

Why Bad Boys Look So Good

By Sonsyrea Tate

My first husband was a straight-up thug, no two-ways about it. My family was mortified when I married him. My “big brothers” at school told me if they were my real brothers they’d whoop my behind for hanging out with such a guy. My girlfriends thought I’d lost my mind, and their mothers felt sorry for my mother - losing a daughter with so much promise.

That husband went back to jail within a year, and after a few months of him calling me on the job demanding more canteen money, cursing me out for not giving enough, I finally began coming to my senses. One day when I arrived at the visiting hall too late - after his girlfriend had already used up the visiting hour - it hit me: this is *not* a decent guy. I began coming to my senses, but my attraction to the rogues only slightly diminished. My next mate would be the flip side of the same coin.

“He’s just a dressed-up thug,” one of my girlfriends said. “He’s a thug working the inside, that’s the only difference.”

That was 20 years ago.

Last week, sitting across the table from several men with criminal backgrounds, and time proudly served, I found myself face to face with “the element” that once held so much appeal.

They seemed so determined. So indomitable. So worldly-wise. So street smart. So indestructible. So resilient. And they are. But, by now, life has taught me that so am I. It will not take my nieces 20 years to know this.

Twenty years ago it seemed that only a man savvy enough to survive the streets, smart enough to con his parole officer, and slick enough to hustle women could teach me to survive life’s harshest realities. So, I signed up for the training.

Polite little prayers and text-book lessons seemed trite in the face of storms I saw on the horizon. I had been raised a good little Muslim girl - sheltered, confined, protected, conformed (protected even from the truth about outlaws in my own family).

It’s the same for some sheltered Christians, Catholics, and Mormons, I suppose. The grass simply looks greener across the fence. The wild side looks like - and feels like, at first - more fun, more life-affirming. The rebels seem more daring, more ruggedly individualist, more authentically American. But hind sight is, well, you know.

“We’re like Noah and Moses,” one of the men told me last week. Twenty years ago, I might have been fascinated. “God doesn’t choose the saints,” he added. “Look at the other men who been to jail. Look at Malcolm X, Martin Luther King.”

“Martin Luther King was a scholar,” I said. “He went to jail for protesting.”

Rhetoric warmed over simply is less appealing.

In their hearts of hearts, the men who served time in prison for selling drugs, robbing people and trying to rip off a system that first stripped them bare and rendered them powerless, are also, in some ways, honorable. Their commitment to their comrades left behind shows, at last, a measure of compassion and a measure of their own power restored.

Twenty years ago it seemed admirable that some men could carve out a separate under-world rather than simply complain about being left out of the mainstream. It seemed

admirable, too, that some managed their way into the mainstream and covered up corruption, for a long time, as well as the white thugs.

Last week, sitting across the table from reformed outlaws, pouring out their hearts in earnest as they promoted an upcoming event, I felt a certain kinship. I hope they can convince others to give to their cause – reaching back to educate, enlighten, encourage and uplift the wayward. More importantly, though, I hope they remain true to it.