

## Wanting to Kill



I REMEMBER the phone call from my mother distinctly. It came in February of 1980. I was 19, a high school dropout working as a tool-and-die apprentice, living in my hometown of Bridgeport, Conn.

“Does John have any tattoos?” she asked me.

I knew by the tension in her voice that something was terribly wrong. “No,” I told her.

“Are you sure, Matthew? Are you sure that your brother doesn’t have any tattoos?” She was pleading with me now, while rushing forward before I could answer. A body had been found, she said, a body without a distinguishing tattoo. The police were sure it was John, but my mother had convinced herself otherwise, that he had at least one tattoo on his body. I, however, knew better. I had tattoos, as did my brother Mark, but John?

“I’m positive,” I told her.

My brother had been stabbed numerous times, his throat slashed. The crime occurred in a park in South Phoenix. An ex-con from Oklahoma was later found guilty of first-degree murder.

Overnight, I became a believer in the death penalty. Before John's murder, I thought that killing a person in any form was wrong. "I want closure," I would rant to anyone who'd listen. "I want justice." But what I really wanted was blood and vengeance.

A few years after John died I moved to Arizona and, several years after that, was sentenced to prison. I was a junkie and a petty thief, the latter a direct result of the former. Between 1987 and 2002 I was constantly being locked up. Aside from time in the county jail, I also served roughly 10 years in both federal and state institutions.

In the summer of 1991 I was being held in a Maricopa County jail on three felonies: third-degree burglary, possession of narcotics and possession of drug paraphernalia. The judge sentenced me to two years in an Arizona state prison, the same state prison system that housed my brother's murderer. After being transferred to the Arizona Department of Corrections I was taken to an office for classification.

"You have a D.N.H. in your jacket," the administrator told me.

D.N.H. is an abbreviation for "do not house," as in: "Do not house prisoner Parker with his brother's murderer." Jacket is slang for a prisoner's criminal record. The administrator had my jacket in his hand, and he was leafing through it as he sat behind his desk in the cramped office. My jacket contained such things as the specifics of my convictions, my criminal history and security threat, as well as any propensity for violence or, as was the case with me, the lack thereof.

I knew that my brother's killer was serving a life sentence in an Arizona state prison. I didn't want to confront him; I was in truth scared to death at the possibility, however remote. Here I was being sent to the same prison system as the man I wanted killed. My thoughts were roiling. What if there wasn't a D.N.H. in my jacket? What if there was a screw-up — not unheard of in prison bureaucracies — and I was sent to the same prison as him? What if I ran into him? What would I do? What would he do? That D.N.H. in my jacket made me instantly realize just how close I was to an actual death penalty — so close that I could personally administer it. One little mistake on the part of the Arizona Department of Corrections and all my wishes for bloody vengeance would have become a reality. "Here's your death penalty, son. We're

gonna accidentally (wink, wink) put you in the same prison with this dirt bag, where you can stab him in his sleep with a homemade shank. Slash him to ribbons with a razor blade in the shower. Bash his brains out on the ball field with a baseball bat.”

It's easy enough to think about vengeance, even to declare a desire for it, but being confronted with the mechanics of murder is a different matter entirely. It forced me to examine my motives more closely, and to think about the sheer intimacy inherent in acts of violence. I'd been in fistfights in jail and prison — fighting is just a fact of life on the inside — but they were relatively harmless and over quickly. Now I was forced to contemplate actual murder, and decided that it just wasn't in me to attack another human being with intent to kill or, a distinct possibility, be killed. It took that D.N.H., that rote product of penal bureaucracy, to teach me that I didn't want to kill anybody, and from there it wasn't much of a mental leap to conclude that I didn't want the state do it for me, either.

That simple D.N.H. in my jacket enabled me to come to terms with the bloodless violence inherent in the death penalty, violence made even more insidious when — especially when — we clean it up and administer it with clinical precision.

He is out now, that murderer, paroled after 25 years. But I don't much care. Those 25 years in prison could not have been pleasant for him. It's not life, but for me it's close enough. I've been to prison and I know what it's like.

And although I was able to clarify my thoughts concerning the death penalty at that time, it took me another 10 years, and three more trips to prison, to get my own life together.