

Matias F. Travieso-Diaz
4110 Faith Ct.
Alexandria, VA 22311
(703) 472-6463
mtravies@hotmail.com

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Tattoos
by Matias Travieso-Diaz

When the Righteous Republic was established, Justin Goodwin went along with many of its changes, which were consistent with his religious beliefs. He approved of the new Constitution, which abolished the separation between church and state and limited the press to activities not inconsistent with the orderly functioning of the government. He also accepted the repeal of the Bill of Rights and other protections for individuals. As long as his ability to practice his religion was not curbed, he also did not mind that non-Christian faiths, as well as atheism, were banned. Persecution of those minorities was regrettable, but it was necessary for the greater glory of God.

Years later, the environmental crisis created by global warming resulted in the demise of major and minor cities on all three coasts. Justin's house in St. George, South Carolina had been unaffected by the rising seas and now sat not far from the beach, so he was not hurting like many others. Yet, he was sympathetic to the plight of the destitute and, as many in his church, was as generous with his charity as his meager income allowed.

All countries were experiencing similar environmental disasters, and tensions among nations kept escalating. Smaller countries with untapped natural resources were invaded and

absorbed into larger ones, with not a ripple of protest by the world community. China occupied the Philippines and began moving against Australia. This attack on a Christian nation could not be tolerated, so martial law was declared and compulsory military service was instituted. Soon American soldiers were fighting alongside the Aussies in their resistance to the Chinese invaders. Justin, in his fifties, was not subject to being called and his marriage had yielded only daughters, so his household was spared from the draft.

As in past wars waged by the Republic, the engagement in Australia brought about massive protests and desertions. Draft dodgers fled across the borders or sought shelter in the mountains or in isolated communities. A cottage industry developed in the manufacture of fake forms of identification.

The government then decreed that the body of every man, woman and child would be tattooed with a unique number that would be proof of identity. However, those persons who already had a tattoo or combination of tattoos on their bodies could have those tattoos registered at a Selective Service System office and entered into the National Security Administration database in lieu of having a number incised into their arms. If a person's existing tattoos were not, alone or in combination, found to be unique, he or she would either need to get a new, singular tattoo or go through the official numerical tattooing. Most people opted for getting additional tattoos of their choice. Tattooing parlors became the only growing businesses in the stagnant economy.

Justin had a strong aversion to tattoos. It had been drilled into him early on by the teachings of his church, which cited Leviticus 19.28: "You shall not make any cuttings in your flesh for the dead, nor tattoo any marks on you: I am the Lord." Preachers also noted that tattoos

placed on the skin a mark a that was transitory. The true marks of a Christian are faith, hope, and charity, which abide forever.

Justin was appalled by the people's willingness to self-mutilate. It seemed to him that while the acquisition of a tattoo may once have evidenced a desire to be recognized as an individual, these days everyone had one or several tattoos, so that the practice seemed more like yielding to conformity rather than defying it.

And there were other considerations. The numerical inscriptions ordered by the government were no different than the brands that were applied to cattle, or the markings of slaves in ancient times to signify ownership, and were abhorrent to his love for individual rights. Other tattoos failed as a matter of aesthetics, for tattoos tended to be maudlin and most times downright hideous. For all those reasons, Justin was opposed to applying any sort of tattoo to his body.

One evening his wife Cornelia hesitantly asked Justin for permission to get a pretty tattoo to avoid the government numerical identification. Justin was incensed: "My own wife wants to get a tattoo? Don't you know how I feel about them? They are disgusting. They are coarse. They just demonstrate the stupidity of the general population. No way am I going to let you disgrace our family!!"

Cornelia cowered, for she knew that in the new society females were subject to the wills of their male relatives, and of course their husbands. But, all throughout history, women had learned to get their way through subterfuge and cunning. She did not oppose Justin directly but tried to another tack. Tearfully, she replied: "Oh, dear, I would do anything to avoid getting tattooed, but the government is going to start doing inspections at places of employment and if

they see that I am not tattooed, I may lose my job and you know how hard it is to find work these days.”

Justin began to protest, but Cornelia went on. “You know, I have been thinking of what would be an appropriate tattoo for me. I looked for inspiration in the Good Book, and there, in Genesis, is the story of Sarah, who was the loving wife of Abraham. I could get a tattoo showing an image of a beautiful mature women with words underneath like ‘Sarah – Always Faithful.’ I would have it on my left shoulder, out of sight but easy to display upon demand. It would be small, but tasteful. No red or green inks. A tracing of the woman’s face and the words beneath, all simple and in black. Then...”

Justin could not withstand the torrent of words. Cornelia was a good Christian woman who had given him three wonderful children... “Fine, have it your way, but how about the children?”

“What do you mean?”

“Are our daughters going to be tattooed also?”

Cornelia put her arms around Justin’s shoulders, and replied sweetly: “Darling, you are not observant. Angela and Bella *already* have tattoos, so we only have to make sure they are distinctive; we may need to add our names to the marks they have. I will take the little one with me when I get my tattoo and will make sure she gets a nice one.”

Justin threw his arms up in despair. “Fine. Do what you think is best. Just please make sure I don’t have to look at any tattoos.”

“You won’t need to. Bella’s tattoo is on her hip, Angela has hers in a place you’ll never see.”

* * *

After a while, all other members of Justin's household had conforming tattoos, discreetly hidden from his sight. He was unhappy, but resigned. After all, every person he knew had one or several tattoos, and most people were not shy about displaying them openly. Often, they were appalling. Justin felt increasingly isolated from his fellow citizens, bent on debasing themselves.

His despair grew when he noticed how every week the attendees to the Sabbath services at his church were succumbing more and more to the tattoo epidemic. One Saturday, to his horror, he discovered that the Minister had a tattoo on his left arm showing three crosses over Mount Golgotha, with the words "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son" underneath. Appalled, he questioned the man for such an idolatrous gesture. The Minister gave him a sad smile and remarked: "Render unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's; and unto God the things that are God's."

Justin was a translator and did most of the work at home, so he was spared many of the outward signs of a society's crumbling. He was sheltered from the tattooing epidemic's assault on public and private morality, as he was sheltered from the succession of tyrants who seemed to climb to power overnight and be almost as quickly deposed, the unending wars, the unpredictable and often catastrophic weather events, the disappearance of foreign goods from the market, and other signs of a world in turmoil.

Cornelia prodded him to get a tattoo, for he was in defiance of the law and sooner or later he would be caught. He resolutely opposed doing so: "Even if I am the last person alive without a tattoo, I will not yield to that immorality. My flesh is only God's to modify." His resolve was tested when the Minister took him aside after Sabbath services and told him: "Brother Justin, I must tell you something that pains me. Our Conference has considered you for an appointment as Elder, which I believe you have earned through your piety, good works in the community, and

promotion of the faith. However, at the last minute one member brought up the fact that you have refused to be tattooed in violation of the law, and as such are a risk to the Church and its reputation, so your appointment was denied. I think I can persuade the Conference to reconsider, but you must become compliant with the law. Please give this matter some thought and talk to me when you are ready.” Justin was stupefied by the Minister’s words and left without a reply. From that point on, he observed the Sabbath at home.

One evening he was working on a new translation of the poems of Gaius Valerius Catullus. He often wondered why an editorial house would spend money on publishing poetry, let alone that of a long dead, disreputable Roman. Nobody read any more, except for short text messages on their phones. Literature was dead, colleges were moribund, and the level of ignorance among the population was comparable to that during the Dark Ages. He was toying with these somber thoughts while he thumbed through his Latin to English dictionary seeking the proper translation of an archaic word, when there was a loud knock on the front door. He did not get up, for he expected that it was something for Cornelia and she would take care of it. A few moments later, she came into his office, followed by two dour men wearing State Security uniforms. Without any preamble, one of them said in a stern voice:

“Mr. Goodwin, it has been brought to our attention that, in violation of Public Law 22-1607 you have not obtained an identification tattoo. Is that true?”

Justin faced his accuser squarely: “That is correct, Officer.”

“Why?”

“It is against my religious beliefs. I follow the Biblical precept that tattooing is against God’s commands.”

“Are you saying that you are a conscientious objector to the law?”

“I never thought of it that way, but I guess I am.”

“Well, Mr. Goodwin, this law does not provide exceptions for conscientious objectors. Tattooing is a matter of national security and nobody is exempt. As you know, members of every Christian denomination have complied with the law, either by numerical inscription or by securing their own distinctive tattoos. You are a lone dissenter, and a public threat by the bad example you are setting. You are under arrest.”

Before Justin could react, each agent had grabbed him under one arm to drag him away. At the door, he turned his head and saw tears streaming down Cornelia’s cheeks and the stunned looks of his daughters.

They had him in detention for forty-eight hours in a pen populated by addicts, drunks, sodomites, and other social outcasts. At the end, he was brought before a bored looking Magistrate who glanced at the State Security report and just asked one question, addressed to the District Attorney’s representative: “What do you want the court to do to this scofflaw?”

The District Attorney’s representative, a man with the demeanor of a scared rabbit, began speaking in a high pitch and then settled down as he got control of his nerves:

“Your Honor, the accused has no criminal record and is reported to be a good Christian and a law-abiding man, except in this area. We ask that the Court give him the choice of agreeing to be tattooed in a conforming manner or be sentenced to five years of hard labor, the choice to be put into effect without delay. The Righteous Republic is merciful.”

“Very well.” The Magistrate turned to Justin: “Justin Goodwin. You have until this Court convenes again to declare your intentions. Today is Friday, so you shall present yourself Monday morning at 10 AM and advise us of your decision. Since this is your first offense, we won’t require posting of a bond, but be advised that failure to appear in court will constitute a

felony to be added to the existing charges. You may bring an attorney on Monday but this Court does not think it would be advisable. Any questions?"

"No, Your Honor."

"Then you are released on your own recognizance until Monday. You can get a release form from the clerk. Have a nice weekend."

Justin had never felt so angry in his life. He was mad at the system, mad at the law that forced him to betray his beliefs, mad at himself for not being more forceful in confronting the magistrate. More than anything else, he was mad at the prospect of having to inflict demeaning abuse on his body.

That night, Cornelia tried to comfort him: "It won't be that bad, dear. Everyone does it. Most people like it. Nobody will think less of you, and a simple tattoo will keep us all safe."

"Yes, but I will have to live with the shame the rest of my life."

"Well, we all have to live with things we don't like. There is a lot about the Righteous Republic that rubs me the wrong way, but I have adapted to it, and so have you."

"I guess that I have adapted too much. I'd like to take a stand on this, but don't know how."

"What you need is a good night sleep. Get some rest, and you'll come up with something before you go back to court."

That night, Justin tossed and turned, talking to himself. He woke up on Saturday, feeling more tired than when he went to bed. He spent all of Saturday in a black mood, wrestling with the impossible dilemma of what to do when he went back to court on Monday. He tried to work on his Catullus translation, but could not get anything done. At the end, he went to bed early and

slept almost as badly as the night before. Almost, but not entirely: in his delirium, a thought, the kernel of an idea was slowly taking shape, as he turned it this way and that in his mind.

When he rose Sunday morning, the idea had blossomed into a plan. A radical plan, but one that would leave his conscience satisfied. By Sunday afternoon his plan had matured enough that he felt he was ready. He said nothing to Cornelia, for she might try to talk him out of it. He did, however, ask her casually: “I have forgotten, where did you get your tattoo?”

“I went to the parlor on Main. They do really good work, as you can tell.”

“Yes, they do” he agreed.

Sunday night he slept better than he had in years.

* * *

Monday morning, dressed in his best clothes, Justin appeared before the Magistrate. When his case was called, he stared back as the official reread the arrest report and the recommendation of the District Attorney’s office. Raising his head, he stared at Justin with incurious eyes and asked:

“Well, Mr. Goodwin. What shall it be? Tattoo or prison?”

“Tattoo, Sir. But I have a question.”

“What’s that?”

“Do I understand correctly that, if I get a tattoo of my own choice, I’m free to select what the tattoo will look like?”

“That’s correct. As long as the tattoo is unique and distinctive, the law does not dictate its form or content. That’s left to your discretion.”

“Thank you, Your Honor. I opt to get a tattoo of my choosing.”

“A wise decision. You have seven days to get it done. On or before next Monday, you will present yourself to a Selective Service System office to be inspected and have your tattoo registered. This judgment will be entered into our system and will be available at all offices. Case dismissed.”

“Thank you, Your Honor.”

It did not take Justin a week to get his tattoo. The parlor on Main Street was all booked up that day and Tuesday, but Justin was able to get an appointment for Wednesday afternoon. By quitting time that day, he had a brand-new tattoo to share with the world.

“Oh,” said Cornelia a bit surprised. “I didn’t expect you to get a tattoo on your neck.”

“Yes, dear. I figured that if I was going to be tattooed, everyone should be aware of it. No sense hiding it.”

“The dark red letters stand out because of your light complexion. What does it say?”

“*Catullus, Carmen 16.*”

“I don’t know Latin. What does it mean?”

“Oh, it’s an old Roman poem. I’m sure it will be unique, since Latin is a dead language.”

“I’m sure, too. You are so clever.”

“That, or everyone is so ignorant.”

“Whatever you say.”

* * *

Everyone reacted favorably to Justin’s tattoo. People commented on the nice color, the choice of lettering (he had picked Perpetua Titling, all caps, which gave the words an air of timelessness that matched the ancient language), the location around the collar. Nobody knew

what it meant and none were about to ask, to avoid evidencing their ignorance. It was another case of the emperor's new clothes, chortled Justin internally.

But, as in the fairy tale, an innocent child burst his bubble. They were entertaining friends of Cornelia from work when one of the visitors, a little girl, approached Justin and squinted, while declaring in a surprisingly loud voice for such a small person: "Mother, what does it mean?" The mother's face assumed a deep beet color, as she stammered: "Sweetie, I don't know. Maybe Justin can tell us."

Justin smiled and said: "It is only a reference to a poem by an old Roman named Catullus." He would say no more, leaving the mother mystified and more than a little annoyed. The mother thus took upon herself to learn more about the poem, which proved a difficult task since the Latin dictionary in the library had nothing on "Catullus." Nor could she do an online search, since all independent engines had been shut down by the government and replaced by an official encyclopedia that was largely useless.

But the mother was a persevering soul, and was able to find in a second-hand bookstore an old book containing Catullus' oeuvre, annotated and translated. Her eyes shot open like saucers when she got to Poem 16 and read the infamous opening line with a somewhat expurgated translation next to it. Gasping, she could hardly contain a howl. Dropping the book as if made of corrosive acid, she reached for her cell phone and began calling her friends.

Word of mouth travels faster than sound itself. In less than twenty-four hours, everyone in St. Charles knew of the contempt Justin displayed for his fellow citizens. A mob that included members of Justin's own church (of which he had become an Elder after donning the tattoo) gathered outside his home, demanding that he come out and face the music. He decided to emerge when a torch-carrying mob threatened to burn him and his family alive.

Justin kissed Cornelia goodbye and opened the door to a chorus of imprecations and threats. “Pederast,” “bastard,” and “scum” were among the mildest insults. In a moment, strong arms seized him. He was repeatedly struck, pummeled and dragged towards the Civic Center, where he was forced to stand, bloody and dazed, before a night magistrate who had trouble making sense of the mob’s accusations. Finally, the judge got the gist of the complaints and asked Justin: “Mr. Goodwin, please explain for this Court the meaning of your tattoo.”

Justin managed to stammer: “Your Honor... it... it was not ... meant for this Court.”

“Nonetheless, please translate.”

Justin sighed: “The poem has a famous first line that roughly translates as ‘screw you all in the rear’.”

The magistrate turned livid but kept silent for a few moments. Then, collecting himself, he declared: “Mr. Goodwin, you are guilty of gross impropriety, contempt for the morality of your community, and probably for the Righteous Republic itself. Your behavior is detestable But not illegal as such. The law does not dictate tattoo content, only requires its presence. Some of the people gathered here may seek damages for the distress that your impiety has caused them, but that’s not within the purview of this Court. You are free to go, for the moment. But a record is being made and you can be sure that the State will watch you carefully in the future. Dismissed.”

Justin started for home, but had barely walked twenty paces when the mob that surrounded him forced him into a halt. More insults, shoves and blows followed. Someone picked up a stone and hurled it at him, striking his cheek and drawing blood. Justin staggered, but managed to regain his balance as more stones were being found and thrown.

Justin fell to the ground and, as the stoning gained in intensity, he began to lose consciousness. The pain became intolerable, his vision blurred, and everything turned red. His last thought as he sank into oblivion was one of regret: “Instead of just the title, I should have tattooed the entire first line of the poem, “*Pedicabo ego vos et irrumabo,*” on my forehead.”

* * *

Shortly after Justin’s death, the Righteous Republic modified its tattooing requirements to specify that approved tattoos had to meet “the requirements of good taste, public morals, and the values of our Christian nation.” There were many protests, but at the end the government had its way, as it always did. Many thousands of tattoos had to be painfully erased and replaced with new ones more in consonant with the goals of the Republic. Inscriptions in foreign languages, particularly Latin, were disfavored.

This gave rise to a new form of protest: people would have one or a combination of words, or variations thereof, from Catullus inscribed as their tattoos. Cornelia was among the first to adopt the new trend, with the word “Pedica” imprinted in bold new letters on her forehead. She was loyal to Justin until her execution months later in one of the Republic’s final purges.

THE END