4. SAN FRANCISCO COUNTY JAIL

San Francisco County Jail No. 3, built in 1934 in the Art Deco style, was the oldest operating county jail west of the Mississippi. In 1997, a U.S. District Court judge declared the prison unconstitutional, its conditions in violation of the Eighth Amendment prohibition of cruel and unusual punishment. For some reason it stayed open nine more years, and was demolished in 2012.

Did I know that in 1968? Of course not. Nor did I care. I spent *my* first night in this Art Deco lockup sharing a two-bunk cell with a black kid doing Cold Turkey, dragging himself from bunk to toilet and back all night, sweating, shitting, vomiting, pissing.

The next day I was moved to Tier 6 North. Nothing like good old A2. Built for 70 prisoners, it held 95. The overflow slept on the corridor floor outside the two-man cells. Those first days I spent wrapped in a cold wary glaze, watching, learning, sopping up the official and social Rules, pacing along the edge of fear, trying to radiate a tough, knowing, unafraid image, waiting for the first visiting day. My act seemed to work. No one bothered me.

I shared a cell with a young merchant seaman, who lost his wallet, asked a guy Downtown for a dime to call his wife, and wouldn't that man standing nearby be a cop. Ten days for begging.

My self-confidence crawled back in like a soul returning. I kept reminding myself: You're an anti-war leader who's addressed rallies of thousands, toured the country, met with the Vietnamese, not just a scared kid. Just as I'd almost convinced myself, the screws shook down the tier while we were out. My blankets, cup, and The Outline of History -- all gone.

That's what happens: a small accident, a screwup, a theft and you drop through thin ice. No cup, nothing to drink, no blanket, no sleep. I appealed to the head trustee ("Can't help you. Talk to the po-leece."), the Deputy ("I dunno"), and the Chief Deputy ("I dunno. Go to the kitchen"), but I knew that was against the rules. Then someone yelled down the tier, "Anyone need a blanket? Hold your hand out." An inmate across the tier produced a cup. Life restored.

Arbitrary life, that is. During the shakedown they took my cellmate's magazine pinups, left the cutout of JFK attached to his rosary. He was a migrant laborer from Mexico who knew about Cesar Chavez and the farm workers' union. I never got H.G. Wells' history back. Sorry, Pop.

I was sitting in the corridor reading. A young black guy, very tall, gangling, came and stood in front of me. He wore cowboy boots. So did I. Maybe that's why.

"How long you been in, man?" I asked. He looked confused.

"I don't know, man, I just ain't sure."

He mumbled something, said "I'll see you later."

"Take care," I said. He wandered to the end of the corridor, sang Temptation's songs in a clear voice, sunk in the music. Later he came and sat next to me quietly and watched me read.

On my 21st day of jail, bam! "Cannon! Roll it up," only this time no secret. I was being sent to the "faggot tier."

The day before, my tier mates had gathered at the rotunda to watch the queens taken out to shower. A circus show of terror and fascination, the queens in bouffant hair, earrings, all swish and giggle, the straights catcalling, screaming at the freaks.

Now I was on my way there. I never knew why. My tier friends were sympathetic but wary as I rolled up my blankets. They didn't *think* I was queer, but then why was I being sent there? A middle-aged black inmate who was ordered sent with me, freaked, refused to roll up, went to pieces in terror.

Fantasies charged through my head like cops at a demonstration. The lead queen would be chief trustee, he'd have keys to all the cells, I'd be vulnerable, isolated, victimized. I entered the block, my pipe clenched between my teeth, trying to look like a cross between General McArthur and Humphrey Bogart. The queens ogled. [ah guld]

"Saay, why did they send *you* over here?"

"I dunno. I guess 6 North was overcrowded"

"Well," said the one I took for the Chief Queen, "I know what *I* like."

By the time I was locked in a double cell with a man who just *had* to be a fag, I'd thought up two day's worth of John Wayne replies to faggot gambits.

Except it didn't turn out that way. The gays did not run the tier, had no keys. The trustees were straight, older and nicer than most. The gay cells were

confined to the end of the tier on the far side of a *white line drawn across the corridor*, that's right, a *white borderline dividing gay from straight* which both were forbidden to cross.

My cell was right at the border on the straight side. My cellmate's first words to me, "I'm not a fag" and then, "This is one of the best tiers in the jail. No one bothers you."

I felt like a fool. Or was I being fooled? It wasn't night yet, something could still happen. Of course, nothing happened and I had time to think. The rage howled at them by the straight inmates scared me more than the gays did, all of whom could be killed without protest or sympathy. The prison held the faggot tier over us as control and punishment. We, the straights, were the prisoners of our own fear.

I was still homophobic and would be until it wasted away and disappeared sometime between the Stonewall uprising and the late 70s. I look at the faggot tier in San Bruno as the moment when my personal white line of Gay Otherness began to wash away. The gay inmates knew where they stood in the straight subconscious and how to use that fear to defend themselves. When I showed no reaction to their taunts, they lost interest. Segregated, we had no chance to talk. At night I listened to them call to one another across the corridor:

"And all of a sudden the Man's flashlight was on us, and I said -- uh oh! He caught me with my head down, just as she was coming in me."

"Oh, you naughty boy!"

I was jailed for being me.

They were jailed for being them.

Late in the early morning dark, screams echoed off the steel doors from a lower tier, reverberated up the rotunda. I tried to understand the words, decipher the emotion.

"Help!"

Sweet Jesus.

"Help!" A scream, a yell, a bellow. A long icy minute, then running feet, keys opening doors, closing doors. No sounds from the screws. A garbled lament, repeated, silence.

The next day I was transferred to 5 North. Which makes ironic sense. The straight prisoners believed the faggot tier was punishment. The jailers believed

the same. Therefore, Dick Hodge had to act as if it *were* punishment, and get me transferred. Denying me the best tier in the jail, *and* who knows what I'd have learned if I'd stayed.

On my way to the showers from 5 North, I found the screaming man. His voice hoarse and dried, his arms wrapped around the bars of a lockup cell, moaning, moaning, head cocked to one side as if listening to a faraway Temptations song. Five black inmates watched him sympathetically.

"He just cracked," said one, "just cracked."

The young gangling guy in cowboy boots who had sat beside me quietly while I read.

That night I wrote in my notebook *Goddamn them all.*

My own brush with crackup came during TV time on the corridor. I knew no one, had no allies on 5 North, alone with 80 strangers, not even a familiar face. I looked up from reading a bad sci-fi novel and didn't know where I was. At all. In the world. The prisoners, TV, domino and card games went flat and colorless, the back of my head rolled up in fog. I crouched in panic, paralyzed, until someone on TV started singing *The Green, Green Grass of Home* and I walked. I knew I had to talk to someone and picked a guy because he resembled a friend of mine. He was from Chicago, busted for panhandling, and as he rapped about his life on speed, I climbed out.

Two black inmates came over to borrow tobacco. For the first time in jail I said I was one of the Oakland Seven, slated for trial in February. And because it was 1968, when everything was political and anything could happen, they knew about it. *Charlie Garry's your lawyer? Right on.* [Garry had defended Huey Newton] *Hey, I'm reading the Panther book on Huey's trial. You* know *Huey? That's heavy.*

After that we were on a clenched fist basis. Word out, no hassles, head trustee greeted me with the fist as I passed by. My sentence passed the halfway mark. I started taking down inmates' stories about their experiences in court, and one name kept coming up: Judge O'Kane.

The merchant marine I first bunked with who asked for a dime to call his wife: Judge O'Kane.

Milt, arrested for drunk. The booking officer said, "He's not drunk," so the arresting officer said, "Ok, make it resisting arrest." O'Kane.

A hippy, first day in town, needed a dime to call a friend. A friendly undercover cop gave him 50¢ and bus directions, walked him down the street and turned him over to two uniformed cops. O'Kane gave him three months.

A seaman in the Seafarer's International Union borrowed money from a friend, was arrested for panhandlng, 3 months. O'Kane's court was a sentencing mill, no court recorder, no lawyers, no arresting officers. He'd line up the misdemeanor arrestees from the previous night, say, "Ok, guilty or not guilty?" and did not take Not Guilty for an answer. Jailed them all. I passed on my notes to Karen Jo and Dick Hodge for investigation.

Karen Jo and I drafted a "Pocket Lawyer" to explain sentence modification and habeas corpus and how to use them, to be circulated in jails. "Do not destroy" the first page said, "When finished pass on to someone else." A samizdat.

The Pocket Lawyer project never got to the right people. It came to an abrupt end with a familiar rap on the cell bars.

"Cannon! Roll it up."

What *now*.

Twenty minutes later, at the midnight hour, I was reassigned to a phone booth in the County Jail parking lot. The lot was empty, dark, and spooky, but the phone worked. I called Karen Jo. I was home, free.

How did this miracle take place? Well, it seems a certain defense attorney had visited Willie Brown, a young left lawyer recently elected to the California State Assembly. Willie, a rising star, had a few political favors to cash in. He placed a call to a certain judge with power to modify my sentence, who called the warden, who signed a paper, gave an order, and cut me loose. As Chuck Berry wrote from prison, *c'est la vie say the old folks, it goes to show you never can tell.*

No. It goes to show the opposite, that a respected white radical in 1968, with supporters on the street and in the legal system, had an advantage over everyone else in the joint -- who had no visitors, no lawyers. Prisoners Herb Caen never heard of. That's why I wrote this memoir -- not about the sufferings of a white kid in a time of upheaval decades ago, when America was being forced to confront its evils, that is to say some of its core beliefs.

I wrote this about my spy hole, my tiny lens opening on the hell that is the American prison system, largest in the world. Black Panther leader Geronimo Pratt, victim of the FBI's infamous COINTELPRO operation, framed for a murder he did not (and could not) have committed, spent 27 years in prison, 8

of them in solitary. His conviction was vacated in 1997 on the grounds that the prosecution had concealed the fact that its crucial witness was an FBI informer.

He and I entered the system when allies and enemies were personal and political, when race and class could be diminished by solidarity. Over the decades, Pratt said, the prison population had become less political, more isolated from the community, less aware of the world. No such horror as Pelican Bay State Prison existed then, where prisoners go insane from years in windowless solitary looking out through a perforated steel door at a solid concrete wall 22 hours a day. Today that hell is being privatized. We are in an era of mass incarceration when black men are imprisoned at 6½ times the rate of white men, a war against the poor and working-class, destroying lives and families, cycling generations into a permanent underclass.

"I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just," wrote Thomas Jefferson. He should. He helped create race and justify slavery. So should we all tremble, when we consider how our society treats the least, the most powerless, the poorest among us, and the deep hellish expression of that treatment, our prisons.