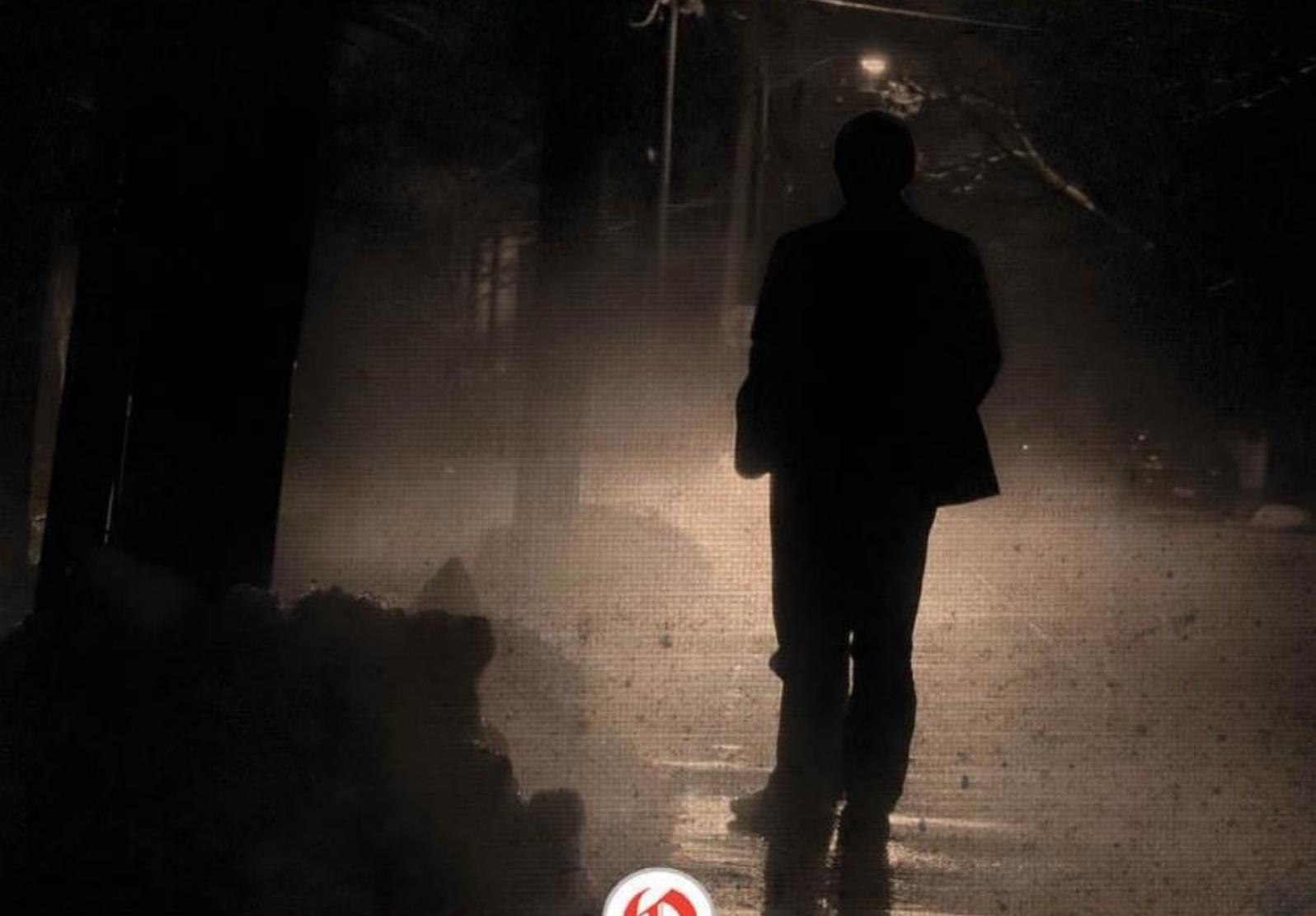


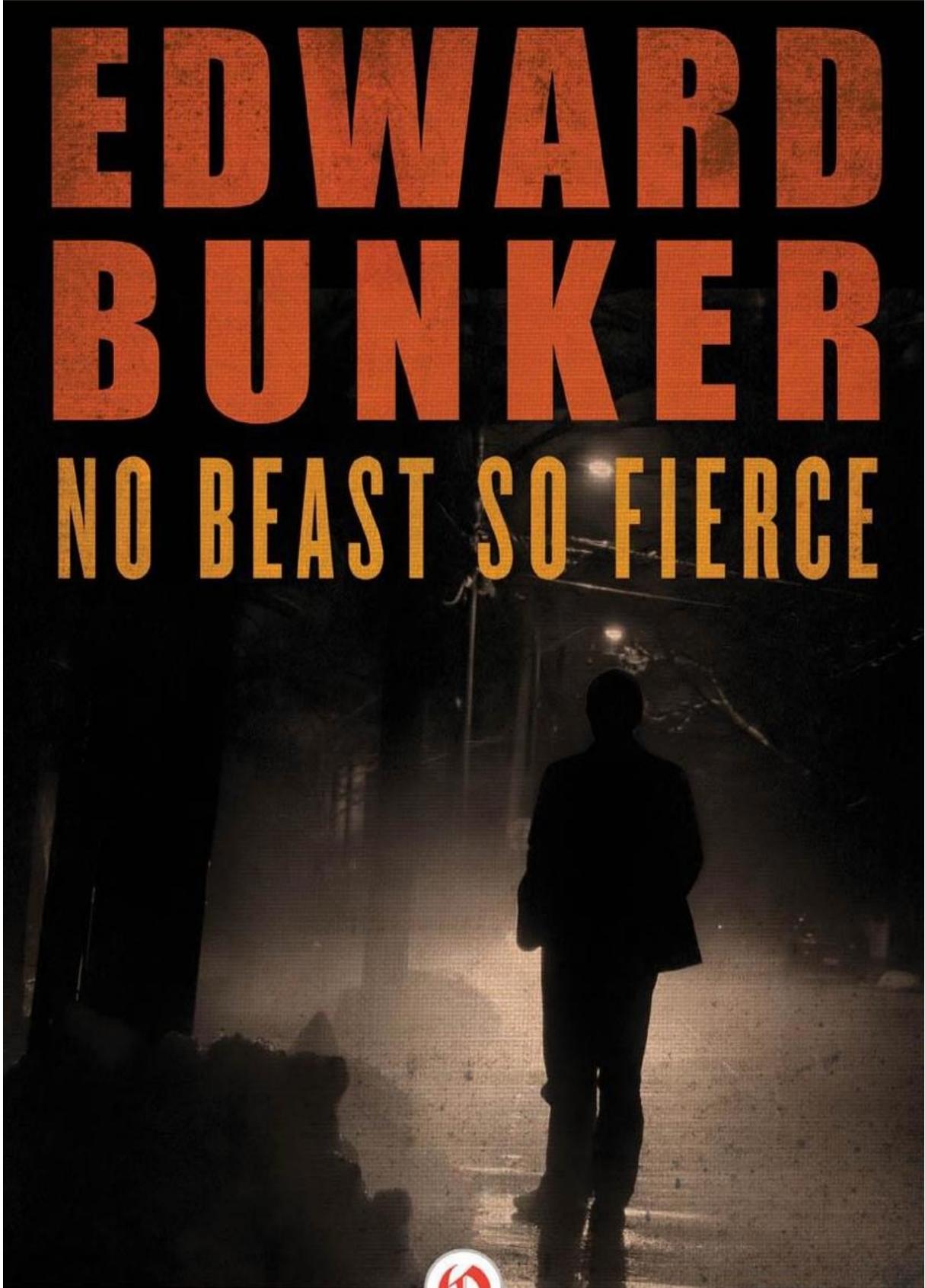
# EDWARD BUNKER

## NO BEAST SO FIERCE



A MYSTERIOUSPRESS.COM BOOK 

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# No Beast So Fierce

Edward Bunker

A [MysteriousPress.com](http://MysteriousPress.com)

Open Road Integrated Media ebook

To Louise Fazenda Wallis,  
who gave an eighteen-year-old convict,  
a typewriter and friendship

“No beast so fierce but knows some touch of pity”  
—*Richard III*, Act 1, Scene 2

## Part One

In every cry of every man  
In every infant's cry of fear,  
In every voice, in every ban,  
The mind forg'd manacles I hear.

William Blake

# 1

I SAT on the lidless toilet at the rear of the cell, shining the hideous, bulb-toed shoes that were issued to those being released. Through my mind ran an exultant chant, “I’ll be a free man in the morning.” But for all the exultation, the joy of leaving after eight calendars in prison was not unalloyed. My goal in buffing the ugly shoes was not so much to improve their appearance as to relieve tension. I was more nervous in facing release on parole than I had been on entering so long ago. It helped slightly to know that such apprehensiveness was common, though often denied, by men to whom the world outside was increasingly vague as the years passed away. Enough years in prison and a man would be as ill-equipped to handle the demands of freedom as a Trappist monk thrown into the maelstrom of New York City. At least the monk would have his faith to sustain him, while the former prisoner would possess memory of previous failure, of prison—and the incandescent awareness of being an “ex-convict”, a social outcast.

I finished with the shoes, set them beneath the bunk and stood up. The cell was small, less than five feet wide. The bunk occupied so much space that my shoulder brushed against the wall as I passed by the bunk toward the front. How many hours had I spent in this cell? From four in the afternoon until seven in the morning, for eight long years. It was beyond computing in my mind. Now the cell was especially barren. I’d given away my small collection of books, the braided throw rug, the soap, shaving cream and toothpaste—everything. “Aw fuck it,” I muttered meaninglessly, without object in mind. I looked out through the bars—thirteen of them, set so close together that only a hand and wrist would pass through. Around this cell were five hundred others, most of them containing two prisoners (I’d angled a single cell after five years) locked down for the night. A typewriter clattered nearby: a letter home or a petition for habeas corpus. Live steam in a pipe thunked and clanked. But the loudest sound was several convicts entertaining themselves with a game of the dozens. It had been going on for half an hour but only now caught my attention.

“Say, motherfucker!” one called.

“What the fuck do you want, asshole?”

“There’s a flick of your mama in today’s *Chronicle*.”

“I didn’t know you read the society page.”

“It’s in the sports section. She’s wearin’ boxin’ gloves and a headguard, gonna fight Liston for the title. She wrote a poem, too. Wanna dig it?”

“Fuck your mother, punk!”

“Man, cough up the poem,” someone else yelled.

“Here we go,” the poet said. “‘I’m the Lady White Hope / My pussy’s so long I use it for a jump rope / I’ll beat that spook into a fit / I’ve got dynamite in my dukes and muscles in my shit / I’ll wipe that chimp like a chump / When I finish with him, his face is gonna be one big bump / I’m the Lady White Hope / I’m so bad I wipe my ass on pictures of the pope.’ How’s that sound, brother?” the poet finished—amid laughter.

“Look, dick breath motherfucker. Get off my mama’s back or I’m gonna put your pedigree on the tier.”

“I’m your daddy, punk.”

“My ass. You’re the result of a few drops of syphilis from a bulldog’s dick rammed in your transvestite father’s ass. You shot shit out and hatched on a hot rock.”

A Negro voice full of anger interrupted. “You honkies better ease up on them ‘spooks’ an’ things.”

I’d been expecting this response, and my stomach went tight though I was uninvolved and leaving in the morning.

“Fuck you, nigger!” someone else yelled.

“Where you live an’ we’ll see in the mawnin’?”

“Yeah, honky redneck motherfucker!” another Negro yelled. “What’s your cell number?”

The cell block was silent. Murders had come from less than this.

“It’s my *room*, for your information. And if you’re inquiring about my address, my dear mother warned me against having anything to do with ghetto riff-raff.”

The reply, so unusual for prison, brought a blast of laughter—but afterward there was silence except for the typewriters. The thoughtless, vulgar repartee could have ignited another prison race war. There’d been several during my stay, each resulting in several deaths and dozens of wounded. And there were no uninvolved inmates. Those who tried to stay uninvolved were the most likely to be ambushed; they made the best targets because they were unprepared. It’d be a bitch, I thought wryly, to have some dumb nigger run a shiv in me the morning I’m blowing this jail.

Attention went out through the cell house’s barred windows to where the prison property fell into San Francisco Bay. The banked floodlights illuminated everything except the black water. The massive concrete and steel buildings gleamed; so did the gun towers set in shallow water on stilts. Two miles away, across the black pond, were rolling hillsides. Only their lights, cast like handfuls of jewels on black velvet, suggested their outline. A highway curved along the base of the hillsides. Headlights and ruby taillights streamed endlessly. Further marking the highway was red, silver, green, blue neon. I didn’t know what signs the neons represented, for I’d only seen them in the distance. And when I’d come to this cell the highway had been dark except for a handful of automobiles, and the hillsides had been empty. The landscape had changed. The question was, had the world changed too much for me? Had the mental and emotional tools necessary for life outside—different tools than those necessary for life in prison—gone rusty in eight years? Again I was back into my anxieties. The churning caused me to grab the cell bars and shake with all my strength. They gave not a millionth of an inch.

Leroy Robinson appeared on the tier outside, carrying a water bucket with a long spout that would go through the bars. The cells had only cold water. The inside of the bucket gave off steam. He caught me wrestling with the unyielding bars. “Say,

motherfucker, what're you doin'? Dynamic tension?"

"I'm breakin' out, damn fool. Can't you see!" Leroy made me smile; he always made me smile, both through friendship and because he transmitted, perhaps by osmosis, his outlook of absurd humor. Leroy would make jokes on the way to the gas chamber. He used wit both to diminish confrontation with his own failures (he was a four-time loser) and to put the world in perspective.

"I know what you're tryin' break out from," he said. "You're up tight as a Thanksgiving turkey the second week in November. I brought you something for your nerves." He put the water bucket down and put his palm through the bars. Wrapped in the cellophane from a cigarette package were two yellow nambutals. They were worth a carton of cigarettes, a considerable sum when ten cartons could get someone stabbed, and twenty cartons would buy a killing.

I unwrapped the capsules and put them on the bunk while he poured hot water into a peanut butter jar and I mixed my last dab of instant coffee into it. The coffee washed down the pills.

"Don't forget to call my sister and tell her I'm okay."

"Man, you ought to write yourself. She wants to hear from you."

"Look, she's married; they've got kids growing up in suburbia. They live in a different world."

I shook my head. Leroy pulled the walls around him like a cloak.

"I used to get full of anxiety," he said. "That was when I was going out with some crazy ass idea of straightening up."

"Well, that's my idea. I'm tired of this shit." I hesitated to express my fears. It would be shameful to whine when he would give anything to change places. And he'd probably make jokes of my worries. Yet, after hesitation, they bubbled out—my fears, vague except for not having a job: "I wrote two hundred letters and didn't get an answer," I said.

"Damn, motherfucker, you don't expect anyone to hire an exconvict sight unseen, do you?"

"No, but somebody should have at least said to come see them."

"I don't have that problem. I start stealin' from the gate."

"That's what I don't want to do. Man, I can root in some fool's cash register—but I want to hang it up. Eight years in this stinkin' fuckin' place is enough."

"Look here, Max," he said, "I went through the same shit you're going through—in your mind—until I decided not to fight destiny, and my destiny was to be a criminal and spend three-fourths of my life in prison. Maybe your destiny is different. But someday, maybe tomorrow, maybe twenty years from now when you're fifty, you're gonna realize that whatever you are and whatever you've done, it couldn't have been very different. You'll see that you're required to do *this* in life, and when you're at the end and everything's totalled, you'll have been *that*, whatever it is. Hope is still ahead of you—but someday it'll be behind you. That's really the point of children, to have someone to pin hope to. I have no children, that's why I have so much feeling for you."

It was the most serious statement I'd ever heard from Leroy. I might have argued with his pronouncements, but preferred to keep the moment of rapport. "Well," I said, "I just hope I last longer than you did. I hope I can handle it out there."

“Shit, I didn’t get busted because I couldn’t handle it. It was just the way the cookie crumbles. Besides, I’d just as soon be in this concrete cunt as be out there without having anything. I’m like a fool in a poker game who’s lost all his dough except a few cents. Ain’t no way to quit. Maybe I’ll win next time, get me a four- or five-year run. After that they can bury me. Fuck it.”

“I don’t want to come back, next year or twenty years from now. I just want to live like everybody else lives.”

“More power to you—if that’s for you. It ain’t for me, and I accept it.”

“I’m burned out.”

“If you can handle the lunchbucket routine ...”

“I’m gonna try. I’m scared, though. I’m trying their game. That’s something new. Besides, I don’t even know if I remember how to fuck a broad anymore. I’ve been down so long I might want young boy butt.”

“Just get one of them hookers to put a carrot on her stomach until you get used to things.”

We stood a few more minutes. The conversation was broken with long silences. My departure upset the chemistry of our relationship. Friendship remained the same, but the paths of our lives were separating, and between us would be the prison walls—and on each side of those walls was a different universe.

A bell rang, bouncing off the walls. The public address system blared, “Final lockup for count. Final lockup.”

“Later on, brother,” Leroy said, sticking his hand through the bars to shake goodbye.

Music came from the earphones until midnight. The nembutal relaxed me, but failed to drive me to sleep. My thoughts turned, sometimes to the music, to the squeak of footsteps as a guard prowled the gunrail, to the hollow gasp of a flushing toilet, or a muttered curse torn from an anguished dream. Mainly, I thought of freedom, of how tired I was of crime and punishment. Having something different would require my being something different. Was that possible? I was articulate, fairly intelligent, very well read (in eight years a cretin would become well read), but what could I do? My only previous job had been selling used cars in New Orleans, and I’d taken that job for cover because of a federal fugitive warrant. I was thirty years old and I’d never filed an income tax return, or used my social security card.

A job was important. Even more than money it would be an anchor holding me stable until I made the transition to a new life. The lack of even a single reply to my letters worried me. Was it prophecy? Would it be different when I was there? Could I hide my background?

My letters seeking a job, though truthful, diminished the full truth. Faces would blanch if the facts had been complete: “Dear Sir,” I thought. “Do you have a position for a journeyman burglar, con man, forger and car thief; also with experience as armed robber, pimp, card cheat, and several other things. I smoked marijuana at twelve (in the ’40s) and shot heroin at sixteen. I have no experience with LSD and methedrine. They came to popularity since my imprisonment. I’ve bugged pretty young boys and feminine homosexuals (but only when locked up away from women). In the idiom of jails, prisons, and gutters (some plush gutters) I’m a motherfucker! Not literally, for I

don't remember my mother. In my world the term, used as I used it, is a boast of being hell on wheels, outrageously unpredictable, a virtuoso of crime. Of course by being a motherfucker in that world I'm a piece of garbage in yours. Do you have a job?"

The mental letter contained too much ugly truth for the humor I'd intended—not the whole truth, but that which was important for the world to judge me. I could not tell them the truth of myself; perhaps nobody can tell the world the truth. Maybe truth is something with dripping organs, gears, unfilled holes, a background of nothingness on a field of melting and shattered time. Maybe I could tell them my memories of being thrown into a pitch black cell, naked, without even a mattress, me and the concrete and darkness—when I was nine years old. Or of being handcuffed to a hot steam radiator in juvenile hall and having a grown man kick my ribs in—I was eleven years old. (But to give the man justice, I had spit on him.)

Whatever the truth, I wanted peace. Tomorrow would be a new beginning, the phoenix rising from the ashes.

It was dawn. The sparrows that nested in high corners of the cell house were unbelievably noisy. The convict keyman was turning the locks on each cell door; but the doors wouldn't open until the security bar on each tier was raised. As the keyman worked, the unbroken rhythm of steel striking steel—clack, clack, clack—rose and fell. It was loud when he was overhead or below, receding as he reached the end of each tier. I was dressed and shaved long before he reached my cell.

Once released, I passed through the mess hall without getting a tray and stepped into the main yard. It was jammed with men from other cell houses. In minutes the yard gate would open and the convicts would flow out to the rest of the prison. The asphalt-topped yard, formed into a rough rectangle, was a concrete canyon surrounded by the giant cell houses. Their faded paint and rusted bars blotted out the morning sun and added to the gothic bleakness. Riflemen patrolled on catwalks overhead, ready to break up fights with bullets.

I'd said goodbye to most of my friends during the preceding two days, while making the rounds to check out. Half a dozen of my closest comrades were waiting just beyond the mess hall door. Most of them I'd known since reform school, a couple had been crime partners. They wanted to shake hands and wish me luck. There was nothing else to say. I was going and they were staying.

Aaron Billings, the person I really wanted to see, failed to appear. He was black and would avoid a group of whites, just as I would avoid a group of blacks. The races had become totally polarized during recent years. Because of this I'd talked with Aaron less and less, but our friendship remained. He'd stopped me at the dentist's office yesterday (he worked there) and mentioned that he might be transferred to camp and wanted me to help him escape. There'd been no time to talk, and he was going to meet me this morning.

I excused myself from my friends, for whom life in prison would continue unchanged by my absence, and began searching through the crowd. I was more conscious of my surroundings than I had been in several years. Two thousand voices collected into a roar as powerful as wind from the sea. The roar moved up the cell house walls toward the sky, failed the ascent and echoed back into the pit. To someone seeing the yard for the first time it would remind them of a teeming anthill, each man identical with every other.

A voice cut through the uproar: “Clear the way! Dead man coming!”

In seconds there was a path ten feet wide. Moses couldn’t have parted the Red Sea any more cleanly. First came a guard, whose voice was calling out. Six feet behind him came the condemned man, a tall young Negro. He was followed by a second guard. Overhead, a rifleman covered them.

It was early for a Death Row procession. This one seemed to be going toward the inside administration building. The doomed men always wore new denim and soft slippers without laces. The man’s slippers were still new, indicating that he’d just arrived. He was probably going for fingerprinting and a mug photo. He was a dozen feet away and I studied his face, seeking (as everyone did) an answer to the great mystery: as if someone sentenced to die at a specific hour by cyanide gas knows more—or is more doomed. The black face gave no message. I didn’t know who he was or why he’d been sentenced to die. Eighty men were waiting on the row. A handful had made headlines; the others were anonymous. Several I knew personally. Sometimes a condemned man had been on the prison main line and waved to friends when he was brought through. Not the black. His eyes remained ahead, except for an occasional glance at the sky. Another detail that told me he’d just arrived was that he was thin; after a few months everyone on Death Row got fat from the special menu. Each time I saw one of them with swollen belly I thought of hogs being fattened for the slaughter.

The procession disappeared. The crowd closed in its wake. The work whistle sliced the air. The gate slid open and in minutes the yard had only a scattering of convicts.

Aaron was near the east cell house wall; he was alone, as usual. His brown head, shaved and oiled, glistened in a vagrant sliver of sunlight. Tucked under his arm were three thick books, all on higher mathematics. His faint smile on seeing me was the equal of a gush of affection from most persons. His ambition was to face life with precise, scientific detachment, with as little emotion as possible. The only decoration in his cell was a charcoal sketch of Albert Einstein.

We shook hands. In prison, the gesture was more than empty ritual. It was the clasp of friendship.

“How do you feel?” he asked.

“Up tight.”

“Are you ready?”

“I’m jack-ready for some freedom. How ready I am for a parole officer is another question.”

“After eight years you’re ready as you’ll ever be.”

“Yeah, if I’m not ready now I’ll never be ready. I know I hope I’m ready.”

“Let’s walk a few minutes. I told the doc I’d be late for work.”

We began to pace the now-empty yard. Though we were the same height—six feet—he outweighed me by thirty pounds, all of it in shoulder, chest, and arm. Years ago, before the racial climate brought too many ugly stares from both black and white, we used to pace the length of the yard for an hour or two at least once a week. The walking habit had developed because if we remained in one place our friends would walk up and intrude in the conversation. The occasional serious conversations we shared—about books and their content—had had a salutary effect on me. Prison conversations usually concern murder, mayhem, homosexuality, gambling, narcotics, stool pigeons, cops, and escape. The all-purpose word is “motherfucker”, serving as

noun, verb, adverb, and adjective—it's meaning depending on context and intonation. Remove this word from the convict vocabulary and prisons will fall silent. Neither the vulgarity nor the topics offended me; they were too close to my own existence. But an unrelieved diet of them left me hungry for something different. Aaron's intelligence stimulated me. In his eleven years of imprisonment he'd learned to speak Spanish, French, and Portuguese, had mastered computer programming and electronics, was a dental technician. His reading habits were less eclectic than mine, but he had a unique precision of mind.

This was our first walk in six months. I'd backed away from him. He knew the reason and had said nothing. We'd never have become friends if the foundation hadn't been placed before racial hate began erupting into wars. The atmosphere had changed in the last two years. The rifles kept things from erupting into wholesale massacre, but there were murderous skirmishes. If a black was stabbed by a white, whatever the reason, there would be retaliation: several blacks would suddenly rush down a tier and stab any white available. Whites would wait and reciprocate. Aaron viewed both sides as ignorant. This was not because he disclaimed his heritage or lacked pride—but he refused to make it a condition of shame or a rallying point of hatred. Quite simply, he found racists on either side to have unsustainable attitudes, lacking scientific foundation. And it was not white convicts who were the problem, assuming the blacks could change the world with violence. The blacks disliked him, too, because he disdained their ignorance. If they tried to force their opinions on him, he could make them back up, for his calm was not fear or passivity. He could be dangerous. He met every person as an individual, and no amount of ignorance could dissuade him. This view created an unusual situation. Many militant white racists treated him as a person first, his negritude being secondary. In other words they reacted to him as he reacted to himself.

When I came to prison I had few prejudices, despite having been through racial gang fights in reform schools.

Now I hate most blacks—because of their paranoia. Suspicion on their part may be justified, but paranoia is a disease. If they hate my whiteness, I hate their blackness. They hate whiteness; they want revenge, not equality. They consider themselves unbound by white laws and moral codes. They pose a direct and immediate threat to me, and to meet it a loathing and hatred has grown—so when I look into their amber eyes glowing with hate, my blue eyes glow with a mirrored hate.

I was ashamed of this attitude where Aaron was concerned, but the prison's racial situation was something we seldom talked about, having agreed that there were no universally acceptable answers. But the situation had driven us apart—not our friendship—and so we talked infrequently. And this would be the last time.

"I've only got a couple minutes," I said. "You want me to help you escape from camp—if you go to camp."

"Here's the situation, precisely. I've got eleven years served and I've been eligible for parole for four. I go to the board again next month. Yesterday I saw my counselor, and if the board denies me again he's going to recommend to the classification committee that I go to camp. You already have my mother's address and I hope you'll keep in touch with her. I'll write you there and tell you what to do. All I really want is to have you give me a ride."

“If you get denied at the board, *if* you go to camp, *if* you send for me, I’ll come for you. But I want you to know something, you’re putting weight on friendship. I wouldn’t give a shit if I was going out to do wrong, but I plan to straighten up. Even before I get there I’m being put in a cross between friendship and breaking the law. I’ll be a dirty motherfucker if it isn’t a drag to promise to commit a felony before I even get out.”

Aaron grinned and squeezed my shoulder. “I thought it over a long time before I asked. If it was anything less than freedom I wouldn’t ask. And it’s no risk. You know that. Drive up to the Sierras, pick me up, and drive back.”

“I hope you get parole. You goddam sure got one coming.”

“What one has coming and what one gets is often quite different.”

“You’re a cinch next year.”

“I could say ‘next year’ to doomsday. I’m no mule chasing a carrot.”

I understood his view—and agreed with it. We walked another lap in silence. I wanted to go. The sooner I reached the front gate the sooner I would be outside the walls. My mind had left him. He understood what was happening. When we reached the end of the yard he stopped and stuck out a brown paw. “Later on, brother. Good luck.”

“All right.” I grinned. “I’ll be seeing you.”

It was time to report to Receiving and Release.

## 2

I RODE off the prison property with sixty-five dollars, a cheap suit (ten years out of style), a set of khakis and change of underwear in a brown parcel, and a bus ticket to Los Angeles. A uniformed guard drove me to the depot and waited until I was on board.

I hurried onto the bus, glad to escape the eyes of the citizens in the depot, eyes attracted to me by the guard. Through the tinted window I watched him depart. An almost electric awareness went through me. I was free. Free!

Other passengers filtered aboard, heaved bundles onto overhead racks. The idling motor made the vehicle tremble. A sense of unreality, so intense as to make me dizzy, swelled up. Everything was weird. The tinkling resonance of women's voices, which I hadn't heard in eight years, was as alien as Chinese to my ears. The variety and color of clothes—the reds and yellows of summer print—crashed against my sensibilities with blinding force. I sat in a trance.

The driver came down the aisle, a stocky man. His belly rolled over his belt buckle; his hat was off and his hair was damp with perspiration. He joked with each passenger as he checked tickets. On reaching me, his smile disappeared. He grunted, wouldn't meet my eyes. Shame and anger made me want to retch—but then I wondered if it was just my imagination. Yet the driver resumed his banter at the next passenger. "Fuck it," I muttered. In a few hours I'd blend into the swarm and nobody would know.

Brakes whooshed, the diesel motor churned. My freedom journey began. All other feelings were eclipsed in the excitement of seeing the world beyond the walls. While we inched through the town's back streets, I soaked up every sight. Commercial garages, body and fender shops, beer joints, and ramshackle grocery stores were pitifully ugly in the unrelenting sunlight—but to me they were beautiful beyond description.

Soon the bus was in the country. The black asphalt sliced through mile after mile of alfalfa, the emerald growth polished by water from revolving sprinklers. I watched the fields with the fascination of a child at his first kaleidoscope.

Wheels and hours turned. The bus passed through rolling scrubland—it was beautiful—and small towns where gas stations bustled, farm workers in Stetsons loitered, and children played in the streets. There were more fields, rippling voluptuously beneath fingers of a breeze. I felt as if I could ride the bus through eternity and be happy.

Two teen-age girls got off in a small town near an airbase. I watched them walk away. They wore stretch pants that clearly outlined thigh and butt. I stared at them

hungrily, fantasy rising with swift intensity. Years without a woman sharpens a prisoner's ability for imagery—one has to have imagination to use a stubble-bearded, plucked-eyebrow fairy. Close your eyes and imagine someone else—perhaps the exotic movie star you saw at the weekend movie. Imagination is necessary where a hand slippery with pomade serves for a woman. Pomade, closed eyes, and imagination. When the two girls disappeared I was worked up with imagining.

For an hour the bus ground a slow ascent up a canyon between slabbed rock walls spotted with scrub. There was no view. I used the interlude to examine an envelope of papers handed me at the prison gate. Three parole report forms. One was to be filled out and sent in the first week of the month. Name and prison number, address, place of employment, income, savings, description and license of automobile. There was a copy of the parole agreement I'd signed, and its conditions. They were standard—maintain suitable employment (what's "suitable"?), make no address change and drive no automobile without written permission, no drinking, make no contract, borrow no money, avoid ex-felons and persons of ill repute, and heed the advice and counsel of the parole officer. Failure to comply with any condition was grounds for return to prison without notice or hearing.

A form letter told me the parole officer's name was Joseph Rosenthal. I was to contact him and report as soon as I arrived. I liked the idea of having a Jew: Jews had suffered so much that he should have some empathy for my problems.

The bus stopped for twenty minutes in Santa Barbara. I hurried to the sidewalk, wanting to just walk around until it was time to go. The tangle of movement and color dizzied me. Everything was strange, a different world than I was accustomed to. Impulsively, I ducked into a liquor store for a twenty-five-cent cigar and a half pint of vodka. The desire wasn't so much to get drunk (I was drunk with freedom already) as to exercise some choice, buy something.

But drunk I was as the bus swept along the seacoast on the last leg of the Journey. I watched the surf weave lace patterns along the beach and the sea glaze with the molten hues of early summer twilight.

I forgot the proximity of Los Angeles until the bus turned up a ramp into Santa Monica. Then awareness of being home crashed with complete surprise and some disbelief. As avidly as a child, I pressed my nose against the tinted window and stared out. Each block was familiar, yet each was renewed surprise.

In West Hollywood we changed boulevards. To the left was the Sunset Strip, and I could see the green hills dotted with white apartments. Memories jumped to mind with almost physical force. This was my territory the year before prison—the only good year in my memory. Not good in any moral sense, quite the contrary, but money had been easy and I'd spent it on easy living, an expensive apartment, sports car, silk suits, good liquor, and food. However meaningless and unfulfilling such a life had been, it was a constant intoxicant. With so much hedonism there was no time to think of "meaning". That year had cost me eight of nightmare, an unfair bargain.

The bus entered Hollywood. I recalled dreary stucco bungalows of yellow and pink, already going to seed after their heyday in the '30s. Now there were high-rise apartments and skyscrapers.

Suddenly the bus was pulling into a depot. My ticket was for downtown Los Angeles. I hadn't thought about stopping in Hollywood. Now I grabbed my parcel and

hurried off, my stomach churning.

The depot was small, uncrowded. The time was 5:20. It was late for the parole office to be open, yet I decided to telephone and see.

A woman answered. Her “please” and “sir” sounded strange. I was more accustomed to “asshole” and “motherfucker”. Rosenthal was still in his office.

“Hi there, Max,” he said. “I’m surprised that you called. Your bus wasn’t due ’til six and I’d be gone by then.”

“I got off in Hollywood.”

“That’s where you are now?”

“They said I was to contact you on arrival. That’s what I’m doing.”

“Good. Good. How do you feel?”

I told him I was a little drunk. Though the statement seemed naive, and it was in a way, there was a test in it. If he accused me of doing wrong, I knew I had a prick and could act accordingly, lying to him forever after. If he passed over it with humor or understanding, I would know that I could manipulate him. But he did neither. He just said, “Oh,” and I blushed, cursed myself as a fool—for not having learned the lesson to keep my mouth shut to authority. He asked where the depot was located. And the bizarre thing was that I didn’t know. I’d been born in Hollywood but remembered no bus depot. Leaving the receiver to hang, I walked outdoors.

The street sign said Vine Street; the cross sign said DeLonpre Avenue. I must have passed the bus depot hundreds of times without noticing it.

I froze, looked around in fascinated wonder. To the left was the downtown Hollywood skyline, familiar to me since childhood—now both known and new as birth. Beyond were the low, hazed hills with a giant sign, Hollywood, perched on top. To the right, a block away, was the Ranch Market. It was old and huge, open-stalled in the style of another era. The sight of it brought a rash of memories. In the postmidnight hours the market—its hot dog stand and magazine rack—catered to weirdos and geeks, freaks and tipsy whores and their pimps. One had to pass the hot dog stand to reach the parking lot, and here at darkness gathered the strange people, watching with predatory eyes those who shopped at 3:30 A.M., cocktail waitresses and musicians red-eyed from smoky bars and marijuana, pills, booze, inadequate sleep. In my teens, too young for bars, with nowhere to go, I’d come to the market on the prowl for a drunk or a fairy to lure somewhere and knock in the head—for fifteen or twenty dollars.

During daylight it may have been just another market. I’d only seen it in the middle of the night.

Remembering Rosenthal, I hurried back, gave him directions, and promised to wait on the corner; he was going to stop on his way home from work.

Before going outside, I bought a handful of picture postcards and addressed them to friends left behind in the cage. I had appreciated the gesture from others in the past and was certain my friends would do the same.

The shadows were lengthening and a wind was rising. It was the first twilight I’d seen in eight years, for the prison was locked up at four in the afternoon. Leroy, Aaron, all the numbered men, were now settled with earphones, books, thoughts.

Rosenthal arrived in a plain, compact automobile, pulling up to double-park and beckon me. I got in quickly and he pulled around the corner, parking on a residential

street of small bungalows. My first impression was of a fat, merry little pig in rimless glasses. Bristles of a heavy beard contributed to this impression; so did his suit, which was far too tight on the pudgy frame. This was exaggerated by a moon face squirting from a tight collar. Perched on his head was a ridiculous porkpie hat with a green feather. His appearance was more absurd than threatening.

The advantage I had of appraising him while he drove was more than offset by his having a large file on me. He eyed me with frank curiosity while we shook hands.

“I imagine you feel pretty good,” he said. “You were busted a long time.”

“Yeah, I’m kind of dizzy, freedom drunk.” I was trying to place a trace of doubt in his mind about what I’d said over the telephone. His eyes narrowed; he had joined the statements. He said nothing about it.

“You don’t look so tough,” he said, smiling affably, getting to what he knew from the file. I grinned back with a candor I didn’t feel. There was no forgetting that our relationship was essentially that of a knife held to a throat. He could order me jailed whenever he felt like it. I sensed that his affability hinged on my agreeing with him.

“Think you can do this parole?” he asked.

“I don’t see why not. It’s just a matter of living like millions of other people. I’ve got problems, but they’re inside me and I should be able to handle what’s in myself.”

“Good, positive attitude. But sometimes it seems harder than that for men who’ve been in prison. They need help. That’s what I’m here for. I’ve seen both good and bad in your jacket. Most parole officers have eighty or ninety cases. I’ve only got thirteen—special cases.”

“I’m a special case ... I only had a forgery.”

“A forgery, yes. But the record goes back so many years, and there’s been episodes of violence. That’s why you’re a special case.”

“I need more watching,” I said bitterly.

“They think so, and it’s my job.” He paused, then went on, “You don’t have a job, so to get my supervisor to approve your release on schedule I had to submit something. I’ve got you a place in a halfway house on Twenty-fourth and Vermont.”

“Halfway house!” The idea of going to a rescue mission for exconvicts, which halfway houses are, made me sick. And the address was in what had been the ghetto border eight years before; now the area was 95 percent black, I knew.

Seeing my feelings, he explained that halfway houses were made for such men as me, those without home or family or assets. “It’s just a refuge until you get settled.”

Perhaps he was right, but it seemed like welfare and it was still under authority. I wanted freedom, not a change of cells. He sensed by attitude and changed subjects: “What about a job? Anything in mind?”

“They always need car salesmen. I talk pretty well and I did it once.”

“I’ve gotta say no to that. Too much temptation to bilk someone.”

“Well, do you have any ideas?”

“We’ll talk about it tomorrow. My supper’s waiting and my wife will chew me out. What about the halfway house? Try it for a night or two.”

“Let me decide that tomorrow, too.”

“Where’re you staying tonight?” I saw the thought behind his suspicious eyes: was I going to disappear, hang up the parole?

“I’ll be at your office early. Keep my bundle in your car. And I’ve got thirty dollars

gate money. I won't lam and leave that behind."

"I don't care if you run. It's no skin off my ass." He reached for the ignition key. "I'm going past Hollywood Boulevard. Want a ride to there?"

"That's fine."

Hollywood Boulevard seemed as good a place as any, though I'd had no thought whatsoever beyond Rosenthal.

When I stood on the curb and Rosenthal drove away, freedom's full impact landed. Until that moment I'd been carried along by the thought of reaching the city, the necessity of seeing Rosenthal. Now my freedom was absolute, of a kind few persons experience. If I went north or south, east or west, up or down the sidewalk, it made absolutely no difference. It was freedom to the point of being in a void.

A faceless crowd hurried by me with destinations born of choice and linked with past choice. Everyone had somewhere to go, and they were happier in their invisible fetters than if confronted by freedom. I was dizzy and overawed and somewhat frightened.

A neon forest was coming alive. The aureole of brilliance around each tube grew as it ate the night. Colors flashed spasms, bubbled illustrations, whorled and exploded, gleamed on the waxed metal of automobiles. I began walking toward the west simply because the brighter lights were there. I had to make some choice, some movement.

"Now what the fuck should I do?" The question should have been absurd, for I'd been born less than two miles from where I stood, had lived my whole life (when free) in Los Angeles. Yet among the city's millions I could think of nobody to telephone. Among the multitude were hundreds of criminals and ex-convicts whom I knew, who were more or less friends. They'd be in cocktail lounges on the Sunset Strip, or in dingy bars downtown, or beer joints and cantinas on the east side. They lived furtively, deliberately made themselves hard to find. A tour of the hangouts would put me in contact with a few. Through them I would find the others. In a few days I could be returned to the underworld milieu. It would be easy—and it was precisely what I wanted to avoid. Suddenly the neon burned my eyes; it was like the sensation on the bus except more intense. The crowd scurrying by might as well have been insects, so alien to them did I feel. I struggled for mental equilibrium.

The odor of food and awareness of hunger brought me back to reality. A greasy hamburger in a crowded coffee shop tasted delicious after so many years in a place where Velveeta cheese was a delicacy. I was finishing a cup of coffee and studying people (men wore their hair longer now) when I flashed on who to telephone. Willy Darin, the dope fiend. He'd been on parole from the Narcotic Rehabilitation Center for two months, according to the grapevine. His father-in-law's telephone number was in the directory, and someone there would know how to contact Willy.

My hand sweated on the receiver. I knew the entire family and anticipated knowing whoever answered; but the man's voice on the other end was unfamiliar.

"Is this the Pavan residence?" I asked.

"Yeah. Who do you want?"

"Who's speaking?"

"Man, you called here."

The game of mutual suspicions was ridiculous. "My name's Max Dembo," I said,

“and ...”

“You re jivin’!”

“I’m not jiving.”

“Goddamn, man! This is Willy. When did you raise?”

“This morning. Damn, brother, I didn’t recognize your voice. Say, I’m stranded out here in Hollywood. Have you got some wheels?”

“Yeah, sort of. It might get there. But it’ll be a while, say an hour. You’re lucky you caught me here. I just stopped on my way home from work. I’ve gotta go home and shower.”

“How’s Selma?”

“Same old shit. We’ll cut it up when I get there. We’ll get loaded.”

“Not on junk.”

“Some pot or something.”

“Don’t hang me up. You know how fuckin’ undependable you are.”

“Don’t sweat it. Where’ll you be?”

“Hollywood and Vine. Where else, motherfucker?”

“I’ll be there in an hour.”

When I went outside to kill an hour wandering, the tumultuous uncertainties were gone. The ache of being alone was also gone. Prison atrophies many emotional needs, but it increases others, among them the need for companionship. The twenty-four-hour crowding grates the nerves, but insidiously it addicts.

I walked the boulevard, window-shopped—and saw that my dressout suit, with cuffed and pleated trousers, was an anachronism. I loved clothes—perhaps through some insecurity—but forced down a rising hunger with the thought that they would come with work and patience. Those who had the things I desired had been striving for them while I vegetated in prison. Only crime would allow me to catch up overnight, and that was out of the question. In many ways I’d never catch up. I accepted that reality.