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War On Suicide By F. C. Brown Cloud

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I needed a break at work so popped by Alex's cubicle to say, "I've decided an honorable suicide is where you flash your organ donor card and pop yourself in the head right there in the hospital. Nothing goes to waste."

Alex didn't even look up. "Only honorable suicide is where they bite off their own skin. Otherwise there's more they could've took." I snorted. Of course he'd say *they*. Alex always votes Republican.

We shouldn't have had that conversation. Not at work. Not at all. But where I work, a bunch of white and Asian guys typing on computers, we're not worried about enforcement.

The letter of the law is simple. Suicide is illegal. Attempt the crime, do the time. State provided you with opportunity, now it's owed your contributions as a living taxpayer.

But then there's the spirit of the law. Which is: our economy has always functioned best when we've had slaves. Some jobs not even Mexicans want, and they'd insist on being paid. Current system is better. For-profit prisons make a killing, corporations lease incarcerated manpower at bargain rates, everybody wins. Almost everybody. A black man buying rope might land his ass in jail. Slammed with five, maybe ten, maybe *life* with priors, for eyeing his own wrists with lascivious intent.

Some people think the 13th Amendment outlawed slavery. It didn't. It outlawed chattel slavery, the idea you could be born into servitude with an unlucky draw in the parentage lottery. But not slavery itself. 13th Amendment simply requires a mockery of justice to accompany the condemned man's branding.

So Congress outlawed self-harm. Sounded good at the time. War on Suicide! Our nation *will* keep its people safe. But instead of fighting that war with counseling and treatment, we lock people up. Culling from the populace those slaves we need. Get situations like a black man on prophylactic isosorbide mononitrate for his heart disease — food he loved never loved him back — slammed to the pharmacy wall and cuffed for trying to buy a vial of sildenafil — *just in case* — before a blind date. Dude was crying, said he had no idea, said staff at the clinic where he got the ED script should've warned him if the pills were dangerous together. Judge was unconvinced. Gave him a dime. But a white doctor can stand before that exact same judge and claim, "Your honor, it was an *accident* I took all those sleeping pills." *He* walks with a fine.

Seventy percent of dudes doing time on the wrist-cutter's rap are black. Ninety-some percent are poor. Which sounds unfair, but our Supreme Court gave it the okay. The NAACP thought they had an unassailable case. This black guy by the name of Lions was walking along the shoreline putting stones into the pocket of his overcoat. Police pounced, hauled him in, claimed he was trying to Woolf

his way out of his obligation to the state. Judge struck from the record testimony corroborating Lions's claim that he sold agate jewelry at Renaissance fairs. Then found him guilty, gave him ten.

Liberal newspapers were all over that case. One after another, rags like the *New York Times* were filling up with scathing editorials. Dude soon had this kick-ass pro-bono legal team working on his appeal. And the case made it all the way up. Lions's lawyers presented all the numbers – percentage of offenders, percentage of those stopped by the police, percentage sentenced, percentage serving time – and argued that equal protection was being denied to African-Americans. A clear violation of the Fourteenth Amendment.

The crusties on the bench disagreed. Supreme Court dismissed the case outright. Declined to overturn. They reasoned that Lions did not have standing to introduce the aggregate statistics. After all, he was a unique individual, and all those numbers came from other people's cases. In their eyes, only a statistically-averaged black man would have standing to contest the racial application of the law, and that "average black male" is nothing but a fleshless mathematical construct. *Nobody* has standing according to the majority, that lockstep quintet of hate machines.

The beautiful snowflakes melt away in jail.

Not that it affects me much. Yeah, I dabble, same as anybody. But look at me. No big risk. I get bored, take a break, shoot the shit, then get back to work. Guys like me get a pass. When I go, they'll say it was an accident. My mom may cry, but she won't be harried by the cops.



F.C. Brown Cloud teaches creative writing at the Monroe County Jail and corresponds with inmates across the Midwest for his work with Pages to Prisoners and as director of the Indiana Prisoners' Writing Workshop. His publications include short fiction in the *Vignette Review*, *Bartleby Snopes* and *Toasted Cheese*; nonfiction in *Literary Orphans* and the *Weeklings*; and research articles in *Molecular Membrane Biology* and *The Journal of Cell Biology*. Brown Cloud received his B.A. from Northwestern and his Ph.D. from Stanford. Find him in Bloomington, Indiana or at fcbrowncloud.com (<http://fcbrowncloud.com/>).

