Thirteen

Marking Time

I didn't keep a calendar on my wall. I didn't need one. I knew how many days I had been in, and figured in my mind how many days I had left. Like me, a lot of guys kept time in their heads. But everyone had their own system. Most x'd off days on a calendar. Some tallied up numbers like card players: four marks down and one across, like little gates. One guy I knew took the corner of a razor blade to his arm and made a small cut each day. He wanted the scars to remind him of his pain. I couldn't wait until I got out so I could begin to forget. One thing I noticed is that guys never told anyone their exact exit date. They just left silently — no parties, no backslapping, no addresses exchanged. They just vanished. It was the safest way to leave. No one wanted some jealous freak or a psycho with a grudge to jump him on the way out.

For me, Sundays were the worst. I counted out the days in units of seven. All my numbers were divided by or multiplied by seven. And every Sunday, when I got to the end of another unit, I was torn between thinking that another week of my life had been lost and that I was one week closer to my exit.

In order to make time pass more quickly I got permission to go down to the medical offices, where I cleaned up the X-ray room and the developing room. Mr. Akers, a prison administrator, had

me mop and clean his office, too. The floor guard would always unlock Mr. Akers's office for me, and then lock it behind me when I finished. The guard never stayed while I cleaned, but drifted back down the hall to his post. I was cleaning one Sunday morning when I noticed Mr. Akers had failed to lock the medical file cabinets which held the records for the entire population — and not just medical records, but duplicate paperwork for the main records. I knew my file was in there and I wanted to read it.

I opened the office door and looked down the hall. The guard was still at his post, chatting with another guard. I quietly closed the door and dashed to the file cabinet and pulled open the drawer. I fingered across the files until I found mine. I pulled it out. I rechecked the guard. He was still chatting. I opened my file. The parole board report was on top. I read as fast as I could. They called me "uncooperative and unwilling to tell the truth." It was crushing. I felt like screaming. Even though I had fucked up, I wasn't a fuckup, but there was no way I could explain this to anyone. After all, it didn't matter who I was, it was what I had done that now defined me. I turned the page. The results of my meeting with the psychiatrist were listed. He summarized me as a "situational sociopath willing to give answers that attempted to redefine who he was, rather than to honestly describe himself. Perhaps," the doctor wrote, "he doesn't have the capacity to entirely articulate who he is." That was a fancy way of calling me a liar. I flipped through the rest of the chart. My caseworker, Mr. Wilcox, said I was not a danger to myself or others and ranked me as a minimum-security risk. That was reassuring. I closed the file and checked the door. The guard was still talking. I returned my file to the drawer, closed it, and locked the cabinet.

When I was back in my cell I recorded everything I could remem-ber from my papers, even though most of it was so

discouraging. I felt anxious. I tried to shrug it off and read, but couldn't concentrate. I paced around the cell thinking that I was in some kind of reverse mental institution where I'd only get released once I was totally screwed up. I tried to sleep but the anxiety stayed with me.

The next morning it caught up to me. I was tired. I was shaving and staring hard in the mirror, which was warped and gave my face the shape of an unshelled peanut. Suddenly my heart started pounding. My neck swelled with pressure. My ears closed. My eyes glazed over. And I began to think I wouldn't make it out and, like so many guys I had helped sew up, I would take the razor and begin to hack and slice at myself as only a madman would. It wasn't a new thought for me to think I might go insane, but I had always pushed the thought aside. This time the thought that I'd kill myself was unrelenting. As my hand began to shake I knew I was a moment away from hurting myself. I dove toward my cell door as if from the path of a speeding train. I shoved the razor out of the meal slot then dropped down and did push-ups until I couldn't do any more and lay there stretched out on the hard floor feeling the warmth of my body replaced by the cold of the concrete. By the time the count guard came by I was sitting on my bunk, half shaved and trying to will my shaking foot into a shoe.

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Visiting hours were only on weekends and no one ever came to see me anyway so I was surprised when the hospital guard rapped on my door one weekday afternoon and unlocked it. "You have a visitor," he said. "Two of them." I had no idea who it might be. I got dressed and followed the guard. We passed through the first set of front gates and entered the visiting room.

My father and my uncle Jim from Pennsylvania were sitting on folding metal chairs and smoking cigarettes. The way they were slumped forward made me realize they were drunk. “Son,” Dad said, perking up when I walked in. He stood and lurched toward me. We hugged and I felt myself holding him up. He smelled of hard liquor — Canadian Club. That’s what he always turned to when he wanted to get hammered.

Uncle Jim grinned. “How’re you doing?” he asked. I shrugged.

The guard stepped forward. “I’ll give you fifteen minutes,” he said, then left the room.

“Goddamned place is closed up tight as a nun,” Dad said. “We had to bang on the front door to get someone to open it up.”

“It is a prison,” I reminded him.

“We would have been here earlier, but Jim spotted a roadhouse and we thought we’d have a few belts before coming in. You know, take the edge off of being here.” He waved his arm around and stumbled. A chair fell over.

I looked over toward the guard, who was watching through the viewing window. “Dad, I hate to tell you this, but visiting hours are Saturday. They only called me up here because you came from so far away.”

“Well, hell,” he said. “Can’t a dad visit his son?”

“During regular hours,” I said. “Look, I’m going to have to go in a few minutes. Is there anything you wanted to say?”

“Wish I had a drink,” he said, and laughed.

I walked over to the guard. “Can he come back in the morning?” I asked.

"Not until the weekend," he replied. "You know the rules."

I went back to my dad. "Can you guys get a motel in town and come back Saturday? We can have the whole day together."

"I got to be getting back home for work," Jim said. "Your dad is up for a visit and we just thought we'd take a crack at running down here and seeing you."

"Well, I'm disappointed," I said. "It would be really nice to have some time to talk."

The guard tapped on the window. "I got to go," I said. "Thanks for coming." I gave them each a hug.

Dad mumbled that he loved me, and I mumbled the same thing back. At that moment, we were not so much in love as we were beat up from loving each other.

By the time I returned to my yellow room I was fuming and just wanted to kick something. I was so mad that he had showed up without any thought of when it was all right to arrive, or how it would look to the guards that my dad was some drunken slob beating on the front gate and hollering, "Let me in! I'm here to see my kid!" I could just imagine some report going into my file describing my home life. I felt even more insane. But by the time I finished writing about it in my journal I had settled down. It was never like my dad to have a lot to talk about anyway, unless he had a good story to share. I'm sure he got drunk just in order to get up the nerve to walk in the door and tell me he loved me, and after that eruption of sentimentality, he wanted out. It was really harder for him than it was for me. It made me think that it must be harder for the visitors to come in than for the prisoners to visit with them. We were used to being inside. And for my dad to see his kid in prison, locked up, it was killing him. Arriving drunk and at the

wrong time was the best he could do. And not hurting myself was the best I could do.

After seeing my psychological report, I set up another meeting with the shrink. When I settled into the chair in front of his desk I noticed it was bolted to the ground. I had cleaned his office, too, and knew there was an alarm button under his desk he could press for emergency help. A lot of guys didn't like the shrink for the same reason I didn't — he had too much power over our lives. His reports to the parole board could extend your time behind bars. Or he could recommend an early release. Visiting him again was a risk, but I needed to do some damage control.

"Tell me about yourself," he said, once I took my seat. I wasn't sure where to begin. "Here's a hint," he said. "Don't talk about your crime."

"What if that's all I've got on my mind?" I asked.

"Then let's start with your family," he said. "I see here that your father came to visit."

"Yeah," I said. "It was great. He's a good father."

"What about your mom?" he asked.

"She's totally supportive," I said. "She's wonderful."

"And your brothers and sister?"

"I love them. I miss them."

"Do you have anything you want to talk about — the stress, or feelings of anger, or remorse?"

"You know," I said, arranging my face into a sincere expression, "I've really worked through all of that hard emotional stuff. I'm just feeling pretty solid right now. Just doing my time,

and hoping to get out and get on with meeting the positive goals in my life."

He stared at me for a long time. Longer than normal. Minutes passed. I sat there trying to hold my trustworthy face. I crossed and uncrossed my legs and hands. I breathed deeply. Then not at all. Then too deeply. I was a fake. I was giving him the fake me and he was just going to sit there for as long as it took for the cracks in me to appear.

Slowly I lowered my hands and held on to the bottom of the chair as if I were about to topple over. Then in a very quiet voice he said, "When you really want to be honest with me, come back. I don't think you are a bullshitter. I just don't think you have walked into my office to get help. You are here to con me, and you don't have to con me. You can tell the truth, and I won't hold it against you."

I couldn't look him in the eye. He had seen right through me. My motives were so pathetically obvious. Worse, I was just the same as every other jailhouse con who walked into his office looking to feed him a fake paint-by-numbers home life. And instead of standing out as something superior, I ended up just being one of the phonies. I stood up. "I'll try to open up more next time," I said quietly. I left and never went back.

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One morning Mr. Bow took me down to the hole, which was a corridor of isolation cells under the hospital wing, when he was doing basic medical rounds. Nobody got sent down there unless they had done something really bad — like get into a fight where someone gets seriously hurt, or try to escape, or assault a guard.

“Help,” came a cry from down the hall. “Help me.”

We went down and Mr. Bow opened the solid steel cell door. There was a naked guy lying face down on a mattress with the metal part of a broken light bulb up his ass.

“What happened here?” Mr. Bow asked.

“I was lying in bed and the bulb fell out of the ceiling and went up my booty,” he whimpered.

The three of us stared up at the empty light fixture.

Bow turned to me. “Go back upstairs and get Dr. Sokel and tell him to bring some tweezers, disinfectant, and suture material. Move it!”

I ran all the way down the corridor. As I ran I wished all the gates would open before me, and I could just keep running, as far away from this place as I could go. But I couldn’t run out of prison. I did what I was told and got the doctor. I helped him gather his supplies, and as he trotted toward the hole to remove a broken light bulb from a grown man’s ass, I went back to my cell. There was nothing to do but feel the despair of that moment, until after feeling it over and over I picked up my journal and wrote it down and emptied it out of me.

When I reread what I had written, it was as if I had cast a spell on myself and the entire experience filled me up again. I just couldn’t get away from it. I poured myself into that book, and it poured itself back into me. It was like pouring one glass of water back and forth between two glasses.

For a long time I had known I wanted to write books, but I didn’t have any help and I didn’t know what I was doing so it took me a while to figure out what I had to write and how to get started. While in prison, it occurred to me that when I lived at Davy’s I

could never write about something as unsettling as what I had seen in the hole because when I felt something so intense I jumped up and took a walk or ran to a bar where I had a drink poured into me, and another until I was so numb I couldn't pour anything back onto paper. I didn't have the patience to slow down and see that I had plenty of material to write about in high school. I just didn't have the confidence and determination to sit still and nurture it properly. My mistakes, my self-doubt and insecurity got the best of me. Even as I crisscrossed Florida looking for "juicy" subjects, I missed them all. It seemed the harder I chased after a subject, the faster I ran in the wrong direction. Even while living in the Chelsea Hotel while waiting for my sentencing, I spent more time looking into the mirror at my wounded face than I did into my notebook. And the only time I did settle down to write was when I was sitting on the Beaver writing in the ship's log. Even then I didn't think I was writing anything of value. At sea I was reading all those great books and ended up thinking I had nothing great to offer in return.

But that was untrue. In prison I got a second chance to realize I did have something to write about. I found plenty of serious subjects. I had plenty of time to write about them and I couldn't get up and run away, or drink, or smoke dope.

When I had my fill of serious subjects I began to think about my life before prison, and I found so much more to write about. Prison may have been serious, but from within it, looking out my cell window, I knew life outside prison was more interesting. And as I sat in my yellow cell with my journal on my lap, I understood I had come all the way to prison to realize that what I had in my past was so much richer than what was before me. My struggle as a writer was a lot like my life, I figured. I made up rules for myself and broke them and made others until I got it right.