut, William."

"What's the cut?"

"Wouldn't you like to know? Wouldn't everybody? You know how many criminal psychologists want to get inside my head? I get at least three letters every day, begging me to do an interview. But you know what I tell them? If they had half a brain,

they'd know. It's all there...in the case file. Maybe if you knew, you could write something that didn't suck. I read your book, William, and I hope you can take a little constructive criticism: it's shit."

"Why those characteristics, Orson? Male, white, middle-aged, overweight?"

"What's your theory," he asked. "I know you've got one. Hell, everybody does."

"I don't think there's any significance. You just killed those sort of men to make people wonder. White, middle-aged, overweight men are in abundance. In fact, I don't think you had a reason for killing period. You're so fucked-up you didn't need a reason." I stopped for a moment. Orson was hanging on every word. "You just liked the control."

A grin slid across Orson's face. "You're wrong. Just like those other assholes. But I do like control, William." His eyes were on fire again. "You can't imagine what it feels like to talk to someone while you're sliding a blade across their throat." He slid his finger slowly across his as he spoke. "You can smell the fear dripping from them. I especially like it when they beg for their life. Grown men weeping, shaking, trembling. The last one I killed shit all over himself, and do you know why? He knew who I was. I made him say my name. Ginsu Tony. Over and over as I slid the knife across his throat. Told him exactly why he was a victim. I told him the answer! Why I killed men like him!" Orson was in hysterics. "So actually, there are 38 people who know why I kill, but they're all dead. You can't tell me that's not funny." His laughter was foreign and eerie, and I stared at him in disgust.

"You people just don't have a sense of humor." He said

"You're proud of yourself aren't you?" I asked.

Orson couldn't help but smile.

"I'm going now."

"Wait." Orson said.

"See you at 10:30."

"William," he began sternly, but I cut him off.

"You think you'll shit your pants when the electricity comes?" The color left Orson's face as I put the phone down. He stared with an instinctive, emotionless gaze, but I turned away and knocked on the door.

At 10:20, twelve authorized media witnesses and twelve official witnesses including myself were escorted to the witness room. When we were seated, a black curtain was spread, and we peered into the claustrophobic confines of the execution chamber.

Everything looked exactly as the escort staff members had described it. Orson was already strapped into the electric chair. He wore a blue, dress shirt, trousers, and white socks. He smiled when he caught my eyes, and my heart began to pound and my stomach grew sick. There were five men in the room with Orson, and they were all waiting. One man held a phone, one guard stood by a closed door, a physician stood closest to the chair, and the executioner and superintendent stood rigidly beside the control panel. Every face save Orson's was grave, but a sneer tugged at his cruel, thin lips.

The three-legged chair was constructed of massive oak timbers. It rested on rubber matting and was bolted to the concrete floor. Straps ran across my brother's lap, chest, arms, and forearms, and a leg piece was attached to his shaven right calf. It held a sponge soaked in a saline solution between his skin and an electrode. Orson also wore a

metal headpiece. Another dripping sponge rested on his scalp, separating another electrode from his skin so it would not catch fire when the electricity came. Electrically-conductive gel was smeared about the crown of my brother's head, and it shone in the hard light of the execution chamber.

The man with the phone looked at the superintendent and shook his head. The superintendent approached Orson, and his footsteps echoed through the speakers in the witness room. He glanced at us through the glass with a solemnity that put knots in my stomach, and then he turned to my brother. He said his full name, Anthony Orson Thomas, the way they always say it, and preceded to read the death warrant. When he had finished he said, "Mr. Thomas, you can make a statement now if you wish."

Orson could not move his head, but his eyes passed over the witnesses. They came back to me, and he smiled as he stared into my eyes. "William," he said, in a voice that was almost nostalgic. "When you embrace it, you'll find escape, but not until. The longer you wait, the stronger it grows, and when it finally does take control, there'll be nothing you can do to stop it." A touch of sadness entered his voice. "We could've done something amazing, brother."

His eyes moved to the other witnesses. "Any families of the victims here?" The women beside me tensed and muttered under her breath, and a man sitting near the glass stood up.

"You killed my brother you son of a bitch. I came here to watch you die."

"I remember your brother," Orson said. "He cried like a baby while I slit his throat. He begged me..." The speakers in the witness room went dead, and the escort told the man by the glass to sit down.

"Are they gonna do it now?" A woman asked. Our escort nodded.

The executioner slid a leather hood over Orson's face and returned to the control panel. I remembered everything the escort staff had told us as I watched the executioner close the safety switch and engage the circuit breaker. He put his finger on the execution switch and looked at the superintendent. I held my breath. When the superintendent nodded his head, I turned away. I stared at my watch and counted through the three cycles: 2,300 volts for eight seconds, 1,000 volts for twenty-two seconds, 2,300 volts again for eight seconds. The gasps and uninhibited utterances of the other witnesses made me nauseous, and I was thankful that the airtight glass kept the sweet scent of charred flesh from my nose.

When the current was stopped, I lifted my head. The execution chamber looked no different except for a thin layer of smoke that encompassed the room. The five men were staring at Orson's body, and with the mask and the headpiece supporting his head, it looked only motionless, not dead. After a moment, the physician examined Orson's body for vital signs. He shook his head when he had finished and signed the death certificate. The man holding the phone notified the Governor that the execution had been carried out, and we were led from the witness room.

I'm sitting on my bed in the Big Horn Motel. It's 12:15, and moonlight is streaming into the room, illuminating these pages. I've just cracked the seal on a fifth of Jack Daniels, and I'm going to get as shit-faced tonight as I've been in a long, long time.

There is a memory that has been haunting me for the last hour. We're eight years old, it's summertime, and Orson and I are playing in the woods under a warm, Michigan

sky. Like many young boys, we're fascinated with animals, and Orson catches a lizard that's scampering across a rotten log.

We're thrilled with the find, and I tell Orson to hold the lizard down. With a smile on his face, he does, and I extract a magnifying glass from my pocket. The sun is bright, and in no time, there is a small, blinding dot on the lizard's slimy skin. The light burns through, and Orson and I look at each other and laugh, enthralled as the lizard squirms to get away.

"It's my turn!" He shouts. "You hold him."

We spend the entire afternoon torturing the poor creature. When we're finished I throw it into the grass, but Orson insists on taking it with him. "I own it now," he says. "It's mine."

I can see the skyline of mountains rising above the trees as plainly as if it were day. The ice fields and patches of snow in the high country glisten in the yellow light, and I'm thinking that I may stay in this country for quite some time. There's something about the openness here that draws me. The East is claustrophobic, so dense with trees that you often miss the sky. But here, the sky is unavoidable. From horizon to horizon it extends. It's bigger than anything, and if you need to, you can lose yourself in it.