

Welcome to Corcoran, Asswipe!

Part 2

By John Hartmire

Did you know that before being sent to places like San Quentin or Soledad or Pelican Bay, every one of California's more than 170,000 convicted felons are initially shunted off to one of 10 classification centers scattered about the state for at least 30 days to undergo a series of cursory exams and evaluations designed to give prison officials not only an idea of what to do with them but what they are capable of doing once they are shipped off to serve out their terms. This where the assault on your senses begins. For me it was Deuel Vocational Institute in Tracy, about an hour south of Sacramento. Here I was transported from county jail and found myself assigned to a cellblock that was a three-tier ghetto, grim, immuring, and noisy. Just like you see in the movies, it was a hulking rectangular structure, narrow, exhausted, maybe 350 feet end-to-end, and the cell doors were solid cold metal but for a small rectangular window through which the COs could peer in during counts to be sure you haven't escaped and are still breathing. Eyes have to adjust to the dim yellow lighting, when there is light to adjust to. The cells had no electricity, and during one particularly challenging 18-hour stretch, all the toilets in the cell block failed, leaving us in an ambient stench that I can only tell you was like sitting squat still in a plugged up sewer line, which, in fact, we kind of were; with it came a chilly silence every bit as eerie as the stench was awful, a quiet I could not adjust to since one of the constants in prison is the unremitting nuclear whoosh of the high powered concussive toilet flushing. It's the noise, relentless and primal, that reminds you that you're alive.

My cell overlooked the small asphalt exercise yard where I would soon swallow

tear gas for the first time in my life. The small window had no glass, only a rusty metal grill that would have been easy to cut wrists on had I been so inclined. The toilet, whether it worked or not, was stainless steel. No lid. There was a writing desk bolted to the wall complete with an attached waffle-sized seat. What little paint there was on the walls and ceiling was flaking off in chunks as round and large as a frying pan. Through the glassless window I could hear everything that was happening down on the exercise yard, and on my first night as an inmate of the California Department of Corrections there was an urban jungle cacophony of sound I couldn't quite digest as I lay on my bunk shivering, even though it was not even close to being cold.

Nothing is static at Tracy. New men arrive from county jails daily. Those who've gone through the classification process get shipped out to their assigned prisons. Those here on parole violations are eventually, within 12 months or so, released and told with a skeptical snicker, not to come back. Many of them do, some within 24 hours. By the time I left Tracy, I had three different cellies, two different cells, been out on the yard 10 times to walk around it, or play dominoes, a game at which I am exceptionally bad, taken 14 five-minute showers, eaten 33 sack lunches, each with bologna sandwiches, and passed on 11 batches of homemade wine—pruno, it's called—a half a dozen pencil-thin joints, and some of the raunchiest skin mags this side of Bob Guccione's underarm hairs.

After eight days in the cell with no electricity, I was moved to a cell in the South Wing that had electricity, and it was there that I met Lord No Love, the kind of con with searing eyes and thick muscular arms that can break men in half. He was, I tell you, a tiger in a cage. Six feet tall, tempestuous, lost, bitter and bright, raging and enraged, an institutional product handsome and strong with pale eyes, shaved head, so tough and combustible he was, so fucking loyal and vulnerable it nearly breaks my heart writing this. He is the archetypical troubled sixth grade, just as likely to give you a dollar as pick up a stick and poke your eye out.

Lord No Love, or No Love for short, or Ray Ray, since his older brother, doing

life up in Pelican Bay is Ray, once dreamt of playing professional baseball then seamlessly moving into a sports medicine career. On his 15th birthday, however, two things happened: he took a baseball bat to his sister's boyfriend's head, and he tasted heroin. The boyfriend had, earlier in the day, beaten the shit out of Ray Ray's sister; despite the baseball bat beating, the boyfriend lived, though he probably would not have had Ray Ray's volcanic father gotten a hold of him first, compelling Ray Ray to argue that he should have been awarded a medal for saving the motherfucker's life instead of getting handed a no turning back eight-year sentence, three with the California Youth Authority, which is like a training academy for felons, and then five with the CDC. The heroin came into play immediately after Ray Ray delivered the beating. Gripping the bat tighter than he ever had when hitting a baseball, he ran to his brother's house for moral support and some peculiar, unique to this new subphylum of mine, comfort. It came in the form of heroin. Ever since, Ray Ray has been better known as Lord No Love. At age 31, when we met, he still had the burning eyes of a petulant and mad child.

"Three years for that!" No Love cried when I tell him my story. Sort of one of those understood prison rules—you tell on yourself to your cellie pretty much first thing. For one thing, it helps pass the time. For another, it's how child molesters and rapists are shaken out. "That's fucking bullshit! Don't sweat it, cellie. This ain't my first rodeo, you know. I know the mother fucking ropes around here and got your back. Don't sweat it. It'll be cool... Man, you had it all and threw it away for this..."

"Not all."

"More than this."

Nothing like having your choices nonplus a lifelong felon who's gone so far as to have his eyelids tattooed and once spent 90 days in the hole for sticking a shiv into the kidneys of a 100% Peckerwood, one of his very own, who stiffed him on 25 cigarettes worth of tobacco, because for an ounce or a pound, you can't let them punk you in here. No Love told me all this staring out our cell window at a small brown patch of grass being mowed by an inmate smoking a cigarette.

“I ain’t no skinhead,” he told me. “The shaved head makes me look harder—shit, cellie, my daughter’s half nigger.” He looked at me for a reaction.

So I told him, “You look plenty hard to me.”

One night, No Love was amped to the max on some pills he traded tobacco for. Said his heart felt like it was crashing through his ribs. Said he could see himself floating above himself looking down, then felt like he’s bouncing off the walls, like a super ball in a zero gravity room. Said he could feel his head about to explode like a hot grenade. No Love later said, “Cellie, I’ll do anything to change the way I feel.”

What he did was pretend to punch the life out of someone. Pow! Pow! He threw his shoulders into each mock blow.

“I’m not called No Love because I don’t love—fuck it, cellie, I’m full of love, got a beautiful little daughter out there, you know—but because I never get no love. No fucking love from this world.”

Revealing this to me seemed to take him out of himself. He leaned against our cell door, crossing his heavily tattooed arms of steel and fighting to get control of that fevered intensity that scared his parole officer into repeatedly finding ways to violate him so he would never be out on the street for long. Put him where his state-sponsored fury can explode in a controlled setting. No Love is the first to tell you. He can blow from zero to a million in the beat of a cringe.

Not only did my new cell have electricity, it came with exercise yard privileges. I got to be herded out every other day to the pintsize exercise yard with hundreds of other day-glo orange clad inmates in classification to circle the yard counter clockwise. It has to be counter clockwise, though I can not tell you why. Or you sat at one of about a dozen tables. Or you just stood around reminiscing and catching up. A lot of mini-reunions take place in classification. There are rules in the yard. No grouping, no talking to anyone in cells that overlook the yard; no running unless it’s on the basketball court; no sitting on tables, only at them, and only then if it’s racially homogenous; no peering through the fence into the mainline yard, just in case there might be something to see; no

looking through the cyclone fence at the other end into the tennis court-sized grassy area where all the new arrivals are assembled; and no smoking, which is, ironically, a no brainer because there's not supposed to be tobacco of any kind in reception/classification, automatically making tobacco a cash crop much like alcohol was during Prohibition. Plenty of smoking goes on in classification.

Just about the first thing that happens whenever the yard opens involves the Hispanics. They ring the yard and greet with fist bumps and quick hugs all the new Hispanics who had arrived since the last time the yard was open; they circled the yard like the rest of us but stop to greet and be greeted. It is precise and orderly. A cultural marvel, really. It's how the Mexican Mafia recruits, I was told. I think Cesar Chavez would have proud.

My first time out on the yard—it was about 110 degrees out there—I happened to catch a glimpse of two bow-legged COs wheel around and assume a kind of hard right tack to where No Love and three others were milling about not so clandestinely passing a cigarette between them. An ocean of orange parts to let the COs pass, an example of servility en masse that was deeply discouraging and seemed to take the mind-fucking penal experience to new, vitiating depths that very moment. It was real clear. This was not really being alive. Toss aside the lost-in-the-woods first days of kindergarten, being alive whittles down to choices, an exercise in empowerment no matter how seemingly trivial the choice might seem to be at the time.

Once the numbing and spectral horror of being in a state prison sinks in a bit, you come to see that the idea is to taper a man's life to a single choice—handling having life's choices taken from you. It becomes particularly traumatic to realize that my choices were forfeited by a ghastly choice I alone made, and being there instantiates proper society's view of that choice, making it all too probable that my choice now deeply defined me in ways any earlier, acceptable choices never quite did.

The herding of inmates into a sociological cluster that automatically parts for a pair of determined COs much like schools of fish scatter when a barracuda swims through,

makes the task of imprisoning inmates much easier. The psychic dehumanizing starts the moment you enter CDC waters and come to intuit that even if you are not fearless you are, clearly, choiceless. Prison does a bang-up job of stripping you down to optionless drones, leaving, usually, but one option—that being, recidivistically enough, nothing but your old options, the ones that got you here in the first place. It's built right into the system. It keeps the prisons filled. The COs compellingly potent union likes it that way.

Before the two COs could reach No Love and his pals, however, a series of sirens shook our small terrible world, and the unmistakable boom of limited explosions I know now forever as the sound of tear gas canisters being fired into brawling prisoners grabbed everyone's attention. Within a concussive heartbeat, we were ordered to the ground. No one disobeyed. Flat on steaming hot asphalt, hissing and melting in the heavy heat asphalt, we lie there prostrate, choking on wafts of tear gas that drifted over us from the mainline yard. My eyes watered and burned.

Being exposed to tear gas is like being force-fed concentrated smoke in a can. Like having the worlds bitterest lemon squeezed into your eyes. Like the scorched smell of burnt to crisp microwave popcorn being pumped into your nostrils at high pressure. Like, I do not exaggerate, breathing broken glass.

Eventually, we were lined up and herded weeping and wheezing back to our cells, which were, in case you want to know, too narrow for two men to pass each other without one of the men pressing against a wall or sitting down on the lower bunk, or on the stainless steel toilet that has the flushing power of a small bomb. (Note: These are not ordinary toilets, mind you. These are furious stainless steel bowls of wild whirlpool action that roar like nuclear blasts, a sucking sound that would leave Ross Perot proud. And here's the thing: they roar constantly. A good shit warrants at least a half-dozen rapid flushes—boom boom boom—each flush producing a thunderous hydraulic eruption. Otherwise, the stench would be too much. Fast and furious flushing is the first and only line of defense against intestinal distress, which is not uncommon when digesting prison chow. It's all we have to keep things olfactorily tolerable.)

I cannot convey to you the bleak and broken sense of the universe: the dim yellowish light of the cellblock, the constant clanging of doors sliding open and closed, the cries and chants, the shame, the anger, the unyielding hunger to turn back the clock and step back over the line I hideously crossed. I would lay on my bunk and smell the diluted to water weakness disinfectant used to mop the cellblock floor and wipe down the stair railings, and out our small window I could catch only a small corner of a surprisingly blue sky I'm not free to step out under and enjoy. I fought back tears that had nothing to do with tear gas.

I was lost. Broken. I had lost touch with wonder.

Every day, the CO sitting silhouetted in the control booth at the head of our cellblock received phone calls from the prison counselors asking for an inmate nearing the end of his stay at Tracy to be sent down to have his points totaled for prison assignment. This was the final step in the classification process. It was a lopsided dialogue, with the counselor, a term stretched to its linguistic limit, explaining how he calculated your point total and confirming just in case it's changed who is to be contacted in case of your untimely death, as well as, maybe, career options and vocational hankerings, and even, prison placement—i.e., being assigned somewhere that might perhaps facilitate a loved one's visit.

At 1315 hours on October 30, 2001, I was on my bunk reading, for the second time in my life, Peter Benchley's hysterical shark tale, "Jaws," when I heard like a wobbling underwater scream, "Hartmire! Counselor!"

"You're out of here, bro," No Love predicted.

A CO manually opened our cell door with a key the size of a serving spoon. He stayed on my right shoulder as I walked with hands behind my back until a bespectacled academic nerd type in a striped short-sleeved shirt with an actual plastic protector in his breast pocket sheepishly appeared almost out of nowhere and asked for my ID.

"Hartmire?"

“T-31606” I blurted out mechanically.

The CO chuckled.

“Come with me,” my short sleeved nerdy counselor motioned. “Let’s see what we can do about getting you out of here.”

Places like Tracy are calculated and prosaic. Guys try and dress up their cells with pictures from home and drawings some surprisingly capable artists sell on the yard for cigarettes and porn magazines, but nothing can expunge the fact that it is a prison and it operates best on monotonous routine and discouraging dreariness. Not even the counselor’s square office in one of the three modular trailers these classifier/counselors work in could overcome the time-honed penal nabe, though my counselor had tried. I realized, upon sitting down across the desk from him, that he was a doppelganger for my eighth grade algebra teacher. Mousy looking, meticulously organized and immaculately groomed, which seemed to somehow expose more than necessary a head too large for the body. There were touches of a high school principal’s office there. Framed photographs of two little girls—cute but not in the same league as my near-perfect nieces—a larger photo in a shiny silver frame of my very own counselor and a woman I took to be his wife and mother of the girls all standing in matching Hawaiian outfits on a beach at sunset. There was a 2001 Ansel Adams calendar pinned to the wall. But the prize winners, what sent bold and pained filial currents through me, were a couple of adoringly hand crafted birthday cards given appropriate prominence on his desk, the kind of cards that only daddies and special uncles find golden and nearly unspeakable in their magnificence.

Oh, God, what had I done?

He had no questions regarding the nature of my crime, no wondering why, just a cool, or more like rote, recitation of what the next 10 minutes would entail, and how, with any luck, I would be out of Tracy within 24 hours. He spoke, the counselor did, in a soft, gentle voice, not unlike a therapist’s practiced intonations, a modulated sweetness measured to get you to spill the beans. Effeminate tones designed to have the soothing

effect of rain on a roof, I guess.

On the wall opposite the calendar and cards was a large map of California showing only a few major highways, large bodies of water, mountain ranges, and, get this, all the state prisons. It was a map of my future. Red pushpins held it in place. Clumps of black ones designated men's prisons stretching from the Oregon border south to the Mexican border. It was a stark geographic reminder—one more—of the choicelessness of my life.

My counselor stepped across to the map. He was, I noticed, my age and short like me, but without any of my athletic mass, and his movements had a birdlike economy characteristic of hyper-graceful Olympic gymnasts approaching an apparatus. Like my old algebra teacher explaining a particularly thick equation, he stood to the side of the map with a wood pointer and one-by-one tapped my prison choices, although he was quick to add, I didn't, not really, have a choice. Regardless of what he and I came up with there were no guarantees.

"It's out of my hands once I type in your choices," he explained. He almost sounded apologetic.

"Any brochures?"

My counselor frowned. Clearly, my stab at humor fell flat.

"You'll probably be going to a camp," he continued. "That's my experienced guess. A month at Jamestown or Susanville then off to a fire camp to complete your term."

"That would be good," I responded. I wish I were funnier. I've always wanted to be funnier. I've always wanted to be almost anything I wasn't.

"Any career training interests?" he asked.

"Thought maybe I could earn a teaching credential while serving my time and get out to teach journalism and creative writing."

He couldn't help himself. He laughed. Then he apologized.

Okay, so maybe I am a little funny, though I wasn't sure I wanted to know what the joke was.

“You’re new to this, Hartmire, aren’t you?”

I smiles and blushed. “First rodeo,” I confessed.

“Anyway,” my counselor said, sliding a CDC form in front of me, “your point total makes you level one eligible, and the CDC is in short supply of level one inmates. So while, like I said, I can’t guarantee your assignment, I’m fairly confident you’ll get what we put down here.” He typed into his computer, looked pleased with the results, and then added one more time, for old time’s sake, “Remember, no guarantees.”

Which explained by and by, how, when I took my brown grocery bag of all I have in the world to the transpack officer a few tortured hours later, I learned I was not headed to some Sierra fire camp but to none other than Corcoran State Prison.

Bored to the point of arrogance, the transpack CO rummaged through my bag like it was garbage. I thought for a gracious second that maybe he was kidding, having his fun fucking with a lower life form. But he’d been around too long, one of those consummate prison pros, whose commitment to personally instantiating the CDC’s marrow-deep commitment to depowering every single one of us was clearly the one thing about his job that still delighted him. If you questioned him about your obviously, egregiously, wrong prison assignment, like I did, his sadist gene kicked in with hurricane powered winds. He didn’t try and pretend otherwise. Witness my point as he looked up from his molehill of paperwork and flashed me his best aspersion smile and said, “Guess you’re fucked up your criminal ass, motherfucker!” Then there came the sardonic, straight from Satan, belly laugh, a shake of the head, and another tobacco juice stained grin preceding a whispered, derisive, “Motherfucker.”

There was no response from me, only a naked powerlessness for which there was no recourse, and which would become even more gruesomely glaring tomorrow when the transport sergeant pronounced after choking down a handful of McDonald’s French Fries that I was—that all of us chained and shackled on the green transport bus—were really nothing but worthless pieces of property reluctantly claimed by the great State of California.

The transpack CO pulled out a thick black marker, wrote on my brown grocery bag of all I had in the world, my name, CDC number, and the letters, "CSP," which was, we all know, my destination. Corcoran State Prison. He tossed my brown grocery bag of all I own in the world over his shoulder into a canvas basket on wheels, the kind health clubs toss soiled white towels in.

"I never miss," he boasted."

"You must be proud."

"Have fun at Corcoran, you fucking asswipe."