

Electric Latches · *Steve Fisher*

THINGS TENSED UP MORE THAN USUAL, in the camp, when rumors of the shakedown were confirmed. In the first place, your stuff wasn't guaranteed to be safe, just because you found a nook to stash it in. Everyone in the joint was thinking of the remote, obscure, nearly sub-prison regions of the yard, and there weren't that many spots available: the yard was just a small dirt tundra, level as a municipal airstrip and anybody could get to your shit fairly easy. Secondly, the routine structure of the institution got knocked around and jammed *inward*, to where we live — this meddling with and confiscation of our possessions — so there was anticipation and complete sensing of the dirty little grub violations about to come down. It made some people ugly, others non-committal. It affected everyone in degrees. It became the sole topic on the yard, starting a week before they came through.

“Big shakedown coming up next week, Holmes.”

“Ain't it a bitch?”

or

“Say man, wanna buy a pair of Levi's cheap?”

“Shit, they're just gonna steal 'em if I have 'em laying around the house.”

“You can wear them no problem.”

“Except they'll be looking at our property receipts.”

“Alright, then lemme get a smoke offa ya.”

“Don't have none.”

But as the customer walked off, without upping one, he felt the eyes of the peddler upon him like a hot coating glaze so he turned around, looked at the guy, yelled “Fuck your goddamn Levi's!” to him to take a bit of the heat off himself. Very quickly another system had been developed by the population, just to accommodate the bullshit. But I can't help thinking that what is supplied to adapt to in our prisons is the same thing, in attitude, that will *aggravate* a man's sentence and get him more time before a judge, until the man feels like he's lost in a carnival of mirrors.

What *I* needed, at any rate, was to find a trusty. Or a dry place somewhere, inside of a building. The problem was that most of the Complex buildings were housing units, “dorms,” and I had bulk that couldn't be

buried outside. Books, magazines, a few personal papers. I was leaning against my locker, looking at the brown crotch of earth that hardened outside of my window, thinking *the library*. It could work. It could be a solution. I could pattern my books along the shelves with the others, and pick them up after the police swept through. A dust devil suddenly whirled up from the ravine in the road, and ran toward my window like a powdered, tan skirt. It was large, violent, a twisting spike of cone. I slid my small, glass windowpane along, before it crashed through the screen and showered all over my bed and the rest of the cramped, double cell.

I turned away from the locker, stuck my hands in my pockets for something to do. Actually, there was a chill in the air. The dorm was pale and stuffy and I stood there, breathing, thinking just who had what type of jacket out of the twenty-five people I was routinely locked down with: Shorty, Flame-out, Pinky, and Spider were all doing time for burglary. Igor and Butter-butt, along with Manther and Blood Bath, had long time for either manslaughters or murder. We had Big Al (#1, white) and Big Al (#2, black), doing old-code time with Tombstone, Rebel, Barbershop, and High Tower for various forms of armed robbery. Both Rolly and Hammer had picked up their numbers for boosting. The Torch had arson and escape on his jacket, with some minor raps of D&D. Also theft. He'd never see minimum-security. Neither would Mad Dog, or M&O, who totaled between them four hundred years. Aggravated battery w/ kidnapping and burglary. *Judicial* winter. Five others suffered these walls for rather personal, non-criminal offenses, primarily the use of drugs. Like me. Chickenshit but profitable for the new penal code, to be sure. And that left Wanda, whose real name was Warren, but Butter-butt figured it sounded more natural, more masculine, to be punking a Wanda because you say "Warren" and motherfuckers take it that you got tendencies as well: just a matter of formality, a language, pride—though my ideas about it were more straightforward than that. But regardless of the circumstances that brought people down, the material to stash was about the same: utilitarian. I knew all of these convicts well enough that at night, in the semi-darkness, I recognized each one by his leg strides and footsteps.

It was M&O who came up to my cube. He was short. Young. Athletic. With corn rows. And some sort of bead, a silver, woven through his hair. The designer shades he constantly wore were blacker than silk screen, but he contrasted little to the function of the dorm: body drag, mere complai-

sancy, combined in a listless May afternoon. He always hit on you for something.

“Ya don’t have no *Chocolate Twins*?” he asked me.

“No candy, no sweets,” I told him, but he looked at me for an instant longer than expected. I said, “There’s just no way to rely on that dentist around here. You get a cavity, they’ll clean your teeth with shaving stones.”

I looked at him with the feeling, I thought (it was a personal thing) of someone enlarging their vision to the circumference of a ferris wheel.

“I hears that,” said M&O, as a flurry of voices shucked through the corridor from the entranceway at the top of the run. There was a beef of some sort which I knew nothing about, nor cared to participate in, so I just fixated the sound into a jazz of overall commentary. It caught M&O, too. He pepped his head up, looking over at the door to see his homeboys in dispute. He wandered off with his *purpose* and got up there with them, prepared to get down.

But these little skirmishes went on all the time, nearly everywhere, it was hardly anything new. Sometimes it resulted in blood, but to me it was yet another thing to endure: simply by preferring to contribute to myself, and not to the hordes. It could be rough enough just maintaining that. But I hardly gave a fuck about what was stipulated by expectation—from either the courts, who anticipated the self-perpetuating criminal, or by the convicts who only played it in one strict way. I just did my time as would a dolphin among a sea of deadly creatures.

As the warden would say, I didn’t measure up. Hardcore, *ése*, hardcore.

I rubbed my back against the wood of the locker, thinking it might take a couple of trips to move my books through the library turnstile. Of course the cops were up there, security—the thing which prevented me from doing it myself—but anyone who worked there could carry a load of overdue books in. They did it all the time. I couldn’t foresee any exceptional problems. I listened to the whirring of Manther’s tattoo gun, a few houses down from me. In a few days, the ream of authority would bear down and rip up the yard. I wanted to get on with it. I looked around.

M&O had moved off, somewhere, with his pals. The argument was traveling through our cold, concrete tombs to another wing, another house—to another multiplication—and very little traffic was moving on the ramp. Really, it was kind of peaceful: there were just six people, over

at Manther's, watching as he tattooed someone's ankle. But as Rolly got up and walked down the aisle I began thinking: this motherfucker can help clear the gate for me. Rolly had been transferred in recently, but I knew him all the way back to my jailhouse days in Tucson.

I said, "Rolly. You're a trusty up in the library now?"

He said, "Yes," very sharp and succinctly, intoning a wave through the word like he was riding on it. I'd always appreciated the manner in which he did time.

"You wanna do a little job for me?" I asked.

"Well, of course it depends," he said. We were eye-height on each other. His brown hair was still full, even though he was no longer a youngster.

"It's real simple. All I need is for you to take my books up to the library before this hoedown next week. I can stash them, once they're through security."

He asked, "What's the load look like?"

I pulled a door open on my locker. They were already bagged up.

"Both of these bags," I said. "That's it."

Rolly just worked an eyebrow, beaming and present at the tip of my cube, then said, as a statement, "Books really scare them." He put a hand on top of my cube's ledge, eyes lit.

So I grinned back and told him, "Content in *any* form, really. I've noticed how they keep locking up these yard lawyers, the ones that make headway and get folks released."

"Sure enough."

"But I also know what you mean about books. They must only carry romance and science fiction on purpose."

"I'm telling ya," he said. "It's a big fucking joke up there."

"If you got the balls for that sort of laughter," I told him, but Rolly knew his way around and laughed along with me. As it slapped the walls in our nearly empty strip of housing, I thought, for an instant—it was really something like flashboard—of two small bombs going off in a quiet office.

"Hey! Keep it down over there!" someone shouted.

Rolly turned his head toward Manther's house, where a young fish was sitting around. The fish only wanted to cut in. Rolly turned his head back, nodding to me that it was nothing: nothing, except somebody was always pushing in.

I opened up my window again.

“Anyway,” said Rolly, “if you want to lug one of those bags for me I’m starting my shift in half an hour.”

“Alright,” I said.

“I’ll get them through with my other crap. Just a few things, not much.”

“I’ll be looking out my window,” I nodded, “ready for you.”

Rolly walked off and I sat down, on my bed. We were under such heavy procedure and security that most people, like Rolly, sensed the value of immediacy in a situation. Even the lames on the yard understood this, in their own way, mainly among themselves. It was the *attitude* which got things done. And, in large part, prevented folks from going to lockdown. Or street court. For mostly non-offensive, in-house charges, which the administration compounded into statistics for evermore of the State’s money.

I lit a cigarette and got the books from my locker, the grocery bags, and moved them to the bed. It was Saturday, and people began returning from visitation. It got crowded. Noisy. Convicts from all over the yard tripped through, some looking for friends, others casing houses, a good many of them hunting the dope bags which came in. Drugs were common in prison because not only did they make people feel better, they altered perimeters within the Correctional ethic of time: which was just a dull, dragging clock, defined by the repetition of daily events. But drugs created a freedom from these chains which hung about, everywhere, like so many links to a policy manual. Whites, blacks, Mexican, it didn’t matter. Fifty people came through within twenty minutes, hustling, jiving, stretching an angle to the fine point of contact. The bullshit interlaced. By the time Rolly returned and said, “Let’s jam,” the dorm had become tight. Become grainy. It felt like I was being suctioned with attachments and I wanted to pull them off, but it was difficult—nearly impossible—something like flexing your own teeth. There had to be a better way to do really close-up time like this, I thought. Really, there had to be.

Rolly grabbed a bag. I grabbed a bag.

We then headed out.

The yard was scattered with inmates, a few cops. Smoke from the Sweat Lodge oiled the air. The Indians sat out there in a hut beyond the inside fence and sweated, we’re told, as part of their spiritual practice. Fine. I

got along with the Chiefs like a regular, but today, for some reason, their coals put out a hot, sardine stink. I don't know if I was simply unschooled in this ritual, or if the guards had exchanged logs, as a prank—it really *smelled* of their mentality and underbrain—but I ingested it as yet another sign of forewarning. The stink blew heavily across the tract with the wind, and sheets of dust flew like bedding discarded in an alleyway. Not only did it darken the Complex like an L.A. smog, it plated on the skin and redirectioned the senses as if, suddenly, you were stumbling drunk. I was familiar with the feeling. Rolly knew the feeling. Halfway across the yard he told me, “Back in Tucson, people stand out in the street and *point* when they see a cloud going over. They couldn't begin to imagine it down here.”

“This really isn't weather,” I'd already decided, “it's interrogation.”

We moved onward, thinking about it, bucking our flesh against the overswelling gusts. I with one bag, he the other. Folded inside he had another bag with his own stuff. On both bags were other bags, bags we had fitted over the top as lids. All Rolly had to do was take both of them through the gate.

He said, “If you really want to put these on the shelf, get a pass for tonight and I'll leave them out. But they'll be safer if I just stash them, in the cabinet.”

“Alright,” I said.

“If the librarian saw them sitting around, she might react and I mean by writing up an incident report and turning them in.”

“I've seen her,” I said. “Let's just go with the cabinet.”

He said, “Ehhh, buddy,” with an inflection of parody, as we came to the side of a building by the gun tower. The gate. We stopped for a second, so I could hand him the books.

“No charge,” said Rolly, “since we go back and were once tight.”

I said, “You motherfuckers are making a fortune off this deal anyway. Good time to be a trusty, no doubt.”

“We have stuff, up there in the library,” he said. . . . “Damn near looks like we went through the houses, vacuuming up essentials.”

“You be *styllin'*, I'm sure.”

“It's high season,” he grinned, “what the fuck?” He then rounded the corner with the two bags, just like he'd heisted a couple of watermelons from a supermarket display. But I had confidence that I'd see them again:

there were some people you just had to believe in.

I put my head down and started back through the yard, the desert cracking whiplines around my eyes, across my forehead. There were moments when I enjoyed the dorm, but usually I had to make it work, for *me*, because not only was I slow at times, I had the extra burden of being stupid: jokes went by I didn't understand, or the food that was fought over I couldn't stomach anyway. And much of the hair on the loud music seemed groomed, brushed, uncoiled, thin. Maybe, that was just me. But I was in there so often, there at the center, feeling such tension in the air that my skin felt like vomiting. That's the only way to say it. To *say* it. There's an energy in reverse, it seems, that just suits up upon itself. Then hangs on you like drywall. Mother. *Never* get caught. I walked along I squinted, looking down as the dust broke from ripples to waves. It gritted on my teeth like dirty linoleum tile. But, for it all, for all the faces that howled from within this iron set-up, I sometimes reasoned I had a jump of my own: I felt like a lightning bolt between beehives of grand symphony—reeling, striking, *advancing* to something above and beyond the walls, something which made me neither bloodthirsty nor elite. As I looked up at the dorm, five young Mexicans were running from a dust devil. They danced with a waving of ballcaps, knees kicking up, like it was some sort of ritual music from home.

I could only see them and not hear their giggling as I walked. That wind finally helped. Then, I was in.

* * *

Leather soles scuffing concrete.

Bones cracking in the joint.

Humming tubes of artificial light.

Red eyes, glazed, wondering.

Then corridor-length conversation. I heard locker panels slamming, wood on wood, metal on metal as the air vent was fitted together. Cups dropped. Towels snapped. Water ran loudly down the sink, unattended, as a lone giraffe gargled in my dreams. Windows scooted open, closed, as some of the blacks ran up and down the aisle. The two in the cube across from me sat waiting, on the hips of their beds, anticipating. I lifted then dropped my eyelids.

The dorm began buzzing with hoots, nerves, hyperactivity. Uncirculating blood pulsed in the fingertips. I opened my eyes as M&O went past,

shirtless and swaggering, making sounds like he had a locomotive in his chest cavity. I managed to roll over but I had a roommate who said, “Ill-mannered little fucker,” and we left it at that.

It was too fucking early in the morning for me. I felt like I was waking with sinus cancer, whatever time it was, but as I reached for a cigarette I heard a brownsuit commanding, “BREAKFAST IN FIVE MINUTES. YOU WILL THEN RETURN TO YOUR HOUSING UNIT UNTIL SUCH TIME AS THE SHAKEDOWN TEAM ARRIVES. YOU WILL BE SECURED IN YOUR UNITS.”

I peeked over the top of my cube’s ledge. I wanted to make sure I got it right.

Sure enough, the old throat giving orders was just an administrative sergeant, nobody we’d ever seen before. So instead of possible questions, she received nothing more than a push-off.

“GIT ON OUT OF HERE, YA STINKY OLD WHORE!”

“YA DOUCHE WITH MEXICAN TAP WATER, SARGE!”

She said, “WE *WILL* COME THROUGH HERE, ANY WAY YOU WANT IT. ORDERS ARE IN EFFECT FOR TODAY.”

“YA OLD *BUFFALO* HUNTER!”

She pushed out the door, locking it behind her. Half a dozen laquered faces stood with her, some in the guards’ cage, looking down the run at us. They mingled like ticket holders at a ballgame, only stiffly. One of them, one big greasy slob, wore a helmet with a face shield and carried a shotgun. I thought, he’s on the payroll to make sure I don’t read. I lay back down and lit up a tailor, as conversations splintered woodenly, numbing.

Then two things dawned on me which helped explain the dorm’s jitters: not only was the Sarge’s voice an unknown, it was *Monday*, not Wednesday, and Monday wasn’t anticipated. Strange, though, because I knew most people were ready. As the nicotine absorbed in my blood I just lay there, not understanding the dimensional shock. Rolly went by and I asked, “What time is it?”

“Not even six,” he said. I heard him lighting a cigarette, next to me in his cube.

That’s another thing, I thought. Some of us never get up until noon including me. I reasoned that mornings were an active write-up shift, and my strategy was to skate as much as possible. I was thinking of minimum,

of the streets. But it wasn't even six o'clock yet. No wonder people were already feeling hammered, beat. Across from me, sunken in the concrete above my neighbor's locker, the small barred window looked like lips peeled back and affixed with a shine. This was sun, the beginning of morning.

Rolly poked his head around, looking into my cube. I drew again on my cigarette.

"Get your ass up and do *time*," he told me, but the look on his face wasn't a challenge.

I exhaled in his direction. This shit of waking up was pointless.

"You want to hear some facts?" he asked me.

I said, "Go ahead. I'm nothing but earcone."

"Alright," he smiled, "they're shaking the other houses down before us. That's three hundred people. They won't even be here till late afternoon. Also, M&O's on the way out, along with one of his buddies. Cops are gonna roll 'em up during breakfast."

Rolly dragged casually on his cigarette, gripping it between his forefinger and thumb. I now had the facts.

I said, "Serves the little prick right. These cretins are coming through to abuse us, and he thinks we're having a party."

Just as I said that, M&O walked by. As he bent down to whisper something to my neighbor I saw the muscles—traps—expand in his neck.

"So fuck 'im," I said.

"Yeah," said Rolly, "I agree. So do most of the people on the run."

"It's a complicated kindergarten," I said, "but I've noticed. And maybe now, since we've got all day, I'll stretch my shit out and go back to sleep."

"Let's go to breakfast, long as we're up," he said. "Hey, why not?"

"Alright," I agreed. "I suppose."

I sat up, yawned, took a last hit on my cigarette then tapped it out in the ashtray. It was good having someone like Rolly around, someone who understood the caravan much in the manner that I did: most of it was toss-off. I slipped my rough State jeans on, feeling them crease into my skin. I thought, it's not just these pants: the whole fucking dorm is like wearing an overcoat, an old stuffy overcoat that's too tight in the sleeves. But not only was that my main problem, others, by their reactions, by the things they said and the webs in their eyes, stated as much in a sort of absence. Rolly and I went in and ate the eggwhip. It was tasteless, oversalted, grayish, like the clouds.

It was fucking hot coming back from the chowhall it was always *hot* out there, but the wind hadn't yet picked up. It would. It wouldn't help. Spider, walking a step or two ahead of us, hacked up a louie and spit it in the dirt. Yeah. But as we cleared the side of the chowhall and came into the yard, the first thing we saw were cops. Outsiders. Their special fucking scavenger crew, brought in as a "service patrol." They were milling around our dorm, twenty or so, some of them going in and out of the door. Vigorously. Carelessly. But oh so *importantly*. An old white pickup truck was parked outside on the walk.

"Change of plan," said Rolly. "Looks like we're first."

"What the fuck?" asked Spider.

"I'll bet when M&O brought the heat, they got in and decided to stay," I said.

"Yes," said Rolly, slowing up and lighting a cigarette. "They figured, 'Why lug the team around when we're already here?'"

"That mu-ther-fuck-er," said Spider. "I've still got some shit in my locker."

"Better get it now," said Rolly, "before they crawl up our ass with a flashlight."

As Spider hurried off, a call came over the loudspeaker: "TENSION ON THE YARDS—ards—ards. ALL RESIDENTS OF HOUSE FOUR REPORT TO YOUR UNIT ASAP!" and we did, since we had no other place to go. Rolly said, "I know they can't touch me," and while I also thought it was true for myself, I didn't at all like the idea of them shuffling through my cube. Getting in close, under the guise of security. I took a pull off of Rolly's cigarette as we walked, scraping my lungs like I was choking down hot bricks. It was still too early in the morning for me.

Spider had made it in, but the cops were all over. In the dayroom, the guards' cage, pitter-pattering along the ramp. Three of them were at M&O's, going through his stuff. M&O stood quietly (for a change) and watched, trying to look bad: the expression on his lips said, "Wha' th' *fuck*, man, wha' th' *fuck*!" but to me it really looked more like exertion. Nobody bothered to ask him what it was all about. Nobody got close to him at all.

His shit was boxed up and wheeled out the door. They led him down the ramp, shirtless but freehanded, only now they had his sunglasses. His character. But just as they escorted him out the door, six cops stormed

through like precinct rookies. Like cadets, practicing for a house raid. Why? What was the exhibition all about? Others followed, as the first ones lined up against the wall. I turned and noticed a young Mexican up the run, looking nervous, antsy, fidgeting in his cube. The Torch, right next to Spider. But really, just standing there with that *look*. I thought the best thing to do was simply lie down and twiddle my thumbs, so I did.

“GENTLEMEN, EVERYONE STAND AT THE FOOT OF YOUR BED. WE’LL BE INSPECTING YOUR HOUSES AS SOON AS YOU’RE COUNTED. YOUR COOPERATION WILL SPEED THIS ENTIRE PROCEDURE ALONG.”

Bastards. I stood at the foot of my bed and was counted. Then I sat down, waiting.

They came inspecting, all right, but now each one of them had a partner. A woman. One of the female “counselors” from the Admin. building, who had also put in for this shift: the counselors would get double-time pay from their supervisors, because the supervisors ranked this as “hazardous duty.” Some scam. Most of them, like the others, we didn’t even know. Our own fucking counselors. But instead of adding a softer, feminine border to the touch of Statehood, they clawed at our quarters like leopards after jungle meat. Starting with the first house, first cube, first party on the count sheet.

“Take everything out of your locker and put it on your bed, and I mean *everything*,” she told Spider. Loudly, coarse. “Clothes, towel, books, radio, tapes, Bible. Legal papers. I want to see your folders.” She scanned a checklist, up close with her pen, brown tassles of pageant hair flying. But her skin was the texture of old foam. I noticed the young one, the one who stood next to her.

“Shaving kit and personal hygiene effects,” she continued. “I want to see your number etched on your reading lamp, radio . . . and I guess you don’t have a television here. Stationery supplies are now limited to one notebook and a box of envelopes. I want to see them *now*.”

She was standing over Spider at the foot of his bed, while her partner crowded the cube. Just staring. Supervising. Watching each move that he made. Behind his cube stood the slob with the shotgun. The cop in Spider’s house said to his partner, “This guy’s got five pairs of socks, Lilly. Aren’t socks a limited item?”

The dorm was suddenly quiet. My ears rang a little.

Lilly moved in, checking her list. She brushed against the cop for a moment, almost like they were nuzzling. They looked crude together, I saw them; glaring, over-fed: “The provision calls for three pairs. I’ll start making a pile, for his box of disallowables,” she said, and I, at that point, sickened by their grayness, pictured two rats fucking in the trash behind the State House, atop a discarded copy of the Arizona Revised Statutes.

Title 31.

Rolly looked in over the top of my cell ledge. “If she was born counting, she’d still be in single digits,” he said. I laughed no problem, but I also remembered my writing board. It was big enough that I could place it on a box and have a table, but small enough that I could hold it in my lap and make a portable out of it. But it was contraband. Their policy against writing materials. I slipped my board on a special, convict-designed rail at the top of my bottom locker, fitting it flush so it would only feel like a piece of unfinished wood.

The agents, cops, counselors wandered around, ransacking the cubes in a spirit of duty. Lord. *Close up time*. I felt I was resisting a colony of moles while being packed down under, down in the earth, but I forgot about that when they got to my cube. They also hit my neighbors, Tombstone and Pinky. My cellmate as well. The first thing I sensed was that they felt comfort from the whole thing.

“Open your locker for us, will you?” asked the girl, the same girl I had watched near Spider’s. “This won’t take very long.”

“Spread your things out on the bed, Sir,” said the cop.

He was young but seemed tight, inflexible, braided like a wire cable. Mustache-trim, polished. The girl just looked like a Mexican teenybopper, Americanized but sexy in these slick, gray pants. Pure bone mama. I started by pulling my few clothes out.

Then the cop said, pointing, “What about those cassette tapes? You have property receipts for those tapes?”

“Sure,” I said, but as I looked through my file of papers I could only find six receipts. I had a total of twelve tapes, actually, that had come through the mail and were legally on my books.

The cop said, “Juanita, mark down on his inventory sheet an inventory of six tapes. Sir, the others are contraband.”

“Now, wait just a minute,” I said.

“All items that can’t be documented, we consider contraband,” he said.

He became adamant about his argument, log rolling, but the bulk of it was so far down in the lower-human register I couldn't distinguish it from dog fat. Juanita placed my tapes in a box, then *he* got in my locker and began pulling things out. Pencils, paper, a bottle of white-out. Not as if he owned them, himself, but almost like the function of my shit was for a mutual welfare, a welfare I wasn't even part of. I was losing out to the proportion of some ill-sided equation and it was apparent, now, to us all.

"Juanita, this pencil sharpener? This eraser?"

But it wasn't like they were merely playing trivia with my stuff, and I would lose some tapes with other small, but important items. That, in fact, happened to everyone, daily. It was more just a matter of watching—up close—as they worked every surface and diameter of my household, that I realized exactly what it all meant: that power is simply the *formality* of disregard. Here, in my locker. Out, in the streets. Time and again we suffer the fools, the subordinate, the weary definition of predominance: a highly formulated racket, I thought; self-replicating but rather padded in the forehead. There was nothing to do but let them go at it.

As I hung around, effectively *in absentia* (the feeling was that of being outside this strange scratch of human netting), I watched Juanita's ass work those haunch-round, snug corduroys. Mmm, looked good, looked good to the entire run, but my mind skipped to other times, other places, other women I had seen. The dorm was cramping with minion heat but there was someone, a woman, not only of form and figure, but a dance which precedes the motion of her body. Eyes sparkling, with the tenor of simple being. Simple beauty. Glowing within her rhythms so warmly that you connect fully—completely—as if her mind and flesh were electric latches: a thing of the sun, of mercy. Of light spreading across a midwest cornfield in early July harvest give this to me once, lord, before I die, and our negotiations will begin even once more: just someone who smiles from the guts of joy. That'll work. But not these servile attendants prowling the dorm, these faces of rain I lift away from. Let's settle someday, but someday as in soon.

I was drifting, Holmes, drifting. Big shakedown, I was drifting.

Then the box patrol came in and dollied out a load of our belongings to the truck. I returned, watching. That truck would be making more than one trip, no question about it. Outside, we listened as the old engine turned over. It circulated, it roared. The cop waited. But Juanita and her partner seemed to be backing off now. Slowly, bit by bit.

They were nearly finished with my house, but Tombstone had enough stuff to keep the pair working his place occupied for another hour. Or so it seemed, the way he was making a *point* out of every worn item he owned. Rolly had sailed through, but it didn't surprise me since he had just gotten here. "I know they can't touch me," he had said earlier, and I now laughed because it was his idea of a joke. Spider watched the run from his bed, also through. Even Juanita just sort of lolled around.

But the Mexican up from Spider, The Torch, looked even more self-cornered than when he'd stood there with *the look*. He was figuring that the cops had him, I believed, by the element of surprise. He almost looked stunned. Goddamn, I thought, whatever it is.

"Will these men be issued a sack lunch?" the cop at my bed suddenly asked Juanita.

"Yes," she said. "Promptly at thirteen hundred hours."

Shit, I thought, a sack lunch, as exhaust from the pickup idled in from the yard. A cop started yelling, "Cut the air on in here! Jesus, my lungs!"

Another cop, who'd been drifting the door by the shotgun, went out and flicked the switch. The vents buckled and the air shot out—cool, it felt good—but a rattling sound vibrated overhead at The Torch's. The Torch stood in his cube and bleached lighter than his skin color, his right hand shaking like he was salting an ear of corn. Goddamn, I thought, be *convict*. It's the last active right you'll be given until the graveyard.

"CELL SIXTEEN!" shouted one of the cops, and their whole fucking aggregate, like mules, clopped over. The cop who had yelled just pointed at the air vent, wrist up, like he'd been specially instructed on the application of that finger.

"Up here," he said. "Somebody get a screwdriver."

As everyone watched the grill come off, Rolly reached over and grabbed the tapes from my box. My box of contraband items. I said nothing, but started realizing how useful boosting skills could be.

"I think I've got it," said the cop. He was standing on Torch's bed, hand jammed into the vent.

"Here it is," he said, everyone looking.

But all he had was a cassette player, and as he pulled it from the vent the cord snagged on a piece of the fitted metal. It gave way, snapping to his cheek.

"AH-HA!" he said. A few people started laughing.

The cops milled for a second, rubbing flares of uniform on each other

before walking back to our cubes. It was up to the loud cop, apparently, to decide if the deck was a matter of incident. But since he'd have to figure out who'd stashed it, regardless of The Torch's giveaway, the problem for the run was: would he lie? We wouldn't find out for weeks, until the paperwork could be neatly arranged.

"I think we're about done here," the cop said to me, to Juanita, as they came back to my cell. He stood tall in my cube, masterful in the program of physical intimidation. "Check his contraband against your list. Let's make sure we get that list right before we go."

He put his hands on his hips and turned, looking down the run. Manther was across the ramp at a three-house distance, eyeing The Torch. Juanita sat on the bed and dug into my contraband box, my "excess" clothes, pencils, white-out, etc. She tossed them around with a peculiar sort of aversion, plowing her ass in my bed. Then she said, "Hey!"

The cop looked over, looked down at Juanita.

"I can't find his tapes," she said. She lowered her voice, saying sternly, "*His cassette tapes are missing!*"

The cop looked at me with scorn. With seething, almost parental anger. I had nothing to volunteer.

"You're certain?" he asked her.

"They're gone," she said.

He glared at me a second longer, telling her: "Take the other ones—just for starters."

"I've got paper on those in triplicate around the yard," I said. "If you want to fuck with 'em, I'll take it up to the Major."

"Then where are they?" he asked. Both of them were staring.

"Search me," I said. I looked at them, looked back. "You're responsible. *You've* taken custody."

"Unless you stole them," he said, "which seems more than likely to me. I can file the appropriate charges on you, if I want."

I pictured him seated at a corner table in the bar, expressionless, laying it all out incrementally to his pals. Somebody else would be buying.

"If you wanna put the *buff* on this deal, you're entitled," I said. And, that's all I said.

He paused, then told Juanita, "Check his locker. Maybe he put them back in."

She leaned into the thing, wriggling her young tail and pushing my

stuff around. I noticed Spider looking her over from the top of the run. Juanita came up empty handed.

"He's a clever one," she said.

"Let's go," said the cop. But he told me: "Remember, I'll be watching you." I didn't think that was any news at all, so I watched them leave without saying a word. Juanita toted my box.

I stood up and opened the window. The earth I saw stretched for miles. Fruitless, still, crusted in bronze. The hot morning air came slowly through the grate, but I felt it loosening up my cell. Juanita had been right: it didn't take long for them to paw through.

They all filed out, soon after that. People moved around again, going from cell to cell. As I figured, Tombstone's house was the one that took the longest. Rolly came over and I pulled out the smokes.

"Good work," I said. "They won't be back."

"Probably not," he said, "but they'll always be around."

I said, "Yeah, there's a trick to that part."

"Naturally," he said, then he looked over at my roommate. In a sense, I hadn't been totally around. I really hadn't noticed him. I handed him a Camel filter, lit all of us up.

"Well," Rolly asked him, "did they cut your action back at all?"

"Naw," he said, "but you know what? It was kinda like having a dormful of M&O's running around . . . bunch of ignorant motherfuckers."

"Well, at least *he's* gone," said Rolly. "That only leaves about how many more?"

"Thing is," my cellie went on, "this is only a State joint. Half the people are in for real stupid, bungled shit, and the others ain't really done nothin at all. They put these mixtures in, like Manther and The Torch. You heard 'em earlier, right? Manther knew that The Torch stole his radio, but he couldn't prove it. Said he'd tear him a new asshole, though, if he ever found out. That was this morning."

"I was asleep," I said.

"Yeah. Well, that Torch has seen what Manther can do to a motherfucker. He's scared. And now the cops got the deck. I've been sitting here, just watching Manth shoot his eyes down the ramp. It's gonna get hot in here before the day's over. Count on it."

"What time you say it was?" I asked Rolly.

"Eight-thirty, nine. We'll be locked down all day," he said.

“Anyway,” said my cellie, “my point is that these stupid convicts in these State joints get themselves killed over nothin. Lots of them do. There’s only about twenty-percent smart con in these State joints. But the *real* smart cons, the money makers, the stock market and extortion dudes, all of them’s in the Federal pens. If you wanna be smart next time, cover your ass with a little mail fraud. That’s what I’m gonna do. Then if the State comes up and beefs you for somethin, you only gotta snitch yourself off to the Feds. An’ shit, they pick up your State time and run it C.C. No more of these Torch idiots. Or M&O’s, for that matter. You got a way to get around in there.”

“Almost sounds good,” I said.

“If ya learn nothin else here, just remember my advice,” he said. “Know why it only took an hour for this shakedown? State joints are impoverished!”

“*Sassing me, motherfucker?*” came a voice off the ramp, one of many we’d hear all day long. I had learned how to cup my ears, from the *inside* when I wanted, when I needed to block it away.

Like now.

Spider walked down, hyper, a bit rattled. Maybe they had gotten to his shit, I didn’t ask, but he usually tried to dodge them with a smoke of Christianity. It was his only real hustle, but he never seemed to get far with it. He only seemed, really, to get more mixed up. I was leaning back against the wall, smoking with Rolly. Tombstone glanced at Spider from across the run.

“See that bitch picking through my cube?” he asked us, he *told* us. “One fine-looking lady!”

I’d seen better looking gas pumps, so I asked, “Spider, when was the last time you were tested?”

“Holmes, I’m serious,” he said.

“We know you are,” said my cellie.

“And we thought you had more heart than that,” said Rolly.

Spider swayed in the aisle, only to look at Rolly and say, “Some of them are big in the Bible, too. The Bible says, ‘Plentiful.’”

“Get off that shit,” Rolly told him. “The Bible’s nothing more than a law book.”

“*I’ll show you sass, you want sass, you hole eater?*” the ramp voice asked.

“But it’s the *Bible*,” Spider argued lamely.

Manther came up, a rolled cigarette smoking at his orange fingertips. His tattoos were clean, some of which he'd tacked on by himself. He sat next to my cellie, on my cellie's bunk, simply because he belonged. Rolly hit his Camel. I hit mine, my cellie hit his. Tombstone exhaled a large plume through the fly screen on his window, into the dust, into the sun. All the way from a reclining position on his bed. Manther was just *there*.

"Now, Juanita," I told Spider, "the one who did me, she had something to notice. Even though she ruined it, by flaunting it to us like a torture."

"*Yeah* she did," said Manther. Always, he was always direct.

"She didn't have *that* much," said Spider.

"What are you talking about?" Manther told him. "She was tight. I could see the wrinkle all the way from *my* crib."

Laughter. Beat the rest of the time down to hell.

"And when she got in here and started handling things, I nearly broke down praying from the agony," I said. "She set something off."

"OK," said Spider, "but I also noticed mine." He then turned and walked off, almost as if he were offended. The rest of us just hung around, blowing smoke.

"*You're just a sniveling little prick,*" came the ramp voice, "*sniveling!*"

"*Got a problem? Huh? Got a problem?*"

Manther held out his burned snub, glancing around the cube. I stood for an ashtray, looking again through my window. The earth was now gold, this high color that dust gets when it shimmers in the morning. The sky was blue and the sun was up there, my head, continuing continuing exploding over the run: you had to be able to disengage, I thought, for this really close-up sort of time. You only had to get over these walls. The trick was to walk away from your own fucking skeleton.

"Those books are stashed good, but if you want I can pick them up tomorrow," said Rolly.

"Whatever you think's best," I told him. "I'm with you."

"*Gonna cut off your pieces, motherfucker!*" said the ramp.

"*I'll show you a set you ain't never gonna get past!*"

I pulled out my writing board and sat it on top of a cardboard box. I put my ashtray down, and my cellie threw out a pack of smokes. We sat around the table waiting, listening, listening to the ramp voices and waiting on their sacked, venom lunch. Time, I thought, you will never really get me.

For me, the shakedown was over.