

3. SF CITY JAIL: CELL A2

The bars closed behind me. There was far too much in a small place for me to comprehend. I sat on the first empty bed I saw and heard my first words in jail: “Get the fuck off my bunk,” from a man sitting on the toilet. That was Stew, a red-haired, florid, burned out case.

My assigned bed was top and center in an 8 x 12 foot cell, six double bunks, six men, four white, two black.

First question: “Where you from?” by Woody, built like a wrestler, black, in his forties.

“Here.” I meant San Francisco.

“Fool thinks he’s from jail. Where you born?”

“St Louis.” From then on I was ‘Missouri.’

Second question: “What you in for?”

“Calling a cop a motherfucker.” That got a laugh. For whaat?

“A righteous cause,” said Woody.

Pop Kelly, a gentle and wise Tenderloin junky professor and shoplifter who’d done more time in jail than I was old gave me H.G. Well’s “Outline of History” to read: “It’ll tell you how the Bible got written, where our languages come from.” His shoplifting specialty was cashmere sweaters.

The high tension wire in A2 ran between Slim, my age, Irish-American second-story man with a cruel radar tuned to any weakness he could exploit, and Stew, beefy, barely under control. Slim claimed to have headed the White Aryan Youth Nation at Chino state prison, but insisted, “I’m not a Nazi, I’m a Scientific Aryan.” Later, when we became unlikely prison friends, I learned he’d been at Stop the Draft Week, not to protest but to brawl. He supported the Vietnam War because “it kills off the colored races.”

He could talk that way in a cell where everything was heard because the inmates of the “colored races,” Woody, Big Man and later Jimmy, could have

crushed Slim's head between their thumbs, which they knew he knew and he knew they knew he knew. He never made anything personal. It was always abstract racism. Pop and Stew ignored Slim's racist rants, and I argued against them, so balance was maintained.

During the first days I watched, listened, tried to control my fear. On the second night, I hallucinated the bars were made of water I could walk through. Then I got 10 visitors on visiting day and my status shot up. No one else in A2 ever received visitors, let alone lawyers -- Dick Hodge visited me twice a week in a private consultation room. Aryan Slim -- on the outside for three months in the last two years -- took it personally. "I fucked seven broads," he said, reeling off their names like race horses, "and not a nary one of them comes to visit me."

I also gained respect by being the only guy in A2 who *listened*, honestly and with interest.

The clashes between Slim and Stew were mocked in the nightly "radio show" by Red in the next cell over. His rapid fire, perfectly timed improv told of the battle between the Fearless Mission Freak (Slim) and Dingbat (Stew). In one episode, the Fearless Mission Freak, disguised as a bulldoze in a topless joint, battled Dingbat's diabolical plot to snitch on every man, woman, and child in San Francisco. Dingbat, disguised as a priest, was finally defeated by the Freak's logic: if you snitch on everyone in San Francisco, who will the Freak freak with? Don't ask. It was all in the delivery.

Until it turned serious. Red asked for toilet paper, a common courtesy.

Stew started to pass a roll between the bars.

Slim jumped for the roll. "Motherfucker, don't you give him no paper."

"Goddamn, I will."

"Punk you won't."

Their fear and rage threatened us all. Slim backed Stew toward a corner. The rest of us alert and cool. The paper either got passed or not. Slim, swifter than Stew though frightened of Stew's weight advantage, snatched the roll from his hand, Stew, close to hysteria, panting like a bear, eyes bloody, desperate, he had

no way out. Fight or flight and nowhere to flee. Two cops walked past with a prisoner. Slim slid to his bunk, leaving Stew exposed in the center.

“Officer,” Stew pled, “Officer, I’m asking you as a human being, take me out of this cell before I kill him. I swear I’ll kill him.”

The cops were baffled. “Kill who? Who’s been fighting.”

“I’ll kill him,” pointed at Slim, sitting innocently as a new-born hustler.

The bulls, visibly nervous, locked Stew two cells away. His replacement was Jimmy, a young black liquor store stickup man. Stew’s removal deprived Slim of a target and stabilized the structure of power. Slim and I became prison friends -- which is different from crime-partners, bonded in crime, or crime-associates, who you know will split on you when trouble comes. I played chess with Woody, partly to show Slim he couldn’t count on me as an Aryan ally. Woody was good. It took me a week to win a game.

Slim and I, the Nazi and the leftist, were the only ones who debated race. I was winning an argument against Scientific Aryanism one afternoon, driving Slim to declare, “I’ve got one thing the niggers don’t.”

“What’s that?” I asked.

“I’m free, white, and 21.”

At which moment, and I do not kid you, a black officer passed by on the other side of the bars, turned, smiled, and said, “You’re white, 21, and what?”

Made the day for the rest of us.

Speaking of making our day, it turned out that Jimmy, the liquor store stickup man, had perfect recall for movies and comedy records. Thus did Monday Night at the Movies come to A2. After dinner (typical menu: macaroni, beets, green jello, coffee-flavored water) and before lights-out, we’d gather on our bunks or the floor, and Jimmy would recreate a pitch-perfect side of a Bill Cosby album, or stretched over several nights, the entire movie *The Good, The Bad, and The Ugly*, complete with music, playing all the parts, describing the scene, the camera angles -- and always interrupted at the wrong moment.

“.... Just as the kid dies, Tuco jumps on the horse and rides, you see him through the window and you think, now he’s got Clint stranded, wrong! cause here comes tooly ooly ooo wah *wah* wah the trick-gonna-happen music and you see Clint leaning on a Confederate cannon which is aimed right where Tuco’s gonna to be the minute the cannonball hits. Get it? BOOM, Tuco’s knocked off his horse onna rock and you think he’s dead, but what is the rock, it’s a gravestone of the cemetery where the gold’s buried....”
The lights flicker. “Lights out. Cell Check.”

“Shit,” says the rapt audience.

One morning I woke at 4 and thought, half-dreamingly, *I like it here*. I remembered the weekend a young monk studying architecture at Cornell invited me to visit his Benedictine monastery nearby. I woke at 5 the first morning when the matin bells rang across the snow, blanketed in a silence not of this world, and thought *I want to stay here*. The mood ended during the Sunday slide show about the abbot’s recent trip to Rome. “Here I am kissing the Pope’s ring.” Ok, lemme outa here.

That was college, this was jail, no exit. Here you only woke at 4 for a bad reason, like a voice from the Hole, three cells down.

“I am a member of the Mercurian Army. You are improperly dressed.”
Everyone alert. Deputies half out of uniform ran past, The Hole door opened, the thick sounds of beating, thud of a body against the wall. Without a word. Two deputies ran back, disappointed. “I wish they’d let me in there,” one complained.

Woody grabbed the bars. “Motherfucking pigs!”

The Hole door slammed. Footsteps. Silence. Then the howl of the beaten man, and later, softly, “I am a member of the Mercurian Army. They’ve hurt me.”

“He’s insane,” said Pop, “He shouldn’t be in prison.”

“Pigs so close to being crazy themselves they’re afraid of him,” said Woody,

“They’re just on the other side of psychos themselves.”

The madman was led past our cell to the showers in the morning, his face covered by what I first thought was blood but was shit crusting his skin in a

dried cracked layer. He returned, cleaned, his fingers held out at odd angles. The cops told us he'd layered the walls of the Hole with his shit.

Over the weeks, as I listened respectfully and asked with interest, my cellmates opened up. Pop had learned tool and die work in the joint so he could make copies of keys to parking meters. He made his rounds emptying meters, shared equally with the Mob, gave the pennies to his daughter. He offered to set me up as an apprentice. First, I'd get a key for several square blocks, then who knows. "You're a smart kid, Missouri, you could move up." His sister ran a whorehouse and took a world cruise every year.

He gave me a crash course on crooked dice. He'd invented a system using silk-screened magnetic paint, but his bosses preferred the cumbersome batteries and electromagnets. He worked the off shore gambling ships dealing 21, shared half the profits. "Rotary Clubs, businessmen clubs, they'd hire the ship for smokers. We'd show em nude movies, get em drunk. A thousand at a time and not one, not one of those guys ever saw the dice jumping around when we turned on the switch."

Pop had been transferred to A2 for participating in a trustee strike at San Bruno jail. "If you do it by yourself you're fucked. Even if you all go out together, 8 or 10 get picked out for punishment. But you can't get anywhere unless you all go out together." Slim agreed. "If you let them hold something over you, something you're afraid of, they have something to make you crawl. You can't crawl. I'm not afraid of getting beat or going to the hole. You gotta be able to go all the way down and know you'll get up."

Red, the brilliant Alabama cracker of Fearless Mission Freak and Dingbat fame was transferred to our cell. The Hole had broken him, he told me, he'd cried for seven days until the bulls felt sorry and let him out. Sensing a target, Slim called him a crybaby. "Of course I cried, motherfucker!" Red yelled, "I was in a crazy bag. I still am!" The rest of us told Slim to back off, which he did. We liked Red. Slim knew when to fold his hand.

Woody had spent 15 of his 45 years in prison, first on a murder rap, got out after 10, spent four years outside, then a battery beef and back in the pen for four more.

"Those last four years broke my back," he said. "After that I couldn't stay on the outside. Something happens to you, your nerves go and you get adjusted to prison life. Don't let it get that way with you, Missouri."

Pop: "I gave the best years of my life to prison."

Slim: "I haven't had no good years."

Someone was transferred out; the cops returned Stew, now ostracized by everyone but me, his cry "as one human being to another" used to mock him. He ended up telling me a remarkable story, perhaps to boost his image, to prove he wasn't a "Mission District drop out," or because he had someone who'd listen. He'd been a Green Beret in Vietnam, he said. "We got a poison, one drop on a gook's skin, he's iced. I'm not shittin you, Missouri. I used it, secret ops."

He ignored taunts from Slim and Woody. He had a story to tell. I drew him out, partly from boredom and disbelief. "Where was that, man?"

"All over, Cambodia, Laos, the North."

"To do what?"

"Kill, man. NVA brass."

"You were in the North, assassinating military leaders? And you got out?"

"You don't know shit, Missouri."

"Ain't Missouri don't know shit," said Woody.

"When was this?"

"64."

"Stew, there wasn't any war until August, after the Tonkin Gulf Resolution." I was showing off.

"See what I mean. You sit around with your college pussies smoking dope. We're who started the Tonkin so-called fucking incident."

I didn't believe him, though he backed up his tale with military details and was the kind of guy who'd lie, but not fantasize. *Now* I know he was telling the truth, now that I've talked to veterans and read many books on Vietnam. When

anyone mentions PTSD I think of Stew. He was a burnout case alright, but not from drugs. The drugs came after.

Memoirs tend to emphasize the dramatic. Most of our days and nights were vacant and inert, my field of vision forced into the 12 foot range from my bunk to what would be a great view of San Francisco except they kept the windows shuttered across the hall. I got used to flannel mouth, tasteless bland thick mushy food, clangs, smoke, yells from the Main Hall from which our small tier of four cells and the Hole was detached. One night we discussed the laws of the universe, the orbits of stars, the paths of planets. Then back to food, clothes, cigarettes, sleep, the things that mattered in our 8 x 12 world. Some days I hadn't the energy to write notes.

We persevered by letting nothing get too far out of hand, by our common hatred of the screws and the legal system, by small adjustments, by never touching. Big Man would say "excuse me" if he brushed by me on his way to the toilet. I counted the days.

Then came the nightstick bang on the bars. "Cannon! Roll em up." I didn't have much to roll up, my most precious belongings were my 10¢ notebook and my 5¢ pencil. No explanation. No sentimental goodbyes, a few "Good Luck, Missouri"s. Everyone serves their own time. They put me in A4 with two inmates awaiting transfer, one to freedom, the other to County Jail in San Bruno. We didn't talk. The clearest voice came from the Hole: each yell punctuated by the bang of a spoon on a tin plate.

— J Edgar Hoover
— FBI
— I'm not a dog
— I'm not a cat
— They've taken away my shoes
— They've taken away my mattress
— I'm cold
— I want to get out

I too wanted to get out, but I was headed for San Bruno. I retreated to the raw steel nerve ends of a lone prisoner. I missed my jail friends in A2. I still do. They're probably all dead. No way they lived to be my age.