A Long, Long Day

I met Mr. Newman at Foley Square. I had one thing on my mind. Probation. I didn't want to do time. Hamilton was right. I wasn't afraid because I thought smuggling hash was wrong— I was afraid because of the punishment.

"Your dad called my office," Newman said. "He's going to be late but he'll meet us in the courtroom. He'll be there to make a statement if we need him."

I looked around the square. I didn't see him. The agents stood a long ways off. I handed Mr. Newman an envelope with the last of my money — $ 5,700 in cash. I had gone to a bank and changed the ten-dollar bills into hundreds. "Take your fee out of this and keep the rest for me in case I go away," I said.

He nodded, and slipped it into his jacket pocket. Then he looked at his watch. "You ready?" he asked. We went up to the courtroom.

We were the first case on the docket. The judge arrived and we stood. The judge sat down and opened the top file on his desk. He read a page or so, then peered out toward us. "Does the prosecution have anything to add to the pre-sentencing report?" he asked Tepper.

"Your Honor," Tepper started, and he went on to once again give an outline of the operation. He revealed all the evidence proving my involvement, and outlined what laws I broke. Then he went a little further. "The accused has not cooperated in the ongoing investigation of others involved with this international operation. It is our belief that he is withholding information, and our office is in favor of incarceration."

"I see," the judge replied, and adjusted his glasses as he wrote something down. "And you, Mr. Newman, what do you have to say on behalf of your client?"

I looked at Newman. We had been hurt pretty badly by Tepper and I was waiting for him to battle back.

"Your Honor," he said, "Mr. Gantos fell into this situation. He was hired merely to help sail the vessel to New York. He did not belong to an international operation, or in any way plan this failed smuggling trip. Mr. Gantos is a young man who has made a grown man's mistake. But unlike a grown man he has a full life ahead of him. He regrets his actions. He willingly admits that probation and a drug treatment program would be in his best interest. He has plans for college and a life free of future violations. Prison can only punish a young man with his background and future. We are asking for your consideration regarding his age and —"

The judge had heard it all before. He was immune to the nice-young-man defense. He raised his hand and cut Mr. Newman off. "And, young man," he said loudly, "what might you say for yourself?"

I stood there. Frozen. Now it was my turn. I looked at Mr. Newman. I turned to see if my father had arrived. He hadn't. I looked at Tepper and back at the judge. "I made a mistake," I said. "A big mistake." I guess I didn't sound sorry enough, or speak quickly enough.

"A criminal mistake? Or just the mistake of getting caught?" the judge roared back.

And then I just stopped functioning. I stood there knowing the truth was that I was sorry I was caught, and if I hadn't been I would just have moved on to college and this would be a great story I could tell my friends after drinks and a joint.

"Well?" the judge asked. "Which is it? Bad judgment? Or bad luck?"

I hesitated. Maybe for only a second. But it was a second filled with a lifetime like it is for the condemned Southerner in "An

Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge," whose life passes before his eyes from the moment the hangman pulls the lever until the rope snaps his neck. And while I was stuck within that endless moment, I was doomed.

Tepper stepped forward and finished me off. "Your Honor," he began. "May I read to you something that Mr. Gantos wrote while on the ship?"

When I saw him holding the ship's log the shock of it pulled me out of myself. That's where it went! They must have found it when they searched the room. I knew what he was up to. He had the pages marked with ribbons as if it were a Bible marked for readings.

"Proceed," the judge said.

"I believe this one section says it all about how Mr. Gantos feels. And I read from the ship's log: 'Hamilton had read my mind — I'm not doing anything wrong. I'm just afraid of the punishment.'" He snapped the book closed, looked over at me, and smiled.

"Did you write those words?" the judge asked.

"Yes, sir," I replied.

"Then I believe we have gotten down to the truth of the matter," he said. "And the truth is always in the motivation. You did it for the money. That much is true. Now the law must respond." He paused, and in that moment I stood there as if my hands were already tied behind my back, waiting for the first blow of many. And it came. "5010B," the judge called out matter-of-factly. He lowered his gavel and a split second later bellowed, "Next!"

I turned to Mr. Newman. "What's a 5010B?" I asked.

"I don't know," he said, puzzled. "I'll have to look it up."

"So, what do I do?" I looked around. Everyone seemed to be standing still except for a uniformed court guard who was reaching toward me.

"You'll have to go with him," Mr. Newman said somberly, and nodded toward the guard who had taken hold of my wrist. As he led me across the courtroom I passed in front of my father, who had just arrived. He looked stunned. For once he was speechless, and had I not been so entirely shocked and confused I might have paused long enough to realize the look on his face was from the anguish that his son anguish that his son was being marched off to federal prison.

But I was overwhelmed by my own pain. "I took a risk," I said, and bit down on my lip. "It didn't pan out." I waited for him to say something and when he didn't, or couldn't, the guard tugged me forward and I turned away and followed.

We went into an office and the guard patted me down, took my wallet and what change I had in my pocket, my watch and belt, then he locked me in a holding cell lined with wooden benches. I looked around. There were guys like me dressed in street clothes who had been out on bail and were now sentenced. And there were guys in prison clothes who hadn't made bail after their arrest and were now awaiting sentencing. One after the other the men in prison clothes were escorted into court, then returned to the cell. Not one of them was released. Each time one returned he announced how much time he had received. Three years, five years, twelve years. One armed bank robber got twenty years. He sat and cried. Even the shortest sentence, three years, was more than I could imagine. Slowly, from watching the pain well up in those men, I began to feel the consequences of what had happened to me.

A couple of hours later the guard opened the cell door and called me out. For a fleeting moment, I thought maybe the judge had changed his mind, or that there had been an awful mistake and everyone now

realized that I was really a good kid and now they were going to give me a slap on the wrist and let me go. But I was dreaming.

The guard escorted me to a room where my lawyer was waiting. “I finally spoke with the judge’s clerk,” he said. “Here’s the situation. A 5010B is a youth sentence. It means you can do anywhere from sixty days to six years, depending on your behavior and what the parole board thinks.”

“What do you think?” I asked. “Do you think I’ll just do sixty days?” I felt I could do that much.

“I don’t know,” he replied, not sounding hopeful. “It will be up to the parole board. I’ll look into it, but don’t get your hopes up too high.”

As he left the room, my dad entered. “What will I tell your mom?” he asked, as he sat down.

I hung my head. “Tell her I made a huge mistake,” I said. “Tell her I’ll be okay. I’ll be out soon. Tell her that.”

While he thought about it the air between us filled with quiet confusion. It was unsettling. I would rather have been in the cell than sitting silently with him. At least by myself I only had my pain to consider. But his silence left me feeling his pain, and that of the entire family. And in front of him I was ashamed, too.

Then as if by magic he did something that turned all my feelings around. All the pain knotted itself up into anger. He pulled a set of folded papers out from inside his jacket pocket. “I almost forgot. I need you to sign something,” he said, fishing around in his pants pocket for a pen.

“What’s this?” I asked. “Car insurance papers,” he explained. “Your car is totaled and I need you to sign this release so the insurance company can pay me.”

“What happened?” I asked. And suddenly I hated him, which was easier to do than feel the unrelenting weight of my shame. “What happened!”

“It went down the cliff,” he said. “It’s a good thing. Look, with everyone fleeing nobody would buy that car. An accident is the only way you can get some money for it.”

“How’d it happen?” I asked.

“Your sister was driving and knocked a hole in the oil pan and the engine seized up when she was climbing the hill. So I got the pickup and drove down and gave your car a shove off the edge. She drove the pickup home, and I kind of rolled down the hill a bit and got myself dirty to make it look like I had been run off the road and managed to bail out. The car was pretty amazing. It bounced down the hill on all fours until it hit the lower road. The damn thing bent in half and skidded across the road into someone’s yard and wouldn’t you know it, they were having a barbecue.” He grinned and shook his head back and forth. “You should have seen them scatter as that car came through their front yard,” he said with a laugh. “Lordy, it was funny.”

“That’s my insurance money,” I said.

“I need it to pay my air fare,” he replied. “Business is bad. Plus our lives have been hell. We’ve all been followed around by the cops. They searched the warehouse. They were even up in the yard looking for plants. I don’t think you realize what has been happening to them.

I had been entirely involved with myself. I signed the papers. “Sorry,” I said, as I pushed them back to him. “I’m sorry about all of this. Tell Newman to give you a thousand dollars, but now it’s time for me to get on with it.”

He looked at me. “I should have known that Rik guy was no good. I never should have let you get on that boat. I blame myself. I just

thought it was your ticket out of the mess down there — I didn't see that it would lead to all this." He motioned to the walls and bars.

"This is all my fault," I said. "Not yours." I stood up and signaled with my hand for the guard. He opened the door. I turned and walked off. I didn't look back because no matter how disappointed I was with my car or my life, if I saw him crying I would, too, and I knew I couldn't cry because I had to enter a roomful of men who were watching me very closely. And I figured they were not looking for signs of friendship. They were looking for signs of weakness.

The first night was the worst. After waiting all afternoon at the Foley Square courthouse holding pen, we were handcuffed together and lined up in the hallway. There must have been two dozen of us. A guard led us down a long passage to a freight elevator. We all squeezed in. When the door opened, we stepped out onto a loading dock. A black bus with open back doors backed up to the loading dock, and one by one our handcuffs were unlocked and we shuffled aboard, filling up the bus benches front to back. There were windows with bars and chicken wire in the glass panes. Nobody talked. There was a lot of sniffing. Not crying sniffing, but sniffing like dogs as if you could smell everyone's fear, everyone's sour sweat, the smell of our exhalation, the lunch, the bile, the illness in everyone all breathing out and filtered back in. Outside, New York only seemed to exhale— horns, voices, machines, tires, sirens, helicopters, music, protests, advertisements— all pushing out the air, all selling noise. But we weren't buying anymore. We weren't selling anymore. Now all our robbing and scamming and dealing and running would take place on the inside. Now we only had each other to deal with and we were all busy sniffing each other out and coming up with some sense of who was dangerous and who was not.

We pulled up to West Street. It was a federal holding prison built inside Dutch Schultz's old liquor warehouse, which had been confiscated during Prohibition after Dutch was arrested. I got lucky. I

was one of the last in the prison bus so I was one of the first ones off, and immediately directed to the ARRIVAL office. There I gave up my street clothes and was given a set of old army fatigues with the insignias ripped off. We were allowed to keep our shoes, so I kept my Frye black boots. I was given a washcloth and towel, extra underwear and socks, and was assigned to D-10. It was a large, barred cage, like the elephant's cage at the zoo. There were eighteen military bunk beds inside for thirty-six men. Because I was the next new man assigned to the tank I had the choice of the two empty bunks. I choose the top bed in a corner under a blue fluorescent light. It seemed the safest. The other bunk was in the middle, on the bottom, where I knew it would be dark at night and without a corner to protect my back. Lucas got that bunk. He must have been sentenced in a different courtroom and he arrived after me. It was late when he checked in and I was already up on my bed like Quasimodo guarding Notre Dame.

Later that night a guy with a metal dinner fork reached up and grabbed my arm. I jerked my arm away and cocked my legs back to kick him. I had kept my boots on.

"It's cool," he whispered. "Are you funny?" I wasn't feeling funny.

"What do you mean?" "You know, funny. Like do you do it with guys?"

Now I knew I wasn't funny. "No," I said. "No."

"But you're young," he said. "You can still learn. I can be your master."

"I don't need a master," I said.

"Believe me, you do," he said. "You can either be my booty-boy and I'll protect you, or all these other dudes will take turns making you a mama."

“Go away,” I said. My fear was so great I couldn’t endure another moment of the conversation.

“You’ll see,” he said. “You got a tax on your ass and you’ll have to pay up.”

He disappeared into the darkness and I stayed awake.

The next morning I didn’t go down to breakfast, which meant going down two flights of stairs to the cafeteria. I didn’t think I’d ever leave the safety of my top bunk with bars to my back. But I was dying to get to the bathroom, so once the floor cleared out I jumped off my bunk, quickly walked to the bathroom, and took a leak at the toilet closest to the door. I had read enough prison literature and seen enough prison movies to know that the bathroom, especially the shower room with its combination dangers of steam and soap, was a place to avoid at all costs. I was wondering if I could take a bath with a paper cup of water and a sock.

Just then a guy walked into the bathroom and came toward me. I zipped up. “Yo,” he said, “best be checkin’ up on your man.” He pointed to a toilet stall. I was stumped. “What man?” I asked. I was rapidly thinking that he was setting me up and inside the stall was a gang of guys waiting to collect their “tax.” “Thanks,” I said, not knowing if I should give him a soul brother handshake like all the righteous brothers in Shaft. He helped me out by walking away. I didn’t know what to do. I looked around like a nervous squirrel. “Lucas,” I whispered. I ducked down to see under the stall door. Lucas was curled up like a shrimp with a blanket. I looked over my shoulder, then opened the door. “What happened?” He closed his eyes and pulled back the blanket. He was naked. His legs had been mauled as if a pit bull had caught him from behind.

He had been raped, and when he finished telling me what had happened — how many guys got him after dark, how the first man held

his throat and mouth, more got his legs and arms and then they flipped him over on his belly and started, and only stopped once everyone finished their turn— I didn't know what to say.

"I'm sorry," I muttered lamely, feeling the total emptiness of my response.

"Help me stand," he said, and reached out for my shoulder. "My wife is coming to visit today."

I gave him a hand. I didn't know how sympathetic his wife would be. And, honestly, I was eager to get away from him. I was beginning to fill up with fear and wanted to put some distance between us. It was the fear of being with a victim, and that I would be next in line. I had that terror people must have had during the war, when they denied they were Jews or Gypsies or homosexuals as the Nazis dragged off their families and friends. At that moment, I hated myself as much as I feared being around Lucas. It was just twenty-four hours since I had been sentenced and I knew I was in way over my head.