My Yellow Cell

I was soon shipped out of West Street and sent to the federal prison in Ashland, Kentucky. By dumb luck I ended up in a private hospital cell when I arrived at Ashland. The receiving physician's assistant, Mr. Bow, spotted lice in my hair. I must have picked them up while sitting in a transfer prison in Washington, Pennsylvania, on my way from New York. Once Mr. Bow spotted the lice, he escorted me to a delousing shower room in the hospital and I washed with a parasiticide that smelled like licorice.

Afterward, I was dusted with DDT and given clean clothes and assigned to a sunny yellow cell to relax until the lice died. I couldn't relax. The color of that yellow cell got to me. It was a bright, smiling yellow that buzzed like a summer day. There was no hiding from that color. Like me, that yellow room had its ups and downs as the day wore on. The slightest fluctuation in the weather outside my window, the smallest passing cloud, the changing position of the sun affected the mood of that room. And my mood shifted with it. I found myself crying, laughing, numb with depression, nervous and pacing, ambivalent, angry, and filled with self-loathing. Even when I slept I kept the pillow over my eyes to keep the yellow from seeping through my eyelids, just as I used to keep my hand over my eyes to keep out the light when napping on the deck of the Beaver. It was a great cell, as far as cells at Ashland Federal Prison went— eight feet by ten feet with a solid iron door fitted with a twelve-inch-square safety glass peep window, and a horizontal slot on the bottom for passing food trays in and out. I had a single bunk, a bedside storage locker, a toilet, sink, polished nickel mirror, and metal chair. Each was bolted to the concrete floor. And it was all mine. When I was locked in at

night I could sleep without expecting someone to sneak up to rape me, or hit me, or cut me. I could go to the bathroom in priv-ate. I could sit and think in private.

I also had a window to the outside. Every few minutes I hopped up from my bunk and looked out beyond the bars at the red brick administration wing, and just beyond it to the picnic grounds where family members visited and ate lunch with minimum-security prisoners and guards on break. There were trees, and flower beds, and pine tables covered with red-and-white-checked tablecloths. It was green and peaceful out the window, and a break from the unrelenting yellow of my cell, which was like having the unblinking eye of the sun blazing on me each day, reminding me that prison was not the dark place where I could hide from my past — and definitely not the place where I could hide from myself. Even at night there was no relief from that color. At sundown the naked bulb overhead came on and beneath it I'd slump into a drama of my own self-interrogation.

There was nothing else to do but beat myself up. That first week I had no books. No writing paper and pencil. No radio. No one to speak with. No cigarettes. No alcohol. No drugs. Just me, sitting on the edge of my bunk, slowly grilling myself under that yellow light. At first I point-ed the finger at everyone else — my family, my friends, the gang of backstabbers that I worked with in the smuggling ring. I burned them all on a bonfire of blame. But that didn't give me any relief. Had someone else been responsible for what I had done, I suppose my blaming them would have satisfied me. But it didn't. So I threw myself on the fire and went up like gasoline. I smuggled the hash. I took the money. I hurt my family. No fire rages like guilt.

Six times a day, like every other prisoner, I was counted at my bed. Each morning before breakfast the guard in the front

office clicked on the intercom system. From the loudspeaker on my floor I could hear his amplified breathing. Then he'd sniff. Finally he'd bellow, "COUNT!" And from loudspeakers in every hallway, every dormitory, every work facility, on the outside of the buildings, from atop the guard towers and telephone poles located throughout the grounds, I could hear the echo of that "COUNT!" Next I could hear the hospital guard's leather shoes tapping across the polished linoleum floor. As he briskly walked by my peep window I stood next to my bed and yelled back, "IN!" And as he passed every other occupied hospital cell the man inside stood next to his bed and yelled, "IN!" I was in. Counted in. After breakfast I was counted. Before dinner I was counted. After dinner. Before lights out. Then while I slept. And even then I turned that phrase over and over in my mind: "Count me in." Those were three words I'd take back if I could. They were my words to Rik and Hamilton. "Count me in." Now I was counted in my cell every day, and I was counted on to be there morning, noon, and night.

Without books, I began to read the walls. Like a blind man reading Braille, I traced my fingers over the graffiti scratched into the concrete blocks. I puzzled out names and words, dates and shapes, and imagined the lives of the men who lived there before me, just as I had done in my old ex-prison high school. The coincidence of that connection made me laugh, and I think it was the first good laugh I had behind bars. I never would have guessed that the visit from the prison alumni I laughed at in high school had been an omen of my future. Then I found the best line scratched above the mirror:

WHAT WE HAVE HERE IS A FAILURE TO COMMUNICATE.

That line from *Cool Hand Luke* said it all for me, whether I was talking to myself or to someone else. Some wit had carved it into the cinder block so that each time he looked in the mirror he

reminded himself that the biggest failure in life is self-communication.

After my first few days the food service worker who had been delivering the special hospital meals took pity on me bouncing off my yellow walls like a cricket trapped in a box. He brought me some books, a pad of paper, envelopes, and a pencil. "Do whatever you want with the books," he said. "They were left in the cafeteria. The paper is regulation for writing letters home. When you finish one, give it to a floor guard. Keep in mind they read it before sending it out, and whoever gets it won't miss the U.S. Dept. of Corrections stamped on the envelope. You'll have to sharpen the pencil with your teeth." "Thanks," I said.

I looked over the books. There was a Zane Grey cowboy novel. An autobiography by Christine Jorgensen, who was the first man to have a sex change. I thought that was odd. And *The Brothers Karamazov* by Dostoyevsky. I stacked them up on my locker and sat down on the bed with the pad and pencil. The first thing I did was write the judge and ask him to reduce my sentence to time served. I told him I had lice, had fully realized my mistakes, and had been scared straight. I addressed the letter to my lawyer and asked him to forward it to the judge. It was a long shot to send a jailhouse appeal, but from where I was sitting I had nothing to play but long shots. Dostoyevsky had spent some time in prison. He wrote about it in *House of the Dead*. And I guess knowing that only encouraged me to use Karamazov for my journal.

I read the book first. Then I began to record my own lines between his lines. Naturally, his were better. But mine were mine, and it didn't take me long to find out I had plenty to write about. I set the journal up differently than I had my others. On each page, I started writing between the lines and then broke out and wrote all

crazy around the margins and every which way I could find some space so that it was all jumbled up. I tossed in everything I saw and thought and felt during the day and wrapped it all up with book quotes and prison slang and bits of wild conversation, and anything I thought was interesting. I didn't keep up my old habit of writing down my ideas for novels because it seemed unnecessary. I felt as if all the fictional ideas I cooked up were nothing compared to what was going on around me in real life.

I was reading when three black guys from the Muslim Brotherhood knocked on my door. They were very well groomed. Their nails shone, their skin glowed, and the hair beneath their elaborately crocheted skullcaps looked drawn on with conté crayon.

"Excuse me, brother," one of them said from the other side of the glass. I looked up from my bunk, then turned away. "Excuse me," he said again, and rapped the glass with his knuckles. "We'd just like to make a brief offer toward improving race relations."

"I'm not in on race-related charges," I replied. "I don't have those problems."

"That's wonderful," he replied in an unctuous voice. "Because we have an offer for you."

"What?" I asked, even though I really didn't want to know.

"More than ever before, the races need to trust each other. And I want to offer you an opportunity to enter the circle of trust between the black man and the white man." Trust was a touchy subject for me. At present I didn't have any in anyone, no matter what the issue. "So here is our offer," he said. "Every Sunday is movie night up in the gym. During the movie, the Muslim brothers all gather in the bathroom for a little prayer meeting. What we would like once you are released into population is for you to join

us in a ceremony of trust. Come meet the brothers; and then we want you to pull your pants down around your knees and bend over."

I didn't say anything. I could hardly believe I heard him correctly.

"It's all about trust," he said, reminding me again of the larger point. "You see, by not fucking you when you are at your most vulnerable, you will realize that you can trust us, and we will trust you because you took a chance on our behalf. So what do you say? When you enter population will you meet us in the bathroom? The meeting will only take a minute."

"I'm sorry," I said, trying hard to sound practical, "but I don't go to movies."

"This is a golden opportunity," he said. "We don't offer it to everyone. Only a select few whom we believe can handle this type of trust."

"Well, no thank you," I said. "It's a wonderful offer, but I have other plans."

"Well," he said, "when your schedule permits, just let us know and we'll make a date."

At that moment the loudspeaker was flipped on and the rotunda guard hollered "COUNT!" They turned, and marched off. After the count was cleared I flipped open my journal and wrote down everything that had just happened. Nobody would believe it. I couldn't. That's why I had to write it down.

After a week the physician's assistant opened my cell. He was a big man, with a head as wide as his shoulders. It made him look like a smiling toad. I liked him. I liked anyone who didn't

look mean or dangerous. “Let’s see if those lice have had enough DDT,” he said.

I stripped down and he checked me from top to bottom. Then he ran a fine comb through my hair. “We have to be careful. Once we get an epidemic of lice, or crabs, or scabies, it is near impossible to get rid of ’em.”

“I guess so,” I said, trying to keep up my end of the conversation.

“Yeah,” he continued. “I think these lice are cooked and you’re ready to be sent down to population.”

I didn’t want to go into population — not after what I had seen happen to Lucas in West Street, and what I imagined was waiting for me in Ashland. “You know,” I said, “I once did some volunteer work in a hospital. Do you need any workers?”

“Funny you should ask,” he replied. “My X-ray tech only just flipped out and tried to climb over the fence.” He looked out my window and pointed to the spot. “I mean that kid just snapped. Broad daylight he runs from the dormitory, out across the yard, and starts to climb. Of course, they spotted him right away. Told him to come down, but he wouldn’t, so they had to jerk him down with something like a gaff hook and now he’s locked in isolation with a couple of broken ribs.”

“Sounds pretty rough,” I said, as I got dressed.

“Would you like a job as the X-ray tech?” he asked. “You could live up here and be part of the hospital staff.”

“That would suit me fine,” I said. And just like that I fell into the best job in the prison. I got to keep my private cell. The medical staff trained me to use the X-ray machine and develop the film, and from then on I was always the first one called to X-ray

the men who were injured during the night — especially those who lived in the hundred-and-twenty-man dormitories, where once the lights were turned off you could stealthily roam from bunk to bunk and settle a score with anyone. And they did. Nightly, it seemed to me.

I also learned how to stitch up wounds (I practiced on chicken parts), properly apply tourniquets, tweeze shattered glass out of gashes, wash out eyes that had been burned with bathroom cleansers, pop dislocated bones back into joints, and perform an assortment of other triage skills. It was a good job, and it allowed me to see the results of all the rough action in the prison, without having to be directly involved.

Still, I knew I had to keep my guard up.