

***DRUMMER* FEATURE ARTICLE**

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What happens in prisons is a crime...

PRISON BLUES: Confessions of a Prison-Tour Junkie by Jack Fritscher

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AUTHOR'S HISTORICAL CONTEXT INTRODUCTION



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IN THE MAIN GYM AT SAN QUENTIN the cement is wax-smooth. The work of thousands of bare male feet. In the showers at Auschwitz, the cement is scored with the long finger-nail scratches of humans clawing their way futilely out of small places. Here, at the Big Bastille on the Bay, the pad of sweaty feet, heel and ball pivoting, running, jumping to score a basket, falling, kicked-and-rolled by a dozen jockers turning out some little punk in the course of good clean fun while the guard shines it on (turns his face away), has smoothed the roughness.

GYMS SMELL LIKE MEN

The San Quentin gym smells like con-jock sweat. Dirty football uniforms and pads hang just out of my reach under row upon row of *Hustler* and *Playboy* color centerfolds boldly unfolded: stapled beavers, one

of which some pissed-off anonymous smoker burned right through the twat with the hot end of a Lucky Strike. At the far end of the huge gym stand the heavy barbells and weight benches on wooden platforms raised two inches above the smooth cement. To the right, three red steps lead up to an empty boxing ring canvassed in a shiny dark blue right out of *Rocky*. The ceiling girders are eighty feet high above us. An ache runs through me. A longing.

A dozen cons tend to us. This is their space. This is a place of caged men. For real. The gym bleachers are initialed and soaked with porous sweat. The panic of being an outsider overtakes me. Covertly I pop 10 mg of cool blue Valium to quiet the rising panic and to still the longing ache, to sit obedient in this gym lock-up, listening to the glib patter, sniffing out more than the uniforms, sniffing out the violence and murders that give these men life.

At San Quentin, claustrophobic terror hardens my dick. Prison tours are my hobby. Editing *Drummer* ain't enough to keep a bird alive, so lucky for me, my real career, my day job, is writing for a huge corporation that buries nuclear waste, and likes to give us employees tours of the Bay Area.

I go to jail every chance I get. To visit. Fanatic subcultures fascinate me. I get off on the cons harboring secret con tempt for the giggling public come for the Saturday night "fun" of the "jailhouse dinner tour," getting their goddamn double-knits leisure suits frisked at the Big Q entrance so they can walk cell to cell with a stick poking at the inmates. Always my mind-camera is running, recording the extremes that life offers.

"These men," the officer of the day told us, "have volunteered to be your guides. No instructions have been given as to what they can or cannot say. You cannot tip them or give them anything. You give them anything and they'll be in trouble and if they get in trouble, then you'll get in trouble. We just ask you not to light up when you're in the woodworking shop. Otherwise, enjoy your walk. Ask the men whatever you like. They're pretty thick-skinned and not too sensitive. If they don't want to answer, they don't have to. Okay. As I say, enjoy your walk."

Our guide, for our group of ten voyeurs, wears scrubbed and pressed blue Levi's.

Visitors are forbidden to wear Levi's. "No jeans or illicit drugs," the guide sheet warned when the tour was arranged. Also: "Hostages will not be recognized." Terrific! When you walk into another world, you walk into its terms.

I listened to our con-guide. You the fuck think he ever tells the truth? It's his Levi's, man. Laundry is cause for war in the Joint. According to law, every dude wears the same "shit" stenciled with his own number: shoes, shirts, and shorts. But Inside is like Outside on the Street. Distinctions this double-knit tour will never see make all the difference Inside. Dudes in starched, pressed shirts and razor-sharp creased Levi's or black Chelsea boots, or, hoo-boy, a stud in gold-rimmed shades, are all mothers working some scam: dealer, connection, locksmith, forger, hit man, armbreaker, enforcer, snitch, whatever. What's sure is that our guide-dude's a specialist with something going

He's upper-crust prison-shit.

Our guide's scam: he's some kind of in-House arbitrator. He's the King Rat in the movies who plays both ends against the middle and ends up with a Plexiglas shiv stuck in his ribs. What gave him away was his black turtleneck shirt: subtle, but revealing of his thick arms and thicker chest. He talked endlessly about the importance of personal hygiene. I imagined him sweaty and stripped down for his one weekly shower. He was from the Deep South where they leave meat blind and uncut. Cheese. He has, I bet, a cheese problem. Under his foreskin. That's why he traded cigarets for extra showers. Sometimes, he admitted, he sneaked an extra wash-off with a fire hose to clean-up during the week.

He was 27 and hot and his hair was blow-dried with a handheld dryer. He spied about the warden who made the men choose whether they wanted to shower or attend college-credit classes. One or the other.

Not both. Men have to learn, the warden said, how to make decisions. No wonder the newspapers carry stories that start: “The warden of San Quentin Prison was belted in the jaw by a convict yesterday while trying to cool things down after a stabbing melee. Warden George Sumner—a rugged, 6-foot-2-inch former football player who weighs more than 200 pounds—instantly took what a prison spokesman called ‘reflex defensive action,’ and belted the con right back. Despite a sore jaw, Sumner shrugged off the incident. ‘It’s just part of my job,’ he said, ‘and I’ve been hit before.’”

STRIP SEARCH: OUR GUIDE, BILL

Our guide had been hit before too. He was a man who had been strip-searched, man-handled from his shackled bare feet, up the outside of his big thighs, rubber-fingered up the butt, foreskin rolled back for short-arm inspection, hands frisking up to his hips, his waist, his muscled ‘pits, his heavy chest and shoulders, his big bull neck—all of him shook down all the way in the “Lock,” a high echoing snot-green chamber stationed between the outer walls and the inner walls, filled with smoke, milling cons, and shouting guards. “Line up, come on, goddamnit.”

Thirty minutes before, we had stood like good-citizen cattle in the “Lock” between two gigantic steel-bar doors. One door goes inside the wall; the other door, out. In the rafters, covered with the unreachable grease of grey cottage cheese dust, sparrows twittered, flying in and out when-ever one door or the other opened. The doors were fixed so only one opened at a time.

What was it like for him to be “Processed in?” Stripping off his clothes, standing naked in a sweaty line of multi-racial cons, surrendering his effects while three beefy guards armed with shotguns paced the gunwalk inches above his shaved head, getting sprayed with anti-louse disinfectant, standing first on one foot, then the other, listening to a bored bass voice shout out, thick with years of whiskey and cigar smoke: “Swearing, cursing, fighting, disrespect to officers, arguments, sodomy, masturbation, homosexuality, drugs, unnatural acts, and political agitation will not be tolerated.”

Jesus! He was beautiful no matter what scam had gotten him from new-fish con with scalped head to full-blown, blow-dried tour guide. Shit! Pinned to his black turtleneck sweater was an ID card: BILL. Bill directed us to look one way. I looked the other. He remarked about a building dated 1842 on the right. I looked left, up through the broken glass and bars of a mean six-tier block.

On the third tier up, a young blond biker, long hair combed wet and straight back, stood stripped to the waist, heavy tattoos on heavier arms, muscled, white cotton pants, beltless and barefoot, staring down at the action on the main floor below him, action I could not see, but he could, looking down between his tattooed forearms resting easy on the iron railing.

No one else noticed him. No one else on the tour, that is, except my buddy, O’Riley, who everybody I know calls “Old Reliable.” He never misses a trick. Especially a con trick. Old Reliable always sees everything. He always has. That’s how he got reliable. That’s how he got old at 33. We exchanged knowing looks and turned back to Bill, away from the third tier.

“I’d pay him a hundred bucks to sit on my face,” Old Reliable whispered.

“And blow ‘Dixie’ out his ass,” I said.

Bill was pulling our tour-group along. “This is the spot,” he said, “where the yellow fire hydrant is now, of the old whipping post. The heaviest sentence to come down was a man getting 190 lashes administered over a two-day period. The original infirmary is right nearby. I ‘m glad the state has done away with corporal punishment.”

My knees grew weak. Old Reliable dragged me from the hydrant. The energy remained of that whipped man’s agony. The broiling sun. The silence in the brick-walled plaza. Silence except for the sound of the whip whistling through the sun and cutting across his back. Silence except for his bit-lip hiss breaking

finally beyond scream into full-racked roar slumping to half-conscious moan. Silence except for the panting of the guard in full uniform, heaving with sweat, laying the leather strap again and again, according to the warden's strictly counted cadence, across the naked man's back. Silence now with the moon rising cool over the Bay. Silence like an unsettling dream remembered too clearly on waking.

I space out on the prison energy.

DREAM MOVIE SEQUENCE

Two horsemen break the flat horizon. Their heads rise in the distance against the blue. They rock easy in their ancient saddles. Their horses surge against the reins. The men are warriors, dark and bearded. Their helmets catch the sun. The men and horses are armed with fur and leather. They rise proudly against the full line of the horizon.

The camera catches behind them a trail of dust as they move in long-lens slow-motion. A rope stretches taut behind the second horseman. Gradually, the camera makes out the rope's burden: first the bound wrists, then the stretched arms dislocated from the bleeding shoulders of the man who is naked and dying but not dead.

Silent above the sad procession a great bird hangs motionless, following the horsemen trawling the side of human flesh. The bird catches an updraft and circles timeless above the horsemen. They ride evenly onward, across a ridge above a still lake. In the noon-sun shimmer they double in the placid lake reflection. The descending hooves of the upright horses meet precisely the rising hooves of the inverted water horses. Below them, and above them, the carrion bird circles noiselessly. In the mouth of the bound man, thin wires roll his tongue into a cylinder swelling purple from his mouth. His cock is wired the same: a purple bloody cylinder.

The horsemen, proud and straight drag the man off into the blinding noon brightness.

I was having the vapors.

"Come on," Old Reliable grabbed my arm. "You're lagging behind."

"I'm not lagging."

"You're standing on your tongue." Old Reliable dragged me away from the whipping post.

Often I perceive the aura of a place long after the event has receded.

PRISON JERK-OFF: ARIZONA OUTLAWS

Once in 1970, at the historical prison at Yuma I pulled my 1969 Toyota Land Cruiser into the rocky parking lot late enough in the hot August afternoon to miss the crowded tours. David Sparrow, who was my lover a year then, threw some coins into the turnstile. We nodded to the bored Ranger in charge and wandered alone through the lengthening shadows of the roofless cellblocks. Bronze plaques described the Zane Gray macho conditions. At the far end of the compound, twenty minutes before the 5 PM closing, I pulled open a heavy iron door and headed down a dark ten-foot adobe corridor to another iron door latticed in a welded gesture of ventilation by some thick-armed smithy a century before.

"You better not go in there," David said. "Not that cage in that cell."

"Chickenshit," I said. "If you're scared to, go out and stand guard."

He cut back quick to the fading Arizona sunset. I pushed through the second iron door into a twelve-by-twelve windowless adobe room in whose center had stood a nine-by-nine foot cage averaging a dozen

desperadoes in the tight kiln space of group solitary confinement. Sartre said, “Hell is other people.” And in that breathless darkness, alone behind two iron doors, the accumulated rage and energy of all the men ever confined within that airless room in that cold cage, bumping and grinding one grizzled body against the other, made in that privacy my privates hard, and once hard, came the involuntary unbuttoning of my fly, the lick of my hand, and the stroked salute to all the men locked in once-and-future cages.

Old Reliable, as Sparrow had been, was embarrassed the others might notice. But hardly anybody notices anything. That’s why most of the time anyone can do anything, jerk off anywhere. As long as you don’t rattle the cage they’re protecting themselves in. As long as you don’t scare their horses.

Part of me wanted out of the Big Q fast. Another part wanted to stay forever.

Absolute ground control of my head is to realize fantasies, to know how far to take them, to clutch the brink of danger close, and then to thrust it safely away: approaching a pair of cops in a squad car to ask their opinion of the Consenting Adult Law; then asking them to “Please stop arresting me, I’ve cum!”

Our con led us on with his gallows rap. He walked flawlessly backwards in the way patented by tour guides from Mount Vernon to Disneyland. “On the left is the original cellblock. If a prisoner gave the guards a bad time, they chained him to the wall or strapped him into a leather restraining jacket. For hours, days, weeks.” He laughed. “I’m glad California has done away with heavy-duty punishment. In those old days, before teargas, when too much trouble came down, the guards spread lye on the block floor and turned a hose on it. The fumes handled the problem.”

BELT A BROAD

One of my co-workers, a woman in an I. Magnin coat, suitable for a prison-chic evening in Marin, raised her hand like some for crissakes perennial Mills College undergrad cunt. “What are you in for,” she asked.

Our little group stopped dead in its tracks. (And Old Reliable had been fearful I’d embarrass everybody.)

Bill smiled. “I got sick of everyday doing 9-to-5, 9-to-5. So now I’m doing 20-to-life.”

“Try to outcon a con,” Old Reliable whispered.

Reliable ought to know: he’s fucked with enough ex-cons to have the climax–after-the-sex-climax–be a gun to his head while his flat was shook down for cash. He kept thinking, if that gun goes off, it will hurt. But he found enough money to satisfy the tattooed nineteen-year-old who, Reliable said, could have had the bread just for the asking he was so good in bed with his thick thighs. Other times, a guy emptied his closet of all his clothes, another took a camera which a third guy said he could ransom back for forty dollars. Reliable’s no fool, but it was worth a try. Turned out to be another learning experience. Never saw the third one again either. The con-game was his trip. He set it up. He liked primary encounters. He could read people faster than Evelyn Wood could read the Gettysburg Address. “This guy’s in for murder,” he said.

Bill tooled our tour neatly around a corner. “Up in that loft, which next year will get torn down, was the gallows. A double gallows.” He counted out his pause, using the time to continue the force field of eye contact with the I. Magnin coat. “Fall-partners. That’s what they called guys hanged two at a time. They shackled their hands behind their backs, walked them up the stairs, tied their ankles together, put the nooses tight around their necks, pulled black hoods down over their faces, dropped the double-trap, and kissed their asses goodbye.”

The double-knit group chuckled appreciatively: this good-natured con was exactly what they had hoped for.

“Executions strike me as, well, rather messy,” the I. Magnin coat said.

“Messy?” Bill laid on her his best Mr. Goodbar stare.

“Definitely in for murder,” Old Reliable whispered. “He’s gonna hit her with both barrels.”

“Death, ma’m,” Bill said, “is always messy.” He stepped toward her. “When a hanged man hits the end of his rope, he dumps, yeah, dumps in his drawers and pisses, excuse the human biology, down his leg.”

He had her full attention.

He had mine.

He had everybody’s.

She was cuming in her coat. “I’ve read,” she said, “that hanged men die with erections.” This cunt would not stop. She stepped toward him. He picked up on her lust and led the dance she had begun. The group was more enthralled than embarrassed by their up-front rutting. Tension hung heavy in the evening air.

Old Reliable rode to the rescue: “Dying with a hardon beats dying with your boots on.”

Laughter broke the spell of the heated *pas de deux* of the con with the coat.

THE WORLD WE LIVE IN

Reliable was good at that: adapting, making people adapt. His half-way house at his apartment for bad-boy ex-cons was his practice. He had long been cynical, but was far from jaded. *Jaded is when you do it, but don’t enjoy it, whatever it is.* He was cynical. He was frank. You adapt or you get out. You adapt or you die. He adapted continually. He handled alternate realities well. All the time, I thought. Whatever it is, he enjoys it.

Except one night, late, a bit drunk and a lot ripped, he told me, confessed actually, embarrassed the way a woman is embarrassed after a rape. No fault of hers nor in this case his, but the embarrassment acute all the same.

Old Reliable is reliable, but not old. He is, in fact, at 33, boyishly attractive. That was part of what makes him an easy touch for so many ex-cons. Anyway, one of his San Quentin graduates warned him that to a con, a gay man is automatically considered an easy mark. That was no news to Old Reliable, who’s been taken to the cleaners more often than a clean-queen’s jockey shorts.

Three years before this drunken night, for instance, he was vacationing in Beirut, pushing the edge of danger that so thrills him. The Hilton was under fire. The city was an armed camp. In two months the American ambassador would be murdered. But this night, Reliable was traveling through the Moslem section in the early evening to ball a friend who was a gold merchant. The driver of his car cursed their luck as the car immediately ahead rear-ended the auto closest to the intersection. The trunk of the car in front of Reliable popped open. “Omigod,” he said. Bulging from inside the sprung trunk of the small car was a fully clothed bullet-riddled body. Within seconds a mob careened around all three cars. Veiled women ululated a high-pitched wail. The driver of the middle car was dragged into the street shouting above the din. “It is only the body of a Christian.”

Two dozen or more Moslem men inspected, milled about, pushed around all three cars, conferred more loudly, and then surrounded Old Reliable completely, stalled in the traffic in their section. They smashed the glass of the locked doors. His driver was silenced by a gun-butt to the mouth. The driver fell unconscious, bleeding across the steering wheel.

The men pulled Old Reliable from the car and dragged him past the body of the dead Christian, doused with gasoline and burning in a heap on the street. The crowd had no patience with a foreigner who might be a Christian, or worse, a Jew. They punched at him without question. They lifted him bodily and carried him into a shop whose corrugated storefront a dark moustached man pulled down from its roll in the ceiling and locked to a ring in the floor.

In the semi-darkness, Old Reliable could see very little. Hands held him, pushed and punched him. A thick-veined fist tore the sleeve off his jacket. A frenzy of ripping and shredding followed. Buttons popped as his shirt tore away. His zipper-fly split apart at the bottom as his slacks were dropped like shackles around his ankles. For a moment, the men held him, fair-skinned against their olive darkness, stripped to his white undershorts.

No one moved. The silence was absolute.

Then a short thick man punched him hard in the stomach and his shorts were ripped away. For two hours they beat him with their fists and, holding him firmly with many hands in the stifling room, took an electric cattle prod to his eyelids, gums, penis, testicles, and anus. He expected to be raped. He wasn't.

He thought they wanted information. They didn't and besides he knew none.

He thought there was some purpose to his torture, but they wanted no more than to vent some release through his pain.

At last, allowed to fall to the floor, he lay flat on his back. Three streams, he remembered three streams, exactly three, of piss rained down from the darkness on his face and genitals. Then they lifted him, pulled up his torn slacks, rolled up the corrugated steel door, and shoved him into the street alone. The door rolled down closed behind him. He tried to pull what was left of his clothes together around him to avoid attention, to pretend nothing had happened so that no more would happen, but no one seemed to notice.

In the distance, the shelling of the hotels continued. Gunfire crackled through the night. They had hurt him anonymously, for no reason, for nothing he did. They had just hurt him for some kicks and he felt dirty enough to be sick in the street, next to the burnt-out body, dirty and sick and embarrassed enough to mention nothing of the incident until this one night of confidences. And even at that, he seemed to hold something back.

People who are tortured, for whatever reason, seem always to gain a reserve, a mistrust, a modesty, born of an astonished, well-grounded fear of their own kind.

Bill, our Quentin guide had that restraint. Only his modesty handled the predatory assault of the lady with her hands buried deep in the side pockets of her coat. More men go to prison because of women than any other reason. He had been decorated in 'Nam and looking at her San Francisco face, he knew a mine field when he saw one.

Some men in prison gain solitude in solitary. Some cut off their penises and hand them out in atonement in a tin cup to a guard passing by. Prisons are all different and all the same. The Quentin population isn't punk kids maturing their street images inside the big house.

These are full-grown men doing a dark time in a narrow place.

MAXIMUM "SECURITY"

Prison is the place where, when you go there, they have to take you in. Prison in America is the maximum security. Prison is where men who can't make it in the mean streets go to have their needs met. The prison "security syndrome" is Life-on-the-Installment-Plan: three years in the Joint; three months on parole; then back Inside to start all over again. Some gays, when arrested, instead of freaking out, find a strange

sense of peace, security, and relief from the constant cruising tension of the gay lifestyle. Prison is the place where guards fire a couple shots to break up a fight where one inmate suffers a deep laceration above his right eye and another stab wounds in the face, back, and buttocks.

Prison is the reality where society permits hired, uniformed sadists to back-flush toilets on men locked down in solitary confinement, where pharmaceutical companies make deals to perform medical experiments on inmates who submit to almost anything for the extra bread, and time off their sentence. If you don't have money in prison, you bargain one way or another with your body. Prisons are where men are sentenced, no matter if they were Tops or Bottoms when they were on the streets to a life of obedient masochism.

The American prison system takes, more often than not, the truly aggressive macho male, who cannot be corralled by the usual middle-class obedience-training of husbands, and separates his overly aggressive XYY-chromosome flesh by means of cold bars from the rest of "polite" society, where normal men have only XY chromosomes.

Prison is the Ultimate Sadism: society's topping of a Top. Prison is a rite of passage. On American streets, you're not a man until you've done some time. Ironic or existential? You choose.

TATTOOS

Like the mark on Cain, prison marks its men. The forbidden art of prison tattooing gives blatant signal Inside and Outside that here is a man who has paid his ritual dues. Tattoos range from the most primitive straight-pin-and-India-ink markings to truly sophisticated, but contraband, three-needle professional artistry. They are always one color: blue. A *star on the face* tells that the con has done at least five years. A *cross on the hand* with radiating marks indicates the number of reform-school stretches. A *rose* means either you like cunt or are one. A *swastika* shows membership in a prison gang like the Aryan Brotherhood. A *web on the elbow* signifies time done in a particular prison; in Bill's case, Soledad.

SAN QUENTIN: ONE OF THE BEST

Prisons are the last medieval institutions in American life; and they are important to the state's economy. The irony is that prison is a walled ghetto where administrators, guards, civilian employees, and cons are all locked together in an environment of fourth-rate failure. San Quentin features a law library and a furniture factory as well as a number of vocational rehab programs. Ironically, in most prisons lifers get the best jobs. Why train somebody who will eventually get out?

Conditions at "SQU" are nowhere as bad as conditions in the absolute secrecy of USMC-run brigades where little is reported about the adhesive-tape head bondage, the beatings, and the sexual abuse. The worst US prison, as recently as the 1960's, was in Alabama where cons were whipped with heavy leather paddles across bleeding buttocks for minor infractions, for refusing to be "turned out" as punks for a line-man trustee; where thiorazine was forcefully injected into the veins of a con cornered by the guards who'd take bets on which way he'd fall.

Paul Newman's *Cool Hand Luke* was not filmed out of thin air, nor is the 1978 film *The Brutalization of Franz Blum*. In Alabama, prisoners have been strapped to tables in the sick bay and then the "Tucker Telephone," attached with electrodes to their cocks, tits, tongues, and toes, was cranked up to proper screaming voltage. Burt Reynolds may shoot prison comedies like *The Longest Yard*, but only recently has even California abolished spot-welding a con into his cell, for up to a year at a time, so he stays put, isolated, with no key to bypass the weld, no way in hell to get him out fast when he is sick suicidal, or burning in his cage. In this Age of Anita [Bryant, anti-gay Florida orange-juice spokeswoman, and Miss America] the death penalty is through-out America on its hanging, shooting, gassing, injecting, electrifying way back. Gary Gilmore, hooded and strapped into his death-wish wooden chair, daring the state of Utah to shoot him in bondage to death, proves we live perilously close to the primitive days of *I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang*. [Gary Gilmore was shot to death, January 17, 1977, by the state of Utah and was the first person to be executed after the reinstatement of the death penalty.]

STIR CRAZY

San Quentin features a dozen indoor and outdoor gyms for pumping iron, and pumping out anger, on incline benches of sweatsoaked canvas. All around, the grey-pink walls are topped with 3-foot diameter coils of wire, barbed every four inches with two-inch razor slashes of steel. San Quentin grew like Topsy. Very turvy. The prison's origins are lost in myth.

"Way back in history," Bill said, "convicts were locked in a prison ship anchored in the Bay. One night a storm tore the ship loose from its mooring and washed it up on Point San Quentin. First, tents were put up, and then the compounds, compounded with other compounds, until this frigging place became the virtually uncontrollable maze it is today."

The Marin County moon rose full over Quentin as our group was conducted through the puzzle of corridors, catwalks, gates, and gardens marked OFF LIMITS because the bushes and trees planted as a bleeding-heart rehab idea so long ago had grown big enough to overshadow quick sex and quicker stabbings.

"Some guys used to like to go into that garden and sit by the fishpond and meditate," Bill said. "Not now. No more. No way." He pointed to the way the moon threw deep shadows across the maze of buildings constructed with no particular design over the years. "New retention facilities," he said, his words again proper as befit an honor guide "are laid out for easy inspection by guards. Quentin has too many nooks crannies, unused corridors, old stairwells, places no guard can cover long enough to keep a con safer than sorry."

A double-knit man raised his hand. Like he was in some fucking schoolroom. "I read," he said, "about the problem of homosexuality."

"Homosexuality " Bill cut him dead, "ain't no problem." And that ended that conversation.

"But are you in physical danger?" a woman asked.

"Not if you keep to yourself. Sometimes a guy will owe a dealer, and when he can't pay, the dealer has him offed. Sometimes when he can't pay, he offs the dealer. You keep clean, you get good time, you get privileges. Like ahead of us here in the Honor Block, you're gonna peek into Citizens' Row."

Two guards—one of them with, I swear, 18-inch-circumference forearms—clicked us off on their counters. Our hands had been stamped for ultraviolet identification. Just so us prison-tour-junkies couldn't change places with some con: him leaving for the cold streets Outside, us staying in the warm security Inside.

"San Quentin is," Bill said, "for 363 of its 2,197 inmates, a fairly comfortable home away from home."

Our group single-filed along the row of honor cells where each man, with 16 months' good time, can live alone in a 4x9 foot space 9 feet high. The walk was embarrassing, like some Toms peeping in where we shouldn't, but even embarrassed fast glances showed that when a man has nothing but time in a very small space, his personality ingenuously expresses his total attitude, his meticulous focus on his toiletry kit.

One by one we cruised the empty cells like exhibits in Macy's windows each coffin-like space an idealized fantasy one with swastikas and covers from outrageous *Easy Riders* magazine; others set up for jewelry hobbies; some with black velvet nude tit paintings under black light; one, a definite monk's cell; another arranged like a writer's loft, the rack-bed hung two feet from the ceiling the plywood shelf under it centered with a typewriter and paper neatly arranged. Stereo headphones and small color TV's sat in every cell. The honor cells can be locked from the inside by the con himself to protect his belongings.

"I thought this was supposed to be a jail," a man said. "This is peace and quiet."

"This is," Bill said, "even in the honor block, a place where you do what you're told to do."

"Everyday I have to do," the good citizen threw back "what my corporation tells me to do."

"No shit."

"I pay the taxes that let you live here."

"For the rest of my natural unnatural life."

"But, really," the I. Magnin coat rolled back into the action, "what about homosexuality?"

"Frankly, lady, in prison, homosexuality has nothing to do with what you call on the Outside being gay. Our up-front gay cons stick pretty much together. Just like any group of consenting adults."

"But TV is always reporting homosexual rape," the tax-paying citizen said.

"Homosexuals don't attack other males," Bill said. "Straight dudes rape other dudes, straight or gay. A homosexual attack, as you call it, like the rape of a lady, has nothing to do with sex. It has to do with aggression. The cock is the weapon. It's just pure, simple, brutal, ass-bleeding aggression."

CHOW DOWN

We ate with the cons.

While I waited in line behind Old Reliable, with my tin plate, fork, spoon, and no knife, an eye came to a peephole in a heavy metal door.

The eye changed to a tongue that wiped its wet way around the perimeter of the cold green hole.

Old Reliable checked the oral action too.

The tongue pulled back behind moustached lips that whispered, "Hey, Bro, you got a file on you?"

The various con-guides split strategically to tables where the foxiest touring ladies sat picking at the chicken and mashed potatoes. That was the last we really saw of Bill. He disappeared into the subtle lust hetero-ing his way with the women over the dessert and coffee.

Above us, prisoners' murals depicted California history. The wooden ceiling, 80-feet high, was stuck with forks. The outlawed outlaw game had been to bend three tynes back and place the fork on the mess-table edge. Then with all the bulked strength of a hard-fisted blow, hit the fork handle, shooting it ceilingward.

If it stuck, the con's rep was made.

If the fork fell short, turned in mid-flight, and started its murderous descent faster and faster, point down, into the mess hall crowd, somebody shouted HEADS UP and every con ducked fast under the protecting table tops. Some fun.

BUSTER AND BILLIE: BOY AND GIRL OUTLAWS

Currently, Old Reliable has come down like a fork from his ecstasy of the dinner-tour-show at the Big Bastille on the Bay. All because one of his corresponding cons has recently been paroled after ten years for armed robbery. Buster is a primary heterosexual, but he puts out either way. Reliable, remember, like all gay men, is considered an easy mark, and Buster on parole needs all the support good Old Reliable can give. "Besides the straight cons, a lot of gay men languish in prison. *Drummer* received an interesting and seemingly authentic letter reprinted here.

Dear Publisher:

I would like for you to print an ad in your gay news paper for me, I am in Columbus State Prison, doing 4-25 years, and don't have any money or family to write to. My name is Bud E. Gooden Jr., I am 30 years old, and have been gay all my life. My number is No. 144- 292. I have brown hair and blue eyes. I am 175 lbs, 5 feet, 11 inches. Sir, it sure does hurt when the Officer passes my cell, with no mail for me. I like to dance, and go camping, hiking, fishing, horseback riding, and most of all have sex with a man and make real good love with them. When I don't get any mail, then I will read a book or write me a poem, so please print this ad for me if you will, Sir, and I want to Thank You so very much for taking the time to read this, and hope you will help me out, Sir. Sir, if you do help me, or even if you don't please let me know something if you will. I am sending my full name and number for you, Sir.

Sincerely yours,
Mr. Bud E. Gooden Jr. No. 144-292
P.O. Box 511 W. Spring St
Columbus, Ohio 43216

Gay people in prison suffer a whole different trip. Two prisons for the price of one. It's one thing to get fucked, to give consent to be fucked. It's traumatic even if you ordinarily like it up the ass, to be raped in a cellblock gangbang.

Meanwhile, Old Reliable's Buster has met his inevitable big-titted peroxide Billie. They're a very small-time Clyde and Bonnie working Reliable like a fish on the line. Billie even confessed the other afternoon that she only looks 20. She's a lot younger. One yap out of her and Buster violates parole with a statutory rape charge. She's got him where she wants him. But maybe he needs to go back, leaving the mean bricks of Market Street for the max security of the Big House. Billie, with her sweet adolescent urge to confess, told Old Reliable between Cokes and chain-smoked Marlboros, while Buster was out at McDonald's, that Buster was thinking about burgling Reliable's apartment.

Reliable took Billie's revelation in stride .

"You write to somebody in prison for six years, send him money and new Frye boots and he comes out, sits on your face like he's told, twists your tits, makes you lick his 18 blue tattoos, fucks you silly, then takes off with a kidcunt who wants to rob you. I could," Reliable said, "become more cynical."

"Disgusting," I said.

"That, my friend," Old Reliable said, "is what the world is about. Finding new ways to be disgusting."

"Why do people want to be disgusting?"

"Because it proves they're BAD."

"You set yourself up every time you go down on one of those fuckers."

"I'll let you in on a little secret of why I like what I like and do what other guys only beat off to thinking about doing with bad boys. I'm like every other sexual specialist. I'm 80-percent impotent unless I get sex my way, unless I'm with these ex-con biker boys. Prison turns out some of the best trade in the country."

"You're going to use up your karma," I said. "Danger."

"So I'm an easy mark for ex-cons. Still I have to judge each one on his own merits. I know my sexual preference sets me up for everything from an easy touch for a few bucks to a full-dress armed robbery with a

side-order of a stomping and maybe a murder. Mine.”

“You have sex with them. You pay them. You yourself have nothing. You’re poor. A starving artist.”

“I have only a relative nothing,” Reliable said. “If I have 15 bucks, and Buster and Billie have 37 cents, then *they* have nothing. For my 15 bucks I could get killed.” He looked contemplatively around his early-Salvation-Army apartment recalling the armies that have marched over him. “Actually, for about 50 bucks, you can get anybody offed.”

“You always talk that badass gangtalk from the bad company you hire.”

“Ah, gangs. Disgusting, ain’t I? Those wonderful prison-gang initiations. First you have to get tattooed. Then, like in the Aryan Brotherhood, they send you out to ‘stick a nigger.’ Everybody’s disgusting. You know, of course, I know how to do away with violence in prisons.”

“So go tell Governor Jerry Brown.”

“Ha. Segregate them. Segregated prisons. I’ve been to bed with men from every pen in the country, coast to coast, and bed is the only true confessional. I have maybe one good point to me: I listen to what they tell me. Just segregate the goddamn prisons.”

“You, your karma, and Buster and Billie. Now segregation. When you don’t answer your phone, I figure I better come down and discover your body. Why do you keep doing this?”

“Why do you keep touring prisons like some fucking prison-tour junkie?”

Touche. We both laughed. We knew. The answer was in our pants.

At the musical show the night of that San Quentin tour the country-western band had twanged out a number called “Ladies Love Outlaws Like Little Boys Love Puppy Dogs.”

Old Reliable O’Riley and I may not be puppies, but we know authentic *macho* when we sniff it.

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ILLUSTRATIONS