Drug Lust

After I settled into my daily routine, I got used to sleeping and waking up behind a locked door. But it took more time to get used to the seesaw intensity of the place. When life was funny in prison it was hysterically funny. And when it was scary it was menacing. The trick was to observe everything and every person without becoming the object of anyone's negative attention. The effort to become invisible, or to appear non-threatening yet dangerous, was exhausting, which is why in prison almost everyone wanted drugs. Not books. Not journals. Not pens. Not anything that would make you more aware of your pain. They wanted drugs to smoke, drugs to snort, drugs to swallow, and drugs to shoot directly into their veins by any means possible. If you took enough you could forget which side of the fence you were on. You could jail your own fears and drift away with the clouds.

Drugs were smuggled in by family members and spouses every Sunday. The altar boys collected them in the offering baskets and funneled them through the church office. Food service workers brought them in and sold them to the cafeteria crews, who in turn had friends or relatives mail them the payments. Drugs were hidden in tennis balls painted grass green and thrown over the double rows of twelve-foot fences and into the exercise yards. They were carried in by trustees on work-release who wore boots with hollowed-out soles and traveled into town and back. Construction workers who came in to build new

dormitories were talked into making deals. Hallucinogens were mailed in on drug-laced stationery. Even a few crooked guards brought them in.

You could get anything you wanted for a price — from cocaine and heroin to reefer and a full range of pills to take you up, or down. I could always smell reefer while out on the yard, and every now and again I'd see someone nodding off in the cafeteria.

About once a week we had some kind of pill overdose or drug-related emergency at the hospital — often involving homemade works. Once a man stumbled up to the clinic with a metal needle used to inflate basketballs shoved into the crook of his arm. He had taped the clear tube of a ballpoint pen to the threaded end of the needle, and on top of that he had fixed a tennis ball. He told me he cooked the dope, poured it into the pen tube, jammed the sharpened point of the needle into his arm, attached the tennis ball, and gave it a good squeeze. The air pressure was supposed to drive the dope down through the needle and into the vein. Only it didn't work out that way. He over squeezed the tennis ball, the air rushed down the tube, through the needle and directly into his vein, and by the time I saw him he had a quivering ball of air trapped in a vein over his biceps. Fortunately he had a belt wrapped tightly around his upper arm cutting his circulation, or he would have been dead from an embolism.

I was on duty and squeezed the air back down his vein toward the puncture in his elbow. It hissed and sprayed blood as it came out. I kneaded his arm over and over until I couldn't feel any bubbles. "You ready?" I asked, hoping there wasn't a bubble left that might lodge in his brain. He nodded and I unsnapped the tourniquet. He whimpered a quick prayer, then sat there still as a statue until he figured the danger had passed. Then he unrolled his sleeve and dashed off down the main corridor before any hospital guards saw him.

While I was in my hospital cell I stayed away from the drugs. I wanted to escape into them— especially Valium and Librium, which

were little pleasure pillows that I knew would dissolve my massive stress, if only for an evening. They were always for sale, but I didn't dare cop. I was too afraid of being caught, and I figured getting out of prison was more important than getting high in prison.

Because the hospital cells were off limits to the general population, we had a number of traveling prisoners stay with us. Mostly they were men from the Witness Protection Program who were in organized crime, had snitched, and were on their way somewhere else. They'd stay for a few days until U.S. Marshals arrived to take them to a secret destination. We also warehoused all the men in on rape charges until they were sent to prisons with sexual offender programs. Guys in for rape were never put into general population. Prisoners didn't like the thought of being behind bars while their mothers, wives, girlfriends, or children were preyed upon. No rapist would have survived in population.

One day I woke up to find a different kind of visitor. He was an Elvis impersonator, and when I asked him his name he replied without hesitation, "Elvis Presley." "Nice to meet you, Elvis," I said. He was on tour, traveling from prison to prison to put on shows while working down a five-year sentence for mail fraud — selling fake Elvis memorabilia through magazines. I found him absolutely incredible. He looked like the young Elvis in rolled-up blue jeans and a denim shirt. His hair was dyed perfectly blue-black. He practiced singing while holding a guitar with no strings — a guitar string was considered a potential weapon for garroting people and he was only given his strings just before a concert, and then had to give them back.

His a cappella voice was very true, though, and it was wonderful to hear him practice "Blue Suede Shoes," "Heartbreak Hotel," and "In the Ghetto" as I went about the hospital orderly business of changing bandages, taking vital signs, and filling out charts. He gave a concert in the gym. I never attended because a fistfight broke out between hecklers and hillbillies and I was busy in the X-ray room taking shots of

..... broken knuckles and metacarpals. He was gone the next day.

We had one female employee in the hospital — she was the administrator's assistant. We all called her Miss Kentucky, as she was shapely and rolled her hips when she walked. Because there were a few cases of tuberculosis in the prison, everyone had to get a periodic chest X-ray. I took all the guards' shots, and the prisoners', but Dr. Sokel, the head of the prison hospital, took Miss Kentucky's. I had to develop all the X-rays, about six hundred of them. When I developed hers I could just make out the outline of her breasts. It was a very faint soft tissue impression. It took me a week of long hours to develop all the X-rays and when I finished I had sorted the prisoners' shots in alphabetical order, and I did the same with the guards' stack. I put Miss Kentucky on top of that stack because she was the only woman.

One night I left all the X-rays on a light table in the examination room. Somehow, somebody stole her X-ray. I guess it was the equivalent of a Playboy centerfold for someone. I reported it to Mr. Bow and he informed the guards. They were upset over it and there was a general lockdown and cell search for the shot. It was found in the cafeteria bathroom and returned to her file. She quit shortly after-ward.

A guy from Baltimore came up to the X-ray room to see me. He wanted a laxative. I told him to wait in the regular triage line for a physician's assistant. I was busy screening the new admissions for venereal diseases. He didn't want a laxative, he admitted. He really wanted an X-ray. That was against the rules. I asked him why he wanted one. A week ago, he said, his wife visited and during the course of the visit she slipped him a dozen Vaseline coated balloons full of hash which he swallowed, and he hadn't gone to the toilet since then and was feeling sluggish. "You gotta help me," he pleaded. "I can't go to the doctor or I'll get busted."

I had him come back in an hour, after I'd finished my work. I put him in front of the fluoroscope without his shirt. I didn't like using it because it leaked a lot of radiation. I wore a lead apron and flipped the switch. "Move your gut around like a hula dancer," I said. He did. I spotted the train of balloons in his lower intestines. They looked whole, but impossible to tell for certain. "You need an enema," I said.

"How do I get that?" "Go down to the cafeteria and lift one of the ketchup squeeze bottles with the pointy top. Clean it out good and fill it with hot water and do what has to be done." I gave him a single-serving size packet of K-Y jelly from the supply closet. "Put this on the tip, first," I said.

The next day he returned with glazed eyes and a smile. He slipped a gram of hash in my upper pocket. "Thanks, man," he said. I nodded. As soon as he left I traded it to the kid in the lab next to mine who did all the blood counts. He gave me a pair of surgical scissors, which I used for clipping pictures out of magazines.

After five months I went to see the parole board. I was very tense because they were going to determine how much of the sixty days to six years I would have to serve. I had already served a hundred and fifty days, so I thought I could advance the argument that I had done enough time, and was ready to go home. Three parole judges made up the board. There was nothing I could do to prepare except to practice my physical and facial gestures in the mirror. For days ahead of time I practiced looking sorry, levelheaded, bright-eyed, and determined to succeed. I wanted to appear reformed, thoughtful, and eager to enter a crimeless future, and I thought my gestures would amplify my argument for release.

My caseworker at the time, Mr. Wilcox, was preparing to retire. It was his job to advise me on all prison procedures and generally keep an eye on my progress. But he was slacking off and took no personal interest in me. During my first meeting with him he actually sat back in

his chair and fell asleep as I talked about my plans for college. We only met twice after that, and when I asked him questions about my release his response was always "Wait and see." I didn't need him to tell me that.

On the day of my hearing he was supposed to sit with me and tell the judges that I had stayed out of trouble, had a good job, and was a model prisoner. Or something like that. But he was sick that day, so I went in alone. The panel was made up of two men and a woman, all middle-aged. They were flanked by three guards, for protection. One judge's name was Mr. Dove, which I thought was a good omen, because I kept thinking that I would soon be free as a bird. That was wishful thinking. Once I sat down and crossed my hands on my lap and struck my remorseful, thoughtful, and bright-eyed pose, the woman looked up and asked, "What happened to the ten thousand dollars?" I gave her a thoughtful look. "I spent it on my lawyer and gave the rest to my father," I said, lying a little. "He needed it."

"Did you pay taxes on it?" she asked.

"No," I replied. "I didn't realize I had to."

As she made a note she said, "Ignorance of the law is no excuse. Not paying taxes is a federal offense."

"Perhaps when I'm released and get a job I can pay the government," I suggested. "I'm willing to do that."

She made a sour face.

I looked at the two guys and freshened up my smile. Finally, one said, "Two thousand pounds of hash is one of the biggest hash busts in U.S. history. We'll have to take that into consideration."

"Only a hundred pounds was ever recovered," added the other judge.

"Where's the rest?" the woman asked, with renewed annoyance.

"They sold it," I said.

"Who is 'they'?" she asked.

"The owners," I replied. "Hamilton and Rik. I just worked for them."

"We have no record of that," Mr. Dove said. "We have here that you sailed a boat with one ton of hashish into New York City and sold it. We want to know where the money is."

"I only received ten thousand dollars," I said.

The woman looked up and cocked an eyebrow at me. "That's your side of the story," she said harshly. "The prosecuting attorney claims that you were not very cooperative at the time of your sentencing, and I don't find you terribly cooperative at present."

I didn't know how to respond. I had prepared to be contrite and sincere, not combative. And the few minutes I had to make a good impression were all going to hell, and I could feel my composure unraveling.

"Thank you," Mr. Dove said. "You'll be hearing from us."

I stood up. I felt insane from having absolutely no control over my fate. I left the room and the moment I returned to my cell I worked over my face. Three weeks later I received a letter announcing that I had a two-year setoff until seeing them again. That was hard to take. Two years before I would see them again, and there was nothing I could do but take it.

Others got their setoff letters, too. Soon a guy came up to me in the hallway and said, "Give me a list of all the drug dealers you know, and I'll give you a list of all the ones I know. Then we each can make a deal with the Feds and snitch on the dealers and get out, and then once we are back out on the street no one will know we snitched them out."

“I’ve been hearing this scam all week,” I said. “You are the fifth guy who asked me for a snitch list. You got to come up with some ideas of your own.”

This kind of thing happened all the time. One guy got a nutty idea on how to get out and before long every guy in the prison was trying it on every other guy. I avoided them. Their desperation made them all the more dangerous. Because the skin on my face was so messed up it was difficult to shave properly, so my shaving became an exercise in landscaping — as if I were shaving around flower beds and trees and rocky outcroppings. I could never get a close, even shave. After a while I began to manipulate my face as if I were a makeup artist getting myself ready to be filmed for some role as a psychotic or hardened criminal.

There were grooming rules in prison. I wasn’t allowed to alter my appearance so radically that it seemed I was preparing to disguise myself and escape. I couldn’t do anything permanent like carve “killer” on my forehead and wait for it to scar. No facial tattoos. No head shaving. No beards. But raging acne, mustaches, and elaborate sideburns were acceptable. For a time, I looked like an unevenly trimmed topiary; but gradually as I got used to my new life, my skin settled down and I regained my face.

From my cell window I could see a line of houses in the distance. As the months passed, I watched people celebrate their lives — Easter, Memorial Day, Independence Day, Labor Day. In October I watched them put up Halloween decorations. We didn’t celebrate Halloween in prison — or, I should say, every day in prison was scarier than any Halloween, so there was no reason to do anything special on October 31st.

But thinking of Halloween reminded me of a funny story from when I was in fifth grade. We were living in Kendall, Florida, right on the train tracks. One Halloween afternoon police cars flooded our neighborhood and announced that Halloween was canceled because

there had been a prison break upstate at Raford. A couple of guys had hopped a freight and the cops thought they may have jumped off in our area. We locked our doors and turned on all the lights. We pulled the curtains. All night I scampered from window to window peeking out and looking for unshaven suspicious types in striped outfits. Every time a bush rustled in the wind my heart leapt. I saw rugged prison mugs in every shadow. It was the most exciting Halloween ever. The escapees were caught not far from our house and I was disappointed that I hadn't spotted them slinking around.

The memory of my youth was such a surprising relief from all the hatred and despair, blood and drugs that surrounded me. From then on, I kept looking out my cell window and from time to time it seemed I could see into my past and amuse myself with stories about my family and old friends. I wrote these stories down in my prison journal, and it gave me a lot of pleasure to recall my childhood.