

Face-to-Face

Every day, for the three weeks I stayed at the Chelsea Hotel while waiting for my sentencing, I worked over my face in the mirror. I just couldn't believe how ugly I was becoming. At first I was horrified. It was as if I had contracted a disfiguring disease that was slowly but surely reshaping my face. Huge lumps heaved up under the skin. Blemishes surfaced. Brown marks appeared as if I were rotting fruit. I knew I shouldn't touch my skin with my fingers, but I couldn't help it. I discovered pools of oil and pus under my skin. They drove me into a frenzy. I went right at them. I squeezed down on the welts with my fingers while pressing up against them with my tongue. They exploded, and coils of yellow matter and blood streamed down my face. I squeezed until the cavities were drained. This was very satisfying, this cleansing ritual. I'd punish my face as if I were a cop roughing up a suspect for a confession. Then, after an intense session, I'd step out of the bathroom and pace the carpet while smoking my hash pipe. I figured my face was the landscape of my attitude.

Each day I woke and asked myself what I should do to avoid the possibility of going to prison. I could go to Canada. But then I'd have to spend the rest of my life there. That seemed unlikely. I could alter my identity, but I didn't know how to change my face, or my fingerprints, or even how to get a fresh set of ID's. The only thing I could change was my attitude, and that was changing for the worst. My only sensible plan was to sit tight, go to court, and hope for probation.

After Tepper had revealed all the government's super sleuthing, I figured they were still spying on me. And they were. In my room I kept

the curtains pulled, the door locked, and the television turned up loud. I didn't like using my room phone except for ordering food. I'm sure it was bugged. And during the day there was always an agent camped out in the lobby, waiting for me, creeping up on me even as I called home from the pay phone by the back door steps. In the evening it was a different man. They followed me everywhere; if by accident or intent I lost them, we always met up again at the hotel. If I went to a restaurant, the agent stood outside. If I went to a bar, he came in.

One night I read Dylan Thomas at the White Horse Tavern, the poet's favorite bar, and drank too much. On the way back to the hotel I staggered into an alley and began to vomit. At the end of the alley, leaning against a wall, the agent stood and watched me. "Leave me alone!" I spit out. He lit a cigarette and didn't say a word. I was trying to kill myself and they were letting me have a go at it.

The next day I worked my face over so heavily it looked like I had been punched around. I didn't care. The only relief I had was the few moments each day when I could pinch and squeeze and knead the reservoirs of blood and pus from under my skin.

It didn't take long to learn how to shake the agents. I'd just get on the subway and dash from train to train a dozen or so times, and before long I'd lose them. I did this after I had set up interviews at Hunter College and New York University. Both schools had writing programs, and both asked me for writing samples to accompany an application. I lied to them. I filled out the applications and promised I'd mail the sample in. But I knew I wouldn't. I had never written anything that was finished. I felt like a fraud. I returned to my room and worked over my face. I didn't have a typewriter. I didn't have ideas. But I had my face. And when I finished punishing it, I settled down for a while and went for a walk to think about what I might write for a sample. But it didn't take me long to find a bar, and for my agent to find me.

I spent a lot of money on drinks and meals while reading books. I read as much jail literature as I could locate. *On the Yard, Papillon, The Thief's Journal, Seven Long Times*. It was all depressing, but it was a distraction from obsessively picking at my face. When I couldn't find jail books, I read concentration camp books and P.O.W. books. I read *This Way to the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen* four times in three weeks. I was living off the voices of other people's pain. Those writers had been worse off than I was now, and still they survived to write about it. I knew my fear was as real as theirs, but my words were still submerged. It was easier to pick at the scabs on my face than put pen to paper. Like those other writers, I figured I'd have to wait until the pain subsided and left the words behind.

One morning, for something to do, I lost my agent in the subway system and went to Lucas's apartment. We had sold him a hundred pounds of hash. He was a nice guy, and his apartment was filled with books, so I figured he was interesting, too. I knew he had been arrested and I was desperate to talk to someone who shared my messed-up feelings and situation. I thought he might be sympathetic.

But Lucas wasn't home. His wife answered the door and invited me in. She informed me that he was in West Street—the federal detention center downtown. After his arrest, she didn't want to bail him out. This was his second bust. They had two kids. She was pissed at him, and pissed at me. “You'll both be sentenced on the same day,” she said harshly. “He expects to do time. And if I were you, I'd expect it, too. That prosecuting attorney, Tepper, is a rabid dog and he's going to take a bite out of you.”

“I know,” I mumbled, and I was filled with dread. Still, I didn't care how blunt she was. It was just good to talk to another person even if she was using me to get a load off her chest.

But a baby began to cry and she asked me to leave. At the door she had a few final words. “You like to sell it, but did you ever consider what it could do to the people who bought it?”

I didn’t know what to say right off, and she wasn’t waiting. “Figures you’d be struck dumb with that one,” she said acidly, then slammed the door.

I stood there for a minute. A minute was all I could endure because I was beginning to feel how I had screwed up more lives than just my own.

I went down to the corner and called Mr. Newman. I told him about Lucas expecting time. He probably knew this already, but I suddenly had the urge to keep talking.

“Don’t worry,” he said. “He’s older, and he’s a two-time loser. You’re a kid. They won’t do much to you. I’m betting on probation. You’ll get off, and then move on with the rest of your life.”

“Thanks,” I said. But I had a hollow feeling inside. Somehow I knew this would never be over.

One morning I took a long walk uptown to the 79th Street Marina on the Hudson. I wanted to see the boat, but it was gone. “Impounded,” the dock manager told me when I asked. “The police have a place where they hold them and then auction them off.”

I sat down on the dock. The river smelled like something dead. The sky was gray. I sat there and cried. I felt sad, and I hated myself for it. I felt beaten, and I hated myself for that. I didn’t have one friend. I couldn’t write one word. I was just waiting for the one day to arrive when my entire life would pivot. And I was sure things were not going to pivot my way.

Then the waiting game got worse. It was September 13th. I was watching the news. I had been following the Attica Prison uprising. Tom

Wicker and William Kunstler had been reporting on the awful prison conditions at the big New York state pen. The place was horrifying. The guards were frightening. The prisoners were even more frightening. One guard had been killed in the uprising, and thirty-nine more were taken hostage. The prisoners had taken over the prison and were asking for amnesty. Wicker and Kunstler were helping to negotiate. But Governor Rockefeller was tired of talking and called in the troops. He had them ring the prison walls and fire down into the yard. Four thousand shots were fired in ten minutes. Twenty-nine prisoners were shot dead. The troopers also shot ten guards in the process. I sat there numbly watching the naked prisoners with their hands on their heads being lined up in the yard, poked with rifles, and shoved around by troops who behaved like Nazis.

I knew bad things were going to happen to me. Guards weren't going to protect me. Prisoners weren't going to protect me. I was screwed. I stood up and went into the bathroom and savagely worked my face over. The days passed. My fear grew. My face remained an open wound.

The night before my sentencing I wrapped my remaining hash, about two pounds, in plastic bags. I shoved it down my pants, turned out all the room lights, and opened the back window. I stepped onto the fire escape and worked my way down to the alley. A few blocks later I flagged a taxi and went uptown, to 50th Street. I went into a little variety store and bought a metal serving spoon. I had to bury the hash and I figured Central Park was the best place. I walked several blocks to the park entrance across the street from the Plaza. I was scared. I kept thinking someone was watching me. I kept looking around for any of the agents, and also for a place to dig a hole, a place that wouldn't be bothered if I had to do time. As I walked I heard the clomping horses pulling buggies on the street.

Finally I looked around and saw a stone drinking fountain. I stood next to it. From there I could see the statue of General Sherman on his horse. "Okay," I said to myself. "Remember this spot and then this map." I took thirty-nine steps to the west because I liked the movie *The Thirty-nine Steps*. Then I took twenty steps to the north, one for each year of my life. That brought me into some bushes. "Take Fifteen Steps to Better Writing to the west then turn around and dig," I whispered. I tramped fifteen paces through the underbrush. I squatted down and cleared the ground with my hands. Then I began to dig. The ground was filled with rocks and roots. It was slow going, and I couldn't see much of what I was doing. I just kept stabbing at the hole with the spoon, then clawing at the roots and rocks with my hands until I could get them out of the way and then stab at the ground some more. It took forever. Probably an hour. When I finally shoved the hash down all the way I bent the spoon in half and left it in the hole. I filled it up with the rocks and dirt and stomped the mound down, then gathered leaves and spread them over the dirt. Then I began to march away. "Fifteen, twenty, thirty-nine," I counted out, until I was back at the water fountain. I looked over to salute General Sherman and walked toward the park exit.

In the morning, I woke up early and packed all my belongings into a bunch of cheap nylon bags I had bought from a street vendor a few days before. I took a scalding hot shower, worked over my face for the last time, and got dressed in my cheap suit. I was ready. I checked my bags with the front desk at the hotel. I paid for my bill in cash. "Either I'll pick my bags up later today, or I'll send someone around to do so," I said. The receptionist shrugged. He couldn't care less. I looked into the lobby. There were two agents. It was sentencing day, and they didn't want to lose me.