

THE BULLET

A year in County jail
San Francisco, 1968

Preface

It has taken me 36 years to begin this narrative. I've avoided it for that long because of the wincing I do whenever I look at my journal from jail or remember exactly what happened in court. The gap between what my friends and I thought we were doing nobly in the streets ...and the truth of our clumsiness...is hard to face. I can't say what happened in the words of that 25-year old man. But neither can I solely from this old man's perspective. Maybe because that young man did not believe he would, or even should, be alive for six decades. He would not respect me...but I feel a need to bring him back enough to experience his wounds without his goggles on. Then maybe he will let me be simply an old guy with memories. Below all the chaff of mind in him was a pair of eyes and ears and a heart...and it was 1968 in San Francisco. That's my lens and crucible.

Freeze Frame

It started in a whirlwind in a hurricane season. I was a mote in an updraft, catching a wind, a wave. I gulped ideas...and nearly drowned. Underneath the wave an horrific undertow of corpses, napalm, people setting themselves on fire. Assassins and martyrs. This story started Everywhere...but particularly – on an October night in 1967 in a San Francisco apartment. A Draft Resistance party with cops coming to the door on a noise complaint. It all happened fast. I'm at the door, they want to come in and bust someone, I ask for a warrant they say *we'll show you what a fucking warrant is* and try to throw me down the stairs. People grab me to pull me back, I'm up in the air, my shirt rips off, a cop is absurdly punching my ankle while I think *Is that all you can do you idiot?* and no that *wasn't* all, there's a gun or a spraytool and they fire it in my face, I'm screaming in pain, it's right in my eyes, it must be acid, it's killing me, I'm blacking out, convulsing ripping at my face and then my hands are flaming, I am head over heels backward, crashing behind my friends to the hall writhing, my heartbeat is five times normal, my chest is wracking, pounding, I'm unable to see. *Get him to the water!* I hear, pushed into a bathroom, splashing from the sink, it's not stopping the pain, making it worse, but I can breathe, I'm thinking tiny thoughts, I can see my face is not disfigured, I hear yelling and screams of pain. I go to the front door. John's on the ground bleeding, unconscious, a cop is trying to drag him. I pull the other way, yank him free, push him to the stairway, he's the target, *run John, get outta here!* There are squad cars everywhere, riot police drawing their guns. At the bottom of the steps is the teenager Ruggsy lying on the sidewalk, a cop runs up firing three shots in the air, he straddles Ruggsy, brings the gun level and shouts *FREEZE! ANYBODY MOVING IS DEAD!* He sweeps the sidewalk slowly with his Absolute-Zero ray gun, everyone turning to ice... but then I see Larry up the street, he's hurt and struggling with a cop awkwardly, he can't hear it, he's suddenly free of the cop, turning as if to fall as the one with the gun aims at him and we shout *stop Larry STOP!* but can't move, and I see in my moviemind the next frames, the awful next possible moment with the shot and Larry falling dead, but Ruggsy is pulling at the cop above him, and gives out a piercing yell *PLEASE DON'T SHOOT LARRY* and the cop hears him, forgets Larry and sweeps the gun right down into Ruggsy's face with a *SHUT THE FUCK UP PUNK!* as Larry mercifully stops flailing.... and that movie frame melts in my mind and is gone.

New Fish

A floor full of cells, sixty in all. Down the middle a completely bare concrete floor. That's a tier. Ten tiers in all, 600 cells. Two long wings joined at a central hub, the Rotunda, yields tier-names like: *Two South* and *Five North*. When you first enter the jail you always go first to Three North. All 'new fish' enter here. You've been through the bus ride with barred windows, you've been fumigated and issued a green jumpsuit. Had your asshole checked for contraband. In Three North more than half the 'old fish' were queens or madmen. The idea was that as you were walked in by a deputy and handed over to the Trustee, you then got marched past the long row of cackling leering voices. *Hey baby want a blow job? Lookit the Fish, ain't **they** raw meat now.* Luckily I've read the Arabian Nights and know I'll be turned to stone if I look around. Then I get my cell, number seventeen? Voices saying "*watch out for that one honey, that's a psycho, a soul eater*" Locked in and sitting alone on the bunk noticing the careful layer of Bull Durham tobacco spread all over the floor and bunks and toilet.

Then here's my cellmate walking up, and the deputy locks him in with with me. His hair is shoulder-length and matted, full of wrappers and bits of stick. He's lean and freckled and has dead eyes. He doesn't acknowledge that I exist. Muttering to himself. A smell like anesthetic and poop. He's gotten more Bull Durham and begins sprinkling out the pouch. I ask him not to get it all over me; he doesn't answer but gets louder and snarls a little. I ask him which bunk is his. No answer. He's a totally gone lunatic. Those eyes seeing in another dimension, in which I am a gnat, or an eddy in a flow of hot air. I can't be expected to 'play house' with this creature. They *have* to know that. I can't really stay another few minutes, this is dangerous in some way, he's twitching as if my presence were a jagged piece of broken aircraft. The trustee walks by and I catch his attention, say "*man you have to get me out of here. this has to be a mistake, I mean this guy should be alone or in a mental hospital...right?*"

"Yeah, you're right brother, we know. The deputies are just messing with you, just like this whole tier is set up that way, right? We have all these freaks and queers to sort of put you thru the mill, like a hazing or initiation thing. I'll get you another cell, be back in a minute."

Finally I'm in your new digs. All to myself the little steel room with the open toilet the only furniture. The coarse army blanket and steel frame bed shelf. Not too bad but the heckling and trash talk is still oppressive. I notice that my lunatic ex-roomie is not the only very mad person. Some old man is talking loud about roast beef. He's across from me, I can see his cell with all its magazine photos of food tied up on the bars. Advertisements with giant color pictures of steaks and roasts and turkey dinners. Bowls of ice cream and beer ads.

He's talking crazy about eating. Suddenly loud, suddenly whispering. His hair is spiky and he's wizened and elfin, jumping about and cackling. Occasionally someone screams at him to shut up. Some prisoners start beating their metal cups on the bars. *Trustee! Make that old man shut up!* A young guy yells out *"I'm gonna cut **you** up like a roast old man! I'll kill you right now if you don't tear down those pictures!"*

When dinner comes I realize how maddening those photos are. The main course is gizzard glop. Pieces of gizzard with cornstarch and potato substitute. I try to eat some with that cheap white-bread slice but I can't stop gagging. Flush it down the toilet. Someone yells at me *"this is the 'special' night chump, this is their best !"* Next to me an older man's voice: *"you have to just eat what ever it is boy. I figured that out a long time ago. No use to starving. It'll keep you alive, and keep some flesh on you."*

That night one of the cells across from me gets noisy. Everyone has been asleep. There's a voice saying *"yes, it's your word, it's the word you were searching for Dr Burgess, It's CLOMON!!! YES!! YESS! Clomon! I have it, clomon is the word, is the crack in the ceiling, the one he wants me to find! I have to see Dr Burgess right away! RIGHT AWAY! GUARDS!!!"* He's banging the metal cup, he's throwing himself at the bars, throwing his blanket out in the hall, screaming *"CLOMON!"* and that he has to be taken to the doctor immediately. It finally gets the deputies moving... a little detachment comes in with their clubs drawn. We're all silently watching with hands on bars. They yell at him to shut up, open his cell, and drag him out. He's screaming to go to Dr Burgess, he has the answer to everything: *"Let's go, Doctor Burgess is waiting! Get me to him immediately!"* But they throw him down hard to the cement floor. He's still yelling. One puts a knee into him, and punches his head back and forth. *"Shut... the... fuck... up!"*

The kid can't stop, he feels no pain and thinks *There's no time* . They cuff him and kick him a couple of times. We get upset, yell at the deputies to *"leave the poor son of a bitch alone. Just take him out of here, you don't have to beat on him, he's a nutcase."* But he gets rough treatment all the way up and out of the cell block. They're taking him to the Hole. This scene depresses everyone, we're just voices in cages in a dim midnight hallucination. The trustee comes up, we talk a minute. He points out that since the mental hospitals were closed by Reagan they can't send these madmen anywhere but jail. They pick them up as Vagrants downtown and give them 30 days.

After awhile I fall asleep and wake the next day... as a *made* guy. Now I'm a card-carrying inmate. I'm doing a 'bullet', a year, the maximum for County jail. There's a routine to this, there's dinner and lunch and stuff in between. Watching TV with no chairs and a vote for the channel every hour. Milling about in the Rotunda. Back into lockup. Meals shoved thru the bars, taking a dump in full sight of several cells on the

opposite side. Three days go by and I'm reading the morning paper...and there's that Bull Durham madman in the news. They say he was discharged from jail and dropped off at the bus station by the jail bus. He walked over to Market Street and found a length of pipe and bludgeoned two people to death before anyone could stop him! **That** guy! He *was* discharged yesterday. The trustee confirms it...*"yeah, that's his name all right. Gus Traheen. Same dude we just cut loose. Wow.."*

I think about the way he looked through me in the cell....That could have been me... *That was you bub. You were a length of pipe.*

Life Inside

After a week of scrubbing stairways, I was assigned a job as a long-term prisoner. A deputy guessed right in asking if I could type, and I was sent to the little office with glass walls in the Rotunda. Sergeant Brown was in charge and the main work was to help him keep the daily duty-lists fresh and accurate. When everyone with jobs was sent to their stations, the deputies needed a list that showed every day the names of gardeners, janitors, clerks in the Front Office and so on, so they could check the numbers and names as they let people in or out of the job. Work was two hours in the morning, two hours in the afternoon. Each job had a characteristic mix of classic West Coast work shirts and pants. There were pinstriped 'hickory' shirts or blue chambray, dark blue jeans and light blue jeans...and the green jump suits. Rotunda clerks wore chambray and denim.

At this point I was also sent to a permanent address that accorded with the job. Clerks were all in Two South or Two North, the privileged tiers for long-term prisoners. There were no cells, just an open dormitory with a common bathroom at the end. Life here was somewhat easier. You ate at big tables together, you could stroll around the tier visiting at any hour before lights out. The administrators had 'integrated' the two dorm tiers like this: Two North was all Black with five White guys. The trustees were Black. Two South was all White except for five Black guys...and the trustees were White. This was perversely clever. No one could say it was Jim Crow. The privileges were the same.

The Blacks were allowed to dominate in 2 North...and vice versa. In fact, it did seem to keep the peace. But it looked strange, and felt strange...to someone who had been marching in civil rights picket lines.

I wished to be back in a cell at first. I didn't trust the other inmates enough to go easily to sleep at night with no walls around me. Yet the two men on either side were quiet and interesting people. Curtis was younger than me, a junkie from the Fillmore ghetto who had come close recently to the Nation of Islam. He was cool to me but gradually opened up because I was a 'political prisoner'. On the other side was Peralta. He was a middle-aged Argentinean who was very gloomy. The word was he had done something wrong in his family...like child support failure?...or worse. He would not talk about it. But it was clear he was also not someone I had to worry about. So after a few days I began to relax and meet some other men that became my core of friends.

The Rotunda was the hub on the ground floor where the stairways emptied from the tiers. There were offices along the edges for deputies to use, and a commissary window for inmates who had money in their accounts. The surprise here was to see all the cosmetics available. The queens were a serious market, always numbering at least a half-dozen. It seemed the Captain felt that the melodramas of transvestite courting and sex kept a lot of prisoners preoccupied... so that they should be allowed to dress up as ladies. Or, the other rumor was true; that the Captain, who weighed at least 400 pounds and had a sadistic edge in his voice, had his own appetite in mind.

There was a corridor to the front area where visitors came in and the main desk sat. And then our little office that was like a command center where Sgt. Brown directed all the daily joblife and numbering. There were three of us regulars. One was Michael who had preceded me. He was a Haight-Ashbury dooper doing six months for selling weed. He knew he'd been mistreated, that the bust was unconstitutional...but had copped a plea. They had tried to get him to name other people to avoid jailtime...but he just couldn't do it. He was durable and cat-like and six months in jail didn't really scare him. The other was Wally, a one-legged older con who believed he was a criminal 'for keeps' and intended to do it with class, 'no snivelling'. Read lots of Ayn Rand and faith-healing books. Let his gray hair grow long and affected a pirate's swagger.

Michael organized the list every afternoon with consultations from the other deputies who told him the changes. Then I got it and typed it up fresh, with a couple of carbons. We were pretty efficient. Right away it was fascinating to watch the deputies come in and ask one of us what was going on in the daily assignments. There was a deference to us that surprised me. The fact that we were prisoners didn't seem important. Our administrative work put them in a subservient mood. It was hard not to prolong those moments.

One of the duties for me was to take a huge log-book down to the receiving zone and record each new inmate. As the deputies stripped them of clothing they gave me the brief details, name, address, occupation, penal code violation. This was upsetting. The men coming in were in a feral state of nervousness. Many of the winos reeked of fecal mess and vomit. Watching them all denuded and herded through lice-fumigation, asshole check and showers...was too reminiscent of death-camp imagery. One day it overwhelmed me. I was writing down occupation for some derelict, and it was "construction". I scanned over the winos noting occupations: farmhand, cannery worker, carpenter, machinist, warehouseman...they were the flotsam of proletarian life. I was shaking, my eyes blurring. I wrote about it later in my journal, a rant about how the workingclass is ground up under the wheels of...etcetera. But what had shaken me was the fear that my father would be in that line some day with a deputy shouting cruelly at him "*OCCUPATION?! What did you do, you old shit, when you were alive?!!*"

The Rotunda clerk job was coveted. Brown was known to be lenient and interesting. He was a middle-aged Black man with a family who was a student of human nature. Always curious about the characters that passed beneath his lens as he pored over the names and assigned people to the outside crew, or the laundry, etc. Winos all went to the Farm. Gardening or lawnmowing...that was their province because it was certain they wouldn't try to escape. Mostly older men who were drying out and headed for the sidewalks when they got out anyway, so the regular meals and nice outdoors work seemed just fine for thirty days. The other jobs had certain connections and attractions. Laundry meant your pick of clothes. A new shirt ironed with starch; pants that fit, with creases sharp...could set you apart and attract a clientele who would pay a carton of cigarettes to look like that. Front office men were able to check out the prettiest visitors. Rotunda Clerk meant being able to take a carton from someone in exchange for telling the Sergeant to put him on the Gardening crew.

There was a fourth man who started after I'd been there a few weeks, Conrad. He was small-statured, with wire-rimmed glasses and a short haircut. He had come right up and asked for an office job and he spoke with agility and was filling out his answers in an interesting way with little side stories. Brown asked him why he had a Federal 'hold' on him. He told us he had been in Florida and an alligator had crawled into his car when he wasn't looking. When he stopped at a restaurant in Texas the alligator bit a man breaking into his car, which brought the cops in to it and they charged him with transporting alligators across state lines. When he walked away Brown was grinning ear-to-ear. "*We have to get that guy in here*" ...

Conrad had been a college history professor in Pennsylvania for several years. Then one day his wife and little son were killed in an auto accident. He was disoriented with grief and spiraled out of control until he had quit and wandered away from the town. Lived on skid rows in Pittsburgh or Philadelphia for a while. Gradually he saw that he wasn't going to do himself in, and that it was stupid to just go on as if he were.

But he had no desire to live in the world like a normal man anymore. He found himself able to embezzle a lot of money out of a temporary job, and enjoyed it. Since then he had lived as a scam artist.

His masterpiece had been a business in New Orleans that advertised it would transport yachts from the Gulf to the Great Lakes, by truck. He had researched the thing well, it was a legitimate line of work. Got the truck, the storefront, the lot by the marina. His first customer was completely trusting. He had a luxury yacht and wanted to get it up to Canada but not by sailing it there. So Conrad did the whole thing up contractually and took possession of the yacht and a \$10,000 advance. He drove it up to the St. Lawrence and then sold it! He had set the whole thing up seamlessly, changing ownership documents, his own identity...the works. That meant fifty thousand, and he was set for a good run.

Now he was in jail because he'd been running counterfeit money orders across the states. The Feds had caught on to his identity, and then when he was busted on a traffic violation the local cops found the Federal hold. He was sent to the County while the Feds readied their case and took possession of him.

We were mesmerized. The stories of his scams might have been wonderfully embroidered for all we knew...clearly any con artist was capable of inventing his life as a con artist. But we didn't care at all. There were a few things that were undeniable. The Federal hold *was* about money orders, Brown checked that out. And the flatness of his tone was that of a man who had, just as he had described, passed beyond giving a shit whether he was dead or alive.

He did care about getting out of jail however. He was very anxious about the Federal Pen. The sentence was going to be years and he hated to be locked up. He hated that he had made that little mistake about the speeding ticket too. It seemed important to reverse time and get a chance to fix that strategic error. If he could outsmart the Federal hold, that would do nicely. Conrad had a new idea for a scam too. The lesson he had learned from this bust was never to deal in Federal crime again. He had to stop doing the Interstate thing. Settle down in one area andwell, he wasn't of course going to tell us that. Brown didn't press him either. Brown was cool that way. He would bust you if it involved the area of his responsibility. But beyond that he had no feeling that he was part of a crusade against crime. He was just too interested in people. His main obsession in life was to complete a treatment he was writing for a TV show based on the life of a Black sheriff in the early 1900s. He would tell us about the history sometimes, trying to impress us with the unique character of the Black people who tried to make it as cowboys or law men or rodeo types. I think he saw himself in that light. Deputy Brown. Stuck in some godforsaken County jail in Frisco...holding his own, not so much by physical toughness, but by guile and wisdom and a good sense of the carnival aspect of life.

We were also the receiving point of all mail for inmates, and the disbursing point. Brown was in charge of checking for contraband, and he was shrewd. Once we got a package for a guy that included some innocent toiletry stuff. Razor, hair oil...and a mirror. I looked over and wondered why Brown was staring at the mirror. Turned it over a few times wondering why a guy would need a two sided mirror. With a penknife he probed the edges...and the mirror split into two mirrors back-to-back...and fell open revealing a flattened baggie of heroin! Oh damn, there went Sikorsky who had given me his battered copy of "Dune".

Nested Times

All this time the strands of my life on the Outside were pulling tight or snarling, week by week. Sometimes they yanked me right out of a hard-won groove. Jail seems impossible at first. One's fears are hard to master. Fear of the Deputies eased rather quickly. The menacing ones are obvious and the rest are just punching in to work and easy to avoid. After a few days I realized I was accustomed to more abrasive authority on construction jobs. It was the inmates that had me worried. The possibility of rape had entered my mind...but it soon dawned on me that the queens were absorbing that potential...there weren't any such incidents while I was there. It was more the menace of the irrational, the hustlers and lunatics and bullies who were all around me. I tried to use what I knew from working in construction...to give off a sense of tuned physical readiness, a 'game-face' look at all times. The political prisoner aura helped as well, gave off a little force field of its own, and a sign that I wasn't 'into' anything, wasn't a hustler or a mark.

As these layers of anxiety quieted down, I was paying acute attention to the routines. Everyone does... you try to bring your focus down to miniscule levels where you can scribe out a sanctive 'home'. Maybe it's that you will watch one TV show each night, then play one game of cards, then pace for an hour. Maybe it's the little collection of chessmen you've made out of the bread. Or the exact way you will use your blanket roll. Tiny zones of reliability and comfort. It's as if one could zoom inward in scale until life in a dollhouse might be hunky-dory. The hitch is that each part of that little landscape is invested with magnified importance. Each one has its own escape inward to an even more intimate chapel. If you lose the little green stone you've been fingering for weeks you're devastated.

People on the outside would eagerly tell me things that jerked me off balance; that for example, the appeal was going to get me out on bail. It was 'immanent'. Then two weeks later tell me that the lawyer had forgotten to introduce a critical motion that meant the appeal was impossible. Or my mother would pull strings to get me considered for Work Furlough. I was transferred downtown(losing my bunk, job,

cellmates...) and shown how it would work. Sitting nervously eating their lunch waiting to be taken out to the business and to even see my wife and child. Then the Deputy came in and told me to "*rollem up, you're out of the program*". Said the FBI intervened. A few weeks later there was the new 'deal' from the DA. Everyone would do thirty days...it was as good as done; I was told to get ready to be free on time served. Then the next week it was voted down...the others wanted to force a new trial.

Each of these times it took me days to get my calm space back. It would mean a lot of pacing and a stomach in knots. My friends who had done Folsom or Quentin time said the County jail was harder in that respect. In the penitentiary you're locked into an iron routine. Even solitary is better in some ways than all the chaotic unpredictable street-life. Too many short-timers, too little discipline. But as with a lot of things that are difficult at the time...years later they are the source of the best stories. What would be interesting, as a narrative, about a year in solitary? County Jail *was* like the streets of San Francisco. A menagerie.

Xmas: Brute Force

The season was upon us. Two weeks before Xmas the TV ads began to feature holiday dinner scenes and mornings around the tree. Some couldn't take it. People were mumbling and yelling in their sleep. One guy moaning out a lost marriage would wake us all up. I was aching with the thought that this would be our first holiday season with a child. Someone was always talking about *getting the fuck out of here*. Perversely, the Deputies let it be known that there were always a couple of Christmas 'pardons'...increasing the anxiety. *Is it me?* There were four fist fights in the last week of December. Visiting days were painful as the families on the Outside, no matter how sensitive, sent daggers of memory into the ones in prison. And those without family..they just ached and tightened their masks. Every day the world was saying you fucked up. Santa's Dad was pulling you off the list.

Wild Bill was the first to go off. He was a biker from the Gypsy Joker club who saw himself as a working-class hero. Bill was about six-two and athletic, and had the patience of a Doberman. As Xmas neared, so did his release date. January 12th and he would walk. He'd done a bullet and had no holds... truly a short-timer . But he started showing signs of stress, jumping up angry at the card table, blowing off friends. One night I woke about two and saw him in the center aisle tearing a leg off one of the metal chairs. Then he went back to the common bathroom, which was separated from the dorm by a wired-glass wall and lit up all night with fluorescents. My nearest cellmate was awake too and we locked eyes for a moment. *Keep still*, we thought. *What the hell is he doing?*

Bill was going to go right through the cement wall, tonight. He was back near the urinals, smashing at the concrete. I remembered that was the area where the foundation had cracked. He was prying and spiking at that crack. Once or twice I saw chunks of concrete fall to the floor.

Most all of us at the last third of the dorm were awake. A couple of his friends whispered to each other...*"Wild Bill has lost it man. Too late now, I ain't going back there and stop him. He might make it!....That sonofa bitch!"*

We watched in amazement as bigger and bigger chunks of concrete were pried and crushed out. Bill was possessed, superhuman. He was leaving his mark in the Saga now, this was beyond anyone's imagination. The tension mounted as we feared that the trustee, at the far opposite end of the tier, would be wakened by the blows. Everyone knew he was a total snitch despite his toughness. But there had been that moment two weeks before when Wild Bill had called him out at the poker game, accused him of cheating. The trustee had been holding the deck as Bill and he both stood up. Then he had let the deck drop out of his hand as if ready to fight. Bill snatched the deck in his right fist with terrific speed and force just before it hit the table and then froze the moment, glaring back like a tiger. Scared the shit out of the Trustee...and the rest of us too. He looked ready to fight to the death. The trustee had backed down, had given him a re-deal. Bill had thrown his hand in and quit, to everyone's relief.

He was trying to squeeze himself through... it was almost wide enough. He was frantic now, whaling on the edges of the hole, bending the reinforcing bars, heedless of the noise. The trustee woke up. He laid there and feigned sleep for a bit while he thought it over. *Better not go back there and get killed. He'll never make it anyway.*

But he did make it. We saw him vanish through the ragged hole. How long had it been...an hour? Wow. Hard to believe what we had just witnessed.

Now the Trustee made his move. Signaled the night Sergeant in the Rotunda...and they came in with force. Three deputies down in the bathroom looking at the hole. Yelling at each other. Running out into the Rotunda, rousing the crew. Now the whole jail woke up. *ESCAPE! Wild Bill got loose!* His legendary status leaped in the minds of all inmates. The con who could not be held in. *He went right through the wall! With two weeks left on his time that crazy sonofabitch.* The ultimate accolade. To be a crazy sonofabitch.

There was no sleeping after that although they put the lights back out. Whispered awe was the white noise that morning. Breakfast went by uneventfully until we heard the rumor that Bill had been caught. About noon they brought him into the

jail and through the Rotunda . He was frog-marched into the holding tank out of sight. He looked like he'd been electro-shocked.

The deputies gave out the story of the night. How Bill had made it up to the road and had jumped in front of a car and hit the driver, pushed him over and drove off. Now it's kidnap, assault, car theft AND escape. He'll get five years *minimum*. They had a bulletin out by that time and the sheriff's men stopped him ten miles away from the jail. Of course he wasn't going to make it. There was no plan for after the Wall. The real escape was to get through that Wall. He was in the Annals forever once he hit the dirt outside.

Xmas : Cunning

There was another fellow headed into the Outlaw Saga. He was just the opposite of Wild Bill. He *was* facing a long sentence...and he was not about to bash through a wall with no plan. It was Conrad, our apprentice clerk in the Rotunda. He had entertained us mightily for a month, but the Feds had gotten their court order and would come for him the next week.

Conrad told me he was going to break out. He had already worked up a plan and it was set. He had bought some street clothes and stashed them in the Rotunda...and had some cash too. He had worked the Sergeant for a transfer to the Front Office crew, just for a week. That took some doing. What he wanted from me was...to mistype the list for the Monday roll call. *"All you have to do is leave my name off the front-office list. They will take the first roll call and the number will be right...that'll give me a head start. You can always say it was just a mistake. You thought Conrad was staying in his cell, was sick. Don't worry it can't come back to you."*

I thought hard on it. It scared the crap out of me right away. I knew he was skimming over my risk. Of course I *could* deny it but if they dug into it like serious detectives, it would point at me. The roll call would be a key to the escape. Yet I felt I had to help him. He was a true rebel wasn't he? Going way out on the edge, risking his life to outsmart them and break free. I accepted the job, feeling as I did the night I swallowed the tablespoons of belladonna; here we go and we might not survive. And too late now. A leap into Fate when the odds are very poor and the deed looks ignoble.

That night after having typed up the list as he wished, I couldn't sleep. Tremendous tension, regret. *Now I'm going up for five years. Aiding and abetting. Folsom, Quentin. Never see my newborn kid again. What have I done? This isn't "for the cause". What*

will you say to the movement people who supported you as a political prisoner? Oh man...a bad night.

Next morning the time eked along until we took up our job posts. I saw Conrad going calmly off to the Front Office... then an excruciating wait. First we had our fifteen minutes of getting set up...then the roll call lineup. That was the moment. When it came, there wasn't much suspense. Right away there was an alarm and general uproar. The deputies made us stand to for a recount. The numbers were wrong, the totals. *Oh shit, now they're going to come in here about the number on the job list!*

Then they brought Conrad in under duress, dragged him through the Rotunda just like Wild Bill... and into the holding cell. After the count was made right to include the attempted escapee, we were locked up in tiers. Next morning I had a few minutes with him in the Rotunda as he waited to be transferred, and he said he had told the Sheriff that he had retyped the list. Then he let me know what had happened.

Conrad had breezed through the outer gate acting as if he were on a normal day's assignment. He hovered around the front steps as he would usually, retrieving the mail from the deputy outside. Waiting for his nerve to build up. Then he saw the deputy who usually got the mail busy with a coffee and out of his sheriff's car. Conrad had the inspiration to ask the guy if he wanted Conrad to make the mail run? *Yeah, that would be fine...*threw him the car keys. Unbelievable, he was halfway free! Got into the squad car and sat a moment with the motor running. *Should I do this fast or slow? Slow.* A hundred yards down the road was the guard shack. One deputy there who would ordinarily hand the squad car person the morning mail. So Conrad eases up to the Shack, smiles at the deputy. The deputy gives him the mail...Conrad edges forward into the turnaround just past the shack, thinks that the absence of the mail might arouse a suspicion faster than the roll call or the squad car slipping away...and goes back into the jail property! He parks at the front steps with the motor running and trots up to the desk to hand off the mail...and they say fine...and he's about to re-enter the car...when the count shows up wrong. *Just wait here Conrad, until we straighten this out.* Had an impulse to sprint downstairs to the car, a Wild Bill impulse...but thought...maybe it will pass over, they'll stop worrying about it. The problem now became that the number in the front office was *too many*. He wasn't supposed to be there...and they caught on. Handcuffs, rough treatment... solitary.

He had come *close*, like Bill. He had been OUT. Everyone marveled at the smoothness of his plan. It was just that fateful hesitation ...or the temptation to fool them thoroughly with his theatrical prowess. Too much cunning. If only Bill had had some of that. They were victims of the Yule tide of anxiety seeping up in all of our cells.

Burnt Sleep

My neighbor Peralta was suffering in his own silent way. He had a theory that he could sleep most of his time away. He would lie for hours during the day with eyes clenched shut and cotton in his ears. He told me he would only wake up in order to work on his book. I asked him to show me. The book was a cardboard box with ten thick schoolboy notepads utterly filled with monotonous longhand pencil writings. Each pad was a chapter with a ponderous title like: "*Metaphysical Inversions of the Gnosis*" He let me read a while in that one, and after an hour of plowing through the nineteenth century South American English I was headed for the morphian states of endless sleep that Peralta had written from. He didn't seem to care whether I understood it or not. I was far beneath him there, a foolish young California kid pretending to read a masterwork in Metaphysics. I asked him how the sleeping strategy was working. He confessed it was not. That he was awake all night thinking about his family. But at least sleeping in the day kept him free of the social minefield.

It was hard not to believe that the deputies were sadistically making things worse. Three days before Christmas there was a "Shakedown". Without warning deputies descended on every tier and marched us outside with visible weaponry. The word was that contraband was discovered and they were searching every cell. Of course there is *always* contraband. Ingenious smuggling takes place every single day in jail and there are every sort of drugs and liquor to be had. I watched a friend shoot up heroin using a safety pin to work the stuff into his arm. Cases of whiskey were left on the hillside for men in the garden crew. Cocaine was flushed down the visitor's toilet and retrieved by the two guys who worked the sewage treatment tank. There was a transom window just below the front steps that laundry men kept open on visiting days so girlfriends could toss baggies in it as they walked up. There were rumors too of corrupted deputies who were bringing dope inside.

Aside from a genuine illegal stash, most of us had other things that were a little secret. Letters, photos of naked girlfriends, special foods, handmade salt shakers, mint gathered from outside, cigars...that we cherished in our tiny zones of privacy. Shakedowns put everything at the deputies' mercy. We milled around the yard in varying states of anger and despair depending on the stash.

When they herded us back in a few hours later, the tiers were in chaos. Huge piles of our stuff were being pushed together and bagged up for the garbage. Most of the cells had been ransacked, really violated. Men were rushing about trying to pull stuff away from the brooms and getting roughly thrown in their cells. My own area was trashed. The little food packages were gone, the tinfoil salt shaker, the magazines. At least they had missed the picture of my wife toothpasted to the side of the locker. Just

before they locked us up I spotted Peralta looking catatonic. He was staring under his bunk. *"What's the matter?" "My book... My book is gone." "Oh no Peralta, they must've thrown it"...*I darted to the Rotunda to ask a deputy and got the quick answer that *"all that paper shit is already in the furnace."* Peralta froze. Laid down. Put the cotton in his ears...and closed his eyes.

Santa Claus Time

The day before Xmas and all through the House. Too much was happening. All day we were getting updates on the Lunar mission of Apollo 8. It had become the first to enter into lunar orbit. Pictures of the moon were stunning...for some of us. There were many who were unimpressed. One of the older Muslims told me *"no way the White man is up on the moon. Don't you believe it. It's a studio shot, a fake. Allah won't allow that crap"* As a space travel fan I was a little shaken. It did seem like a TV show. And aside from that, *would* the cosmos allow this Imperial Corporation to leave its little prison yard? Would the moon reject us like a wrong blood type? What a strange place to be while this happened. We were about as far removed from *"taking part in this historic national event"* as one could be.

There was a petition passed around to allow us to stay up past ten o'clock so we could watch "The Robe" to its conclusion. The men carrying it from tier to tier were really intense. The right to see this movie was somehow cleaving through everything. *"Goddamn it! Cant we even see "The Robe"? The best damn movie about Christ and what it all means? We've about taken enough of their shit this week brothers, sign here!"* And everyone did. Rumors flew all day about "The Robe" It was the most important thing in our lives. *Captain O'Neill was against it! That tubba guts !* You could just imagine the deputies and officers laughing about this. *"Let it hang till after supper men, this is rich."* They probably started every rumor. Finally it was announced right after supper that we had received a great boon and beneficence: "The Robe" was to be permitted. *Yeah!* Huge yells from every tier. We won!

Just before the movie started, the loudspeaker bellowed for everyone to line up. "SANTA CLAUS TIME!!!" it blared, and in marched the Salvation Army troops. The lovable uniformed goofballs who held services on Sundays. They were carrying boxes filled with little plastic baggies and politely walked up and down our lines making sure each of us got one and got a handshake and pleasant *"Merry Christmas"*. We opened our bags to find: one toothbrush, one pair of socks, one comb, and one Mounds bar. Every bag the same. I felt like laughing...not in malice, just laughing. It was bizarre.

Merry Xmas indeed. A couple of guys were bitter, saying the obvious, but most of us were kind of stoned by it. Fingering the toothbrush, the cheap socks...but then there was that Mounds bar. That has to be one of the least popular candy bars. It would be like if they had chosen Beeman's gum. Oh well, I *had* gotten that big sheepish dorky smile though!

"The Robe" had us buzzing. Richard Burton really convinced me that he had experienced *something* at the Mount. Talking with Cliff about Xmas mythology; what the hell is Santa, *really*? Something about chimney spirit-visits, smokeholes in the ancient hogans, dead of winter, Tree of Life..? was older by millenia than Jesus. There's another plane of reasons that we're all upset and things are getting so surreal. We need a smokehole.

Silent Night

It was hard to get to sleep Christmas Eve. And fitful when it came. There were dream-cries and mutterings from other bunks that woke me. Our Christmas morning began like this. At exactly five AM the loudspeaker came on at horrendous volume with "Silent Night". They must have turned it to the max. We came out of sleep screaming, tumbling out of bed expecting an adversary, a riot, a bomb, catastrophe. That first three seconds was unforgettable. Then as the song became evident it stung into us that it was a prank. This was the usual time for mail call...in itself a sadistic idea...but they always did it quietly. An amplified whisper :*"Mail call, Johnson, Rogers, Stenson..."* I got pretty frequent mail and always felt as I staggered up to the front of the tier that it was done to make the others hate us. It was because of me that fifty other men were wakened an hour early. After another ten seconds of roaring assault noel, the volume went down and the deputy's voice came on snickering. *"Merry Christmas men, here's your mail call."* And of course my name and a couple of others.

Back at my bunk, seething, I find that I have a letter from my mother. We haven't spoken civilly for a month. She was on the wrong end of an argument about my case and blew up at me. So this is to break the ice...on Christmas...hmmm. But what the letter said in furious spiky longhand, was that she had resigned as mother. Literally. *"I want you to know that I am no longer your mother. After that last turn of events I can see that you will be much more suited to your new mother-in-law who thinks as you do and I'm sure that she will be able to fill the role. Goodbye."*

As much as I had disagreed with her I had really hoped she was trying to patch it up in this letter. It was like a blow in the stomach. I was already crazed with the rude awakening. This was too much. It's goddamned Christmas morning! Maybe it was she that had played Silent Night full blast. I had the simultaneous thought that any mother

who would do this would have to be...crazy. I mean, you'd have to understand the wallop this would carry on Christmas...wouldn't you? I almost felt sorry for her. What had I said that could lead her to this precipice? Too late now. That was a miserable goddamn morning. I was sick with anger and really disoriented...along with everyone else.

I had an oasis of relief when they allowed visitors later on. My wife and nine-month old son were there, my Dad, a couple of friends. The visiting area was difficult but by then we knew the ropes. You had to get there right at the outset before it got crowded. There were no separate areas, just one room surrounded by a visitors' walkway. There were no chairs on either side, and at chest level were two layers of very heavy steel mesh, with little windows placed every five feet. As more men came in to the room and stood next to each other, everyone's voices had to rise up a little to be heard, until it was unpleasantly loud. My wife was usually first one there and sometimes we could pass briefly at the main barred-door before I entered the visiting room. This time we managed a kiss through those bars, as furtive a kiss as I ever will have in my life...and the sweetest. It was heat lightning.

After my long visits, feeling very disembodied and exhausted from trying to show myself in good spirits, I headed back upstairs with the other last guy to have a visit.

We knew they were supposed to serve a semblance of Christmas dinner today, probably turkey, our first meat in weeks. When we got to the tier, it was too late, dinner was over. They told us to go to the kitchen and get the cooks to give us a plateful. When we got there, the Head Cook refused. He was a big slovenly man, an employee rather than a deputy. We looked daggers at him and asked why. *"Too late, too late"*. *"No"* we said, *"not too late."* We were both furious. The inmate kitchen crew heard the tone of our voices and came over right behind the cook. I said *"look, you're not a damned deputy, you don't have any stake in this nor any authority"* and the other guy took it up a notch: *"Give us the Christmas dinner, punk, or we're gonna take it!"*

There was a frozen ten seconds while he stared at us. The kitchen crew started making up two plates. He glanced back at them...and gave up. Didn't say anything, just walked away. We took our plates upstairs and felt nothing. No triumph, no fellowship...I didn't even know the other guy's name. Sat by our bunks eating vengefully and without pleasure. Something like *"fucking Christmas Day"* was repeating itself in my mind, occluding everything else...*Fucking Christmas Day...*

Ping Pong Diplomacy

Recreation was ping-pong. That was it, ping-pong. For months there were 'reasons' that the weekly yard time was canceled; but even on those rare days that they allowed it, most of us just walked around. There was a baseball game but it was controlled by the trustees and their chosen ones. I wanted to play because that was my game in school and I felt as I watched that I could easily match the skill level. I hung around and asked once or twice. Finally one day near the end of the game, a trustee I knew let me take his place in the infield. Second base, my old position. What was not like my old experience of playing ball was the withering trash talk. Even on your own team. None of that *hey batter batter* stuff. This was more like "*can you fucking play? we have three cartons on this game punk*". I say "*yeah, I can play*"... but something is creeping up my spinal fluid. Doubt. Nerves. It's a dirt infield with lots of stones. No chance to warm up, they don't do that comforting ritual of throwing grounders to each infielder just before the first batter. The pitching is swift, so the hits are coming with plenty of snap and English. My first fielding chance is a twisty hot ground ball and I think *oh I know this shit, I'm not letting the ball play me, I'm playing the ball*. Going into my stance and ready to scoop and fire to first...and the damned ball is right through me into right field. *Oh no. Impossible. I had it.*

I was fired immediately. "*Get off the fucking infield you chump*"...the pitcher coming over with a balled up fist. "*Get the fuck out of here, now! candy-ass puke!*"

I was glad there were no yard days for a month after that. Ping-pong started out that way too, but ended up differently. Each tier had a table and a couple of paddles. Everything was in terrible shape. The tables were dinged-up old plywood and the surfaces of the paddles were irregular. I lost a lot of games at first, but by then I had a few friends and they weren't banishing me. They enjoyed having an easy win every day. I had to get used to the crazy bounces and the trash talk and constant slamming. Inmates play ping-pong the way they play dominoes. There has to be some smack to it, some juice, some style.

Watching the older guys play dominoes was wonderful. They'd play faster than I'd ever seen, calculating swiftly and then slamming a bone down each in a signature way. The only standard was that at the last moment, the bone had to hit flat to the table to get an explosive clap of impact. Then a deft twist in one motion to place it at the correct joining to the tree of bones without disturbing any of them. Just kiss the edge.

Same with the ping-pong. You had to develop a style, and it had to have steam. Nobody played defensively. Backhand slams, outrageous spins. There were no rules on the serve either, so we did as weird a thing as we could to get an advantage. After a

while I began to get my reflexes cranked up so I could let go and stroke with abandon. I had one daily partner who enjoyed tutoring me: Ed Teshara, self-proclaimed 'raggedy-ass dope fiend'. Ed and I and Curtis and John were a crew for a couple of months. I had a strong little Panasonic radio that could pick up KJAZ, and we had sessions every day of just sitting around my bunk listening. Ed and John were lifelong musicians who would school me in the great bop artists. It was a music appreciation seminar. Telling me about chord structures, about who they really admired and why. Pepper Adams especially because he had been in Quentin and his sound was deep and without pretension.

John was a horn player about forty who was in for theft but said it was just to feed his habit. He had done time in Folsom and had a faraway ruined gaze. He had been roused for what?... for being Black and High...for hanging out at nightclubs with other musicians... and, in short, for some weed in his pocket. They gave him 'one to ten' and then he was hassled in Quentin, shoved a deputy, and wound up in Folsom for eight years before parole. Eight years for a joint. He said it wasn't even a joint, just a roach.

Ed had a defining story too. He had done federal time in Arizona, three years. He had been married then, just 27, and had really wanted to be a great bassist. Played in the prison jazz band the whole time and was constantly practicing and dreaming of getting with a quartet when he got out. A couple of months before his release, his wife informed him that she had taken up with another guy. He says he went right into the airport store and bought cough medicine and got stoned on the flight home. As soon as he hit Frisco, he took a cab to Fillmore and McAllister and scored a bag of heroin. Both men loved the music, both knew all chance of 'success' at it was gone, both were in love with smack...

There were a few civilians working in the jail and they were viewed with ultimate contempt. The idea that a person would *voluntarily* come out here and call this their 'work' was appalling to us. Deputies, well, that's a different trip. They're cops, they're principal players here, engaged in the physical strain of keeping us caged. That was the other team in the great tug of war. But that cook, and the farm manager and the *social worker*. He was the lowest. He came in as seldom as possible; had a little office near the Rotunda. You could get appointments with him if you wanted counseling about what to do on the outside. But everyone knew he wasn't serious. He avoided us like plague, and had a smarmy callow manner that was just way out-of-key for the prison population. He was also nominally in charge of recreational rehab or something. So we started agitating him to get us some ping-pong balls. I got an appointment. We had completely run out and I made the case that the jail was supposed to at least give us this measly form of exercise. He promised to get a meeting with the Captain about it and then apply to the City's operating fund. Weeks went by and we didn't see him. Then one of us did and cornered him about the Ping-Pong balls. *Nothing's come through*

yet fellas, I'm working on it. Finally we told him to just stop on the way to work at the store and buy a box of Ping-Pong balls. For Christ's sake.

All those hundreds of games with Ed and the others really served me well a couple of months later, after I had been busted out of my job and was living up on Five North in a cell. I was the player to beat up there, and soon attracted the enmity of a Muslim guy who had a little crew on the tier. All of them were younger than I and knew each other from Hunter's Point, a tight squadron. Eventually the leader challenged me to a game. It was done with condescension and insult. Like, *White boy, you ready at last to get your ass-whippin?* I accepted and we began. The trash talk was intense right away. Every serve was going to teach his crew that the White man is a devil. *"Know why he missed that shot? He eats that pork."* *"why don't you just quit right now punk, I hate to watch a man go all to pieces and cry for his mama"*

But as the game went on, I realized I was just hearing it as noise, and my shots started landing. Then the game itself took over. It was the best ping-pong game I ever played in. He had made the stakes so high that we both elevated our play and found ourselves about equal. There were full-on overhead smashes that would get smashed right back and then right back again. Wild backhands that spun off the edge of the table, running back to scoop a shot and just getting back in time to lunge over to the net where a drop shot was fading into the table. When it got to a dead heat at 20 I said it: *"Man, this is some great ping-pong."* He couldn't stand that. Something was tearing at him. He knew what I meant. We were soaring and the game was bigger than both of us. It was like lightning...never happen again like this. But to admit that to me and in front of his crew was impossible. I could sense the strain in him, and it made me suddenly confident. I went one-up and then he claimed my shot had missed the table even though we all saw it ding the edge. He was desperate, trying to see if he could just bogard me out of it. But that only made me more confident. I gave him the point almost cheerfully and he knew he looked bad. That's when I won.

I tried to be a 'gentleman' . Tried to signal camaraderie and absence of racial feeling. But it couldn't happen. We both knew it. He demanded a rematch and I said fine. Now things were different. I had already played the great game. I was floating, unfocussed. I didn't care as much anymore and he took a lead. I may have even wanted him to win...but I would never let that show. Especially with the tongue-lashing I was getting. His friends piled on now that he had a lead...there was a little gang-up show there and a need to buttress their captain. He won by five and I said *"Nice game...maybe we can play tomorrow?"* But he turned on his heel and left. The rest of my time in jail we often passed each other on the stairs or in the Rotunda and I felt pleased that, away from his crew and the game, he allowed us to exchange curt nods of respect. That was cool.

Wilt vs Bill

Why were all my best friends junkies? Was it just that I made one friend and he knew all the others? I don't think so. I think they were the people I was most akin to. The psychedelics and weed in my past had opened up the whole dimension of other dimensions. With these guys you could talk like sea anemones...multiple layers of feeling. I was curious about the distinct high of the opiates, the vivid dreaming. But when Ed described it as superseding erotic experience, I just didn't believe him. Besides, jail smack had no allure after watching it mainlined with safety pins.

There were a few other men beyond the jazz crew who fit into this. Cliff and I talked mostly about books. He had gone a year to a Junior College, and then had had the amazing luck of being cellmates in Quentin with the prison library trustee, a former English professor. It was a sort of Great Books course, with endless seminars. Proust was Cliff's absolute favorite. He described how much like heroin it had been for him in prison, knowing that all those volumes were still waiting for him as he slowly read through the hypnotically detailed prose.

Cliff loved to hold forth about jail psychology. He was obsessed with the dovetailing of deputies and inmates. Inmates were unable to get past the oral stage of development, they wanted the bliss-out opiates, they wanted to please Mom, they were anarchicwhile deputies were stunted at the anal stage and needed to please Daddy and have everything stern and and hierarchic. *Achtung, Captain O'Neill*. He knew where he fit in that world and it was fine with him.

Then there was Gary, a Pasadena guy about my age. Our bond was basketball. It was the last year of the Celtics' dominance and the season was winding down to a titanic showdown with the Lakers and Chamberlain. Gary was a Chamberlain fan, I was for Russell. We argued this thing up and down the Rotunda for weeks. Often with a small crowd taking sides. It was wonderful. Everything about those two men and their teams was laid out in great detail. The fact that Russell had taken public positions against racism. Wilt getting a bad rap because he groused about fouls in an unseemly way. The unbelievable timing of Russell's impact plays. Chamberlain's willingness to stop scoring so much if it would help the team.

As the playoffs started there were huge audiences at the tier televisions, and much yelling and booing. It was the most intense sports-fan event of my life. At times Black inmates were challenging our over-weening interest. How could I or Gary(also White) have anything like an insight into this matchup? How could we presume to know Wilt's motivation or Russell's? It was interesting. But neither team was clearly a

'Black' or 'White' team, in style or players, so this never quite got off the ground as a division in the jail. More of a psychological tournament with shifting rules.

The thing that I dug about Gary and attributed to his being a junkie, was the way he loved to describe his minute feelings and observations, *what was really happening*, as we watched the games. I thought he was wrong that Chamberlain was going to dominate, though, and when it came to that fateful seventh game and Wilt sat out the fourth quarter as they lost a big lead, I felt that it showed the radicals were ascendant in America. Like Ali over Patterson.

The other dimension of having junkie friends was that life beyond the jail was off limits. Once, I was urging Curtis to consider going to City College when he got out. Trying to inspire him a little to use his good mind. He was embarrassed and broke it off. John, the horn player, had been listening and looked at me with disappointment. *"Don't you see man? Curtis can't stand that talk. He knows and I know what he's going to do when he gets out next month. He's going to score. That's what he is. A dope fiend. You're trying to tell a cat to become a cow."* The depth in his voice stopped my thoughts utterly. *Shit. I hurt Curtis just now. I held up a "good boy" image to him that he knows he won't live up to. Damn it. He won't talk to me for days.*

I happened to run into Curtis a couple of years later with my family at Golden Gate Park. He was wearing shades, sitting stoned on a bench. I sat next to him and said hello. He recognized me and returned a muted *howreyoudoin...* but clearly wanted to be left alone. He was a cat.

Gary called me a year after jail and sounded wired, wanted to get together, was passing through town, staying near the Greyhound station... *"could we get together, man? I sort of need a little cash, I'm a little, um, on the road you know...just passing through..."* I went down to meet him figuring I could give him twenty bucks. But he had disappeared. What they all told me in jail was: *do not trust a junkie on the streets. Like, here we're cleaned up, relaxed...but when Curtis or me or Ed get out, we're going to have to score and we will take your car if you leave the door open. Get that? It's just the way it is.*

Strike

This was of course 1968, the peak of the earthquake and tsunami that swept all across the world. Before I started serving my sentence we had 'lived through' the King assassination and following nationwide insurrection, the Robert Kennedy slaying, the big antiwar Mobilizations, the rise of Black guerilla movements in the city ghettos, and the titanic street battles with cops at the Democratic Convention. Going to jail at that point was leaving the 'Movement'. I was cut off except for KPFA radio which sometimes

broadcast live from demonstrations and interviewed the leaders. Every night when we watched the news in jail there was at least one upsetting report from Vietnam and one report of protests at a campus or in the streets. Then the San Francisco State strike broke out, and I'd see my wife or her friends on TV. I became a sounding board for inmates who were fascinated with the uprisings. There was a definite interest.

Like a lot of people in the Movement, I fantasized about the oppressed in jails standing up against the system. It was clear when I had been inside for a couple of months that I didn't know *anything*. Sometimes you'd hear inmates defend Ronald Reagan for knocking heads in Berkeley. Or step back appalled when a seemingly radical guy would suddenly reveal that his idea of a new order of life would be to go back to chieftains who ruled by strength alone, and had harems and slaves.

I also discovered that I wasn't really much of an 'organizer' when out of the milieu of duties and exhortation. I didn't like to push on people. Ideas, that was fine. Talking all day about Lenin or the I Ching or music. Whatever fantasies I might have had of forming a resistance group in jail...went out the first week. To my surprise, there was plenty cooking anyway. One morning a small group of men very rapidly circulated a petition to all tiers demanding a better diet. We were really fed some terrible gruel. Breakfast was a watery hot cereal with three pieces of the cheapest white bread. Lunch, more white bread and some soup. Dinner, white bread and glop. Sunday was the treat day. We got two slices of baloney with the lunch bread...and two hot dogs in the evening...with white bread. Out on the farm they were raising lots of vegetables and there was a chicken-and-egg operation. We never had eggs, never. The petition guys said it was all a side business for the Captain, they sold the produce and the eggs.

By the afternoon, word came down that the Captain had hassled them when they handed in the petitions. Threw down the gauntlet. So they spread the word that next morning the whole jail would go on strike! No work, no eating. Strike? It disoriented me. Would the Captain just assume that I was in on it and trump up some charge on me? Damn. It embarrassed me that I was so completely *out* of it. In truth, there wasn't anything I could do. We were locked down. We just had to refuse our breakfast in the morning and then refuse to go out to our jobs. It was electric that night. Some wanted to brutally enforce the strike. Beat the shit out of anyone who tried to eat.

In the morning, no one on our tier accepted food. There was cheering and encouragement yelled up to the tiers and the Rotunda seemed like a big bullhorn. There were some finks...A scattering of men reported out to work. Quite a few old winos went to the farm but no one felt like killing them for it. They were considered 'retired'. There was a news crew in the Rotunda, so somebody had had the nerve to contact the press. I was impressed. It was just those five or six men that handed around the original petition, but they had moved so rapidly and decisively that everything went their way. When it got on the evening news there was Stan from upstairs saying "*this food they give*

us isn't good enough for livestock. There's eggs right out there, we can see the damned hen house, but they're never on our menu."

Next morning was the showdown. It was clear that the Captain hated this to be in the newspaper and was already holding three of the organizers on suspicion of something. At breakfast time, they wheeled up a couple of big warming carts and the smell overpowered us. Eggs! They had real scrambled eggs on there. But the strike was still on. Lots of yelling, "DON'T EAT ANYTHING! DON'T SCAB!" There were some cave-ins. We were pretty hungry by then...a 36-hour fast. Later on the Captain sent out two Sergeants to negotiate. There was a quick settlement which was a partial victory. There was an attempt to get amnesty for the three still in the holding tank, but that failed. They were sent back downtown to face new charges. All I remember is that we were to have meat in our diet a few meals a week. And eggs once a week. It wasn't much, but as word spread, everyone felt great. We had done *something*. And no one got killed.

Sergeant Hein

One night right after lockdown, I was summoned to the head of the tier. The Rotunda was dark, just a few lights in side rooms. The officer on duty was Sergeant Hein, a sadistic middle-aged deputy who was rumored to be in a neo-nazi group. Maybe that was because of his name and German-American background. But it was clear that he was a right-wing person. He definitely was on *my* case. Always made a point of hassling my visitors when he was outside. Make them show ID exhaustively, take off their antiwar pins. He'd come in and cut my visits short too. Little things... but I felt he was tracking me.

So I was worried right away when Hein told me to get my pants on and report out in the Rotunda. When I got out there, he led me into a side room, the infirmary, and switched on a lamp over the nurse's desk. We sat on either side of it and he put the lamp in my eyes. Clearly he'd been planning the effects for a while. Then he produced a letter I had written a week before. It was to one of the older mentors in our radical group with whom I had been friends before he moved back to New York. Morty Steinberg. Hein put the letter down and showed me parts that were heavily underlined.

"I want some answers about this letter. Who is this Steinberg? What kind of a name is that?"

I said *"He's a friend, he's Jewish."*

"Well now, is he your commander then? A Jew from New York?"

"No, he's a friend."

"Mmm-hmm. You see here where I've crossed some of this out? You can't talk against the jail like that."

"OK then, leave it out."

"So this Jew guy, what's he like then? Is he part of some bigger conspiracy? How did a young guy like you get under his spell?"

"I'm not under anybody's spell damnit."

"You don't seem to understand...you've got to realize I could make life very hard for you Johnson."

At this point I felt the fear drain away. It was something rare and almost beautiful. I knew that instantly, almost from outside my body. *This is it. The game is over now. This bastard is a Nazi, he really is. And he's looking for an excuse to take this to another level. Or to turn me.* I felt how helpless I was and yet ...what could he really do? Kill me? Maybe if I were stupid enough to get angry. I was quiet for a few long beats, letting it all drain away...the cat-and-mouse game... the fear... my ignorant little life.

"Look, Mr. Hein, you could do a lot of things, I know what you're saying. You could even kill me couldn't you? So, why don't you stop wasting time with all this junior G-Man stuff?"

He looked stunned and had the odd reaction of backing off... *"Hey, you've got me wrong here, I'm a human being you know, I'm not into that kind of shit."*

Then he ended the interview, saying he couldn't allow letters like that to go out with all that negativity about the jail conditions. He kept the letter and took me back to the dorm. Lying in my bunk I thought; *this isn't a Nazi. There's a difference, I'm sure of it. This really is a "junior G-man."* He's in some John Birch group or the like and he reports to them about his secret work monitoring the leftists in the jail. What I didn't think about was that he wouldn't quit his little project that easily.

Reduced to Tiers

After Christmas things settled into a new routine. I moved across the Rotunda to a little office where I dispensed appointment slips for church or social workers. This was a plum of a job where I could listen to my radio during work hours and chat with a

couple of friends...and write in my journal. I started getting a little too comfortable. I would tell the deputy in the Rotunda that I'd be starting early, and settle in while everyone else had to stand for roll call. In three months I had moved from New Fish to this cushy job...and life in the dormitory. How this can happen to you...the luck that slides into a succession of available improvements...until you're one of the favored ones, the elite. Even in jail this works. Even in hell.

One morning I woke from a dream that upset me. In it I was on an airplane and was writing in my journal when the pilot announced we were going down. My own life seemed complete, I wasn't that upset about dying. But I had a terrible fear of not being able to save my journal. How could I finish the sentence and then throw it free of the wreck? I woke in a sweat with no answer.

A few waking hours later I was in the little office, early as usual, and was writing in my journal when *right in mid-sentence* two deputies came in and harshly yelled at me to *Rollem up! You're busted!* Said I was out of the dorm during roll call. I protested that it was my habit and that the Rotunda Sergeant knew that. To no avail. Next thing I knew, I was being marched up to Five North with a bedroll and my few belongings. Lost my job, my 'uniform', my bunk, my friends, five days of "good time", and my visiting privileges for the coming weekend.

I was staggered. Something told me I had it coming, that there was some karma happening as evidenced by the eerily similar dream. Why wouldn't they let me finish my Sentence in peace? My plane was going down even as I trudged up those stairs to Five North.

I was given a cell and green ill-fitting jumpsuit because I was a busted-guy; I had to stay in lockup for five days, no free time. That turned out to be luck because the jail was very overcrowded and there were men sleeping on the floor at night. This was more like the Truth of being in County Jail ...lots of short-timers; men and teenagers from the lower depths, little gangsters and screw-ups and madmen. Doing sixty days after having copped to something. Very few up here had that older con's attitude, the long view. They committed all the most abrasive breaches of the unspoken codes. For example complaining about doing thirty days...complaining about the food in peevish ways...saying "*I can't take this shit!*"... talking incessantly about babes they knew and how they would get it on next week when they got out. Then there were the night times when lights were out and I could hear the conversations. One particular Mansonesque dude from the Haight kept turning the talk to his own vision of the world to come. He saw himself as a righteous messianic figure who would straighten the mongrels up in a hurry. First he'd purify the country... *just off the old people and cripples. And if any countries mess with me, like those fuckin Chinese? Drop the H-bomb man. Let God sort em out. Then I'd go over there with my army, kill any men left, fuck all the women and then tell em to go to work and behave.*

Or Valentino the one-legged cat holding court with his stories of conning young ladies. *That's why they call me Valentino. I make em think I want to marry em, I go down on em , I make em scream...then I get close to the dad, you know make him feel sorry for me about the leg...then when the time is ripe and they've set some dough aside for us to make our little lovenest...I split. I take everything , dude, everything.*

Every night I heard these fantasies and boasts about bitches and rip-offs and slitting throats. It really depressed me. The underclass, the lumpenproletariat, exposed to the core. What was this mind? Pure piracy, a fantasy of what the barons on top of us all were doing in 'real life'. Levels of my own defenses about "the people" of America, fantasies of good and evil as class expressions, were burning off and leaving an odor. And that let in my fear of being in prison. I felt as if I were sliding down a Dantean path with no traction.

Missing my visits was acutely painful. I could see the cars drive up from between the cell window slats. No way for me to have warned them, the bust was on the day before visiting. There was my wife with our baby. Damn! Too bitter. I started to cave in during the next few days. Stopped eating, had trouble sleeping. A pattern began that continued for months, of frequent urinating. Getting up five or six times at night. I felt as if I were literally pissing my life away. As if there were a press inside me with a big threaded crank turning inexorably tighter every night. When I finally was released four months later I saw the truth of that image when I got on a scale and found myself 30 pounds lighter than when I had gone in.

A week later I was let out in normal walking times and tried to find a way to fit in. Pacing and pacing. There was one Chicano guy that I had known earlier and we spent some time together. He liked board games so we would do that every day, Monopoly or whatever beat-up old things they had with missing pieces. Sometimes a conversation with a few others watching our game or joining in. Here I met some of the first truly ravaged Vietnam vets who had been over there and come back on the streets with nightmares and suicidal episodes or dope addictions. The most intense of these guys was a small-statured Black man about 25 who had been in the Intelligence section in Saigon. He had a grunt to do the dirty work, a big goon with a kitbag of pliers and scalpels and thumbscrews. They'd interrogate a Viet Cong suspect with a translator, then he'd order the goon to break something. Eventually they talked, although he was sure it was mostly lies. He didn't care at all. He was smoking that powerful weed nonstop and just going through it all like a swim through mud. A couple of times they had done the helicopter thing. Take a dozen prisoners up to 5000 feet and then push one of them out. The others would talk right away. He also told me that the lines between VC and himself got very blurry. He met a young woman who was supplying him with dope, and sometimes they'd get high together and play around. She let him know that she was VC. He let her know that he was interrogating...and she said she knew all about

it. They worked out some sort of *quid pro quo* where he got laid, got more and more dope...in exchange for easing off on the torture, maybe letting a few key prisoners off. *It was totally weird, he said, totally. There was no right or wrong. I was in another world, so stoned, speaking Vietnamese, making love to this VC chick, betraying my command, and still going up in those helicopters. A couple times I had to shoot a prisoner, he'd make a move to escape...ohhh man, you can't possibly know what I'm talking about.* He was having serious flashbacks and had no idea why he'd been busted. Or any idea what he'd do when he got out.

There were cockroaches in every cell. They made appearances at night and occasionally gave one the creeps. But in a way I enjoyed seeing them. Like the seagulls outside, they were wild and interesting. They were little cellmates, just going about their business, as proscribed in their way as we were. They were just tiny janitors. One day we were ordered outside, all the North tiers, for a fumigation. Deputies went through with poison sprays, opened up the access-panels to all the waste-pipes, opened up ceiling panels...they sprayed everywhere. It was potent stuff because when we were let back in two hours later, there were huge piles of roaches being swept up toward the front gates of each tier. Tens of thousands of carcasses. The fumes were overpowering yet as soon as they bundled out the corpses, we were ordered back in. Roaches were still dropping from the ceiling cracks and wriggling their last on the floor. We coughed and tried to get close to window vents. You couldn't help but think of the Nazis. *"Where are the wooden soap bars?"* Damn. That whole night I could hear the little bodies falling inside my cell. When I had to get up to take a leak I had to brush away a little path to the bowl. The whole next day was like that. Eyes stinging and feeling like maybe the next morning we too would be swept up to the head of the tier.

Sometimes I'd wish I could get back down into Two South again, back to dorm paradise with all those cool junkies and the pace of the men doing long sentences. It embarrassed me to realize how attached I had become to it. I was *...spoiled.*

Seagulls

Rain... the worst weather in jail. On a sunny day I'd feel a little bad not to be able to go out and enjoy it, but the pleasantness filtered in the windows, and California clear blue days are rather monotonous and unfeatured. But during a storm I would get melancholy. The exact edge of my bondage was limned with water and the distinction between *in here* and *out there* was acute. Staring out the steel louvers my mind drifted

amongst weather memories, most of them with my wife. How we camped in the Cascades the year before and were wet half the time. Or just sitting in our apartment with the rain keeping us in and amorous.

The seagulls came inland in bad weather, and tripled the population hanging around the jail. They were scavenging in the farm and garbage areas, but also would fly close to the upper floors hoping for someone to toss something from a window. I thought this was terrific. I'd save some bread from breakfast and make little balls of it. After awhile I learned how to time a throw so that a gull could neatly catch the ball right by my window. That way I could see the full wingspread and athletic moves they'd make to slow down and grab and fall away into a soar while they ate. Sometimes a rivalry and midair fight, and sometimes one would come right up to my fingertips without a throw. It was a thrill and a pastime and a connection to the wild and free. Two others on my side were doing this pretty regularly and we'd talk about it as if we were in the Audobon society.

I had decided to stay in my cell for a few weeks while I finished up the thirty days prohibited from having a job. One of my buddies from the Rotunda office came up to tell me that there was a chance I would get called down to work in the Front Office...he'd talked me up to the Sergeant out there who was reasonably honorable. I was feeling extremely tense out in the general population of my tier, so I just stayed in lockup. Sometimes Luis came over and we played a board game by putting it half way under my door. But mostly I listened to my radio and read books and wrote my manic thoughts about the political situation.

One night I dreamt that a contract was out on me and that I was holed-up in a little house with my Dad, playing cards. We heard a noise and I tensed for an attack. The door opened and the hit-man stood, poised but silent. He stared at me vacantly and suddenly I saw it too was my Dad! As if the cold drunken side of my father were there while the loyal wise one were at my side. I gaped in horror. Then my father-at-my-side yelled "*He's got a knife*" as the attacker made a lunge. I put all my strength into a kick at his chest...and woke up in a loud noise with terrific pain in my foot. I had kicked the steel wall between cells. The sleeping man on the other side of the wall was cursing a blue stream at me. "*It was a nightmare, sorry*"... Sorry, my foot.

In the prison library I had found Camus' "*The Plague*"...pretty good reading for convicts. The pages were heavily marked-up by previous readers... especially wherever he describes what it feels like to be cut off from the world. I was only speaking a few sentences a day to anyone. Too many short-timers up here. A list every morning of releases...somebody standing by my cell talking about what-all he's going to do tomorrow when he gets out. Guys like that invariably assumed I was getting out soon too. Because I looked young? Then their consternation doubled the insensitivity. I had

to explain, *I'm 25, I have a wife and kid, I still have five months to serve.* Very depressing. It made me go cold, I didn't want to meet anyone new.

I was thinking about being spoiled. How hard it is to stop thinking that one can influence one's condition for the better. It's a terrible mistake to get one's hopes up about anything. Not about a better cell or bunk or tier or cellmate or job. Not about a break in the case. Not the appeal. Not a visit. Not the food. *No hope is best.* It starts to feel good to me, cool. Time starts going by faster. I'm going into my own world, I don't care what happens here. Doing my push-ups and sit-ups, reading for hours, writing letters and sometimes a poem. Feeding seagulls. Maybe this is better than the dorm.

Ed and I had used to talk for hours about "doing time". Hard Time...Easy Time. He'd say that he'd like to know who first had that idea, to 'give' someone Time. *"Like to know who that bastard was. I'd rather get twenty lashes. If they said would you like to stay here another year or have your thumbnail pulled out, I'd say pull the nail, let me go."* He'd talk about listening to a judge musing over his own term years ago, wondering, hmm whether to send him up for... three years? Or the parole board. *"'No we think you're not quite ready yet.'* What do they think they're doing, cooking a chicken for christ sakes.?"

One day I was looking up the hillside far away and watching a horse. For a long time. Trying to absorb everything about it. Such a beautiful scene, a horse grazing, an oak tree...suddenly I felt the smell of the grass and an instant of seeing the ground close up. Then it was gone. Vivid. It was as if I had looked through a periscope.

Time was the hulking adversary, the sumo lord that never left the ring. I was trying to get hold of it, to wrestle it down. To shut out all those with the 'wrong' theories. Wrong attitudes. Time was a mental sheaf, strands passing through a ring. I had to remove the ring. It was constricting me. Everyone else's mindsets, the judge, the wife, the deputy, the old friends, the mother, the short-timers, the low-riders, the James Xs, the Gypsy Jokers. Why did they call it a *sentence*? Then there's *parole* which means *word*. I give them my word...and they put it at the end of my sentence? I had been 'given' one-to-ten years. That's an *'indeterminate sentence'*, a run-on sentence. How can sentences be *concurrent*? They're all death sentences, with time as a shackle, a hammered ring, a noose. Maybe that ring was the juice press that was pushing all my substance out as piss. Maybe the seagulls. Maybe the horse on the hill.

Just when I thought to be cleared for visiting, I got busted again. This time for feeding seagulls. Sgt. Hein claimed he had seen me from outside. I said *"lots of us do it, how did you pick me?"* *"I counted windows from left to right. It was you."* In truth he was wrong, I hadn't been at it that day. I was really angry. Opened my mouth with a loud "YOU..." but caught myself and sat down. Helpless. Another weekend locked-up and

watching my wife drive up and then drive away. Busted for feeding seagulls Wonder Bread. Is this real?

Getting Through

It hurt me to miss that visit. My boy was ten months old, he was almost walking. I had been away from the political pepsquads and justifications long enough that my wife and child had begun to seem paramount...and a stabbing guilt sometimes overwhelmed me. There had been moments when if I could have stepped away from my political bravado I would have said *"I just had a baby, I'm not going to take this to the hilt"*. The first glimmer of this came to me when I was visited in jail by a buddy from work, a fellow apprentice. He told me *"I like you man, we've been friends and I hate to see you in here. But I have to say, your buddies are not doing right by you. How could they let you do the time? If my friends and I did something and got busted, we'd never let it go down like this; we'd stick together, take the deal. I mean, you've got a wife and a new baby...it's not right, no matter how they talk about it."* I had tried to explain the strategy but he had let me know that stuff didn't cut it with him. What he was saying was, *if you're friends with people like that, you're not friends with me.*

I kept thinking of how much I was missing with my little son, how much I wanted to help. In those first four months I'd been amazed at the tiniest changes ... when he first popped his pacifier in his mouth it seemed like the dawn of a new race of beings to me. My wife and I had come closer in our awkwardness. I was only just understanding how much more in love I was. The image that kept coming to me was: lying awake with her after a feeding, whispering. It was tearing me up. But every time my mind got to a certain point, I was reminded that I was 'setting an example'. I didn't break that loop of pride and ideology for another four years...but this was the point I'm most ashamed of. I've never gotten over it. Summoning bravery, or trying to live up to its exemplars, played a part in the way I lived through this . But the truly brave deed would have been one that would perhaps have looked weak.

Eventually I finished my penalty period and was allowed to have a Front Office job and to live in the dormitory again. Of course everything was different, new routines, new adaptations to people. The Front Office had its perks, the hickory shirt and light blue pants, the toaster that made that Wonder bread palatable. But one was right under the eye of Captain O'Neill and that was not pleasant. He 'interviewed' me for the assignment first and let me know I was being given a second chance. The guy was not so imposing close-up. You could see the arrested development in him more as weakness, strangeness. The fat boy hiding behind the badge and desk. His voice was gentler, almost seeking approval. But when he walked that huge body around the office and glowered you knew he was also the fat boy who had the power of torture over 800

men. Hein had used the words on me...but O'Neill could *really* 'make things very hard on you'.

That last period was uneventful. I was gliding towards a release date in a groove of job and routine, aided by the conditioning of the months of lock-up and the various false hopes of work furlough, appeal or deal being dashed down in my face. I was just pacing it off, playing ping-pong and reading more intensely than I ever had in my life as a student.

The jail allowed packages of books so I had been getting things mailed in. I read four or five hours a day and much of it had impact. I was repairing the tissue damaged when I had become so political that I had sold off half my literature at an anti-war fundraiser. There were book experiences in jail that had a unique intensity...like Parker giving me his beat-up Faulkner with the Snopes trilogy. Something between he and I that is hard to recall exactly. An undercurrent. He was soft-spoken, in his fifties...from Alabama. He told me that he had been around the Black Panthers for a while but had not agreed with them deeply, and that he could hear something in the way I was talking that reminded him of those snarls and fish-traps of thought. Said he knew the Black Nationalist movement was down on Faulkner but that it was better to read this than a hundred books of political diatribe. He gave me the Snopes books as a prescription. He was right, no doubt. I read through them in a trance. Like a plant that was nearly dried out getting a bucket of water. "Steppenwolf" and "Demian" hit me that way too. An offering from Michael. He knew about my peyote days and that I had lived in the Haight a couple of years back. It was like a plastered-up door crumbling open. Was that a man in foolscap drinking amontillado in there?

In the end I was cut loose in a "time served" deal. It was anti-climactic and just short of the actual time I would have served for a year's sentence anyway. I won't waste anyone's time with the tortured handling of my case. Anti-climax is enough of a description. When the last month had drained away uneventfully, when the last gymnastics of principle and expedience had led to my release...it simply ended. My wife picked me up at the gate and I thought I was flying just to touch her face. We stopped at a restaurant and another epiphany was triggered by the simple taste of real butter on French bread. And then I went home to my toddling son. Whatever it was in me that needed to Go Through Things...had just gone through one. Not like Wild Bill, not like Conrad...but I was through with this Time.