

Description

In the late 1980s, Bill Cleveland – then director of California’s Arts in Corrections, the program that provided arts programming in all our state’s prisons – hired me to write a manual for artists working in prison. He wanted this manual to include necessary factual information, but asked that the bulk of the book be a work of fiction that examined the work from the points-of-view of all those involved. *We’re artists*, Bill said. *Create art we can learn from.*

Based on my own years teaching poetry at San Quentin and on dozens of interviews I did across the state – with prisoners, artist facilitators, teaching artists, and a range of prison staff – I wrote the novella I share with you here.

These ten chapters show what it was like to do this work in a fictional California prison during that era, the late 1980s. The times have changed dramatically, but much in these pages still applies.

Please feel free to share whatever in this novella you find useful. I ask only that you credit me as author and mention California’s Arts in Corrections.

You can read the work of my San Quentin students, see more about prison and prison arts, and find an address at which to write me at:
www.judithtannenbaum.com.

You can also read more at my site about *Disguised as a Poem: My Years Teaching Poetry at San Quentin* (Northwestern University Press, 2000), a memoir about my own primary prison teaching experience.

Thanks, *Judith Tannenbaum*

CHAPTER ONE

Varella extended her braceleted arm to the tall black man Susan Robertson had introduced as Timothy Augustus. He slid his palm against her own: "Welcome to the concentration camp known as North Coast Correctional Facility."

Timothy smiled straight into her eyes and Varella remembered. Right, this is the man who wrote that "To The Hunters of Hunters Point" poem in the class anthology Susan sent.

A thin white man introduced himself as Mitch Reiser. His blue workshirt and jeans were so precisely pleated, Varella could swear he'd just pressed them. She was going to ask if he'd shaved on her account, slicked down his hair, but she noticed that although he remained at her side, his eyes were radar tracking Susan.

So, she thought, noticing her impulse to tease Mitch on his preening, I'm doing all right. For when Susan had called saying "Come on Varella, I've worked here over two years and had a dozen guest artists, but you've always said no, you're too busy. You'll always be busy. This time come anyway and perform for my class," Varella had experienced very mixed feelings. Years before some men at Central State Prison had seen a performance she'd done on TV and one or two wrote her care of the station. There was no arts programming then and these men wondered if she'd look at their poems. Off and on for six years she'd heard from these poets and she knew from them what she'd always assumed: the soul has to struggle for song when stuck behind bars.

Still her sister had been robbed last spring at gunpoint, and two weeks later a kid barely older than her own oldest son was found dead in a driveway three blocks from her house in some drug deal gone bad. At the time of Susan's phone call, Varella wasn't particularly overflowing with sympathy for a roomful of maximum security prisoners, even if they were students of her old friend, even if they were poets.

But she had said yes and now she was here and she thought, how did I let myself forget?
All these inmates are men. These brothers look just like those on my street corner, checking me out when I walk toward the grocery to buy milk.

A big-muscled man walked up and asked, "You're a poet, too?"

"Poet-woman-mother-singer-lover-dancer-teacher ... "

"You going to give us some of all that tonight?" Timothy asked.

"I'll give what I always give; what you get is up to you."

"That's proper." Timothy stood still and smooth, then sauntered to the back of the room. He reached out, as he walked, for the writing arm of a wooden chair, scraped this chair across the floor, twirled it around on one metal leg, and settled his long body into its seat.

Although Varella's eyes were open to this room – to the computer talk on its chalkboards, the acoustical tile ceiling, the stale cigarette smell – some inner camera was still registering shifts between her Oakland home, downtown glass and steel, boarded up storefronts, freeway traffic, rolling hills October yellow, the road to the coast lined with redwood, the apparent medieval castle that was the entrance to this prison, all the faces Susan had given names to: Al Greer, Raylene Dakota, Mac, Officer Betsy Chin, Timothy Augustus, and now this one man, blond and young, who stood before her. "Hi," Varella said into his gray eyes.

"Not tonight; wish I was." The kid placed his hand in hers and Varella saw the tattoos – motorcycles and small-waisted, big-breasted women – that traveled his bare arm to where it disappeared beneath a cuff of folded blue.

Varella tilted her plaited head, pondered – hi, not tonight – then got it.

"Right, you're a poet, you play with words."

"I don't know about all that," Roger grinned, "but..."

"Don't listen to this one," a fine-featured brown man took a pretend swipe at the blond boy. "Listen to me instead; my name's DC."

"DC," Varella shook the man's hand. "Your initials?"

"No, I'm from there. The capitol. A rare enough occurrence in here to earn me that handle."

"Well, you certainly do have an interesting face, Mr. DC. Where are your people from?"

DC smiled, paused. "I'm an Other."

"Huh?"

"In here a man is either Black, White, Hispanic or Other. I'm an Other."

"An Other," Varella tried to absorb this concept when she saw the man Susan had introduced as Mac, the man who taught painting and drawing with the Arts Program at NCCF, pushing a wire cart filled to the brim. He stopped at the door, "You seen Al?"

Susan shook her head.

"I've got to get the charcoal and pencils from the back storage room and Al's got the only key. Officer Chin doesn't have one." Mac caught Varella staring at his cart with its load of material. "You know, every time I see a bag lady in the city, I want to say, 'Honey, I know just how you feel.'"

From the back of the room, Susan threw Varella a shrug, "Woody's not here, but it's 7:00; we may as well start. So," Susan fidgeted with her black hair as she spoke to the class, she played with the barrette that held it, "obviously, this is Varella Williams, tonight's guest artist."

Varella rose from where she had been seated, walked slowly, stopped in the center of the room, wooden chairs in a circle around her.

"You know," her orange skirt twirled as she talked, as she moved, "once was a time, poetry was one with music and dance. Once was a time, expression was whole. *Sister, daughter, mother, old one,*" Varella chanted. "*Sister, daughter, mother, old one.*" Her bracelets, rings and beaded braids flashed as Varella sang choruses, danced interludes, and wove individual poems into a complete body.

Varella knew, after twelve years of performing, that she could wrap any group around her bejeweled little finger. And she'd make use of whatever spell her enchantments might cast. Her

intention, however, was not to bewitch but to beckon an audience toward feeling, toward thought. She could tell by these men's awed silence that they were affected, but after forty-five minutes of hard work, she wanted to hear how. She wiped away sweat – human, no ethereal nectar – from her forehead, her neck.

The young kid, Roger, sat forward in his chair and asked, "Where's your heart at when you write these poems?"

Varella smiled, nodded. All right, she thought: These guys are going to ask me the interesting questions.

"When I do my poems, my heart gets just about as big as it can get. I want my heart to spread everywhere, to every corner of suffering, joy, contentment, despair, passion, exploitation and kindness in the entire universe."

Tall Tony jumped into the rich, lively space this credo created, "Well, lady, your poems prove you're successful, but you know, I'm saying what I'm about, I want my poems to speak from my heart, from my experience. I feel it's my obligation to speak what I know. If I do that well enough, then my poems can speak to everyone else, they can be universal."

Who were these men, Varella wondered as she kept this good conversation going, when they were each their moms' little boy? What happened to them that they're here? I'm damn straight keeping good track of Roland and Hassan.

Roger seemed distressed, "I'm just learning what I even see, think." He leaned his gangly kid's body over the small desk attached to his chair. "It's a kick trying to get that onto paper. I mean, I'm twenty-four years old and I've been in prison since I was nineteen." It was clear Roger was about to begin a story, and the other men sat deeper in their chairs, giving the kid room. "My life before that was pretty bitchin'. I'd never been in any trouble with the law. I spent my time partying and having fun. Then, suddenly, here I am, sitting in a line with the other fish, all of us still in those orange suits.

"They take me to Unit 2 and I look around at the cages. They escort me up to what they call my 'house.' They lock me in. And there I am. All I can think is, 'What the fuck did I do to deserve this?'"

"The kid's got it right," another man said. Reginald Potter. Varella remembered his name was Reginald Potter. "The day after I got here, the guy in the cage next to mine stabbed a K9 through the bars and the guard on the rail started shooting. He didn't care where he shot and I ended up with buckshot in my leg. My second day here. Welcome to NCCF, sucker."

The men laughed and Varella asked, "Have you written a poem about that?"

"I've written a god-damn series of poems about that," Reginald glowered at Susan. His look said: this series is all her fault; she made me write it all down.

"Why I started writing," Roger went on, "was, see, I tried to escape. Shine this place. But I was caught. I spent two years in the hole. I never would have thought I'd be able to survive two days in lock up, let alone two years. But that's where I started writing poems. Gave me a way to get my thoughts out, to look at them. Gave me a way not to go crazy. So, see, for me, poems let me find out what I think; poems saved my life."

Varella began to respond to the apparent difference between poems with an individual "I," and her poems which spoke in a larger voice. No sooner had she begun, then Betsy Chin, the officer Susan had introduced earlier that evening, came to the door and announced, "Five minutes more, Close Bs." Varella felt the question form, but Susan caught her before she had time to shape it. "A few of the men, about half, have to go back to their cells in five minutes."

"And the rest can stay?"

"The rest can stay."

Varella could not tell from the response in the room, which men were, what did Betsy call them?, Close Bs. No one moved. No one was going to cheat himself out of the full amount of time he had coming.

"Your poems are wonderful, Varella, and I much appreciate your visiting and sharing them with us, but I'll tell you," a man named Ralph brushed strands of gray hair from his forehead, "all I want to do when I write is to speak about what I knew before this place. I want to tell about my childhood and my small corner of the world. Writing my poems," Ralph continued, looking at Varella with a small, sad smile, "allows me to feel that I'm not in prison."

"But doesn't just the process of writing do that?" Mitch asked. Varella had been aware of this man's intensity all evening and now that he broke from silence to speech, he drove the words forcefully, relentlessly. "It doesn't make any difference if I'm writing a so-called prison poem or a poem about the mountains I lived in as a kid or some kind of surrealistic imagistic no-particular-place poem. Just sitting there with paper and pencil gets me out of here. Creating something, especially something that comes from deep within me – or deep without me," he smiled at Varella, acknowledging his understanding of what she meant when she said she wanted her heart to be everywhere – "wherever it is poems come from, is so opposite to every other experience in prison. Just the act of listening to those words that somehow exist within me, but aren't me, allows me to speak in a true voice, my voice, but not my voice. And whatever it is, it has nothing to do with prison. Is that what you mean, Varella? Me and not me?"

Again Varella began to speak, and again Betsy came to the door. This time Roger, Tall Tony, Reginald Potter and the other Close Bs rose. One by one they came over to shake Varella's hand, to thank her for her visit, to invite her back again.

Their leaving broke up the class for a few minutes as other students went into the hall to smoke a cigarette, to get a drink of water. Varella watched the men through the glass that formed the top half of the wall. She watched other inmates – musicians, visual artists – walk from other classes, up the stairs and out of view.

When Susan's students had gathered again Varella began, "You know, if I were in prison... Well, I think you're lucky to be poets."

DC laughed, "Some funny kind of luck."

"No, I mean, it would be awfully hard to be, let's say, a dancer in here. How can you dance in a cell? Or how can you play your trumpet? It would probably be, like 'shut up that racket!' And I suppose with painting, well, I've been watching Mac running up and down the hall out there lugging stuff, so I suppose it might be pretty hard just to get the materials you need to paint. And, then, you have to make sure nobody touches your painting, it has to dry and all.

"But a poem is something very few people can take from you. You can keep it in your head. Even if you don't have a pen or a pencil, you can still do your poetry. You can be in a little box, you don't need any space. You can do it in your mind and not disturb anyone. And, too, you can hurt your leg and you can't dance. People can take your paint brush and you can't paint. People can take your horn and you can't play. But nobody can take a poem out of your mind. It's always going to be yours."

"I just read about a contemporary Russian poet, Irina Ratushinskaya," Susan said from the back of the room. "She was taken prisoner because of her poetry, her political beliefs, early in the 1980s. In prison, in solitary, she wrote poems with a sharpened matchstick on a bar of soap. Then she memorized the poems. After that, she'd wash her hands and erase the poem from the soap so she could continue to use the bar to write more poems. Apparently, she wrote and memorized dozens of poems in this way."

DC expelled a long breath, "Man, that just about says it all."

The room was silent for a few moments. Timothy Augustus didn't even speak to say that oppression North American style might be less brutal, but was certainly as insidious as oppression Soviet style.

Varella broke the silence, "How much longer do we have? Susan sent me your anthology and I want to hear you read your poems to me."

No one said a word. Then Timothy began, "That's proper, that's proper," and he read his most recent poems. Mitch read, then DC then all the other men still scattered in the room.

Varella listened, laughed, applauded, and asked, "So you've told me you write to know what you think, to get your feelings out, to make universal what you yourself experience, to get yourselves out from behind these walls. You write, as Mitch said, because just the process of writing creates a whole different reality. What else? What haven't you told me?"

Again there was silence, the silence before taking a risk. "Well, I can be someone in my poems that I can't be anywhere else in here," Dennis looked around the room. "The truth is, in here I've got to be hard. We all do," his hand swept the room. "You don't think you can be lonely living with 3,000 guys, but you'd be surprised!"

The men laughed, a group laugh with sharp edges. "Yeah, that's what I mean. We're all supposed to be tough guys, writing poems is pumping kool aid, man, weak. But, I tell you, I don't have to be hard in my poems. They can be what I can't be when I'm out on the yard."

"Look," DC said quietly. "I want to walk out of these walls some day and still be a half-way normal human being. My poetry just might help make that possible."

Varella saw the man Susan had named Officer Miller run down the stairs, heard his shout, "Count's cleared, let's go!"

Soon Mac and his students were in the hall, pack animals under their loads of material. Raylene and the musicians were laughing as they walked from the music room and up the stairs. DC waited until the other poets were out of the classroom. He stood in the hall, leaning, one leg bent at the knee, its foot resting on the wall. Susan paused before shutting the door, took one last glance at the room. This was Education's space and, Susan had explained to Varella, the Arts Program got blamed if one chair was out of place, one piece of paper forgotten on the corner of a desk.

DC stepped up to Varella. He moved with her to the staircase, asked if there were some way he could write to her; he'd really like to ask her a few questions that had been on his mind.

Although Susan had specifically told her not to give out her address, Varella's first response was *sure, of course, we've been talking about what I most like to talk about*. But before she spoke these words she thought, *no, better not*.

"Sorry, DC, I'm just so busy. I know I'd never write, and you'd just get upset with me." This was truth and also evasion. She would probably give the same response to anyone from any audience where she'd just performed her poems: she was busy. Still, her hesitation here was also caused by a whole interwoven set of concerns – rules, sense of possible danger, not wanting to play favorites. Didn't take long for all that crap to sneak its way right between me and DC, Varella thought.

"I understand it would take you awhile to get around to my letter."

"Man, I haven't even written my own mother a letter in over six months!"

DC smiled, but moved away. Varella couldn't tell if he walked on because he was mad at her for not giving him what he wanted, or because he saw through the partial truth of her explanation and was disgusted with her for the piteous way in which she'd let that partial truth stand as whole. Shit, Varella thought.

Susan had closed the door of the classroom and climbed the stairs behind Varella and DC. Varella felt vibes, although she couldn't easily assess them: was Susan's close presence meant to protect her, or was it meant to make sure no rules were broken? How much of a cop had her friend Susan become? Varella shook her head to clear it. I could become paranoid in this place, mighty fast.

Susan walked to the door of the Education Building and Varella joined her for the good-byes. The women watched the men turn left, walk through the courtyard, approach the gates of what Susan had called Unit 2, Mainline. As the men passed through the fence, the darkness took them. It was impossible to see any farther.

After watching the disappearing blue backs for a few moments, Varella and Susan caught up with Officer Miller walking across the courtyard.

"So," Officer Miller asked, "how was your evening with our murderers, rapists and armed robbers?"

Varella shrugged, not having the slightest idea how to respond. "Luckily, I got to meet with them as poets, and they are mighty fine poets no matter what else they are."

"I think that I shall never see, a poem as lovely as a tree.' See, I'm no dunce," Officer Miller paused. "Those men aren't coming to class because they're interested in poetry. It's a night out of their cell, a way to hang around women."

Officer Miller turned to talk with another C.O. as the two women continued their walk out of the prison.

"You know, back there," Varella said as Susan pulled the sallyport gate closed, "DC asked if we could exchange letters. You told me not to give out my address, so I didn't. But what if I'd told him he could write care of the school where I teach? What's the bottom line rule?"

Susan waited to answer as Varella signed out at Count Gate, as Officer Morse checking their bags and briefcases joked with Varella about poets in cornrows. But as they walked out towards Main Gate, Susan said, "The rule is no 'over-familiarization,' that's the phrase. It includes no personal correspondence between inmates and the people who come into the institution. What the system is worried about is that some kind of relationship would develop and because of this relationship, you might be willing to break more serious rules, rules about drugs or weapons. You might help plot an escape."

"But....," Varella began to protest.

"Yeah, I know: no chance. But the system has seen it happen, more than once, and so it feels it has to protect itself. You may know you'd never bring in drugs or a knife or whatever, but once you've broken a rule, even a little one, the system feels an inmate has you in his clutches. You've shown yourself as weak, and he can get whatever he wants."

"And where does poetry live in all this?" Varella asked as the women reached her car.

Susan smiled, "Three hours ago you were blaming me for talking you into driving all the way up here to say poems to a bunch of men who had hurt other people."

"I'm a fast learner," Varella laughed now at the prejudice with which she'd let herself walk inside. "No, really, how can you spend your time thinking about all these rules and still have half-a-mind to share poetry with your students?"

"Look, I'm a tourist in a foreign country. I have to pay attention to the way this culture does things."

"Sounds like a Nazi apology to me, 'I was just following the rules ...'"

"Well, maybe you're *too* fast a learner. You've seen one small slice of a whole big pie. Don't think you know all there is to know from one night in one class." Susan stood by Varella's car in the prison parking lot, the Pacific Ocean just beyond the buildings at her back. She looked east, out to the hills of the first coastal ridge.

"Here I thought you were a poet," Varella slapped Susan's ass, "and then you come up with a tired old cliché about pies!"

CHAPTER TWO

Al Greer pulled open the barn door and entered his studio. The first storm of the season always revealed new leaks and he moved the easel further away from the skylight thinking, I haven't been back to this canvas in, what?, nearly a month. He looked for some moments at the amaryllis and sweet william he'd painted on cloth, then walked back outside. Al drove the twenty miles west to the prison on a road wet beneath redwood. The storm that had begun the night before showed no sign of letting up. Maybe, he thought, if the pink-slipper-flowers more clearly framed the tufts of purple? Or more white, there, at the upper right?

Tansy. The day ahead ripped apart the possible placement of visualized paint. The first thing I'll do when I get to the prison is to ask Sam for advice on Tansy. Then I'll sit down with the order forms. Al felt his jacket pocket, yes, good, it's still here. Last evening as he'd left the office, Raylene handed him a slip of paper. "You know those ear plugs the guys have, to block out the noise in the housing units?" she had asked. "Well, our band's going to sound like all that animated silence if you don't get some guitar strings ordered soon!" And then, what was it Millicent had said about brushes? Raylene, Millicent, the meeting this afternoon. Okay, Al thought as he parked the car and pulled the hood of his jacket over his head, first it's Sam about Tansy, then it's ordering supplies, then ...

But inmate Tweed Lambert approached in his soaked yellow slicker before Al had taken ten steps into the courtyard. Tweed complained, "Our group never gets enough rehearsal time. Why are you always picking on us? You don't like jazz?"

And Officer Tipton spotted Al as he entered the Operations Building. "Can you stop by the office for a second, Al? There seems to be a problem with tonight's movement sheet. Don't you usually have Gordon James' blues workshop on Tuesdays? We've got the paperwork for Raylene's country and western band, but not for Gordon's. Your clerk slip up?"

Then Dolores Mendoza saw Al move toward the door of his own office and she fell in, a short two steps behind. "What are we going to do about Wednesdays?" Dolores, the Community Resources Manager and Al's immediate supervisor, smiled at her own frenzy. She slowed down, "Good morning, Mr. Greer," and curtsied at Al's returned, "Good morning, Ms. Mendoza." Then Dolores sat down on the corner of Al's desk.

"Really, Al, with all your classes, and with T.M. and A.A. and now this new Narcotics Anonymous group, we're over the limit to maintain proper officer coverage. I say we've got to drop one of your inmate music groups."

"Tweed Lambert just accused me of not giving his group enough rehearsal time."

"Tweed Lambert isn't running this office. Tweed Lambert does a good job of getting four of his homeboys to play the music he wants them to play, but that is where his organizational abilities are going to remain."

When Dolores left the office, Al had already been at NCCF for nearly an hour and had done nothing of what he'd planned while driving to work. Al turned his stout body toward the window, watching the angle at which the raindrops hit glass. Okay, get in there and see Sam. But when Al looked down the hall, he saw that the Associate Warden's door was closed. He went to check; the room was empty. "He's in Unit 2, Al," Mavis called from the office next door. "He said he might be there awhile."

Well, Tansy gets tabled. I'm not making this decision without talking to Sam. Sam's the only one in here who will listen to problems and not over-react.

Sam Randle might have returned to his office, but Al would never have known. For Al's telephone kept ringing: "I heard the blues workshop was canceled tonight. That true?"; "Al, this is Betsy Chin. I'm trading with Tipton. I'll cover your classes tonight." "I'm inmate Morales in Unit IV. How can we get an art class going down here?" "David here, Al, from Central State. I'm having a problem lending out materials to our band students and I heard you've come up with a

solution that works." In between phone calls, Tomisino came to the office door and asked to trade an "A" harmonica for an "E." Tomisino was a new student in Tom Scaramella's class. He didn't speak much English, and Al wasn't sure how to read him. He seemed extraordinarily polite and always returned what he borrowed. Al remembered the words Warden Martinez once spoke: "I trust everyone who walks through my door, unless or until he or she burns me."

Mitch Reiser came by assuming, since it was Tuesday, Susan would be in. He knows her schedule better than I do, Al thought. Mitch was in a few Art Program classes and knew Al pretty well. He now sat around the office talking small talk. He always seems to be deciding whether or not to tell me some secret, Al thought. I wish he'd give me even half-an-inch so I could tell him straight out, "forget it, Mitch. You're living in Fantasy Land. Susan's your teacher, that's where it ends." Dolores says most of the men in here are cuckoo about women, about sex. May be. But Mitch Reiser might be beyond normal cuckoo. Should I be writing him up for hanging around, for that sad-dog look in his eyes? I'd better at least go read his file, check out the deed that "R" represents. Al made a mental note to add this task to his list.

After Mitch Reiser walked out, Paul B walked in, wanting to copy a page from the blues book. Paul had been at the prison for nearly ten years, and had been in and out before then. He'd been a wild man as a youngster, he said, hair out to here. Now Paul B was a quiet and reflective forty-five, due to parole in two years. If I had a factory on the outside, Al thought, Paul B is someone I'd give a job to in two seconds flat.

As Al rose to close the door – enough is enough, I've got to get some work done today – there was Triple T. in the hallway, a painting in hand. "Just give me a minute of your time, man. Let me know what you think." But Triple T. never really wanted to know what Al thought, or what Mac thought, or what Millicent thought. He wanted murmurs of approval, stunned praise. He wanted to tell whoever would listen how much money he'd be making selling his work on the street.

"Not today, Triple T, I'm up to my eyeballs."

"Just a glance."

"I don't want to be rude, but..."

"But you will be."

Al shrugged, his hand on the doorknob.

"It's all right, I'll be back tomorrow."

Al shut the door, turned and spread catalogues and order forms over a desk already thick with notes for memos, signed memos, half-signed, quarter-signed and yet-to-be-signed memos. Al still had monies left – or he hoped he did, hoped the rumored budget crisis hadn't already cut away what he assumed was his – in both his supply and equipment budgets. Supplies were easy to prioritize this time: Raylene's guitar strings and some drumsticks for Gordon James' blues workshop, yes, but mostly paper and more paper for Mac, and pastels, pencils, charcoal, paint. Let's get it all in at once, Al told himself as he put numbers on paper, and have enough to last the year. I'll worry about where to store everything when the order gets here.

Brushes, right, he remembered now. Millicent had mentioned that Patricia of Pen Arts knew of a new supplier for brushes and Al picked up the phone to call the manager of this non-profit that was the primary funding source for all his programming. As he began to dial, he heard a harmonica being played and he put the receiver back in its cradle, rose to look out the window.

Sure enough, Tomisino was walking in front of the Operations Building blowing the harp Al had just lent him. The sound was mournful in the rain, yet Al's heart was cheered: this one man playing the blues would have felt his personal grief in silence were it not for what Al had been able to provide. He wanted to tell Patricia that, the good her money did, but when he returned to the phone on his desk, Millicent came in and said it was time for their meeting. Was it going to be at the snack bar? There certainly wasn't enough room up here.

"I don't know why not," Al dead-panned, his sweeping arm extended toward the three desks, stacked anthologies, guitar strings, videos from the National Institute of Art, drawing paper, pencils, boxes of Prismacolor, chord books, memo forms, gate clearance forms, U-Save-

Em envelopes, one typewriter, two metal filing cabinets and a plant on the window ledge that badly needed watering.

As Al gathered his notes for the meeting, Manuel stopped by the office to ask Millicent some questions. Artist-in-Residence Millicent Hidalgo worked with five inmates whose job assignment was to paint murals, and Manuel was the mural crew's most shining star, shining in his artistic ability and also in his concern for the program. A few months after Millicent had organized the mural crew last year Manuel had let her know – not through any direct statement, but clearly enough that Millicent, who had been around NCCF for awhile, understood – that two members were using the crew as a front to sell drugs. With Al's help, with Dolores' help, Millicent had found a way to blow the whistle on the two without destroying the crew or giving up Manuel to his peers.

Manuel walked in the rain with Al and Millicent through the courtyard. The voice on the loudspeaker sang. "Attention on the yard, attention on the yard," although Al couldn't imagine too many inmates were out on the yard in this rain.

"Thomas, C-7610f, you have a visit. Inmate Thomas, please report to the Pass Window, you have a visit."

"So, Millicent," Manuel asked above the sound of the rain, above the sound of the voice on the loudspeaker, "you got any big action planned for this weekend?"

"Mighty big action. Rain or no rain, I'll be stacking the last of the firewood. Every year I say I'll have all the wood in by September, but every year I'm still scurrying in early November."

"That's what you get for living alone, Ms. Independent Woman. You live, .where? Just up the road, right?"

"Up the road a mile or so, close by."

Al wished Millicent wouldn't say this much, but he knew she was savvy to the prison world and decided not to comment. As they walked into the sallyport, however, Millicent herself said, "I'm always opening my big mouth when I should keep it shut. So hard to remember each

and every minute that I can't really be friends with these men I'm with all day. Manuel especially. I work so closely with him, trust him so completely on the job. I tell you, Al, that's probably the hardest part of this work."

Al wondered at this "friends," then he remembered when he first came to NCCF as an Artist-in-Residence. He'd just come from a job teaching junior college and was used to his family being an active part of his work life. His young sons had sat in the back of the classroom at the college, drawing as he taught. Students stopped by the house; his wife knew many of the kids he was teaching. None of that was possible here, and it had taken Al quite a while to get used to the split between his worlds.

Al wondered if it inevitable that the longer one worked inside the more jaded, toughened, one became. Was it inevitable that, as a teacher, one could care about inmates, but that with every rung up the ladder one became less concerned? For Al knew his job was different from Millicent's, Susan's, Mac's, Gordon's, Raylene's, Tom's, Tansy's. Their job was to bring knowledge and material and support to their students. His job, the Artist/Facilitator's job, was to create the way within the institution for these artists to do what they were hired to do. His concern was less direct, less personal. He was the one who had to say, "Yes, you can," and "No, you can't." He was the one who had to decide the criteria by which inmates would be allowed to join a new workshop. He was the one who had to determine, "Sorry, we already have enough people for that program."

No, Al told himself, it couldn't be true that compiled years and job advancement automatically led to callousness. Look at Sam Randle. He'd been in the system close to forever and had worked his way up from Correctional Officer to the third highest rank in the institution. And Sam still cared about inmates as people. But four years ago I would have understood immediately Millicent's "friends," and now I'm suspicious of the word, almost questioning Millicent's judgment.

The rains hit in earnest and for some reason the sound of the surf was louder from the snack bar than it had been from the Arts Program office which was, actually, closer to the ocean. Al would have loved to just sit quietly for awhile listening to all the actions of water, but Gordon and Raylene had to teach in little more than an hour, so he got the meeting going as soon as the artists arrived.

Gordon James spoke about some instruments that were being trashed in Unit 3, Mac about the space problem. "I mean, it's not only having to run hither and yon to gather what I need to offer even the most basic class, it's also the office. I'll tell you, the first time I came into the office – I mean, it's so small and Al and Susan and Millicent and two or three inmates were all in there and I looked around and suddenly thought, 'My God! This is what it's like to live in a cell!'"

Millicent gave an update on the project her mural crew had begun for the North Coast Battered Women's Shelter. She'd had an idea months ago for her crew – men who had caused hurt – to paint a mural on masonite panels which could then be transported to the Shelter, a place of refuge for women who had been hurt by men. She talked to Al who talked to Dolores who talked to Warden Martinez, who gave permission for Dolores, Al and Millicent to talk with Nancy Corcoran of the Shelter, and then for Millicent to talk with the men on her mural crew. The content of these talks kept traveling up and down NCCF's chain of command, traveling verbally and in memos, and now finally full permission had been granted and work had begun.

Tansy, who taught drawing in Unit 1, the lock-up unit, was angry about how difficult some of the officers were making her job. Al drew tight circles on the paper before him as Tansy spoke. How much do I want to say now? Al thought. I don't even know what to say, not yet, not really. Tansy's an excellent teacher; I'm so impressed when I see how far some of her students have come. But her pink cashmere and her dense perfume, those hours unpaid for she donates to teaching Gonzales and Davis to read. And every day she teaches, she hands me a forty-minute wrap up full of complaints of ill-treatment from one officer or another.

What could I say when Officer Willis came to talk bad about her? Willis always thinks the men in lock up have nothing coming, especially not from a beautiful woman. But, damn it, he's right; she's crossing some line.

If only she'd hear me. I guess she hears me, she has ears, those ears from which dangle thick masses of silver. But whenever I use the word "inappropriate," she tells me, "nothing human is inappropriate," and lets me know she'll fight for the right to be on the side of her students.

Side? What is this division into sides?

Dolores says, "Let her go." She says it's up to me, my decision, but in her book, good riddance. She says talk to Sam, make up my mind soon, or she'll step in.

Side. Of course, a teacher has to be an advocate of his students. Al wanted his teachers to be advocates of their students. Is that all Tansy was, a vocal, insistent advocate?

Dolores was right. He had to make up his mind. Dolores must assume that when he did, Tansy would be history. And he supposed that's the way it would go. He supposed he would eventually – soon, Dolores said, make it soon – have to tell one of his best teachers that she was a detriment to the program. He supposed he'd have to say – what were the words of the song Raylene was humming in the office the other day? – "Adios, sayonara, good-bye."

When Al clicked back into the conversation at the table in the snack bar, Millicent was responding to Tansy. "When I was working in lock up last year, I was amazed at how quickly I, well, I guess the word is 'adapted.' Once, after I'd been teaching there for a few weeks, I'd gone in as usual, climbed the steps. You know, getting to the cells requires passing through a gate between the staircase and the tier. These gates are locked, of course, and so I'd have to wait for an officer to come by with the keys. If the officer was escorting an inmate to the showers or rolling the food cart down the tier, I might have to wait awhile.

"Well, on this particular day, I climbed the steps and stood there waiting patiently. The officer came down the tier laughing. He pointed to the gate and I saw that it was ajar. He said, 'It sure didn't take you long to become institutionalized!'"

Al laughed with the other artists and half-listened to the stories that followed documenting how quickly habit takes over, even in a place as dramatic as North Coast Correctional Facility. Mostly, though, his eyes wandered around the room watching staff come in out of the rain. Every skin color imaginable, every dialect of American English.

There was a pause in the conversation. Mac and Gordon had gone to get some coffee and were on their way back to the table. Tansy was showing some drawings her students had done to Millicent, and Susan was reading a song one of Raylene's students had recently written.

As soon as Mac and Gordon were seated, Al asked, "What do you all think of the idea of an Arts Banquet?"

"Edible art?" Mac joked stirring his coffee. "Some Thiebaud cream puffs or Oldenburg french fries? Carmen Miranda with bananas and grapes on her hat? Elvis singing, 'Milk Cow Blues?'" Mac looked innocently at Gordon James' shaking head. "No? Then will we have Johnny Shines' version of the song? Or, perhaps, that Victor Valle 'Comida' poem I heard you read to your class last week, Susan, 'the moon in a tortilla?'"

Mac was ready to continue, but Raylene jumped up, stood behind him, put her hand over his mouth. "Enough!"

"A banquet of our own," Gordon James mused over everyone's laughter. "Sounds good to me." Gordon's Unit 2 blues band had just played for the Muslim banquet and his Unit 3 band was scheduled to play in two weeks.

"I like the idea a lot," Raylene said. The country and western band, too, often played [or prison functions and Raylene felt the goal of a performance gave a shape and focus to her group that it didn't otherwise have.

"I'm not so sure," Tom Scaramella said. "Why do we always need to focus on performance, production? I mean, so few of the men in here are excellent." Tom was also part of the music program at NCCF. There was a constant dialogue, on-going discussion, between Tom, Raylene and Gordon, and by this time Al could almost predict what each of their positions would

be on any musical question. Tom readily admitted to being a purist. He wanted auditions for any music group and felt part of his responsibility as a musician was to uphold strict standards. At the other end of the spectrum, was Raylene who felt that, really, within the constraints of time, space and officer coverage, whoever wanted to play music and could at least respect the instruments enough not to destroy them, should be able to play. She felt virtuosity was a lovely, but not a quality she required. She felt it was possible to have fun playing music and that a lot of human, and musical, good came from just that sharing.

Raylene was Al's oldest colleague at NCCF. They'd both been Artists-in-Residence under Al's predecessor, Mat Thompson. Mat was a musician and when he was Artist/Facilitator, there were seven bands at Unit 2 and ten at Unit 3. The bands organized themselves and dealt with program details at monthly meetings. Al remembered Mat sitting for hours, being called a racist by members of every race, being yelled at by one hundred inmates: "I'm getting screwed," or "How come they've got two practice slots and we've got only one?" Al recalled with a smile how Mat used to say that problem solving skills in the prison generally meant looking it up in the rule book, but that he was interested in trying another approach. Mostly Mat would just sit, asking once in a while, "So, how are we going to work this out?", and then fall back into silence. And, as often as not, the group would come up with some solution that everyone could at least try out over the month ahead.

Mat held few auditions; he left most of the work of weeding out to public opinion. He used to say that performances took care of 90% of his problems. All he had to do was put a band on stage, and if they hadn't been rehearsing, they'd get up there and make fools of themselves in front of their brother convicts.

After a few months as Artist/Facilitator, Al realized that, although Mat had run an extremely successful program, his own style would be different. Al saw that his vision of the best program for NCCF depended on quality instructor-based classes. For Al, the Arts Program had an obligation to provide more than recreation time, more than an opportunity for inmates to do what

they already knew how to do. Also, Al had watched political squabbles, who had the power within a class?, and peer pressure – ostracism resulting from pursuing one's own artistic interests instead of providing the cards and verse that were in demand on the line – take a toll on the men and the program. So Al set about finding the best artists he could, artists capable of both teaching their art and paying attention to group dynamics.

Raylene was an excellent guitarist and singer who had been comfortable working under Mat, but who adapted easily to Al's way of doing things. Gordon James, though not the purist Tom Scaramella was, cared a great deal about teaching new musical skills. Tom's own position brought him to the point where for the past few months he hadn't been teaching any band class at all. Instead he was offering an instrument-making workshop which allowed him to work with his students on the pure fundamentals of sound. His students had created wonderful structures to pluck, blow, beat, shake.

"Well, I think you'll end up being pleased, Tom," Raylene said. "You'll see how the men are energized by preparing for a banquet like this."

"I wonder about the poets," Susan said. "Their poetry is often so personal. And remember that talent show last year, Al? When Tall Tony and DC did get up to read, they were booed before they even began. The audience wanted music, man, entertainment. Nothing heavy."

"Are you saying your students won't want to read?" Mac raised his eyebrows, lit a Gauloise.

"No, I'm sure most of them will want to read. I'm just wondering out loud. Trying to see a way to make a solid presentation where everyone's work can really be heard, appreciated. How will we share the work of the visual artists, for example?"

"We can set up part of the room as a gallery and Mac and Tansy's students can display work there. And, Millicent, do you think your crew would be interested in coming up with a mural we can use as a backdrop for the bands and the poets? Something small, maybe a couple of panels."

"I'll have to ask, but I'm sure they would be," Millicent swatted smoke that rose from Mac's Gauloise. "What kind of time frame are you thinking about, Al?"

"It always takes two months of active paperwork to create any kind of banquet," Al looked past the artists, past the prison staff, out the rounded glass, into the rain, thinking about that two months of paperwork, thinking about the painting in his studio, untouched for so long already.

What did it mean to be an artist? Marie, his wife, had looked the word up once when he was feeling bad about how little time he spent in front of his easel. "The Latin root," she read, "means 'to join;' The Greek, 'to arrange.' See, you're an artist all the time," she smiled, closing the dictionary, "all day long. You're always creating a beautiful, skillful shape. You do that in your studio, and you do that at the prison."

He'd taken Marie in his arms then, hugged her warm and long. Even now he knew there was truth in Marie's own artful equation, but Al still missed the daily concentration of the brush in his hand applying paint onto canvas. Creating an arts program at NCCF might require skill, but no one could convince him the minutia of memos was as lovely a joining as a work by Matisse or Mark Rothko.

"And we'd need at least two months to prepare our classes," Gordon James broke into Al's thoughts.

Al shifted gears, thought, said, "So, what about some kind of New Year's banquet? We could hold it," Al looked down at his calendar, "January 9th, Saturday. How does that seem?"

"Wet and cold, but other than that, fine."

"Well, then, I'll get right on the paperwork," Al said, back in memo mode. "That's my problem. Yours," he looked around the table, "is to work with your students to put on a dynamite show."

"I'm glad it's not the other way around. Paperwork, mon dieu!" Mac hit his forehead with the heel of his right hand, enjoying his continual self-parody.

"Bureaucracy," Gordon said buttoning his parka, "I've been waiting three months and still haven't been paid back that insurance money from the accident I was in at the end of summer."

Millicent nodded, "I was on the phone for what felt like the entire day last Friday trying to line up some blood tests for my mother. Starts to feel as though the health care system is designed to function at maximum efficiency without patients. It is patients who muck up their plans."

Raylene laughed, "I've heard Officer Miller say something like that." Raylene's ear was finely tuned and she captured perfectly the pitch, tone and rhythm of Officer Miller, "'This job would be okay if it wasn't for inmates.'"

There was a long pause then. Al watched how it was already getting darker outside, imagined how in two months, at the time of the banquet, it would be dark by four in the afternoon. Al loved the rain, winter, loved those hours that used to fill his week before he'd taken this job -- hours in his studio, painting, a fire in the woodstove and rain on the skylight.

"I had a great moment in class the other night," Tom broke the silence. "We were sitting around in that basement room, no windows, tin cans for ash trays, those broken wooden chairs.

"Two guys had been working on these wild rattle-tube shaker objects and were now sitting next to each other with a book one of them had brought. From your poetry library, I guess," Tom looked at Susan. "The guy with the book was older, maybe forty, and black, the second was a white kid, twenty or so. The boy was looking at the book and started to read a poem out loud, some poem he liked. About sensual women and love. He read out loud and had trouble. He could make out the words okay, I think, but he had a bad stutter. He doesn't stutter at all talking, but now, reading this poem, he could hardly say certain words.

"I didn't know if the guy wanted help or wanted to be left alone, but that forty-year old just stepped in, saying the words the young one stuttered over, quietly, so the kid could repeat them, get them out. Together they read through the poem, then discussed it, articulately, with the rest of the class.

"You know, sometimes I come in here and everyone's talking as though he wore an Hawaiian shirt on his brain and then, pow!, I get to witness a moment like that."

All the artists nodded, slowly gathered their papers.

"Here we have a world where Northern Mexicans hate Southern Mexicans and the Crips hate the Bloods and the whites hate everyone not white and Christian, and we set up this art class and, for a couple of hours, sometimes, when we're lucky, the art class gets to be Switzerland, neutral turf."

Raylene and Gordon rose. Millicent stretched and hoisted her bag over her shoulder. Al looked at the list of items he'd wanted to cover. As usual, not enough time.

"Switzerland, huh?" Raylene rubbed the top of Tom's head. "Well, then, I'm off to Switzerland." She smiled, "My students yodel, too." And she left, sounding just like Jimmy Rogers.

CHAPTER THREE

Sam Randle watched Al Greer as he walked back down the hall of the Operations Building. He was glad that Al had come in to talk with him, appreciated the way Al functioned. He'd noticed right off four years ago that the man was sincere about wanting to do things for the inmates, and that had earned him high marks from Sam. As time went on, Sam watched how Al went about making decisions. He didn't rush off, sure he had all the answers. He asked around, picked up the facts he needed, and then made his plans.

There are no experts in Corrections, Sam thought as he turned again to his desk. Nothing stays still long enough for one person to know all there is to know. New inmates walk in and out every day, new staff walks in and out every day. Rules and regulations change. Outside society changes. What you do might work today, but that doesn't mean it will work tomorrow. In the thirty years he'd been in the Department, Sam had seen the pendulum swing from a focus on rehabilitation and programming, to a situation where the word rehabilitation was wiped from the books.

Sam found if he asked people outside – the public – if they believed in rehabilitation, these days they almost always said no. If he asked, "Do you think we should teach illiterate inmates to read?" more often than not this same public would answer "Yes." So Sam had given up using the word rehabilitation, while still continuing to focus on getting services to the men under his care. Although the Department hadn't been in the rehabilitation business for years, Sam and a lot of old timers refused to listen to those who said, "Nothing works," for experience had shown them that a lot of things worked with certain offenders. The Department's mission was to protect the public, and changing the behavior of criminals was the most sure-fire way Sam knew to protect the public. Some inmates were going to become more responsible citizens no matter what the Department did; they were just ready for that change. Some men, it was true, would never mature no matter what was offered. Of the majority that was left, some things would work with

some men, some with others. So, Sam said, offer as much as possible; anything is likely to be helpful to at least a few individuals. Besides, he felt, even a man who was going to spend his entire life behind bars, even a man who was going to be killed in the gas chamber, was still a human being who deserved, as long as he was doing his time peaceably, to be treated like one till the end.

Thirty years had shown Sam that the ones who considered themselves experts knew the least about what was what. What the Department adds up to, Sam thought and always said, was just a lot of people, each with a certain amount of knowledge. If they wanted to be successful, they had to work in a sharing mode. It was when people started doing their little empire thing – Sam thought of the memo he'd received earlier that morning from Associate Warden Torello asking for more coverage for Unit 1 – that everything turned to crap. For some reason Al, an artist who hadn't come up through the ranks like practically everyone else in the prison business, knew all this by instinct. He was someone who had no problem coming to people for advice and information. Sam respected the man.

Sam started to respond to a 602 Lieutenant Reeves had placed on his desk earlier that morning, but instead he turned to look through the window out over the lower yard. His mind was still on Al's conversation. He didn't envy Al's having to deal with this Tansy. He could see it from Al's point of view the woman was apparently a damn good teacher. Even Al's list of staff complaints wouldn't have turned Sam against her. He knew officers in the units often resented the inmates getting any programming, especially from an attractive woman. No, what troubled Sam was when Al said that Tansy wouldn't take what he told her seriously. When Al, her supervisor, brought his concerns to her attention, she didn't change her behavior. This is what made the woman dangerous. This one person could wreck all that Al had done to build up respect for the Arts Program within the Institution.

And Sam didn't blame the inmates. Hell, if he were an inmate, he'd probably take a drawing class, too, just to be around a female. Knowing himself, he'd probably go after whatever

he could get, just as a lot of these guys did. Human nature. And also the set up: inmates had to go after what they wanted when what they wanted was against the rules, and staff had to stop them. Might not be the best system in the world, but it was the system they had. Most inmates and most staff recognized the game and didn't blame each other for playing their part, as long as each played fairly and by the rules. Sam remembered, a few years ago, shooting between a convict's feet in a white/black riot. And then, two weeks later, he was helping the same man he shot at get a new job assignment. Everyone does what he has to at the moment, then no hard feelings. Might sound odd to an outsider, but most often that's the way this particular world worked. Or used to, Sam thought, in the old days.

It was up to staff to set limits. Al said this Tansy dressed provocatively. Well, Sam questioned her judgment, but just that fact didn't prejudice him against her. As long as she was clear and straight with herself and with the men she taught about exactly where her limits were, Sam had no problem with her perfume. Trouble was, this woman apparently listened to Al, and then went ahead and did what she had been doing all along.

Sam remembered that journalist who wanted to come in years ago. He hadn't trusted him from the get-go, but the Warden wanted this particular newspaper coverage, so Sam had to go ahead and grant approval. He'd made sure that he got everything they agreed upon in writing. The man had wanted to interview fish straight off the bus and Sam had said, no, that wasn't okay. For one thing, they needed clearances from each of the inmates being interviewed and, also, Sam didn't like the idea of the families of these men, just getting used to the fact of their sons in prison, confronting those familiar faces in the paper.

The journalist had signed the forms agreeing to this restriction and then, the first thing Sam knew, he was down there as the bus pulled in and jumping on board with his microphone. You tell someone no and they go ahead ... This is what roused Sam's bile. And it sounded as though this is what Al was facing with Tansy. Sam had told Al, sometimes people just aren't

trustworthy and they become a threat to your whole program. And then the inmates lose out. Sometimes people just have to become *persona non grata* to the Institution.

It wasn't easy being a woman working in a male institution, Sam was sure of that. He'd been in the Department before women were allowed to work there, and he'd watched the years of transition. He'd seen those first women officers given the hardest assignments. Those women were tested, and by and large, over the years, they'd passed every test. There was a harshness, sometimes, Sam would rather have not seen, but maybe it was necessary, just to survive. Any personal vulnerability was picked up in a second by these men. And Sam meant his fellow guards as much as the inmates.

Sam didn't begrudge anyone love. He'd seen a couple of cases where female staff had fallen in love with inmates. As long as it was above-board, fine. That's what Sam thought. When the woman acknowledged the situation, and was willing to leave her job so she could marry the inmate, Sam had no problem with that. It made him sick sometimes when he heard an inmate talking bad about the woman who had married him, left her job for him, calling her a "fat bitch," and saying how he'd dump her the second he got out. But, other marriages had survived the inmate's release and had apparently been good for both parties.

For two years Sam had worked at Central Women's Facility and those had been the hardest two years in his career. Most of those women had never had a lasting personal relationship with a man who didn't take advantage of them. Most had been molested as youngsters, raped, things like that. The women needed so much emotional time, and they knew how to play him like a fiddle. He had to watch himself constantly. Not sexually so much, he was happily married and not vulnerable on that count, but emotionally, in a fatherly kind of way. Some part of him felt called upon to protect these hurt women. He felt himself to be often on the brink of falling over some line of personal concern, a line that was never an issue with the boys in blue.

Sam tried to operate in as straight-forward a fashion as he could. His door was always open to inmate and staff alike. "You have a problem, you're not being treated fairly? Fine, come on in and we'll talk about it, see if we can come up with a solution." But with the women, he found it more difficult to maintain his objectivity. Their hurt and their need often got to him. So he especially admired those women he saw working with male inmates who managed to be warm and caring, and still able to know what they were there for, to set limits.

Sam looked down the hall, saw Susan and Raylene laughing in front of the Arts Program's office. These free women brought some sorely needed life and spirit to the Institution. Sam saw that lanky white inmate who always hung around Susan. Well, I'd hang around, too, if I were in his shoes, Sam reminded himself.

Sam liked these artists, liked their energy. Even before there was an Arts Program, inmates had created art. Staff and outside people had volunteered their time to work with the inmates. All that was gone now since public opinion had shifted so dramatically, since unions put a halt to staff volunteering time. Now, what had once happened naturally, had to become institutionalized. Just like everywhere else in society.

When programming was really underway, in the early 60s, there were people coming in all the time to do projects. And inmates going out into the community, too, to play at band concerts or to help out in various ways.

Sam remembered with a chuckle the woman who came in wanting to make masks. Papier Machê. She was very gracious when he'd explained that he understood she had only good intentions, but to the Institution, a mask was something that could be put on a pillow to pass for a sleeping inmate during a count, a mask was something that could be used to aid an escape attempt. Thirty years. Funny how with each person, you kind of had to go through this with them again. But, really, how could someone fresh from the streets possibly be expected to understand right off the way a prison works?

You take somebody from the outside, someone who has never even been in a penal institution, let alone worked in one. They've taught, say, at a state college, or a community arts program or something of that sort, and they're used to the relationships that build in those situations. There, you can say to your students, "Hey, come on over to the house and have a cup of coffee," or, "Sure, give me that letter. I'm passing the post office and I'll drop it off for you." You can give a student a friendly hug. Most natural thing in the world. And then they come here and our way of doing things is going to look mighty strange.

Sam looked up from his thoughts and saw an inmate at the door to the office.

"Come in, come in."

"Mr. Randle, sir, can I ask you to do me a favor?"

"I don't do favors for inmates," Sam said, and after a moment's pause, "Now, what do you need?"

The inmate talked to Sam about the problem he was having with his cellie and asked if there were any way he could change cells. It wasn't that he was asking to be single-celled, it was that he had really tried to get along with this man, and he just couldn't. He'd rather not be in this situation when, in such close quarters, one of them was likely to get hurt.

Sam listened carefully, asked some questions. The man seemed sincere. He wasn't asking for some privilege or blaming the other man out of hand. He wanted help dealing with a potentially dangerous situation, and Sam approved a cell change.

After the inmate left, Sam turned again to the 602 on his desk and began reading the inmate appeal. Before he'd gotten very far, Mavis, his secretary, buzzed him: Lieutenant Reeves was on the line.

"Jimmy, just now sitting down with the appeal you brought by."

"Put it on hold, boss. I've got much heavier news. You know the inmate who died last night out in the county hospital?" Jim Reeves waited for Sam's, "Yes," and then went on, "Well, word is he died of hepatitis."

"Was he double celled?"

"Worse than that. He had a cell-mate and he was working in food service."

Sam paused before he spoke, "How much of this are you sure of?"

"I know the man's dead. I know his job assignment was over in the kitchen. I know I just got a call from our infirmary saying the county hospital contacted them about the cause of death."

Sam nodded, "Well, let me start making some phone calls and we'll see what I find out. If it's hepatitis we're looking at, we'll have to get the truth out. I don't want us to be lying to the inmates. If we have a situation, we'll get as much truth out as fast as we can and get everyone to understand that we need co-operation," Sam's shaggy bear of a body was very still in the chair.

"But first let me make sure hepatitis is what we're dealing with; let me be 100% sure of the facts."

"That's why I called you, boss."

"Okay, Jim. Talk to you soon as I know more."

Sam let the receiver rest against his shoulder. He placed his index finger on the plunger as he looked at the institutional phone directory, deciding on his next move. Should he call the Chief Deputy and let him know right away of this potential crisis, or should he try to get more information? Sam released the plunger, dialed NCCF's chief doctor, and put the receiver to his ear.

The doctor, it seemed, had received a call from the county hospital requesting Inmate MacIntosh's records. They weren't sure yet of the cause of death, but they knew the man's liver was enlarged. The doctor had not, thus far, been able to find the records.

Sam called the kitchen and asked if an Inmate MacIntosh had been assigned there. He had been, Sam was told. Until two weeks ago, when he became very ill, Inmate MacIntosh had been in charge of the inmate lunch crew.

For the next two hours, Sam made phone calls and walked around Unit 2 asking questions. "Hello, this is Sam Randle, I wonder if you could tell me a little about..." "This is Associate Warden Randle over at North Coast Correctional Facility. It's come to my attention that

an inmate of ours died in your hospital last night. Can you fill me in on ... " "Hi, Tim; Sam. here. What do you know about..." "MacIntosh a friend of yours? Did he ever talk about..."

During this careful attempt to gather accurate information, Sam Randle's heart and temples all were pulsing. If hepatitis is what this man who made lunches for 3,000 men died from, NCCF was probably in for an epidemic that Sam could only think of in terms of a cliché: the disease and the panic both spreading like wildfire.

Sam walked back to the Operations building, knowing his next step must be to call the Chief Deputy to share the limited information he'd been able to gather. But Sam's progress was slowed by a delegation of inmates who approached him to ask if he knew that the Visiting Lieutenant had brought over a form to the print shop to be reprinted in order to replace the word "person" with "inmate"? Sam hadn't known and, under different circumstances, he would have gone off to investigate. He would investigate, he promised the inmates – he was curious, too, about this expenditure during a time of supposed budget crunch – but not now.

"The Lieutenant said the change was ordered by the Warden," one inmate said.

"Well, if that's true, there's nothing I can do. When you work for wages, you accept what the boss says. I'll check into it."

Opening the door to his office, the ring of the phone worked on Sam's heart like climbing ten flights of stairs in a run. "Yes?" Sam grabbed the handset from its cradle on the first ring.

"This is Russell, at the County Hospital. We spoke earlier ... "

"Go on," Sam's voice urged the man.

"Our autopsy shows that although Mr. MacIntosh did have an enlarged liver, he definitely did not have hepatitis nor any other contagious disease."

Sam sat deep into his desk chair, let his shoulders drop, sent Mavis a victory signal through the glass window that separated their offices, and made the phone calls that would set the matter to rest.

Lieutenant Jim Reeves walked into Sam's office, then, shaking his head, "All in a day's work, huh?"

Sam's mouth paused somewhere between a smile and a smirk, "Now, let's get on to this 602."

"The 115 was fair and square, Sam. This 602 doesn't hold water. As far as I'm concerned..."

"Jim, every man has a right to appeal a judgment. You can't take an appeal personally, can't feel it's a comment that you did something wrong. These are the procedures: staff can write up an inmate with a 128 or a 115, and the inmate can appeal. That's the system. Everyone's got a right to be treated fairly."

"The asshole was treated fairly, Sam."

"Let's look at the 602, Jim, and see what the man has to say."

"He's a rapist and a murderer, what he's got to say doesn't have much weight in my book."

"Whoa, now. You and I have worked together for only a short time, Jim, but there's something I expect you to understand. You're a correctional lieutenant, not a judge. This inmate has already been judged. He was sent to prison as a punishment, he wasn't sent here to be punished."

"He raped a ten year old girl, left her to die in a ditch."

Sam covered his mouth with his hand, shook his head, sat quietly for a few moments.

"Look, Jim. I have grandchildren. It's very difficult for me to work with inmates who have harmed children, but I don't dwell on that because it's not my role. My role is to give the person what he's got coming as far as services and supervision – my role is to be fair and equitable in treatment."

"And how do you do that, Sam?" Jim Reeves sat down in the chair opposite Sam's desk. "I really am asking, because I don't know how not to judge a man who's done something like that to a little girl."

Sam looked out the window, watched the inmates lifting weights on the lower yard, watched the mid-November sun begin to lower. Sam hated the child molesters. Every crime was bad, but to hurt children, who couldn't protect themselves, whose whole lives would be forever scarred... Well, emotionally Sam would like to personally wring the neck of each child molester until he was dead, dead and gone. Good riddance. But Sam was not being paid to respond emotionally, he was being paid to respond professionally. And professionally, it was only by treating everyone – even a man who had committed a crime as horrible as the one Jim just described – as a human being, that Corrections could function.

"To work here, Jim, we just have to strive to be objective. This doesn't mean you have to condone the crimes these men have done, but look... Based on experience you come to realize that there's not one person, no matter what terrible crime he's committed, who is going to benefit from your mistreating him. The only thing that can happen is that he'll get worse. It can't go the other way. We don't agree with these men's crimes by treating them fairly, but our job is to treat them fairly, and I demand that from my staff. If staff is pulled down to a level of pure emotional response, that's how we get brutality."

Lieutenant Reeves nodded his head but said, "I don't know if I can do it – just look at the issue before me, not think about the crime."

"You have to do it; it's your job. Besides, your attempt to be objective just might rub off on the inmate involved and show him another way to respond."

"Now, the issue before us in this 602 is: were the man's photographs taken from him unfairly? That's what we have to look at, not does a man who has raped and murdered a ten year old girl have a right to have any rights. Okay, can we look at the issue before us?"

When Jim Reeves left Sam's office, Al Greer walked in. "Sorry to bug you twice in one day, Sam, but I have a memo here I'd like you to take a look at."

"Let's see what you've got, Al," Sam put on his glasses and reached for the form Al handed him.

State of California

Memorandum

Date: November 18, 1987

To: Tom Browning, Captain

From: Al Greer, Artist/Facilitator
North Coast Correctional Facility

Subject: Arts Program Banquet

The Arts Program requests permission to hold a banquet on Saturday, January 9, 1988, from 4 PM – 8 PM. This banquet will be held in the gym and will include a meal, prepared at the institution and paid for by guests at the rate of \$5 per person. The event will also include performances and presentations of work by the Unit 2 and Unit 3 inmate musicians, poets and visual artists in the Arts Program at North Coast Correctional Facility.

All guests will go through normal security clearance procedures and will be listed on gate clearances. They will be escorted into the institution by Supervising Artist, Al Greer. All inmates attending will be listed on movement sheets and will be escorted to and from the gym by officers providing coverage.

Upon approval of this concept memo, Artist/Facilitator, Al Greer, will provide a detailed narrative for the approval of the Community Resources Manager, the Captain, the Associate Warden in charge of Units 2 and 3, the Chief Deputy Warden and the Warden.

The Arts Program feels such a banquet would provide inmates an opportunity to share the work they have been creating in the program with other inmates, interested staff and family outside. Since artwork requires not only the person who creates it, but also the one who sees or hears it, we feel this banquet would greatly enrich the Arts Program at NCCF, and we hope this proposal meets with institutional approval.

Dolores Mendoza, Community Resources Manager

Tom Browning, Captain

Sam Randle, Associate Warden, Unit 2

LaShaun Burke, Associate Warden, Unit 3

Ralph Teller, Chief Deputy Warden

Philip Martinez, Warden

Al pulled at his full red beard, "I went to the Watch Commander and the Captain and asked if they had any problems with the concept. I told them I'd be submitting this proposal to the Warden and wondered if they had input. I wanted their impressions about the security concerns. I want to make sure we design the event to make it as easy as possible for them and their staff."

"Right," Sam agreed. "If you get everyone involved in the decision-making and planning process, it diffuses a lot of difficulties later on."

"That's what I've found. Let people buy in."

"I have no problem with this," Sam said as he signed the memo. "Of course, the real nitty-gritty will have to be spelled out in the narrative: the equipment you'll need, how you'll get it in, who will be responsible, how you'll handle bringing in people from the inmates' visitors lists, all the details about food, time, coverage. You'll have to let us know how each person and thing is going to get from point A to point B. I know you've heard all this before," Sam smiled, "but a good narrative has to be a blueprint for the activity; you've got to show us that you've thought the event through and you know exactly what's going to go on."

Al nodded.

"Well, you haven't burned us yet, Al." Sam lifted his large body from the desk chair and turned to look again out the window. He'd been in the Department for so long, his eyes were always open to even the slightest unusual sight that might signal crisis, and his eyes were always scanning. Then he turned back to Al. "We used to have so much more going on around here—band concerts, art shows. We even took the inmates out into the community to sing at Christmas time."

"Now the community has turned its back on inmates. Oh, they might let them fight fires or build the Little League park, but there's not the same sharing there used to be. The pendulum's swung. It will swing back again, though. It never stops swinging."

"As long as we're on that subject," Al said, "I'd like to let you know of another project we've got cooking."

"Go ahead."

"Dolores has arranged for the North Coast Shelter for Battered Women to accept a mural created by Millicent Hidalgo and our mural crew."

Sam smiled, "I like that idea. Too many people sell the inmates short. Give most of these men a chance, and they're as eager as anyone to do a good deed. We just have to give them that chance."

Sam knew Al would put the banquet together properly. Al was good about things that were of concern to custody, like tool control and keys. He understood that, although his program required exacto knives and scissors, no one wanted a knife with his name on it. For someone with no custody training, Al did pretty well. The inmates might not always understand that Al's concern with following the rules benefited them. If it wasn't for his care, there would be no programming. It was hard to do your best to be fair and then have inmates see you as the enemy, but Sam had learned not to take this personally. They were engaged, he thought, in something like a football game. The game demanded they see each other as on opposite teams, but Sam knew the real truth was that the institution couldn't function if it weren't for co-operation between staff and inmates and that, even though no one acknowledged it, this co-operation was constant. Otherwise how could first watch run smoothly with so many fewer officers than second watch? The inmates allow us to operate, Sam thought, though no one can say that out loud.

Sam began to organize his desk for the next day's work. No, not the next day's, the day after, if he was lucky. Tomorrow he had to go to court to testify. That meant a long trip inland to talk about a case he could hardly remember. Attorneys were always trying to prove some evil

intent, when really what staff was constantly doing was making judgment calls. In any given crisis, there wasn't time to sit down and consult a philosophy book – or even a rule book. You could only, on the basis of your years of experience, make the best call you could make. The call was sometimes right, sometimes wrong, but usually it was the best reading that particular staff member could make at the moment.

Sam again picked up the memo from Torello. Before he read three words, he heard an alarm and he immediately jumped up from his chair, walking as fast as his sixty-year old body could move. From all over the Operations Building, custody trained staff ran toward the alarm's origin in Unit 1. There was a flurry of green-jacketed bodies moving fast. Sam remembered other alarms, hundreds of them in thirty years: alarms that took him to the yard, to a shrinking tide of inmates leaving a lifeless body lying alone, blue in a pool of red, and next to the dead inmate, a shank, some ingenious weapon fashioned from a piece of bed frame; alarms that took him to gang fights, race riots, shots into the yard from the wall tower, attempted escapes, fires set in cells, and dead officers.

This time, though, before Sam reached Unit 1, he noticed staff turning from the Unit, going back to where they had come from, sheepish smiles and smacks on the back: another false alarm. More false alarms than real incidents, but the real incidents real enough and frequent enough that everyone's adrenaline went sky-high at an alarm's reminder of the brutal bottom line of prison life. Not a movie. The reality of staff and inmates alike.

“You're getting too old for this, Sam,” Mavis warned as he walked back into his office. “I'm afraid you'll get a heart attack or something.”

“Oh, worry about me tomorrow when I have to drive to the county courthouse. That's when I'll be in danger, on the road.”

Mavis swatted her hand against the air, pooh-poohing Sam's apparent nonchalance.

Sam was packing up his briefcase when Officer Topps came to the door. “You wanted to see me, sir?”

"I did, but not just as I'm leaving for home. Topps, some inmates came to me today complaining about the garbage that's always lying around your dining hall. What can we do to get it cleaned up?"

"I do what I can, sir, but these inmates are just so lazy."

"It's your job to make sure they're not lazy. It's your job to make sure your crew cleans up after each meal."

Officer Topps shrugged.

"And I expect you to do your job."

Sam left angry, thinking of all the Officer Toppses who robbed the inmates of the services they had coming. who robbed the state of the eight hours-a-day it was paying them for. The inmates have to live here, Sam thought, and the Officer Toppses could care less. They get to go home after eight hours. Sam would never say he knew what it was to live in this place. He knew what it was like to be here ten hours-a-day, five days-a-week. But he didn't know what it was to be here twenty-four hours-a-day, seven days-a-week. And neither did Officer Topps.

As Sam walked past Unit 2, an inmate came up to him. "Mr. Randle, I just want to thank you."

Sam must have looked confused, because the inmate continued, "I came to see you a couple of days ago about a problem I was having with my supervisor. You told me you'd look into it. and you must have, because things have really changed on the job."

Sam smiled, "I remember now. You thought your supervisor had some kind of problem with blacks, but that wasn't the case at all." What had been true was that this particular officer was having trouble at home that he was bringing with him to work. Sam was glad to know their talk had helped the man to keep his two worlds separate.

"Well, I wanted to thank you. It's not often in this place that someone actually takes care of something he says he'll take care of."

This acknowledgment erased the bad taste Officer Topps' attitude had left, erased the adrenaline the alarm had sent shooting through Sam's system, erased those hours of uncertainty over MacIntosh's death, erased Al Greer's worry about Tansy, Jim Reeve's response to that 602 and Torello's constant concern with his own little desires. There's nothing more satisfying, Sam thought, than to end the day with an inmate's thanks for something he felt was important. No need to crow, but Sam drove home feeling fine.

CHAPTER FOUR

Timothy Augustus stood on the upper yard of Unit 2 with all the other mainline convicts, waiting to be locked up for the day. Cages. The Man could come up with all the vocabulary he wanted – inmate, correctional officer, house – the truth was still the truth: to them he was an animal deserving only to be locked in a cage.

Shit, Timothy thought. They've got us herded here like damn cattle and then they put a fish cop in charge who don't know his ass from a hole in the ground.

Timothy watched as the young man in green tried to tough his way through procedures he hadn't yet mastered. "All right. All you inmates," he draped the word in ridicule, "get a move on here. One at a time, one at a time."

What bullshit idiocy they going to come up with next? Timothy wondered as he moved toward the block. He was wearing only his state-issue denim jacket and the wind was picking up, but Timothy Augustus moved his long, lean body like a lion under the noontime jungle sun. He would never let either The Man or his fellow convicts see him as other than composed.

"I've got a little detail you're bound to appreciate, Homes," T.J. said walking close behind Timothy. "It's a good one." Short, squat T.J. was a clerk for the Visiting Lieutenant and he had a fine ironic enjoyment of the strangeness the system imposed. "Seems like the State just spent who knows how much bread to reprint all the visiting forms. And you know what for? To change one single word, the word 'person' to 'inmate.'"

T.J. had chosen his audience well. His report launched Timothy into the waters of elaborate speech-making, until the new cop told them all to shut up and just keep on moving.

Timothy's cell was on the second level and it was a slow walk, as close to single file as the new officer could bully it into being, up the metal staircase and down the littered way to number 37. Once inside, Timothy picked up the U-Save-Em envelope on the floor, turned on his TV placing the headphones over his ears, and settled in on his cot.

The kite was from Susan, the poetry teacher. The note wished class members a Happy Thanksgiving. Timothy laughed. It took someone pretty sweet and silly to hand them a wish like that in a place like this. Susan wasn't that dumb; she'd written: this mixed blessing of a wish. Susan had also enclosed a quote from some dude she said had been in the pen in Arizona. This Michael Hogan had written: *The Man can kill you but he can't stop you from feeling. Only you can do that. He can mess you up, but he can't make you hate life or lose your sense of wonder. Only you can do that.*

Again Timothy smiled at the misguided, naive Susan. The woman meant well, but she was really the dupe of a system that used up good people. A system that let them turn their full-to-the-brim hearts to tasks that would make them feel better without leading to any real change in the way things worked. A system that let the folks in power still make their millions off a world where you were a hero if you murdered a whole nation, robbed people of their culture and their economic potential, raped the earth, extorted taxes from those with barely enough to get by, set up leaders in foreign lands to act as drug runners but a criminal, a pariah and locked up for life if, after knowing only deprivation, you took something this same system didn't think was supposed to be yours. Timothy thought with a smile of the bumper sticker Chermaine, his wife, had mentioned seeing in the prison parking lot: "Don't steal. The Government Doesn't Like Competition."

Susan talked about the poet's task of observation and all, but the woman didn't notice what went on under her own nose. She wasn't even aware that for six months the white boys kept clear of her classroom or that Mitch Reiser was fixing to get him and her both into some heavy shit. Susan went on and on about responsibility, about how, no matter how accurate, his analysis left out his own personal responsibility for causing pain to another human being. Shit, he had no problem with taking responsibility, but he wasn't opening his mouth to speak out against the harm he had caused until all the big shots in the government did the same. If you're talking about responsibility, Timothy had often told Susan and whomever would listen, you're obliged not to

stop at the obvious – the armed robbery, let's say, caused by a need to shoot up – but to look deeper at the society that for two hundred years has been setting up masters and slaves, a society that has all sorts of tricky ways for keeping its underclass way deep under. If you're talking about taking responsibility, talk about all the men and women now in prison who had been beaten by their parents who had been beaten by their parents who had been beaten by their parents because they all lived in a world that gave them no god-damned good choices. Sure, this Hogan dude was right: every man and woman in prison would be a victim as long as they perceived themselves as being one. But come on, please spread out this responsibility-taking trip a little farther, a little deeper, so we can begin to make some changes here, not just in the individual, but in the society that creates an individual's chances.

Timothy stopped his internal soap-boxing, and turned again to the TV. The folks on the Donahue show were talking about corruption in the Reagan administration. They were morally outraged, or they were sure the President himself was unaware of any wrong doing, or they thought it was all some communist/media plot. Don't you know, Timothy silently raged at the voices speaking through his headphones, that this is the way it's supposed to be? People profit from this corruption. It's not a mistake, it's the game plan.

At chow that night, Timothy sat with T.J. The two men had been cellies years ago when Timothy first came to NCCF. Timothy was a youngster then, talking loud to T.J. As time went on, he realized he never heard what he'd told T.J. repeated by anyone else; what he told T.J. stayed with T.J. It was virtue such as this, virtue proven over time – the time they all had – that lead to as much trust as prison life could offer. T.J. had been rolled up on some bogus charge and had been in the hole for many months, and Timothy was mighty glad to see the brother when he was again released to mainline.

"Every day it's more bullshit," Timothy said. "Yesterday we got two slices of bread instead of three. Tonight it's still two slices of bread and now one potato instead of two. Every day they chip away at what little we have. Good way to start a riot, you ask me."

"No doubt about it, but I was in the hole so long, I'm still amazed to be eating without a mini-14 over my head each bite I take."

Timothy shrugged, "Guess there's that. But I tell you we're due for some major problems in here soon. Holding on tighter and tighter to the petty rules. And did you see how the white con next in line opened a new loaf of bread after Tall Tony had taken his two slices?"

"That's nothing new."

"No, but there's something different in the air. There are all these new cops who've seen too many prison movies, for one thing. And turning the screws on the rules. The tension's got to go some place."

In his cell that night, Timothy wrote a letter to his wife. She was able to visit so rarely. All these prisons in Mountain Man turf where no black folks lived. His wife had to be in the city to have the job that kept her and their son off welfare. Bus fare round trip cost nearly a day's salary. But she wrote and he wrote and they tried to keep what was alive between them alive. Timothy wrote his wife a Thanksgiving letter, describing the day they'd have if he were there and they were all together. It bugged him that so many of his details came not from what he remembered or imagined, but from the TV that was his link to the world outside, perverted link, controlled by the system.

Then he wrote of the rains they'd been having; of the winds from the south that preceded these rains. He started to shape a poem to her, she to his south, what rode in from her on the winds from the south, and the rains, the tears, the rains these winds gave way to.

Unit 2 was locked down on Saturday and Sunday. Nothing had happened, no stabbing, no fight, just lock down on rumor, as usual. Actually, Timothy thought, they've probably got us locked in our cages so more of them can take a long holiday week-end, that's probably nearer the truth.

Still, Timothy's sense that something was going to break soon continued. From his cell on Saturday – amidst the conversations that ran along cell-to-cell, the call of chess moves from a cell

on the west side to a cell all the way on the east, the unlocking of food ports and the handing out of sack lunches, the tirades of various cell soldiers who were brave since safely locked in – Timothy watched the police escort two men from their cells in handcuffs. It seemed to Timothy, watching for clues, that these men were being put in P.C, protective custody: The Man was afraid someone was after these dudes.

From the cell next to his, Tailormade said something about gangbangers, but Timothy knew it had been a long time since any active gang members were out and about in Unit 2. Could be these men had once been gang members who had wanted out. That happened. Everyone got older, tired of the violence. Maybe the police were reading the same signals he was and were sensing these men were now in danger. Although usually the police weren't so smart or so thoughtful.

It was frustrating to have nothing to go on but rumor and subtle clues, frustrating never to be told what time it was. And when The Man did hand out those informational memos, the bullshit between lines was so deep, a streetboy messed himself up wading through it. In the evening, the tier cop, who considered himself every convict's old buddy, tried to pump Timothy for information about some story he'd heard from Maybelene about activity among OG Crips. Timothy was no friend to Maybelene, but he'd never give up anything to a cop.

Unit 2 went off the lockdown Sunday night and by Monday morning, all mainline inmates were back at work. Timothy was a clerk in the Education Department and, as their photocopying machine had broken down, he was given a pass to the Operations Building to use the machine there.

Susan was leaning on the doorway of the Arts Program office looking down at a sheaf of paper. Timothy walked to the copier, nodding his head toward Susan as he passed. "Happy Thanksgiving."

Timothy knew he'd hurled his irony in a perfect pitch and Susan smiled, shrugged, caught it. "I tried. For whatever it's worth." But Susan was learning to throw her own hardballs, "Write any poems during the lockdown?"

"Got something I'm working on."

"Good."

Susan had come to NCCF with her Birkenstocks and hippie ways, but she was getting some edge.

Timothy ran paper through the machine and watched Mitch Reiser enter the Operations Building with his tip-toe tread. Timothy gave the man credit: Mitch had assessed the precise distance from which Susan would feel his presence without being startled. Mitch stood there, still, until Susan picked up on what he'd calculated she'd pick up on, looked up from her papers, turned her head. "Oh. Hi, Mitch."

That blond sneak smiled wide.

"No, not today, " Susan quoted the line before Mitch had time to speak it. "I've brought a poem for you to look at. Did you have a nice holiday with your family?"

Smooth enough, Timothy thought. Always got a poem to cover his real intentions.

"Yeah, really nice. Here, let's see the poem."

Susan knew what was going on, but she was out of her league. She believed too much in that '60s bullshit. It just wasn't in the woman to tell Mitch off, to tell him to leave her alone.

Mitch was after the woman, everyone knew that. He'd convinced himself he was in love. Timothy knew as well as he could know anything that the poem Mitch had just written was a beautifully crafted hymn to this love. Timothy could hear how Susan dealt only with the poetics, not with the content. Getting smarter, Susan, but not smart enough for Mitch, who Timothy could tell, was hardly listening to her words, was taking in her essence. From clear across the hall, Timothy could register the impact each of Susan's smiles had on Mitch. This woman could say no until the Prison Board released each and every one of the 80,000 convicts in the state, Mitch

would continue to believe what he wanted to believe. He'd believe those smiles Susan just naturally gave out were a secret message for him. He'd believe she wore that purple shirt because he'd use the word purple in his last poem. He'd believe it and not believe it; he'd spend all his waking hours assessing and analyzing.

Mitch and Susan sat down at the table just outside the Arts Program office. Susan penciled some notations on the poem Mitch had brought her. Timothy watched Mitch sit beside Susan, his hand caressing the air where he felt her aura to be. Timothy could see that for Mitch, this touch was a physical truth, could see that Mitch was interpreting Susan's lack of comment as acquiescence to something they had shared. Mitch was a subtle one, although Timothy had to laugh and laugh to himself at how the observant poet Susan seemed so oblivious to what to him was so obvious.

Or, not exactly oblivious. Clearly uncomfortable, and Timothy could see that Mitch was interpreting the way Susan tugged her hair, looked away from his gaze, as a statement that some part of her wanted him, too. Mitch was reading Susan's vulnerability, her inability to draw a firm line, as a sign that eventually she might be his.

Eventually. That's what Susan didn't quite get. Timothy knew that Mitch had all the time in the world. He was a lifer; he wasn't going anywhere. He could approach her with his love poem, watch her get to a point of maximum confusion, then pull back, throw out something a guest artist said two months ago, talk about a poem Susan once read, refer to the way Tall Tony recited when they made the videotape. That slow build-up of shared details was bound to make someone like Susan feel safe.

Timothy took the sorted papers from the machine, criss-crossed the piles and began to staple the packets together. That white kid, Roger, from class, was in the building and Timothy watched him creep up behind Susan, shake his hands – Boo! – in her face and give the woman a good ghost-story scare. She jumped, then laughed.

Mitch turned to her, very serious. "Why were you frightened? You know I'd never let anything happen to you."

This time Timothy could not keep his laugh to himself. This man's got it bad. Like those two rape-murders he's serving time for are some kind of righteous recommendation for dependable chivalry. Careful, man, Timothy thought. You're going to get yourself in the hole and this woman you say you love in some kind of mess she's never know in her white-girl life.

Susan walked back to the Arts Program office and Mitch followed her. Timothy, who had finished stapling, also went over to the office. The room itself was full: Al Greer, Millicent – the mural lady – some dude Timothy had never seen, Susan, Mitch. Timothy stood in the doorway as though leaning on a lamppost at dusk, a lit match in his cupped palms, apparently relaxed, absolutely attentive.

Millicent had been showing drawings to the stranger, rough drawings her crew had apparently made. Leaning into the room, Timothy could see that the drawings were of women taken, from the looks of them, mostly from magazines.

"Pretty romanticized, huh?" the stranger commented.

"That's what we're working on," Millicent said. "I've modeled for the group a few times now and at the beginning the men would come up with drawings of this glowing, gorgeous creature. And I'd say, 'Look, I'm 53 years old. I'm overweight. I have warts. I have wrinkles. I want you to be brutally honest.' And they're beginning to see. Look," Millicent showed some drawings that did look like her. As she said, warts and all.

Strange how these artists look at the world, Timothy thought as he walked back to the Education Building. Warts, wrinkles. There was some integrity there that he respected, was curious about, but the taste went so against what was valued most in cards made on the line.

Timothy didn't trust that these teaching artists from the outside would not mess with the convicts' work, with the way they chose to express themselves. Although he'd written poetry his whole time down, he'd avoided Susan's class for months and months. Assumed she'd always be

telling him how she wanted his poems to sound. Censorship comes in all forms and Timothy lived with enough of it to make him choose to keep his poetry to himself. But the brothers in the class said, "just try it" and Timothy decided he was quick-footed enough not to get caught in any bullshit laid down.

The class wasn't bad. Sometimes Susan's comments were helpful and when they weren't, Timothy didn't trip. He knew that anything that went on inside the joint was, bottom line, going to be subject to The Man's final world, but the class wasn't bad, not bad.

Timothy was in his cell watching the news and waiting for 6:20 movement to be announced. The cells hadn't been locked back up after chow and Tall Tony and DC soon stopped by. "Ready for class?"

Timothy was wearing his headphones, but felt the men's presence and turned toward them. "Don't you want to watch old man Reagan mouth his lies?" The three looked at the screen for a moment or two. "All right, let's see why we haven't been released yet."

Downstairs, men waiting to attend the evening's classes were gathered. Again a new officer was on duty, a man who had only worked the Main Gate before this assignment and who had no experience with movement sheets. Slowly he checked each man's name against the printed lists, slowly he released them toward the Education Building. Timothy held back, chuckling over the State: if it wasn't harassment, it was incompetence. The police, Timothy pronounced the word with a long o, are masters of efficiency when it comes to stopping an event from occurring, but are notably slow when it comes to letting normal activity proceed.

Finally all the convicts had walked out of Unit 2 and the cop was sighing loudly. Timothy ambled up to the desk, then, and said, "Timothy Augustus. For poetry."

"I'm done. You're too late."

"I've been standing here all the time not my fault you're slow."

The man in green's face closed up, his eyes narrowed, .he looked ready to pop.

Timothy was torn between the desire to rile this cop who looked as though he could so easily be riled, and the steadier desire to stay out of trouble. He wasn't about to miss class because some cop couldn't handle the movement sheet, but he stood without speaking, erasing the grin that threatened to set itself on his face.

The officer, too, seemed to be letting mixed emotions fight it out before he spoke. Finally, he grabbed the movement sheet and yanked it toward him. "Poetry? Okay, Augustus. I see it. Get on out of here."

Timothy managed to keep that grin off his face, but he did his most leisurely saunter out the door.

When Timothy got to the Education Building, the officer on duty was about ready to call in the count and he, too, nearly refused to let Timothy attend class. Officially, though, Timothy was there on time, so the officer took his ID card, checked his housing, and shooed him on to class.

At the bottom of the stairs, Al Greer had set up an easel in the hall and was applying blue paint in long strokes to a canvas that was still mostly blank.

"Kind of crazy to even begin this with no consistent place to work. but what fun is life with only memos and phone calls? We all get to be crazy once in a while, right?"

Timothy marveled at what simple acts seemed crazy to this man, but he smiled and stood for awhile watching Al. Al Greer was a trip, hard to figure out. He was pretty fair, but extended no small favors, as some staff did. To the convicts, Al was part of the system and although he treated them decently enough, basically he couldn't be trusted. They knew the program would always come first to Al, way before any wishes of theirs.

The cop must have called the count in, because he was bounding down the stairs and soon stood there teasing Al about this modern art junk. Timothy got enough of that ignorant bullshit fast, and he turned to walk to class.

On his way, he passed the room where the country/western band met. Those KKK-ers were there, but no one was playing. Raylene was in front of the room, her hand on the tone arm poised over a record on the phonograph.

"Can't you hear that? Can't you hear how good old country boy Hank Williams was influenced by the blues? Stop being so stubborn! Listen. Here, I'm going to play 'I'm So Lonesome I Could Cry,' again. I know your ears are open, but open your minds, too!"

"If I wanted the blues, I'd take his class," one fool muttered, pointing down the hall where Timothy knew Gordon James' ensemble was playing.

Raylene rolled her eyes upward on hearing this complaint, and Timothy shook his head out there in the hall. The woman must know her students damn well to tease with them like that about race. He wondered if she knew the chance she was taking.

Timothy walked to the back of the poetry classroom, nodding to DC, Tall Tony and the others. The stranger he'd seen in the Arts Program office that afternoon, stood in front of the class, talking. Didn't seem to be a poet. wasn't even talking about poetry. Timothy balanced in the chair on his tailbone, appeared to be looking at the floor, at these heavy, brown institutional boots, stretched out in front of him, but in fact all his senses were set to pick up the information he needed to assess this man. The dude was white and stocky, dressed in cords and a heavy sweater with fake elbow patches. Trying to look casual, but a businessman underneath. As Timothy listened, he pieced together the reason for the man's presence in this room. Seems he was a film maker, making a movie about the arts in prison. He wanted to see if they'd be willing to read some of their poems for his film.

"Have you read our poems?" Timothy asked.

"Susan's showed me your anthology."

"You read it?"

"Some of it."

"You read my poem on pogroms, American style? That's the one I might be willing to read for your movie."

Timothy loved pulling rugs out from under the feet of these folks who thought they stood on such artistic, liberal ground. Loved revealing to them how they were, in fact, just as ready to censor the truth as any warden in any prison.

"I'll have to read it."

"You do that."

The businessman film maker tried to get the discussion back into his own high gear, but Timothy had jumped the talk elsewhere.

"What is it you're going to be doing with this film?"

"What kind of art work you done yourself?"

"You going to let us read poems that tell the truth about this place?"

"What kind of money's in this for you?"

Timothy knew a lot of these convict poets were aching for any chance to be heard. Might win them points with the parole board, might get them a woman, might even earn them a fame that could catapult them out of this place. Yet and still, he was glad to see these men were not so greedy as to forget that they would always be disrespected and used by whoever they let use them. They were not so greedy as to forget to take care of business.

They had the man back-pedaling now. Didn't take long for him to show his true colors, yellow and more yellow. Almost sputtering air, he was so weak.

Susan tried to speak in the man's defense: he was here to get facts that would make his film real, not another cliché. But the cons in the class had stopped buying. And besides, Timothy thought, what kind of a man hides behind a woman's defense? Even more, Timothy could tell from Susan's half-hearted tone, that she didn't much respect this film-maker either. If she had, she'd be giving them all an earful about being open and seizing on this opportunity to present their work. to the world.

Upstairs, after class, students waited the last few minutes until count cleared.

Gordon James' blues workshop came up as a group. Old Man was walking with his arm around the shoulders of a free man, an older black dude with his trumpet in hand. That night's guest artist, Timothy surmised. Old Man's eyes were full of water. Tears and hugs were pretty unusual sights in the pen and Timothy's curiosity was strong.

"Twenty years," Old Man sighed. "Sure is good to see you. Now you give my best to everyone in the band."

"Old Man used to sing in that brother's band," T.J. had reached the top of the stairs and walked to where Timothy stood. "Gordon James knows the horn player and invited him out here. Quite a reunion."

"Imagine so."

Count cleared and Timothy and T.J. walked back to Unit 2 with the others. The night had gotten warmer since they were in class the wind was picking up from the south..

"And Gordon told us all a story tonight that's kind of been staying on my mind," T.J. said.

"Said when he first taught in prison it was down south and he was teaching a beginning guitar workshop. All these dudes hardly knew the fingerboard from the sound hole. Then this one brother walks in, picks up a box, and starts playing righteous progressions, elaborate work.

"Gordon listens a while and then approaches the man, says, 'Your playing is mighty fine, but this is a beginning guitar class.

“‘I am a beginner,’ the man says. ‘This is the first time I ever picked up a box.’”

“‘But that’s impossible,’ Gordon argues. ‘You’re playing chords and progressions and...’

“‘This is the first time I ever picked up a box,’ the man repeated. ‘Thing is, I was locked up at Central State. In the hole for ten years. No guitar, no nothing. I got me a chord book, though, and made myself a keyboard out of cardboard and just went through the book. Done with that one, I found myself another; did that the whole time I was down. But this is the first time I’m hearing how it sounds.’”

CHAPTER FIVE

The plaza was quiet under the low, gray sky. "Lockdown," the officer at Count Gate had said, but Susan's mind was still on the week-end and Thomas and the deep ruts in the road that led to their cabin, ruts they'd have to fill with gravel. And then there were the brakes going out on the truck and please, please, please let Thomas be safe in that truck. She hoisted the box of books and papers she carried high on her hip and really looked at how empty and dismal the plaza was with no people, only dense sky, wire fences and the grim buildings behind them.

The shock of this place the months she first walked through it. Fences holding buildings whose insides she could only imagine, gates she did not know how to enter, calls of "escort," or "hospital," or "AC gate," whose meaning she might guess at, but how was she supposed to respond? The men in her class checking her out. "Friendly, not friends," Al's phrase.

"They're only cons, why do you bother?" the question she heard from most staff. Her eyes were open then, her ears, for each rattling of a key chain, each new expression – lockdown, rolled up, p.c. – each head in a blue bandanna was a discrete entity, simply itself. She had no whole to fit the parts into, and so each event was single and startling and demanded her complete, open-mouthed attention.

Now, nearly three years later, her eyes had filmed over. She'd knit together enough of a context to allow her to function. But now, so often she was blind to each particular moment those months of being in The Unknown had kept her alive to.

The first person Susan saw in the Operations Building was Officer John Tipton who told her there had been a stabbing over the week-end and one black man was dead. At this point, he said, no one was sure who had killed him. The man had gang affiliations in his past and his murder could be the result of black gang rivalries. The victim was also highly disliked by some of the white inmates, and he might have been killed by anyone of these individuals. No drugs had

been found, but the possibility of a bad debt murder had not been ruled out. Or, he could simply have been in the wrong place at the wrong time. "As of right now," Officer Tipton said, "we know nothing for sure, so the whole mainline population is locked down."

Sam Randle was in the Arts Program office when Susan got there. Al, Millicent and Gordon James were gathered around listening to what seemed to be a debate between Sam and Dolores Mendoza.

"Just because this man was a leader, doesn't mean he was part of a gang. There was a group of men interested in what he had to say."

"He was an OG Crips, Sam."

"Fifteen years ago, when he was a kid. My goodness, give the man some credit for growing up," Sam said. "His record shows he's been clean his last eight years in here. He was sixteen when he was last on the streets, Dolores."

"You make gangs sound like sweet little mutual aid societies," Dolores said, "but that's not my experience." Dolores was short and round and full of energy. Staff called her, Now-you-see-her, now-you-don't-Dolores Mendoza because she moved so quickly, because she always had work to get done, because she seemed a woman with a mission, on fire.

"Gangs menaced my childhood, Sam. Always taking over the streets, always threatening my brothers. Those guys, the gang was their home," Dolores paced the available floor space.

"They were as loyal to their gang as we were to our family, but the values they learned weren't the same ones we learned."

Dolores turned, stood still for a moment, her hands on her hips, "The Warden just showed me a write up he received about a kid who used to be housed here. This kid wanted to be a member of the Aryan Brotherhood so bad that he'd kill officers, kill inmates, didn't matter. He was down at Central State and he tried to kill a black inmate and the gunrail officer had to use fire. In the write up," she swung around to face Susan, "you'll be interested in this, was a poem another inmate had written comparing this weasel to a Viking warrior." Dolores pivoted once

again and took a few steps toward Sam Randle. "They're making this guy into a folk hero for the group. Sorry, Sam, to me the gangs are serious, as serious as heart attacks."

Sam Randle was perched on the edge of Al Greer's overloaded desk. Sam shifted his weight and paper fell to the floor. Sam bent to pick up the sheets, then straightened his bulky body, settled again on his rump. "No question about it, Dolores. I've seen time and time again how the gang is the worst enemy of any single gang member. They decimate their own ranks. They make it impossible for an individual inmate to make up his own mind about what path he should take. They tell him it's weak to get involved in programming or to believe in any self-improvement the system offers.

"All I'm saying," Sam handed the papers to Al, "is, if an inmate does find the courage there all alone in his cell to be real with himself, to make decisions without the help of his buddies – if this inmate sincerely wants to change – I say, give him a chance and give him some credit."

"Well, I don't disagree, it's just, when do you believe the guy has really put gangbanging into his past? When does the Warden believe him? You know, the Warden grew up with gangs, too, and he knows that the only thing that makes these guys feel like they're part of the human race is their gang. He knows how difficult it is to give that up."

"What you're saying about gangs is really interesting in terms of what I've noticed with my students," Millicent said. Millicent was curled in her desk chair as if resting at home by the fire. She was even drinking a cup of hot cocoa. "My students often come from heavy gang backgrounds and even though, since they're on mainline, I guess they're no longer actively – what did you call it? gangbanging? – that sense of conformity is bred deep into most of them. They find it so hard to look for their own artistic expression; it's much easier to make cards or tattoo designs."

"Hey, that conformity you're describing sounds like culture to me," Gordon James said. "I mean, why is a painting in a frame a more personal expression than a card sent home to your woman?"

"It's not the form as much as the images. Every visual artist working in prison struggles with such a heavy load of cliché in our students' work."

"And again I ask," Gordon stretched his long body forward from the wall against which he had been leaning, toward Millicent curled in her chair, "what's a cliché and what's culture?"

"Maybe there's a difference between the visual arts and music," Al said. "I thought about this a lot when I worked under Mat. Musicians most often play music written by someone else. Their artistic task is skill, style, interpretation. But a visual artist has other obligations, poets, too."

"Poets, too," Susan agreed. "You are all talking about the conformity bred by background, but what I see with my students is the oppressive conformity imposed by the prison system. Here these men are addressed as a number and have volumes of Director's Rules and IPs governing their existence. I find my students are dying, something in them is dying, for a way to speak their experience in their own voice."

Millicent, Gordon and Sam, too, seemed about to speak, but Al jumped in. "What we have to know now is, what about the lockdown? When do you see things opening up again?"

Sam shook his head, "This one is going to last a while. Already investigations are turning up shanks and other inmate stabbing devices."

"And I heard they're finding *placas*, graffiti drawings claiming turf," Dolores looked over her shoulder to explain to Al, "that must have been around for some time." Dolores smiled at the Associate Warden, "What is it, Sam, we got a bunch of yuppie officers who don't know a homeboy from a square john?"

Sam returned the smile. "At any rate," he said, "I have a feeling the administration is going to want a bit of time to see what's what."

"That means no classes, huh?" Gordon asked. Everyone nodded.

"And it means we should probably postpone our banquet, doesn't it Dolores?" Al asked.

"I hadn't thought about it, but you should." Dolores looked at the floor, "That's scheduled for early January, and it's already December." She looked back at Al, "Yeah, we'd better put it off until February."

"In February, if we're lucky and the past few weeks of drought is over, this place will be deluged by one constant rain storm," Millicent said, "and nobody's people will be able to drive up here for a banquet. Maybe we'd better wait at least until early spring."

"Besides we need time to work with our students," Gordon James said, "to rehearse, to prepare. If they're locked down, practice time isn't possible. Let's shoot for spring."

"Let's not shoot anything," Dolores quipped as she walked toward the door.

"Before you leave," Susan's voice halted Dolores, "I'd like to take some material up to my students, an article on metaphor. I'd like to write a group letter asking everyone to gather the poems he wants to present at the banquet, so we can begin to go over these. Can I do that?"

Dolores looked at the Associate Warden, "What do you think, Sam?"

"I have no problem with it. Just tell the officers in the unit who you are and what you're doing there."

Sam and Dolores left the office and Gordon James moved away from the wall, went over to his gear on the floor and packed up his music, his horn. "Guess I'm out of here for the duration."

Susan walked out of the Operations Building and toward Unit 2. The gray sky pushed further down, threatening, not rain, not yet, but a cold so damp, clothes and the bones inside them could not stay dry. Her eyes were open as she walked, but Susan wasn't looking at the steps she walked down, nor the mounds of dirt that would be beds of iris, daffodils and jonquils within two months, nor the high metal fence nor the concrete fortress with vaulted glass that was Unit 2. She looked, instead, at what was taking shape inside her: the pressure of the sky, the stabbing,

Gordon's question about cliché or culture. She watched these wisps begin to weave into a strand that might become a poem if she could leave it loose in her mind while she woke herself up enough to walk through the block, visit the men in her class, pay attention to what was in front of her eyes rather than to what was beyond them.

Susan had been in the blocks before, but not often enough to be blasé about the truth of where her students lived. There were two levels, each with one hundred cells. Each cell was 4 feet by 8 feet and contained bunks for two men, a toilet, a sink, boxes with the men's papers and other belongings, and usually, a TV. Across from the cells were windows, glass so dusty and dirty that light barely entered, especially today when the light was dim outside, even now, even at noon. The floors were concrete and were scattered with paper and styrofoam containers thrown from the cells after breakfast.

Susan climbed the metal staircase to the second story. She remembered that the last time she'd been here, she'd nearly fainted when she reached the risen heat of this top level. Many men made the best of the sauna they lived in by wearing only shorts.

She walked to Tall Tony's cell. The bars of the cell were covered with a metal grille of diamond-shaped holes – a consequence of the time Unit 2 was a lock-up unit years before – and there was only about a quarter-inch of space across each diamond. The door to the food slot was locked, so Susan bent to slip the envelope containing the materials she'd prepared under the bars at floor level. Tall Tony laughed, and said "Here, look here" as he pointed to the left edge of the bars. Susan smiled, and wiggled the envelope through the slight space between steel and concrete.

"What's this?" Tall Tony asked.

"Some poems, a letter. An article I thought you guys might find useful."

"Looks like the lockdown's going to last a while, huh?"

Susan shrugged.

"Such bullshit."

"Someone was killed."

"And what?" Tall Tony stood right up against the bars of his cell. Still, Susan had a hard time seeing him whole, through the bars and the grille. She had to blink away the shapes this metal made, as in one of those games of visual perception: is this a goblet or is it two profiles? Is this an old woman's face or is it the form of a well-dressed young woman? Susan wanted to look into Tall Tony's eyes, but imposed on his eyes were these layers of steel. "They're trying to say there's some major race problem going down? They locked up all the gangbangers a long time ago. Listen, it's the system that turns race into a big thing. They're the ones segregating us, sending northern Mexicans here, southern Mexicans there."

"Come on, you can't tell me there's no racism among you men."

"Sure, some convicts turn to those with the same color skin for survival. The most obvious thing to identify with is someone who looks like you. You going to tell me it's different with the guards? The Man's always looking for the next dude with a green uniform on. That's who he trusts."

"That's what you always do, shift the conversation on to the other guy's error, the error of the system. We're not talking about the system now, or about the officers' racism, we're talking about yours, you plural."

"But you can't talk about our racism without talking about the system. The system sets us up."

"Then why do I hear so many whites talk bad about blacks and so many blacks talk bad about whites."

"The system... "

"Hey, Tony..."

"Bottom line is, how long are we going to be locked down here?"

Tall Tony was behind bars with no access to accurate information and Susan, although certainly not one with power, worked in the Operations Building and heard at least fragments of what was on the administration's mind. So Tall Tony pumped, tried to find out what Susan might

know. Susan didn't resent this, it made sense to her, but she never knew how much to say. Her own belief was that "the truth shall set you free," she felt a full disclosure of available information always worked toward the common good. But she was teaching in a system that operated differently. Her internal editor was always working overtime, trying to decide, what's appropriate? What's appropriate here?

"Susan, you turning into a cop? What aren't you saying?"

Her students could always catch her in that place where she was unsure. She hated the discomfort of being in that place and so she moved to the ground that was solidly hers, "a cop, yeah, that's right. My point, Tony, is, let's get the poems together for the banquet. You know which ones you want to read?"

"They won't let me read the ones I want to read."

"Which ones that you know they'll let you read do you want to read?"

"You're good, you're good," Tall Tony laughed as Susan steered the conversation back to the poetry they shared, to the work she was here to do.

Dennis was housed halfway along the second floor. He and his cellie were asleep, but Susan's quiet, "Dennis?" woke him. He startled, jumped off his cot and walked to the bars.

"I'm sorry for waking you," Susan said in hushed tones, hoping not to disturb Dennis' cell mate, still asleep on his bunk.

"No problem. It's been a long time since I've been awakened by the sound of a woman's voice. Did you bring me the name of that poet?"

"Jessica Hagedorn. I tried to call you at your job last week to tell you, but I was calling from home. The operator told me, 'You can't call inmates from the outside, you should know that,' and put the call through to Officer Tipton." Susan smiled, "He told me he had no problem, personally, with the call, but that, officially, it was against the rules, as the operator had said. Officer Tipton said, 'Sorry, you got routed to the system that says 'no.'"

Woody was on his cot, writing. His cellie was on the upper bunk, watching TV. Through the bars of the cell, through the metal grille, Susan could see that Woody had hung the picture poem he'd created in class, on the wall opposite his cot. There was the blue paper, the drawing Woody had done of a pond and its waterfowl, the poem about mallards, pintails and Canadian geese.

Woody smiled when he saw Susan, "What a surprise. What are you doing here?"

Susan passed the envelope through the bars, as Tall Tony had shown her. "Writing?" It pleased Susan to see Woody writing, to see his picture poem on the wall. What she had shared was now part of this man's world.

"Yes, a poem. I don't really mind lockdowns. I enjoy the time. In my cell I don't have to worry about everyone's eyes and mouths and attitudes. Kind of peaceful, if you can call anything in this place 'peaceful'"

"Can I see the poem?"

Woody handed it to her.

"Would you read it to me? Seems like it might be the perfect poem to share at our banquet. I'd like to hear you say it."

Woody took the paper, "It's still rough.

In late fall rain I sit
in my cell, on my bunk,
and I remember other falls.
Falls where the ground was
covered with leaves,
reds and golds and tawny browns.
I remember early snow and early dark.
There was a small boy in those wilds
who grew up to be me.
I wish I could teach him
all that I've learned."

For a moment, the noises, smells, sights, of the block stopped for Woody's poem. Or didn't stop, went on simultaneously. but the poem claimed its full-bodied existence in the midst of the more usual reality of Unit 2.

"You know, my points are low enough to be transferred down to Unit 3, but I don't want to live in a dorm," Woody said. "You've got 32 guys in one dorm, right on top of each other. Everyone sees your work, you never get any peace. The guy in the next cell," Woody pointed to his right, "he actually got himself transferred from Unit 3 to here for that very reason. The guy's an artist and down there everyone watched him drawing and he got a lot of pressure to do portraits for other guys, cards. Felt he had to provide what was asked for and never got enough time to draw what he wanted. Up here, his cellie leaves him alone, as mine leaves me to do my writing."

"The noise in here is bad enough distraction. How do you write with all that noise?"

"Didn't you see those ear plugs in my ears when you walked up? The State gives them to us and I'll tell you, they're as necessary as shoes."

Susan walked down to the first level and across to the cells further on. "Look what's coming!" "Who's that?" "Um, baby, you coming to see me?" She was used to cat calls and mostly ignored them. If a man said hello or made some comment that felt human to her, she always responded, but the general hiss and bleat, Susan ignored.

Susan stopped at Reginald's cell. Potter was sleeping, but his TV was on. Through the bars and mesh, Susan saw the gun battle on the screen. Bodies lay splattered all over this film.

"Hello, Susan. Coming this way?" Mitch Reiser's voice broke into Susan's thoughts on violence and its effect on the mind and soul. She walked on ahead the few cells to where Mitch was housed.

"Are you psychic or what? How did you know it was me?" Susan asked, always on her guard with Mitch. How to be friendly and not feed Mitch's weird "love," he called it "love"? Some love that left her never able to be herself with Mitch around. And Mitch was always around. There were so many silent ways in which Mitch made sure he was there, always there.

"I am psychic where you're concerned, but this time I have to give credit where credit is due." Mitch pointed to the small mirror he held and which he could adjust to give him a reflection

of just what was coming along the walkway. Susan stepped back and looked at the other cells and saw that many such mirrors were now focused on her.

She shook her head, "My third failing as a trained observer. I'm not seeing anything well today!"

"You may not be seeing well, but you sure are looking good."

Susan smiled, "Cute. Corny, but cute." This parrying with Mitch was easy, but dangerous. If she wasn't careful, he'd pick up whatever she said and run with it as far as he could.

"Susan, come closer."

"I can hear you."

Mitch sulked, "But I want to smell your perfume."

"I don't wear perfume," she said, then thought, shit, he's trapped me. I've got to get out of this dialogue without one more personal interchange.

"Then why do you always smell so sweet?"

"Mitch, what poems are you going to read at the banquet?"

"I don't want to talk about poems."

"That's what I'm here for."

"Does your husband give you flowers?"

"Mitch ... "

"I'm going to send you flowers. You'll see. Some time you'll be home alone, night will be coming on. Maybe you'll be taking a bath, or rubbing oil over your naked skin. And they'll be there, these surprise flowers. And you'll know they're from me."

"Okay, Mitch, that's it." Never had the promise of flowers sounded so like a threat.

"I'm going to love you forever," Mitch whispered toward Susan's departing back.

Although she tried not to hear, she heard, "I've got all the time in the world, Susan, and I'm going to take as long as I need to convince you. And I'll convince you, you'll see."

A bird had flown in through the open transom and was singing in the block; Susan focused on this bird. Its song made her hear the weighted silence of the gray sky outside, the ocean water; she listened to these silent sounds that rode under her quickly beating heart, under all the noise in the block. She wanted to leave Unit 2, run back to the office and talk to Al about Mitch, but she set herself to see the rest of her students first, and she walked down the tier, steady as she could, toward Roger's cell. When she got there, Roger sat on the shitter at the back of the cell.

"Excuse me," Susan stuttered, moved away and waited.

"No problem," Roger laughed as he walked up to the bars, ignoring the embarrassment his lack of privacy might make them both feel.

The officer was still distributing lunches. He pushed a metal cart filled with sacks, stopping at each cell and unlocking the narrow rectangular food port, slipping the lunch in, then locking the door to the slot once again. Susan squeezed herself around the food cart to get to Timothy Augustus' cell.

When Timothy saw Susan, he rose from his cot where he'd been lying in the dark, turned on the single bulb on the wall at the rear of his cell and started in, "That man who was killed was a brother who was trying to teach some truth in this place. He knew all about apartheid USA style, and he was shot down for speaking what he knew."

"But it was another convict who killed him."

"You believe that? Or that the guy wasn't some dupe set up by the powers that be? Get wise, Susan. This man was a writer. You should have known him. In fact, you're irresponsible for not having known him. Prison is not a place to carry around a bunch of illusions and this brother saw the truth and spoke what he saw. He was respected in here. I don't believe another black man would ever have killed him. You bring that Varella Williams back, she'd see the truth."

For the twentieth time in the three hours she'd been in the block, Susan said, "Well, I don't know." And she didn't. Truth. Everyone in this place was always so sure of his opinion,

from Sam Randle to Dolores Mendoza to Roger Watson to Timothy Augustus. Susan moved through NCCF from one whole truth to the next and in the moving, each individual's truth became part of some larger truth. It was this truth she herself was most interested in, although it was so large she couldn't see it, didn't understand its shape. She felt she could never know prison, never understand harm to others or feelings of retribution or society's inequalities or spiritual evil or human greed or moral laziness or being a good soldier, without getting some glimpse of this larger picture into which it all fit. She felt Timothy Augustus' observations about dominant white society were accurate, but they left out Sam Randle's ideas about individual responsibility. She felt Sam Randle's ideas about individual responsibility were valid, but they left out Tall Tony's knowledge of how the system set things up so that the individual hardly had a chance. She felt Tall Tony's knowledge was precise, but it left out Dolores Mendoza's experience of becoming part of the system in order to break out of a past that wanted to limit her and her people. She felt Dolores Mendoza's experience had much to teach, but it left out Woody sitting in his cell focusing, not on culture, but on the clear strain of a voice that could only be heard when all was quiet, a voice that asked him to be a channel for its words. There was a larger picture, she was sure of it, but maybe she'd never see it whole, maybe she'd always be able only to listen to each person's story, each person's way of perceiving the world.

"You a counselor?" a man called from his cell.

"No, I teach poetry," Susan answered as she walked past.

"Tell me a poem, then."

Susan knew dozens of poems by heart, her own and other contemporary work, but the poem that came first to mind was by Shakespeare, from "The Tempest."

Full fathom five thy father lies:
 Of his bones are coral made;
Those are pearls that were his eyes:
 Nothing of him that doth fade,
But doth suffer a sea-change
Into something rich and strange.
Sea-nymphs hourly ring his knell:

Hark! now I hear them – Ding, dong, Bell.

"Sea change, huh? That's raw. Can't help but go through a sea change in this place," the man pointed past the bars, towards the glass and the Pacific beyond. "I grew up in the desert, and the wind and water sure have worked me over. Sea change. Salt in my wounds. I keep wondering what in me is going to come up coral and pearl." The man's smile was broken by bars, by black metal grille, by diamond-shaped holes. "You know of any sea nymphs wanting to toll some bells for me, you let me know."

CHAPTER SIX

Dolores Mendoza sat in Warden Philip Martinez' office. The oak veneer paneling was covered with plaques, certificates, framed photographs and awards. Against the rear wall, the Warden's desk was mostly clear of paper, but the open cabinets that circled the room were filled with directories and reports. In the center of the office was a massive walnut table with thick legs, turnings and feet. Ten padded leather chairs surrounded this table. Dolores Mendoza and Philip Martinez each sat in one of these ten chairs.

"I've been one busy bee," Dolores was saying. "It's easy to get work done when inmates aren't around." The Unit 2 lockdown was going into its second week and Warden Martinez had not yet approved release for any but the most critical workers. "I sat at my desk all morning making phone calls. Set up a month's worth of speeches. I should be able to talk proud about NCCF to every senior citizen and Rotarian on the entire North Coast next month."

The Warden smiled his aristocratic smile. An El Greco body, the air of a grandee, Philip Martinez had grown up picking grapes and lettuce from the fields of the southern Central Valley.

"Didn't have to sign my two initials to a single piece of paper all day," Dolores laughed deeply.

"In the afternoon, I went out with Officer Taylor to check the work crew from Unit 4 where they're planting willow down by the old schoolhouse. You know that abandoned building upcoast five miles where the river floods a half-dozen times each year?"

The Warden nodded.

"Who knows if the willows will make any difference, but if this drought is ever over and we get some real rain, that Stream Restoration Committee seems to think the willows will help, and they're the ones we're trying to please."

As Community Resources Manager, Dolores Mendoza's job was primarily to make connections between the prison and the community. At NCCF, this meant that Dolores spent a lot

of time at meetings outside the prison talking to the Lion's Club, to the Chamber of Commerce, to businesses that might donate books, magazines, televisions, equipment, to the prison. She also worked with other governmental agencies that wanted to use inmate crews on some of their jobs. The men in Unit 4 were able to work on such crews and were currently doing stream restoration, road work, forest fire fighting and – everyone's favorite project – training wild horses for the Bureau of Land Management.

Volunteer programs, such as Alcoholics and Narcotics Anonymous, Transcendental Meditation, Yoga, a range of Northern California semi-spiritual self-help groups and the chapel volunteers, also came under Dolores' jurisdiction, as did inmate activity groups such as the Lifers, the Veterans Group and the Inmate Advisory Council.

"I want our inmates to give something back to this community that houses them," the Warden's long fingers lifted strands of gray hair off his high forehead. "I don't want bullshit, Dolores, I want something real."

Dolores had noticed since the Director of the Department had begun making public talks and formal policy statements about wanting inmates to serve the community, that her job had become many times easier. Martinez had always supported her work, but now there was more clout to his support. And other staff, like Associate Warden Torello who used to laugh at Dolores in meetings –saying “If I were Warden, you'd be out of a job” – had at least to acknowledge the work she was doing.

"The crew's working hard doing the job they've been asked to do. No bullshit, nothing *pro forma*. And I spoke at length with Millicent Hidalgo today." Millicent's project with the North Coast Battered Women's Shelter was a good example of how the Director's priorities had trickled down through the institution. Dolores would bet this project would not have been approved even one year ago. Criminals creating art for a victims' organization would have been seen as too controversial. Now, although she, Millicent and Al had to be careful to go through every step towards approval very precisely being sure to follow each link in the chain of

command, the project had, in fact, been signed off. Just today Al had brought in the panels the mural crew would work on the back of the institution's flat bed truck, accompanied at every checkpoint by a ream of signed memos Al kept in his hand.

"How's that project going?"

"Al brought in the panels today. As soon as the lockdown is over, the mural crew can get to work."

"As long as this is handled correctly, everyone should benefit from this one: the inmates, the women, the community, the prison," the Warden smiled at Dolores. "It's up to you and Al to make sure it's all handled correctly."

Dolores nodded.

Again Philip Martinez smiled, "You're welcome to bring me as many of these win-win situations as you want to."

The phone rang. Martinez motioned for Dolores to stay seated; the call was not confidential. Dolores sat back in her chair and looked out the large double-hung windows behind the Warden's desk. Through them she could see the turrets and battlement of the parapet that held count gate. Four o'clock, mid-December, nearly dark. Time to go home. Dolores began to gather her papers spread over the table.

"The chaplain's concerned because we asked one of his volunteers not to come back," Martinez said as he placed the receiver back in its cradle. "A few months ago, the man took out a tape some inmates made of their music group. He had a friend in the record industry, and he was going to give the tape to this friend. We reminded him that he was not allowed to take anything out for inmates. He apologized. Then, just a few weeks later, he's the only one in the chapel and he gives permission to an inmate to make an outside call. And still we give the man another chance. Two days ago we catch him leaving with letters some inmate asked him to mail. He says, 'But, Warden, they had the postage on them and everything.' Sorry, buddy, three strikes and you're out."

"You'd better check, Dolores, on what kind of orientation the chapel is giving its volunteers. You know, some sweet soul from the outside comes in here and none of our rules are going to make any sense. How can it be a sin to let a man call his brother? What harm can come from posting a few letters? Dolores, make sure the orientation properly informs these folk about the dangers of breaking rules, of what can be smuggled out, of what can happen when a naive or unsuspecting volunteer is trapped in some inmate's tight web."

Dolores nodded, looking over her list and mentioned an impending suit she'd heard rumors of regarding access to the Pre-Release program.

"Lawyers and suits," Martinez sneered. "Don't talk to me about lawyers and suits. Here we are in the midst of a budget crisis, and the State's just had to spend thousands reprinting forms in order to change a single word: 'person' to 'inmate.' The Court decided the Department was guilty of imprecise language. Of course if we'd used the word 'inmate' in the first place, we'd have been sued for something else, inhuman categorization or something like that."

This was the first formal acknowledgment Dolores had heard about the rumored budget crisis and she walked out of the office and down the stairs of the Administration Building wondering about this crisis' effect on her program. But she'd worked too many years for the Department to be concerned for long about what wasn't right on her doorstep. She'd learned from the nuns as a little girl, "The Evil Of The Day Is Sufficient Thereof" and this teaching served her well at NCCF.

The stucco building she'd walked out of was at the top of a slight hill covered with iceplant. Dolores could hear the ocean at her back as she walked to her car. She drove the fifteen minutes to town wondering, as she wondered most evenings, how she'd ended up here in the rain and the wind like some Anglo pioneer when Whittier Boulevard had been her home. There were far more people who looked like her living inside the walls of NCCF, than on the streets of this old lumber town. Once, on the yard, some kids from the Mexican Mafia were going at it with some northern *Nuestra Familia* members and the officers were trying to break up the fight.

Dolores was a C.O. herself, then, and she'd called out, "Hey, what are you doing to my people?" The yard lieutenant said, "These aren't your people. "But he wasn't even close. Despite her hatred of gangs, all she had to do was look at some tough *pachuco* and it was, "There but for fortune."

The next day, Al Greer came by with a rough draft of the narrative he'd written for the Arts Program banquet.

"Hard to believe I'm actually early on this one."

"It's the lockdown," Dolores said.

"It's the lockdown," Al agreed.

Dolores moved to the front of her chair and perched there at the edge, her feet tapping the floor, her elbows resting on the desk. If it weren't against prison rules to chew gum, Dolores would probably be blowing bubbles.

State of California

Memorandum

Date: December 15, 1987

To: All Concerned

From: Al Greer, Artist/Facilitator

Subject: Arts Program Banquet

The Arts Program requests permission to hold a banquet on Saturday, March 19, 1988, (Note change of date from Memo dated November 18, 1987) from 4 P.M. – 8 P.M. This banquet will be held in the gym and will include a meal and performances of work by the Unit 2 and Unit 3 inmate musicians, poets and visual artists in the Arts Program at North Coast Correctional Facility

We request that each participating inmate be granted the privilege of inviting one (1) outside guest, providing such guest is on the inmate's approved visitor's list. Any inmate who

received a disciplinary (CDC 115) within the past six months, involving illegal trafficking of money or narcotics, will not be permitted to invite any guests.

A maximum of two hundred (200) individuals will be expected to attend this banquet. This number includes inmates from North Coast Correctional Facility's Units 2 and 3, staff and outside guests.

This banquet will be in two parts. The first part will be conducted at approximately 4:00 P.M. with performances by the musicians and poets of NCCF's Arts Program. The second part will be the meal, which will be served at approximately 6:00 P.M. This meal will be prepared at the institution and paid for by guests at the rate of \$5 per person.

Sponsors for this banquet will be as follows: Artist/Facilitator Al Greer; Community Resources Manager Dolores Mendoza; Correctional Officers Betsy Chin, Pete Miller, John Tipton, Leoma Nelson and Terry Mandel; Artists-in-Residence Millicent Hidalgo and Susan Robertson (green card holders); Teaching Artists Raylene Dakota, Gordon James, Tom Scaramella, Mac Riley (brown card holders).

Five (5) inmates of the Arts Program Mural Crew will be in the gym at approximately 1:30 under the supervision of the Community Resources Manager and Millicent Hidalgo. These inmates will set up the artwork and arrange the tables and chairs for the banquet and will transport the food from the kitchen. At this time, Artist/Facilitator Al Greer will transport instruments from the band room to the gym. He will be helped by Teaching Artists Raylene Dakota, Gordon James and Tom Scaramella.

Arrangement in the gym will be concluded at approximately 3:30 P.M. and at that time, the rest of the participating Unit 2 inmates will meet in the gym and will be out-counted in the gym for the 4:00 P.M. Institutional Count by Correctional Officer Betsy Chin and Correctional Officer Pete Miller. These sponsors will collect the inmates' ID cards to confirm the count of inmates.

The gym doors will be locked during count and supervised by the above sponsors. The collected cards will be brought to the Third Watch Commander Service Unit to confirm those participating inmates. The count will be called into Control by Correctional Officer Betsy Chin. At approximately 3:30 P.M., Correctional Officer John Tipton and Community Resources Manager Dolores Mendoza will meet and escort inmates from Unit 3 to the gym to participate in the banquet.

Guests are expected to arrive at the Institution's Front Gate between the hours of 3:00 P.M. and 3:30 P.M. They will be met at approximately 3:30 P.M. by Artist/Facilitator Al Greer, Correctional Officers Leoma Nelson and Terry Mandel, and Artist-in-Residence Susan Robertson. These sponsors will process all the guests and the correctional officers will search all items the guests will be bringing into the Institution. Normal search precautions for outside guests will be enforced. All guests will sign a Guest Log entrusted to C.O. Leoma Nelson.

Processing will begin at approximately 3:30 P.M. After all the guests have been processed, through Front Gate and Main Gate, they will be escorted to the gym via the Count Gate to participate in the banquet.

Guests will be escorted to the front door of the gym at approximately 4:00 P.M. and at that time the banquet will begin.

Upon completion of the banquet, at approximately 8:00 P.M., all guests will be escorted through Count Gate to Front Gate by Artist/Facilitator Al Greer, Correctional Officers Leoma Nelson and Terry Mandel and Artist-in-Residence, Susan Robertson.

After all the guests have departed, all inmates will be searched before leaving the gym by Correctional Officers Betsy Chin and Pete Miller. After all inmates have been searched and have left the gym, the five (5) inmates of the mural crew will remain under the supervision of C.O. Betsy Chin and will begin the clean up of the gym. This process will be completed by 9:00 P.M. at which time C.O. Betsy Chin will escort the inmates to Unit 2.

At approximately 8:00 P.M., Community Resources Manager Dolores Mendoza and Correctional Officer John Tipton will escort Unit 3 inmates to their housing units.

Correctional Officers Betsy Chin and Pete Miller will be in full control of the rest rooms.

Submitted by

Artist/Facilitator, Al Greer

Approved/Disapproved
Dolores Mendoza, Community Resources Manager

Approved/Disapproved
Tom Browning, Captain

Approved/Disapproved
Sam Randle, Associate Warden Unit 2

Approved/Disapproved
LaShaun Burke, Associate Warden Unit 3

Approved/Disapproved
Ralph Teller, Chief Deputy Warden

Approved/Disapproved
Philip Martinez, Warden

"Looks pretty good, Al," Dolores said. "Although there are a few missing pieces."

"That's what I came to you for."

"First of all, have you written a memo to the gym? Do you have the coach's permission to use that space during that time? Let's see," Dolores thumbed back through the pages of the memo. "We aren't going to need the space until 1:30, so that means inmates using the gym will only miss a half-hour that day. Should be no problem, but get a memo signed off and include a copy in this narrative."

Al nodded, "I've talked to the coach, of course, but didn't get a memo signed. Good thinking."

"And I think it's going to take more than a half-hour to process all those guests. An hour is more like it, and that's only if everything's running smooth. So either have your guests come earlier or your banquet starting later.

"Also, you'd better get signed agreements to be present by all the staff sponsors. I'm not sure your Artists-in-Residence and Teaching Artists are going to fly as sponsors."

"I thought of that. We have enough custodial coverage to meet the proper ratios. But I listed our Arts Program staff just to show that these bodies will be around, also."

"Let's see, what else?" Dolores tapped her long red fingernails against the top of her desk. "Better say that all participating inmates will be listed on a movement sheet."

"Even the inmates from Unit 3?"

"It's not absolutely required, but it's simple enough to do, and it will make everyone's life easier, so why not? LaShaun will appreciate it, I'm sure."

"Okay," Al added this item to his list.

"Also, obviously, you'd better have a memo signed by Food Services agreeing to furnish the meals. Include that, too."

Al wrote this down, looked at Dolores, smiled, "I'm not sure my Masters Thesis was as long as this narrative's going to be."

"You want the banquet? Give everyone else what they want."

Al raised his hands, palms out against the air, "I'm not arguing, Dolores. I want this to work."

"I do, too. After all, I'm paying for it. Which fact, come to think of it, you ought to mention. You ought to say sponsors will be paid out of the Community Resources budget."

Dolores looked over the pages on her desk one more time, "You know, maybe you also better include the menu, all the utensils you'll be taking from the kitchen. Work this out with Food Services. One last thing," Dolores said as Al rose to leave, "I'm going to be spending,

what?, eight hours there?, and paying overtime for 5 COs? Sure wish you had a mariachi band, salsa, something.”

Al was half-way out the door, when he turned back into Dolores' office. "Oh, Mitch Reiser. I did what you told me, went to talk with Sam Randle. I gave him the whole history and told him of this latest incident Susan reported last week. I told him Susan informed me of everything that took place, everything that was said, and he asked me if we had written Mitch up," Al had taken a seat and placed his stubby hand on Dolores' desk, palm down, fingers spread. Al counted out these fingers, "I told him, one, that Susan always was clear verbally and every other way about what her limits were. Two, I told him Mitch was a valued student in many Art Program classes, a good artist and a sincere worker. I told him, three, that we thought Mitch would finally wake up."

"But he didn't, hasn't, has he?"

"No, and that's what Sam pointed out. Sam gave his usual talk about how if he were locked up in prison, he'd eye all the women, too, and go after whatever he could get. But, he said, he'd take no for an answer. He said these men who won't take no for an answer are dangerous."

Dolores smirked.

"I know, I know, you told me.”

“Many times.”

“And Sam said, whether it's a defect in the nature of a man who won't take no, or just an accumulation of years in a system like this one, sometimes the only NO such a man will hear – not even 'will,' the only No such a man can hear –is a formal, institutional, no. Write him up, Sam said, and then his mind can't play tricks on him, can't pretend Susan's verbal no was really a yes. If he has the 128A in front of him, he's got to face the truth.”

"So you'll write the 128A?"

"I just wanted to get your okay."

"You've got my okay."

Dolores spent the day on paperwork. December was more than half over, time to begin the quarterly report. She hoped, once again, to be number one in donations. Most quarters, she topped the list, having received more free supplies and equipment than any other CRM in the state. Hard to achieve up here in the boonies, but Dolores did a good job at those Lions Club breakfasts. She came in with jokes and stories and hard facts and she rattled these all off at breakneck speed, and her spark ignited fire in those who listened.

At noon, Betsy Chin came to Dolores' office with her bag lunch. She stood in the doorway, "Want to have a chat?"

"Sure," Dolores put her papers aside, went to get her own lunch. Dolores had been the sergeant to first train Betsy when she came to NCCF. Both had been single women living in the tiny town just north of the prison, both were "women of color" inside the Institution. The two became pals.

"Because of the lockdown, I've been diverted to Food Services this week," Betsy's small-boned body settled in the chair Al Greer had sat in earlier that morning.

"Making sandwiches, huh?"

Betsy nodded, "Hardly hungry now after looking at all that processed meat. One slice between two pieces of bread. That's it, that's lunch, for these 200-pound weight lifters."

"Those wannabe sandwiches look like cardboard. Do they taste like that, too?"

"I wouldn't know. 'I don't eat State food,'" Betsy quoted in Sam Randle's voice. Sam was always making such pronouncements. It bothered him profoundly when staff took what by rights belonged to the inmates.

Dolores laughed.

"How's your day been?" Betsy's black hair was cut just below her ears, her long bangs fell in her eyes as she bent her head to peer into her lunch bag. When she raised her head again, she held her large eyes steady on Dolores' mobile face. It was this gaze that had earned her the nickname some staff used, "Inscrutable." Another Asian officer had once asked her, "Don't you

mind? 'Inscrutable.' Sounds pretty racist to me." But Betsy had just laughed, "Oh, let them call me what they want to. I think I'm as easy to read as a country-western song, but if they want to think of me as a mysterious easterner, that's okay with me."

"Full of paper," Dolores waved her hand over her desk in answer to Betsy's question.

"What I like best about this job is variety, getting to run around the institution and out in the community. So I get antsy on a day like today when I have to sit still like a good girl and fill out forms."

"Never any fun being a good girl," Betsy smiled.

"You better believe it, sister."

"Your kids okay?" It sounded like a non sequitur, but both Betsy and Dolores knew the question followed logically.

"Rough-housing, as usual. More than usual, now that it's vacation." Dolores had a seven year old and a ten year old. "I get to have Christmas with them, then they're off to their dad's for a week."

"So you'll have some time to be a bad girl, huh?"

"Oh, I'll probably just sleep. Anyway, you can't do anything in this postage-stamp town without everyone else knowing all about it. Not worth the trouble."

"Don't be getting cynical on me."

"Not cynical, just realistic. Just tired."

Betsy was going to make a joke about if Now-you-see-her, now-you-don't-Dolores Mendoza was getting tired, the rest of humanity must be lost in deep slumber, but she saw a sadness on Dolores' face she'd have to touch if she continued. The women were friends, but work-friends, there was no precedent for going further, so Betsy let go of her joke. Instead she said, "I see you'll be covering the Arts Program banquet, too."

"Sure, they're under my supervision. I'd better be around to be on top of what's happening. Hope this one's not all work for no glory. Or, no, actually, I could care less about

glory, but" Dolores had been leaning back in her chair, her feet on the desk, but she swung forward now, rested again on her elbows, "remember that concert I put together last summer? I worked so hard to get that concert to go. Two months of paperwork and then the day itself. I must have been moving a steady ten hours, easy. I had to take the next day off because my back and legs ached so badly. Then I come to work on Tuesday, and well, maybe one inmate thanked me for the concert, but everyone else came up to complain. 'Too much black music,' 'The musicians were lousy,' 'Nothing was organized right.' Not a single person came up and said, 'Good concert. I really enjoyed it.'"

"Ow, that must have hurt."

"You know, it did. I mean, I'm no bleeding heart who needs love from these guys. I'm doing my job. But a little thanks is always welcome. Oh, well, look," Dolores fell back again in her chair, one booted leg across the other on her desk, her wide wool skirt falling all over the papers she'd been filling out. "Prison life is the law of the jungle. You and I were both brought up to respect our elders, to say 'thank you,' to be polite. Most of these guys didn't have the benefit of such an upbringing. I've always got to force myself to remember that."

Betsy's large eyes were open and soft in thought, "If my parents could be cloned, we'd be able to tear down the prisons tomorrow. We wouldn't need them."

"Mine, too. But, since our parents can't be cloned ... "

"I heard Torello say just the other day, 'There will always be prisons. Always be parents who raise children to fill them.'"

Dolores grimaced, threw her weight forward, beat her closed right fist on her desk, "Truth is, it's not just our parents. You can't blame it all on 'bad parents.' You and I both know that as well as anyone. We both know there's an upper crust of society, which neither of us has ever been part of, which none of these men," Dolores swung her arms open and wide, pointing to all four corners of NCCF, "has ever been part of, and it's this upper crust that dictates the laws and regulations that are supposed to apply to everybody. But who gets in the most trouble? Not the

ones at the top. Even when they're doing wrong." Dolores shook the newspaper that lay on the far corner of her desk letting the headlines make her point, "They don't dictate laws for themselves.

"And your blue collar criminal is watched over by a blue collar worker. And you know society looks down on cops and prison guards almost as much as it looks down on criminals.

Let's tell the truth, it's a class thing."

To Betsy, prison was complicated. "A class thing," as Dolores said. Yes, class, race, but, she had to admit, Torello was right, too. Personal, what was learned from one's parents. Or not learned.

Again Betsy spoke what seemed like a non sequitur, but Dolores had no trouble with the leap. "I heard some inmates talking in the print shop just before the lockdown. Seems they'd had three work positions established especially for that *History of NCCF* book. The inmates hired happened to all be Hispanic. They knew at the outset their positions were likely to last only as long as it took to produce that book. Eight months later, when the book was completed and there was no other special print shop work, they were let go.

"Now, there was a print shop clerk, black. His job description was entirely different from the printers', but he'd been hired at the same time. His job was not related to the production of the *History of NCCF*, he was a good clerk, and of course, he just kept on working after the book was finished.

"Suddenly all the Hispanics in Voc Ed are complaining about discrimination. 'How else would you put it?' one guy asked me. 'Think about it. Who was retained and who was let go?' 'The clerk was retained and the special-project printers were let go,' I answered. The evidence seemed obvious to me, but it was equally obvious to the Hispanics – also on the basis of the evidence – that the decision had been racially motivated."

"Prejudice is such a slippery worm," Dolores agreed, making her own leap. "Last week I was talking to the Warden. One of the counselors had filed some personal grievance alleging he'd been discriminated against because he was white. He's a man who seems to involve himself in

behavior that continuously puts him in a situation where people don't like him. You know, you can legislate against racial discrimination, against sexual harassment, but you can't legislate making people like a person. And, as the Warden was saying, it makes investigation very tough, because the investigators can just say. 'Shit. if this guy wasn't such an asshole, he wouldn't be in this trouble anyway.'"

"But it's the system's obligation to take each grievance seriously."

"Yeah, I know. But how many folks do you know in here who really manage that kind of objectivity?"

"Not many."

"Not many. It's hard to stay objective in here all the way around," Dolores said, munching the last of her salad, her legs propped up again on her desk. "Remember when we worked visiting and we had to do strip searches? Even kids? Remember what it was like having to strip search a three year old? I remember when I first ordered you to do that, you almost refused."

Betsy nodded, her slow careful nod, "And then I'd start to find drugs hidden in baby's Pampers, in their little pockets."

"It's a weird world we live in, huh?" Dolores said. "You think people out there know how weird?"

CHAPTER SEVEN

Pat McNally stood in the sallyport of Unit 3. Unlike the medieval castle that led into the main facility, this passageway was simply a well-weathered trailer with aluminum frame windows and fluorescent lights. There was a long counter bisecting the trailer's length. Pat McNally and two other inmates coming back from hobbycraft stood on one side of this counter; two officers sat at their desks on the other side.

Pat signed the logbook, then heard the wooden door on the Unit 3 side of the trailer squeak open. He looked up, saw a large ruddy face he had never seen, shoulders in green, through the glass which formed most of the upper half of the door. The new cop entered the sallyport, his eyes running all over the three inmates. The men in blue walked on out toward the Unit, but as Pat stepped past the officer, the man slammed the air with his palm. Halt.

"That's not a state-issue jacket you're wearing."

Pat glanced down. The jacket covering his long, bony torso was blue denim, as were the jackets of all other inmates. But, it was true, his jacket was longer, more tailored. His mom had sent it to Pat.

The officer circled Pat. "Nope," was his verdict.

Pat kept his eyes on the linoleum floor of the trailer, but folded his fingers into a fist. I've been wearing this jacket for the past two years," he said through the narrow opening between his clenched teeth.

The officer's gaze was so steady that Pat raised his head to meet it, "Well, you're not wearing it anymore."

Pat McNally had served three years and eight months, and was due to be released in barely thirty-two days. For two years officers, sergeants, lieutenants, captains, even Associate Warden Burke herself, had seen him wear this jacket, and now he was going to get busted by some rookie cop? Pat wanted to yell, or at least put up a good verbal argument, but how far could

he let loose the reins on his feelings without jeopardizing his release date? He breathed deeply, looked back down at the floor. It was getting out he cared about, not this bullshit infraction. They could have the jacket if they wanted it. He wasn't going to let himself get written up. He'd go through the next month of rain in his shirtsleeves.

"You want the jacket, it's yours," Pat began to remove his arms from the sleeves.

The man stepped back, took a look at the two other officers seated at their desk who were watching every move. The guard shook his head, "Keep the damn jacket. I was just trying to give you a friendly warning."

Pat settled again into the blue denim, shaking his shoulders into place beneath the material. He said nothing, walked through the door into Unit 3.

Three years ago, he thought, he'd have ended up in the hole after an incident like that. Three years ago, he *had* ended up in the hole after an incident like that. Some guard had jammed him then about walking too close to the "Out of Bounds" line on the upper yard by Unit 2. He was walking that line, purposefully, just barely where he was supposed to be. But the cop's vision was off, or maybe he just didn't like Pat's attitude or his tennis shoes edging that yellow line. There had been words, then louder words, and then Pat found himself cuffed and lead to Unit 1, where he spent the next ten months. He'd have been out in two weeks on the original charge, but once behind bars like that day after day, with only a few hours each week on the yard, Pat couldn't stop himself from talking tough to anything in green that marched by his cage.

For a while. After a few months of repeatedly being deprived the few freedoms a man locked up in Unit 1 might have, Pat began to realize he was causing no pain at all to the system.

So he stopped and sat still in his cell for weeks, thinking. It was, Pat could see now, the first time in his life he had engaged in anything that might be called thought. Before he'd always let his Irish blood make all the decisions. But in those weeks of late 1984, early 1985, he taught his mind to slow down, to look at the material before it, to weigh and judge and select. There was

no one to show him how to do this, only those rocks he tried to hurl at the system, the ones that slammed into his own face instead. He had only the teacher those rocks were becoming.

Nothing Pat thought in those long weeks made him see what he was up against differently. The system still seemed evil to him, set up to make hardened assholes out of childish pranksters; the worst of the guards still seemed like sadistic tyrants while the best were kowtowing bootlickers. Still, his observations forced him to realize the truth of that John Cougar Mellancamp song he'd listened to on the streets before his arrest: "When I Fight Authority, Authority Always Wins." Seemed he was left with only one power, the power to "Yes, Sir," them out loud, while inwardly holding on to the manhood he knew was his birthright.

And then followed weeks of examining this manhood. The manhood he'd always known was assertive: claiming its due. He started to see his old self, not with society's eyes – he knew he'd never been some unredeemable animal – but from a vantage point that was on shaky new ground. Shaky, but interesting. For all of his thirty-three years, he'd held onto what he called "himself" by defying whatever and whoever tried to tell him what to do, who to be. The result of all this defiance, it seemed to him during those long weeks caged up, was a thirty-three year old ignoramus who could barely read, think, add or subtract. No one in the system was interpreting his ignorance as "up yours;" his ignorance was only that same rock hurled in his own face.

So Pat began to listen to the con housed beside him, "What you got to do, man, is learn how to read." The Education Department provided no teachers to Unit 1, but enough other convicts had what he needed and were willing to share. Basic readers, basic math books. Soon Pat saw that his lifelong fear – that he really was as dumb as everyone said he was – was totally unfounded. He was smart. He took to reading everything anyone handed him and then realized, no, not this way. He wanted to exert some control on his mind, and went out (to the extent that anyone in Unit 1 could go out – requests yelled to a convict way down the tier, a kite delivered by a sympathetic cop –) searching for what he wanted to learn more about. He didn't know the word

then, although now he caressed these four syllables constantly in the quiet of his own mind.

Philosophy.

And eventually Pat went back to Unit 2, mainline. Everything Unit 2 offered that had seemed bullshit to him before – preparation for GED, access to making things in hobby, music classes though the Arts Program – attracted him now. Homeboys, his old pals, tried to dissuade him: "What's up, Pat me man? You going to let them get you in their sweaty clutches?" But still Pat persisted, got his GED, took a job as a clerk in the prison library, used the woodworking skills his father had taught him to make toys out of redwood which were sold at the hobbycraft store just outside Main Gate.

Pat walked a fine line between his new endeavors and the urgings of his old friends. His old friends shut up when The Man was around, they did their day's work to get the day off their sentence, they might even attend a class or two because it would pass the time and look good on their record, but none of them let any of this touch them. His friends saw Youth Authority and prison as part of a regular cycle of their lives, the price of doing business. They did what they had to do to get out of this place as soon as they could, but inside they stayed the same. Inside, Pat was changing. He wanted what he never knew existed before. Oh, he'd used the word "freedom," but he meant escape from some adult's rules. Now he read everything he could find on the subject and felt a longing he could not talk about because it was not shared, or at least not articulated, among those men he'd felt closest to in all the world.

He wanted freedom from who he'd always been, from the limitation inevitable by being born to a particular set of parents on a particular conjunction of mean streets, in a particular big city, in a particular country at a particular time in human history. Who was "Pat McNally" separate from these sets of particulars? It was to find the answer to this, that Pat read every philosophy book he could lay his hands on.

And then he met Raylene. Pat had always listened to music, he played guitar and harmonica haphazardly himself, so when he noticed that there was a country and western band he

could be part of, he signed up for the class. The music was great, and having the loan of a guitar he could play gave him tremendous pleasure. But the heart of what happened to him in the early winter of 1986, was Raylene Dakota.

He'd never known a woman like her before, or if he had, he'd never recognized that woman's qualities. Women to him had always been something to wear on your arm, to screw, to discard. He'd never noticed anyone as a unique set of qualities – not his pals, not himself, certainly not the women he used. He noticed Raylene. He noticed her long strawberry blonde hair, her green eyes, the freckles that covered her arms. But he no longer even thought to ask the kind of questions that would have come naturally to him before: "Is your hair that color all over?" or "Let's see, can I count freckles?"

Instead he shut up. His mouth closed, his eyes opened. He noticed not only how Raylene walked, but how she smiled, how she treated people. He noticed not only the slight curve of her hip, her long waist, but how deeply she loved the music she played and how obsessed she was with making her students play with their own true love. Love. The word entwined with the word "freedom" Pat had been saying over and over to himself for the months of '85 and, joined, the words forced an even deeper longing in his heart and soul.

He let this longing work on him silently. He never told Raylene how he felt, partly because he knew her warmth was for all her students, not for only one, and partly because he started to see – glimpses, then steadier sight – that if he held quietly to his love for Raylene and his love for freedom, he might learn something he'd never dreamed existed.

And he did. Although even now, nearly two years later, he couldn't put this learning into words. It had to do with "agape," as his reading of the Greeks named it, rather than "eros." But his erotic love for Raylene never slackened and his desire not only for the philosophical lessons her presence in his life was giving him, but also for the touch of her skin, sometimes came close to driving him crazy. So, when he added up his points and saw they were low enough to allow a move to Unit 3 – where Raylene taught no classes – he put in a request.

He moved to Unit 3 expecting a freer existence. And, applying his old definition –escape from some authority's rules – it was true: there was more freedom at Unit 3. A double fence surrounded this compound, one fence a few feet in front of the other. The inner fence was topped with rolls of razor wire, the outer with rows of barbed wire. There were watchtowers with armed guards inside them. But he slept in a dorm rather than a cell and could roam freely around the compound, not worrying about passes and movement sheets.

However, applying his new definition – freedom from who he'd always been, freedom from defining himself by the limitations chance imposed – life at Unit 3 was harder. Sleeping in dorms meant that there was never any privacy and that the attitudes of others were always in his face.

One time, just before he was arrested, at the bottom of what he now saw as his plunge into the depths, Pat had attended a banquet for pimps. A pimp stood up at that Holiday Inn podium and made a toast to the devil. Straight up. Pat remembered; that's what happened. Pat got out of there as fast as he could, but here, at Unit 3, he saw many of those same pimp faces.

Pat had been a crook his whole life, and in prison he kept seeing men he knew from that life. In Unit 1, he was locked up all the time and could think his own thoughts. In Unit 2, he could get away to his cell half the hours of most days. In Unit 3, he was around his fellow punks twenty-four hours-a-day. Everyone he saw was a mirror and it took constant attention not to bite into what his pals, colleagues and former acquaintances set in his way.

And the cops – not afraid of the men who had earned prison good-guy status – baited them mercilessly. That guard who this very morning had asked, as the convicts waited in line to be let into the Pre-Release trailer in the first rain in weeks, "Is it cold out there?" And when the cons answered, "Yes," had replied, "good."

Pat wasn't sure there was still time to pick up his clean laundry, but it had been more important to go to hobby. At Unit 3 his job was as clerk of the compound's library. He received a fairly high pay number, as far as the prison goes. As far as the prison goes meant that he earned

\$35/month. Enough for canteen and stamps, but not enough to keep him in the books he needed to read and couldn't justify buying for the tiny Unit 3 library. Hobbycraft allowed him to sell those toys he made, which most months at least doubled the money he added to his trust account.

Last year, the Arts Program had offered a wood sculpture class at Unit 3, but it had died for lack of interest. Most of the men who worked in wood would prefer to get paid for what they produced. Convicts couldn't sell what they made through the Arts Program's classes, but could, as long as they'd purchased the materials and handed over the required percentage to the Inmate Welfare Fund, sell their hobby productions. The emphasis in the Arts Program's classes was on artistic instruction; the emphasis in hobby was on production and sales. This fact helped make hobby very popular.

The laundry room was closed, but Dining Hall 2 was still open so Pat walked by, stood in the door watching Gordon James wind up his blues workshop. The dining hall was set up with clusters of four suspended seats surrounding individual tables. The spacing of these clusters was fine for eating dinner, but not ideal for music-making. Gordon James did his best. The blues wasn't his music, but Pat had joined this class for a few months in order to keep playing his guitar. He liked the way James operated. Convicts would wander in, ask what was going on. Most teachers, all cops, would have said something like, "There is a class in progress here. If you are interested, sign up." Most staff seemed to feel that curiosity should immediately be put in harness by setting limits. Gordon James would just look up and answer, "Music, the blues. You play music?" He'd wait an instant for an answer, but never fully divert his attention from the student he was working with. Pat and every other convict knew what seemed obvious: if you invite someone in, you have fewer problems than if you try to exclude him. Saying no only whets the appetite. Gordon smiled in greeting to Pat, who continued to stand in the door frame until he was sure class was over.

"You want to do some playing at the banquet in March?" Gordon James asked, handing the keys back to the officer in charge of the room. "Oh no, that's right, you won't be here; you're getting out."

"Yes sir, February 2. Ground Hog Day."

"No chance you'll see any shadow," Gordon slogged with Pat through the mud that the rain had made of the walkway leading to Dining Hall 2.

"You better believe it. No additional six weeks to this winter, not for me. My hibernation is about to be over."

My hibernation is about to be over, Pat repeated to himself on his way, alone, to his dorm. Mostly he believed it. He knew he'd changed. He knew prison tested this change at almost every moment. He knew, as with the cop just now in the sallyport, he managed to keep passing the test. Still, everything about the street was an open question. Would he be able to hold fast to all he'd learned when he was out there where speaking one's mind didn't automatically land one in the hole? Would he be able to keep his desires in check when giving in to them was encouraged by every ad and television show? Would he be able to stay away from booze, with bars and liquor stores dotting the thoroughfares? Would he be able to keep his spirits up when three weeks of searching didn't land him a decent job?

Last week he'd been out on a TCL to check a job possibility at the bookstore he'd been buying his books from. He'd begun a correspondence with a bookseller there and the man had written that maybe they could find a place for him when he got out. The interview hadn't landed him a definite job, there were no openings at the moment and the shop was a small one. But he'd gotten along fine with the staff and they urged him to come back when he was out for good.

That one day, not even a whole day, just a few hours, made Pat's every sense hungry. The world was so full of color and light and movement and smell. The guard escorting him had stopped at a Chinese restaurant and for nearly an hour the two had sat together as equals. Or they

pretended that. Pat wanted life, just regular life. He wanted grocery stores and gas stations and the daily paper. He didn't want to mess it up.

They told the cons a story in Pre-Release that Pat knew was true, because he'd known the poor sucker it had happened to. A convict was to be paroled and was out on a Temporary Community Leave, supposedly for a job interview. But before he left, he made a phone call to his wife, girlfriend, and had said, "I'll be by to pick up the stuff." Just a dumb asshole. He must have known every call from the prison is monitored. He wasn't scheduled to go by anyone's house on that TCL. And stuff, what stuff?

Because of that overheard phone call, his TCL was rescinded, but two days after the dude did parole, he picked up that "stuff." Which turned out to be drugs. And in the dealing that followed, he was shot and killed. Two days on the street, and then he was dead.

Easy to say, "It can't happen to me," but Pat knew the statistics as well as anyone else. He knew how high the recidivism rate was, knew just how far that two hundred dollars he'd get from the State on his release would go. He wanted Raylene. He wanted someone to hold. He wanted comfort, but knew there wasn't any, knew that for now, there was only Pat McNally, this existential self who, he had to admit, he'd discovered in the joint, who had to make it on his own. Who, Pat was determined, *would* make it.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Thomas Robertson shivered under his blue vest. Damn, the afternoon was cold. No rain, though, and that made it easier to work on this shell of a house. Thomas' construction crew had been on this site through the fall. A crazy time to clear land, dig trenches for power and sewer, sink a well and build. But the owner's financing hadn't come through until the end of summer. Drought year or no, there had been enough wet days to slow the project to half-time, and it had taken Thomas and his partner, Red, nearly three months to complete what usually took them barely more than one.

Thomas was a tall man with bushy gray hair and a weather-beaten face that, by this time in the afternoon, was stubbled and rough. His body was as wiry as the hair on his head and even at forty-five, he bounded up ladders, walked sure-footed along girders and jumped across joists like the white-tailed deer that had always appeared when they cleared brush from this site all last fall.

How it was late December, just past solstice, the shortest days of the year. Not yet 4 PM, but already near dark. The brakes on the truck were so bad, Thomas hadn't driven the vehicle all week. It took forever to get parts up here, and besides, when did he have time to work on the truck? He'd depended on Red and his van all week, but today Red had to leave early so Susan was coming for Thomas. Would be here, in fact, at any moment. Thomas packed his tool box and padlocked the piece of plywood that stood as a door. For all the good it did, since the holes that would be windows were now only covered with heavy plastic.

Thomas heard tires grinding gravel, but by the time he'd lifted his hand to wave hello his wife was out of the car and in his arms, her head against his blue vest. Thomas opened to her hug, returned it. He thought from this hug she'd be smiling, but when he raised her chin for a kiss, he saw Susan's tears.

"Mitch," she responded to the question in Thomas' eyes. Thomas walked to the car with his arm around Susan, remembering how pissed she had been earlier in the month, how she'd told him, "Mitch has really gone over the line, saying he loves me, saying he'll send me flowers, saying he'll wait for me forever."

Thomas backed the car out toward the main road. "What is it this time?"

"Al wants to write him up, give him a 128A."

For two years Thomas had urged Susan to find some procedural way to stop the verbal liberties this man Mitch took, "Good," he said now.

"I don't know; I don't like it."

Thomas could feel energy rising, anger. He always lived with mixed feelings about Susan's work at the prison, and everything he had heard about Mitch Reiser enraged him. "Susan, you've told me that no matter what you say, Mitch Reiser won't listen. Isn't it time to take some action he'll have to acknowledge?"

Susan looked out the window as Thomas spoke: the burger stand, bowling alley, the high school at the edge of town. "I don't know, I tell you. Every week I go up in front of that class and talk about finding words to match what our eyes, minds and hearts know are true. Am I being a liar?"

"Listen, Susan. Mitch has brought this write-up on himself. The man knows the system better than you do. He knows the consequences of his behavior."

"Yes, but..."

"You're going to give me a speech about human concern."

Susan turned to Thomas and smiled.

"Seventeen years, I know you a .little," Thomas said. "But, Susan, you know sometimes concern has to be expressed sharply. How many times have we had to say, 'That's it!' to the girls?" Although Thomas felt Mitch was a manipulative weasel who couldn't be trusted within ten feet of a woman, he knew his wife wouldn't listen to words in that vein. If he wanted Susan to

hear him, he had to find another way of phrasing the problem. "Susan, if you keep treating Mitch as some poor misguided child who needs to be protected from the reality of the world ... "

"Okay, okay. Enough. I mean," Susan again revved herself up, then stopped, was silent for a few moments. "Well, let me tell you a story, a true one.

"Al got a call just as I was leaving, from the Artist/Facilitator at the women's prison. Some of the women are preparing a puppet show. They've come up with the idea, are writing the script, making the puppets, painting the scenery," Susan said. "The story is of a good girl gone bad, and then gone good again.

"The puppet of this good girl stands with her round, green face, her long dress, sweet bonnet. Remove her bonnet, though, the Artist/Facilitator told Al, and there's another face on the back of her head, black and gray this face, distorted and very, very sad. This face, says its creator, is the childhood the puppet carries around with her, the childhood she must hide." Susan paused, "I mean, Mitch ... "

"Sssh," Thomas said, "I know." He put his arm around his wife's shoulder and smiled. "Want to ask me how my day was?" Thomas asked.

Susan leaned her body into Thomas. "Right. How was your day, sweetie?"

"Red and I were quiet all day, just nailed on roofing. From up on the rafters, we could see clear downcoast. Red brought his binoculars and we'd take little breaks to watch the last of the whales on their way south to Baja."

Thomas pulled into the gas station in town and Susan went up the block to the post office. She came back to the car laughing.

"Something funny in the mail?" Thomas asked, heading the car back onto the road.

"No, just thought I saw DC."

"You thought he escaped?"

"I didn't think anything. I just saw this man from the back in blue jeans and workshirt and I started to say, 'Hi, DC.'"

"I guess there's no escape," Thomas said. "I mean for me, not DC."

Bad enough, he thought, that we can never go anywhere without running into at least one officer, secretary or administrative official. Bad enough that Officer Davies plays outfield for my baseball team, that Chief Deputy Teller's wife is the girls' high school principal, that Randle's youngest son clerks at the deli, that Betsy Chin's out pulling weeds from those two flower beds she calls her garden whenever we drive by. Susan and I can't even sit in the car for ten minutes without being joined by imaginary prisoners.

That night, Varella Williams called from the city. Thomas answered – "Just received this invitation to some banquet," Varella said – then passed the phone to Susan.

Varella must have asked how things were going, and when Susan told her, come unglued. "You think you're a cop, girl?" Thomas could hear from his chair next to Susan's. "The man didn't do a single thing wrong."

Thomas listened to Susan sputter the words he, and probably Al Greer, had been speaking, "But, Varella, talking like that is wrong in there."

"She's right; I know she's right," Susan wailed as she hung up the phone. "Not right from Al's point of view, or Sam Randle's; but as a poet, a teacher, I know she's right."

"Even as a poet, I don't think she's right," Thomas said, beginning to tire of Susan's struggle. "A poet has to take responsibility for the words he chooses. Language shouldn't be used to manipulate."

Susan insisted on feeling bad until Thomas said, "Maybe you're the one needing to grow up."

Susan responded in kind, "You're a fine one to talk, taking responsibility for lumber and concrete, but no human beings."

"What are you and the girls – redwood siding? Susan, Varella spent exactly three hours inside with your students who all were dazzled by her. She walked in on edge and was so grateful

to encounter human beings instead of monsters, that now she's gone to the opposite extreme: all the men she met were deep soulful freedom fighters who are being repressed.

"Look," Thomas was walking out of the room, "if you can't do the job you think you're in there to do, then just quit."

For the next couple days, Thomas and Susan were cool. On Thursday, Thomas came up behind Susan as she cooked, put his hands on her belly, nuzzled her neck. But she stiffened and he walked away hurt. Friday morning, Susan sat down in his lap as he looked over blueprints. She smiled, then began working her tongue in his mouth. "Okay, I give in," Thomas said.

That night, New Year's Eve, they drove to Red and Melissa's. Thomas and Red had been friends since high school. Red was the one who had discovered the North Coast and his letters to Thomas, who was then traveling around the world, invited him to come and dig in, to find and create a new and true home. It took another two years, but eventually Thomas arrived at the land Red had just bought. Red was about to begin building his cabin, the core of the one he now lived in with Melissa and their kids, and Thomas stayed around to help. And then stayed around longer, stayed around now for nearly twenty years. Their marriages were nearly as old as the business they'd started, and both business and love lives had survived many a severe North Coast winter storm.

Red and Thomas enjoyed physical labor and neither cared much about financial success, so they continued to build houses and eke out a living. Melissa and Susan had been young hippie girls when the men met them, living at a commune on the river, spending their days in the garden, their nights in some lover's bed. They were all part of the first wave of back-to-the-landers, knowing an Eden their age and The Age had allowed. And then they grew up, were thrown out of the garden. These young Eves became householders, mothers and serious artists; they sunk roots instead of sprouting wings.

Now they had teenage children who were, at this moment, partying elsewhere. Now their winter gardens were green with chard, parsley and leeks. Now the fiber sculptures Melissa worked on ten-hours-a-day had found a home in one of the Bay Area's finest galleries. Now Susan's desk was covered with a cycle of poems and the nearly completed paste-up of her class' new anthology. Now the shell of the house Thomas and Red were building was battened down and safe.

The four friends stood around the woodstove, together and close. Still there's that look in her eyes, Thomas thought as he looked at his wife. Part of her is elsewhere, with her students. He wanted Susan here, fully here, though he, too, felt for those men, New Year's Eve, alone. She's such a Romantic, still, at 40, Thomas thought. Beauty and Suffering, that's what she responds to. In his heart of hearts sometimes Thomas thought Susan's Pain, her attempts to find Truth – capital P, capital T – lessened her effectiveness as a teacher. He wanted to block out these thoughts, they seemed like betrayal, for he loved Susan's heart and he loved Susan's soul. But despite the morning making up in bed, Thomas still felt a small gap between them. How could Susan not see Mitch needed a firm "No"?

A car pulled into the drive, and Melissa went toward the door, "Guess LuAnn and Trevor are here."

Trevor and LuAnn had never exactly been hippies, wanderers or back-to-the-landers. They came to the North Coast in the mid-70s, rather than the late '60s, and came more out of a desire to be part of a small, therefore, they thought, manageable, political community, than out of a desire to build a home or dig in earth. They had come as teachers from Los Angeles where they felt surrounded by other teachers wanting to do good for their students, but finding it impossible to do so in a system that was so huge and so full of paperwork and red tape. They came hoping this town's combined student population of three hundred, kindergarten through twelfth grade, would allow them to teach, really teach.

They discovered that small school districts were as stymied – albeit for different reasons – when it came to "teaching, really teaching," as large districts, but they stayed anyway. They bought and continued to live in a house in town. Trevor had been instrumental in beginning a continuation high school for students who would otherwise have dropped out, and he was this school's primary teacher. LuAnn was the chief administrator of the county's youth services program, which meant, as the county seat was over the hills, that she spent most of each week in her car.

The friends caught up, talked about work, about the play in town, about the newest controversy before the school board. The lives of his friends amazed Thomas. He and Red worked hard and they were certainly at the mercy of forces bigger than they were – the weather, building codes, inspectors who'd say one thing today and another tomorrow, and city-bred homebuilders who knew very little about water tables or perc tests. Still, there was a scale to his days that felt human to Thomas. He deeply respected LuAnn, Trevor and his own wife, but he couldn't imagine choosing to live in the world as they did.

Melissa called the group to the dinner table at 9:30. The moon was high now, just outside the dining room window, and the moon and candles shed all the light the room needed.

LuAnn asked Melissa about her sculpture, Susan about her poems. Melissa had made the choice a few years ago, when her children were old enough not to need her full time attention, to be an artist, to give herself the time she needed to fully do that work. She argued that Susan and Trevor cheated their art by spending most of their week doing other jobs.

"Oh come on," was Susan's usual response. "What's this notion of 'artist'? Even you with your gallery in Marin, aren't interested in that few-win/many-lose art market. You use squares from old quilts and rag dolls made by grandmothers. Everything about your work gives credit to the artist in each homesteader. Every piece of yours sings hallelujah to making beautiful objects to be used by loved ones.

"Trevor and me, too; we're making art all day long with people who aren't usually thought of as artists. I've got a great book of my students' poems just about ready to go to the printer. Isn't that art? And Trevor's always showing kids how to think as they draw each other's portraits, or document the old buildings in town on canvas."

For awhile – in his early 20s, before he'd met LuAnn, before he became a teacher – Trevor had focused entirely on his painting. He loved the work, but went stir-crazy spending all his time alone in a studio. Slowly he realized he needed to have a lot of contact with people, and in teaching, he'd found room for this need. He was a good teacher, and this competence helped out when he was in the phase of the painting process where everything was still in pieces and his inner voice was saying, "You're never going to get it right, are you?"

For a long time, Trevor saw his life as a teacher, as a husband and as a painter, as all split from each other. He resented this split deeply and was often angry. LuAnn pointed out to him that all these lives were his life and that seeing the parts as split seemed to lead directly to his migraine headaches and her eating three pounds of Oreo cookies a day.

Now, more and more, Trevor's life felt whole. His week-ends were long dreamy days where he functioned on intuition, letting paint and paper lead him. He'd work until three in the morning and not realize it was three in the morning.

Sunday evening, he'd "come back." He'd read the paper, talk politics and sewer lines and Real World with LuAnn and friends. Sunday evening would be followed by four ten-to-twelve hour days with the kids, with their parents or foster parents, with psychologists and counselors, with principals and other school administrators. And then motor-mouthing half-the-night with LuAnn, each of them running down their day, examining, telling stories.

Then, Friday mornings. Those hours that used to seem so unproductive to him, for it took so long to wind down. He'd drift on Friday mornings, putter around town or underneath the car. Then, at some point in the afternoon, he'd be ready, and he'd make his way to his studio in the garage and begin to paint.

And it worked. Trevor found all this was working. It worked at the cost of having no children of their own; it worked because he lived with a woman equally obsessed with her job, a woman who calmed down by cooking soups that would last all week, a woman who didn't mind going dancing by herself while he painted all Saturday night. But it did work.

Thomas knew it wasn't quite like this for Susan, who was raising two daughters and who lived on five acres, not in a house in town. Thomas knew that Susan never really got the time she needed at her desk, just there with a blank piece of paper and a pen. Or, it wasn't time, she said, it was space, the mental space new poems are born in.

"I mean, why do we spend our time creating these objects," Susan was asking, "sculptures, paintings, poems? Just this week, a guy came into the office to talk to Millicent. He was always like a walking ball of rage, you could just see it. He talked to her, and I heard him, about how in his life there had only been two ways to get rid of anger: carrying it inside, or getting it out through hitting against someone else. Well, he told her, she'd taught him that this rage could be art. That it wasn't dark or bad or evil, but something real. And, he said, now when he gets mad, he doesn't have to hold it in or put it off on someone else, he can turn it into art. He told her this was the best thing he'd ever learned in his life, and that she had taught it to him."

"When I think of you at the prison," LuAnn said after the group's long, shared silence, "I think of when I was in Greece. No, don't laugh," she said to Red. "I do. When I was in Greece, I could never sit on a park bench without some strange man joining me, I could never walk without hearing that 'hsss.' I hated it, and everything in my upbringing as an American woman of the late twentieth century, gave me the right to hate it.

"But, you know, when I looked around me, I saw a few women going to market in the mornings, scurrying around in their loose black clothes doing chores. But, at night, the world was all male. And I could see how truly foreign I was, this single woman traveling alone. From their eyes, I was hardly human."

"How is that like Susan in prison?" Trevor asked gently, scooping the last of the salad onto his plate.

"What it must be like to function in a culture that's so different from yours, such different values. And, yet, you're the tourist; you have to follow their rules."

Susan nodded, "Yeah, but more than that, too. Before I went in to NCCF. I had such clear assumptions about 'guards' and 'our brothers behind bars,' all that rhetoric I grew up with. But it's not like that. Right and wrong don't stay in one place. Some of my students have killed people and, at the very same time, they are intelligent, compassionate men I really care for. Some of the officers will do whatever they're told to keep the order they're hired to keep, but within that, they try to be decent and funny and fair. I'm astounded, so often, by staff members who do a good job, who are human, in this place that so easily calls up the worst in all of us.

"I get so angry with people who come in from the outside thinking they have the place all figured out. There was this film-maker a few weeks ago, who came in wanting to make a film about artists in prison, but he wasn't there to observe, he was there to use all of us to justify the assumptions he walked in the gate with. My class put him in his place fast.

"I can say the system is wrong because it's not working. We lock up more and more men and give them longer and longer sentences and still the crime rate doesn't go down. I can pull myself way far away so that my perspective is massive and say nothing will change until racism does, until everyone gets a real education and can get a job that pays enough to raise a family. I can say nothing substantial will change until greed does, until we all care absolutely about every human being living.

"But when I'm inside, I'm there, up close. I don't have the luxury of panoramic vision; I have to do the best I can do. Same as the staff does, same as the prisoners do. When I'm in there, I can only give what I've got to give: this small gift of making a poem."

What is it in there for her really, day-to-day? Thomas wondered, wanting to get close, wanting to erase any trace of a gap between them. When I talk about building a house, no one

who's not done it is going to think of uneven lumber and the sound of a hacksaw cutting rebar and what knots do to nails. What is it like for Susan, her students pulling her one way, the rules pulling another, Al Greer's advice, staff opinions and keeping focused on what she's there for, the art that she shares?

"Let me tell you a story," Susan said. "Millicent told me about a friend of hers, a very beautiful woman who had just begun teaching at a maximum security prison down south. The woman was teaching, holding class, when there was a power outage and all the lights went out. The woman was very, very frightened, expecting that at any moment she would be attacked by these rapists and murderers she hardly knew."

Thomas could see from the way Susan sat – a softening in her shoulders, a raising of her cheekbones in a slight half-smile – that something had shifted. Maybe it had been Trevor's talk about the new kid in his class who had lived until he was five mostly locked in a closet, how now this kid played basketball and loved algebraic equations. Maybe it had been Red telling of his sister's slow recovery from last spring's automobile accident. How she'd said, "I wouldn't have made it without my friends, but no one could re-learn how to walk except me, step-by-step." Whatever it was, Thomas could see Susan had made peace with Mitch having to live out his own fate.

"When the lights went on, though," Susan continued, "the woman saw her students in a circle around her, facing outward, ready to take on any man that might have come in the dark to threaten her."

The moon was caught in the fir's upper branches and now gave scant light. In the last flickering of Melissa's New Year's candles, Thomas thought how all the stories told this evening had been stories of pain and confusion, yet what he felt from his friends' voices was hope. He remembered, in the darkening room, once seeing "Waiting for Godot" in Berlin, not even understanding the words in German. The play was so stark, so full of silence. But he walked out into the street that night, half his life ago, wanting to sing.

CHAPTER NINE

Betsy Chin rolled the food cart along the third tier of Unit 1. It was Wednesday usually the first day of her week-end, but today she was working two shifts back-to-back. A year at this pace and she'd have the down payment on a place close enough to the ocean to allow a thirty minute drive to NCCF, and far enough inland to spend all the hours she now spent working overtime under the sun gardening. Her father frequently quoted what he said was an old Chinese proverb: If you want to be happy for a night, get drunk; if you want to be happy for a year, get married; if you want to be happy for a lifetime, plant a garden. Betsy had tried the first two, and found the happiness lasted just about as long as the proverb predicted. Now she'd turned to gardening.

The man in cell number 23 sat on the floor in the dark, using his cot as a desk. Betsy had wondered, as she first walked the tier, why he sat with his light off, since he was so obviously involved in his drawing. He hadn't looked up when she unlocked his food port, but he looked up now. "You're new up here, aren't you?"

"Just filling in today while Officer Norris is off on vacation," Betsy's rubber-gloved hand slid the tray through the food slot.

"Think you can do anything about this light?"

"Huh?"

"The bulb's been burned out for ten days. I'm having a hell of a time finishing this drawing right."

Betsy had been about to push the cart on down the tier, but she turned again to the man in 23. "You haven't had a light for ten days?"

"As you say, Officer Norris has been on vacation, and we've had someone different up here every day all the time he's been gone. Everyone says they'll take care of it, but I'm still drawing in the dark."

Betsy nodded, "I guess it's not going to mean much for me to say I'll bring you a lightbulb."

"Well, I hate to be impolite, but I'll believe it when I see it."

"I don't blame you. Look, I still have half the tier to serve lunch to. I'm going to finish feeding, and then I'll bring you that bulb."

"Cell 23's right in the middle. I live with that fate."

Again Betsy looked puzzled.

"Officer Norris starts feeding one day at cell number 1, the next day at cell number 50. Either way, he reaches me just when the food's starting to get cold."

"I'll be back with the bulb."

So often Betsy heard staff talk about inmates as though they were a different species, a species whose most characteristic traits were impatience, self-centeredness and sexual weirdness. Betsy had been gassed often enough, had been fronted by enough convicts, had been the recipient of enough catcalls and vulgarity, had seen enough wool being pulled over enough eyes to know how exhaustion and disappointment and the need for self-protection could lead one to throw up a screen, a wall, a steel-plated fortress that allowed one to say, "these guys are animals and that's all there is to it."

However, just when Betsy would be on the brink of shutting down, she'd be shaken awake by some incident like this: a man locked all day every day in a 4_ by 8 foot cell with no light bulb, drawing. Whatever these men had done that landed them in this place, here they now were, human beings locked in cages. When she could crack through her own exhaustion, disappointment and need for self-protection, Betsy often witnessed moments of selflessness and patience. She was struck daily by how these men's lives, although not chosen, were so like the lives of monks she'd read of. These men had to find something like the surrender her mother's Buddhist teachings spoke of, or they would go crazy.

And to be a decent officer, she had to find something like surrender herself. If she started taking personally all that came her way, she'd also go nuts. She once heard an inmate say that no woman walks into a prison without being mentally raped by half the men there. She knew that was true. When she first started working, she didn't think she'd be able to survive a shift on the lower yard or being on duty when all the men in Unit 2 were coming back from chow and were ambling to their cells before lock up. Every man in the crowd seemed to think he and he alone was god's gift to women, that his particular line or his particular swagger, if only she'd notice, would win him her body, if not her heart.

Betsy had long talks with herself and with other women who worked at NCCF. The temptation was to chalk all this strutting up to the word "inmate," spoken in a voice of disdain. But every woman who worked in the joint knew her brother officers were often as much on the make and as vulgar in their approach. The disdainful "inmate" would change, then, to a scornful, "men." But what, someone would tend to bring up, about women locked behind bars? Some were as bold as any man here. Betsy found this talk lead only to a misery of bad feeling, to a cynical sneer. So she tried to look deeper. She told herself that any human being locked away from full life was either going to become a saint able to renounce all desire, or was going to go after whatever he could get. To want to be close to a creature of the opposite sex wasn't perverted, but natural. She knew the dumb swagger wasn't really for her sake, but for the sake of the man kept away from women and sex. She couldn't imagine any of these men had ever truly won a woman, even for one night, with the kind of crude come on she heard on their lips. She couldn't imagine the whistles and sniggers and "baby, you sure are a sweet one"s would move or impress any woman alive. So then for whose sake were the hips thrust, the words crooned? For the sake of the singer Betsy supposed. For the man himself locked away, to prove to himself he still was a man. When she kept this in mind, she could walk through the yard or the block and ignore or laugh at what came her way.

But after a week walking handcuffed men to the showers, or finding shanks whenever they searched or strip searching visitors to find dope up their asses, or seeing an officer who tried to be fair get stabbed, or working for a sergeant who thought praise beneath his dignity, she got tired and every pore of her skin would scream, "leave me alone" if an inmate even smiled in her direction. At times she'd find herself writing up an inmate for behavior she would have laughed at earlier in the week or before a dozen other inmates had let her know what a fine piece she was. Betsy had heard, though she hadn't experienced it herself, that many women who worked in a men's prison for any length of time, began to have trouble with their periods. She believed it.

Betsy had provided custody coverage for the Arts Program's classes for over two years and she'd often heard the Teaching Artists talk about sensitivity, planting seeds – about how art was the one thing alive in this place of death and despair. But, Betsy thought, you didn't have to be a poet to be sensitive. Everyone has feelings and half the people she talked to who worked in the pen expressed these feelings. You didn't have to be an artist to be a human being.

Betsy walked back to cell 3-23 with a lightbulb.

"Hey, officer," an inmate called from cell 17. "I need a phone call real bad. My wife's supposed to visit this week-end, but she doesn't know I'm in the hole, doesn't know we'll have to visit through glass."

"Why is that a problem? She'll find out when she gets here."

"Yeah, but I've got to tell her," the inmate, holding onto the bars of his cell spoke to Betsy through the black wire mesh, sputtered reasons and excuses.

Betsy listened and decided that this man was not trying to cover anything up – a planned drug exchange, a transfer of money – but just wanted to occupy her own time, wanted to keep her there listening to him.

"I've got to move on," Betsy finally said.

"Don't you want to hear my drag?"

Betsy laughed, but said, "No, not really."

Thursday night Officers John Tipton and Betsy Chin sat in the Education Building waiting for the inmates to arrive for evening programming.

John Tipton was a big black man who played Santa Claus both for the kids in the visiting room at NCCF and for the holiday show at the school in town. "Those plants my wife bought from you at the Flea Market for Christmas sure are doing well."

"Maybe I'll be a full-time gardener when I retire."

"In thirty more years."

"In thirty more years," Betsy agreed. "What's up with you, John? You look really annoyed."

"I am. That bozo teaching yoga hands me his paperwork about two minutes before class is supposed to begin. It's happened each and every week since the lockdown."

"So just drop his class."

"That's it. He goes around me, this week to the Captain, last week to Torello. I get a call, 'Let's do it just this one time.' Each week he goes to a different administrator. If I say no, it should end with me. I'm following Institutional Procedure. I mean, hey, I don't try to screw anybody, but you better believe I'm not going out of my way to help this guy out of any bind."

"Well, thanks to Washington and Lincoln, you have a four-day week-end to unwind."

"Not you?"

Betsy shook her head, "Nah, I'll be working my usual shift."

The officers were covering a full house tonight. With a month to go before the Arts Program banquet, both band teachers scheduled extra rehearsal time. Susan and Mac were also meeting with their students. Paul, Officer Tipton's "yoga bozo," was there, too. Betsy checked in inmates, while John Tipton ran around unlocking the doors of the classrooms, helping Mac transport materials.

Betsy wandered around during classes, checking to make sure no one was in the halls selling drugs, smoking dope, planning some deal, getting killed, digging holes through brick walls or escaping out of non-existent basement windows. That was her job and she did it thoroughly, conscientiously, although she had seen that, by-and-large, inmates wanted to protect programming and weren't going to do anything to jeopardize these classes.

Betsy was well enough liked, but she knew she was custody and that her presence altered whatever was happening in class, so she never stayed long. For a few moments, though, she watched Susan's students memorize their poems, Raylene talk swing, Gordon talk beat, and Mac's students work away at self-portraits.

John Tipton was sitting on a high stool, reading the prison department's newsletter when Betsy came back from making her first rounds.

"An article here about the new prison at Lake Mendocino. Have you heard from Reyna? She's there now, isn't she?"

"Yeah, she's been there six months. She said it was amazing to go from NCCF, which has been here close to forever, to this brand spanking new prison. She was there when the first busload came in, thirty-five inmates!"

Betsy looked over John's shoulder at the newsletter, "So now they're double celling even there. Reyna talked about how orderly everything was at the beginning. Each inmate on each bus pulling in learned right away that he'd get the services and treatment he had coming, but that nothing out of bounds would be tolerated. And staff could follow through on both counts because there were, what?, three, four hundred inmates?"

"Now," Betsy pointed to the article, "it will be interesting to see what happens as they get more crowded. You ever been tempted to transfer to one of the new institutions, John?"

"Me? Nah, my life's here now. What would this town do without its big black Santa?"

"You seen Rudeen?" John Tipton asked Betsy when she came up the stairs at 9:15.

"He didn't leave with the others?"

"His ID card's still here."

"Well, he was in yoga when I looked at 8:30. All the rooms are empty now, I just checked. You sure you didn't see him leave? Maybe he just forgot his card."

"I know Rudeen; he didn't walk by. And I don't remember Paul Norris walking out, either."

"I was in the music studio making sure everything was locked up in there. I just told the rest of the classes count had cleared, it was time to go back to their cells. Well, let's lock the doors and go through the building."

"I wouldn't put it past that yoga-bozo to help Rudeen escape," John said as he and Betsy unlocked every door, cabinet and storeroom their keychains had keys to. They pushed aside ceiling panels, shone flashlight beams into dark corners, looked under tables and behind stacks of chairs. Nothing but trash, moldy bread, cigarette butts.

"I guess it's time to call the squad," John said.

"Let's call Unit 2, first. Make sure he's not somehow in his cell. And I'll call the hospital, though surely one of us would have known if he'd taken ill."

"Yeah, I guess we'd better cover all the bases before we call in the big time."

But phone calls to Unit 2 and the hospital turned up no Rudeen, so John summoned the squad, who moved fast in heavy boots to all the usual escape haunts – baskets of sheets in the laundry, backs of trucks in the maintenance yard.

"If this guy escapes, that will be the end of programming. At least for awhile," Betsy said as she and John went downstairs to make one more search.

"Forget programming," John Tipton said sotto voce, since the two C.O.s were being followed by Lieutenant Mitchell from the squad. "Let's just hope we don't lose our jobs."

The three made the rounds, Betsy unlocking and relocking every door.

"And what about this one?" Lieutenant Mitchell asked.

"That's a room we don't have the key for," Betsy said. "It's on a ring we don't pull. It's locked; we checked it before."

Lieutenant Mitchell turned the knob, but the door would not open. He began to search his ring for one that might work, when, quietly, the door opened. Out walked inmate Rudolph Rudeen and right behind him walked Paul, the yoga instructor.

"What the hell?" John Tipton stared at the men.

"Rudolph needed to talk and he showed me this door was open, so we went back here after class."

"Talk?" Lieutenant Mitchell sniggered. "Well, your pants are up now. But you expect me to believe you were talking, in a room whose door you locked from the inside?"

"Talking, yes sir. These men don't have the chance to say what's on their minds much in here."

"Well, I can tell you straight up what's on my mind," Lieutenant Mitchell shoved Paul Norris toward the stairs. "You're out of here."

"Let me explain."

"You can explain all you want to when you talk to the Warden, but believe me, no matter how innocent your talk with Rudeen, your program's a goner, if it's up to me. You had us running around this place for forty-five minutes. We don't need you.

"Here, lead this man out," Lieutenant Mitchell instructed Betsy. "And make sure you get his card. We don't want him back. I'll take care of Rudeen," he said as he turned to the inmate. "Tipton, call back the squad and make sure that this time, all the doors in this building are locked."

Betsy was called in for questioning after the holiday week-end. "It takes a long time to prove yourself here, to be trusted. After all, your brother and sister officers' lives depend upon you," Lieutenant Mitchell lectured. "No matter how custody conscious any teacher or artist or

chaplain, or even a counselor, might be, he's not wearing green and his job isn't the same as yours. He can only be trusted up to a point."

John Tipton was blaming Paul, blaming the convict, blaming the second watch officer who had forgotten to make sure that room was locked. But Betsy knew it had been her responsibility to be on top of what was going on in that building, and she bore the burden of not doing her job as well as she should have. For no matter if 99.9% of programming inmates played it straight, she knew all those photographs they'd shown her during Orientation were real: the stashed weapons, the shoe with the hollow heel, the teacher with a knife in his back.

On the way back to the yard, her usual assignment, she saw Millicent's crew hauling masonite panels. "Look, Officer Chin," Manual called. "Come see what we're doing."

At this point the panels were still mostly covered with charcoal and not much paint. The drawings were of women, all different ages and races and sizes of women. Betsy knew Millicent had been working to make her crew see the value of creating real women, not magazine pin-ups, and, although without all the paint Betsy couldn't tell for sure, the charcoal sketches showed sagging cheeks, double chins, bags under the eyes. She wondered if these finished eyes would hold the real pain of real women badly hurt by men they loved. Would these inmate artists, these men who thought of themselves as so macho and tough, be strong enough to touch these victims' pain and paint it on wood? All she said, though, was "I love how I get to see this here, now, and also to know I'll be passing it by on my way home every night as soon as it's done and installed." Betsy was working the yard again on Sunday as the men were leaving for chapel.

"Yeah, I know. Protestant Chapel," the sergeant said to the twentieth man leaving the yard. "They have a slew of guests from the Bay Area visiting the service today," he said to Betsy. "Nothing fills the chapel with inmates like enough women from the outside.

"Okay, get your butt on over to the chapel," the sergeant said to two more men. "Come on, come on. I know what a serious believer you are."

The sergeant turned again to Betsy, "Last Sunday two dozen sisters came in and I swear, all these jokers were Catholic."

CHAPTER TEN

In early March, the talk around NCCF was: no rain and no money. A major deficit in the State's coffers lead to a daily parade of facts and rumors. What would be cut next? Al Greer could order no new equipment. A third watch lieutenant in Unit 2 retired, and in order to save the State the cost of benefits, Sam Randle might have to use Permanent Intermittent employees indefinitely to fill the spot. Timothy Augustus, and all other inmates, would now have to pay for whatever medicine the institution's doctors prescribed. Two crew officer positions were cut, so Dolores Mendoza had to stop the road work project that had been so successful. Money for coverage during afternoon programming might dry up soon, which would mean Betsy Chin would lose one of her favorite sources of overtime pay.

Dolores Mendoza walked into the Arts Program office one sunny, late winter morning, and sat down at Millicent Hidalgo's empty desk. Al had been alone in the room wondering on paper how he would, if he had to, reschedule all the afternoon classes. He showed Dolores his figures, "It won't work."

Dolores pulled out the lowest desk drawer and lifted her legs so that, leaning back in the chair, she could rest her calves on the drawer's outer edge. Her elbow bent on the desk top, she rubbed her forehead with the fingers of her hand before she spoke, "My suggestion is to stop worrying about theoretical troubles; I've got worse news to tell."

Al sighed, slumped in his chair, "Go on, hit me with it."

"I was just in with the Warden, and he said no more banquets, at least through the end of this fiscal year."

"That means us?"

"That means you, us. All of us. No Arts Program banquet, no chapel banquet, No Indian pow wow, no Muslim celebration, no Jewish Passover. Nada."

Al paused, "Maybe I'll take early retirement."

"Twenty years early?"

"Why not?"

"I assume your family's gotten in the habit of eating?"

Al smiled.

"You're an artist," Dolores said, swiveling the desk chair and swinging her feet off the drawer and onto the floor. "Be creative."

Al sighed. He hated that phrase – knowing it meant he'd been dumped on again – but he said, "All right; you're right."

For a few moments he stared through the open door of the office. In the hallway, Torello's clerk, a tall, stringy man whose blue shirt was too short to cover his long torso, stood, back to Al, at the copy machine. Anne, the Appeals secretary, walked slowly across the hall to this machine, reading the small stack of papers she held. Business as usual in this unusual world. Equipment for the Arts Program or no equipment; afternoon programming or no afternoon programming; banquets or no banquets, made no difference to the basic operation of the North Coast Correctional Facility. But in his world, to do his job, the outcome of these either/ors made an enormous difference. Al felt tired. Sometimes it was so hard to keep on truckin' when a major, but unpredictable, road block up ahead was bound to be part of the journey.

"You've got to be kidding," Mac stirred sugar into his coffee. The snack bar was nearly empty, except for the Arts Programs staff. "After all the work these guys have done, after all these weeks of planning?"

"Don't they realize that some of my students have family coming from as far away as San Diego?" Gordon James asked.

"Don't you realize, nobody cares?" Tom Scaramella responded.

"No wonder staff here turns off," Millicent said. "How long can a person keep putting out effort in an environment where the best laid plans ...?"

"What's the alternative?" Raylene asked. "If we stop trying, nothing gets done. There must be something we can do?"

"If there's no money for coverage, what choices do we have?" Mac asked. Al tried to let his mind open, to stop thinking along the straight line it had been following in order to make the banquet happen: Who would provide coverage? How would the food be prepared? What space could they use? How would inmates, equipment and artwork get from point A to point B to point C and back to point A? How could he put the answers to all these questions in memos that would meet his superiors' needs? Get yourself off that track, Al told himself, and see what else there might be lurking around the periphery.

"If coverage is the problem," Gordon James said, "and all the extras like bringing folks in, food, why not just get our classes together one night when we've already got coverage? Let our students perform for each other?"

"But they don't want to perform for each other," Susan said. "They want to perform for their people."

"What about videotaping all the performers," Al suggested.

"Wouldn't that have the same limitation?" Susan questioned. "If all we do is to show that video in here, we haven't met our students' desire to share their work with their families."

"There was a woman in here last fall from a cable TV station in the Bay Area," Al said. "She was very interested in the Arts Program; maybe she'd be willing to show a tape we produced on her station. And she must know people at stations elsewhere in the state. We could at least investigate the possibility of creating a tape that could be shown on TV in some of the places our students' families live."

The early afternoon sun fell through the snack bar's windows and across the table where the Arts Program staff sat talking. Al felt the sun warm the left side of his face, his shoulder. As

always in here some part of himself was not here; some part of himself was at home, in his studio, this same sun lighting the primed canvas he'd placed on his easel only last night. "I'll talk to Tony," Al said. "I'll see if he is willing to have his video crew work on this project. And I'll talk to the cable TV woman from Oakland. Let me see how realistic this idea is before you talk about it to your students. No use disappointing them again."

"What should we tell our students now?" Raylene asked.

"The truth. Because of the budget cuts, all banquets have been canceled. Tell them we're working on alternatives, but at this point we can't promise anything."

Timothy Augustus shook his head, "You believe that drag about a deficit? Look around, Susan. This place was quiet for a long time. Then, all of a sudden. we go into a long lockdown and now this bogus deficit. What does that tell you?"

Susan shrugged, "Well, I guess it doesn't tell me what it tells you."

"You believe the surface?"

"Yeah, I guess so. The lockdown followed a murder; the budget cuts are hitting everyone."

"You have to learn how to look. Who benefits from this so-called deficit?"

"No one."

"No? Next year's an election year, right? Positions get cut now and next year they can go to the people and say, 'look, you all want to stop crime? Well, we don't have enough money to operate our prisons safely. You'll have to give us more.' And the public runs to the polls to vote in an increase to the prison budget. More jobs. It's all about more jobs. The lockdowns are about more jobs, and phony deficits are about more jobs."

Timothy was severely disappointed that the banquet had been canceled. He'd been at NCCF too long to believe anything they promised would really happen, but he'd allowed himself a small dose of excitement at having his wife here for this event. Banquets were different than

visiting in the visiting room. They were more like real life, a party. There was music to dance to, decent food to eat. He hadn't told Susan, but for the Arts Program banquet, Timothy had been planning to read the poem he'd written last Thanksgiving for his wife, for Chermaine. He might get teased by the brothers for reading a love poem, but Chermaine had that much coming – that much respect, that much acknowledgment of his feeling.

Betsy Chin walked slowly around Mac's classroom as his disgruntled and disappointed students stacked the drawings and paintings they'd made for the banquet. Betsy studied each one as it was placed on the dolly, to be transported back to the Arts Program storeroom. First was a painting of a woman looking at herself in the mirror. Nude, but she was no Playboy bunny. She was Latino, with big brown eyes. and her body had small rolls of fat – not ugly, just real. Betsy liked the way her skin wasn't painted one solid color, but had little areas in varying hues of brown. There was a large drawing of a cell, the rumpled blanket on the cot darkly shaded, the porcelain of the sink and toilet nearly white. The next was a painting of a man with bulging muscles, his arms tattooed with horses, swords and what looked to Betsy like the angel of death. The man was standing by a brick wall under a watchtower manned by an officer as burly as he was.

Another work was full of bright flat colors, one against the other, making shapes but not a recognizable object. There were birds, prison bars, portraits of children, ticking clocks, deer beside a river, and a whole series of inmate faces in pencil, charcoal and paint.

Betsy had watched the creation of all this work over the past weeks and months, had watched the excitement of the inmate artists preparing what they knew would be viewed by the public including their own families. Their faces, which had been open while creating, were now closed and sarcastic, and Betsy couldn't fault their anger. She wished she could just volunteer, say, "hey, I'll provide coverage for free." It used to be like that, before her days at NCCF. All programming then was covered by staff who volunteered time because they were interested in the

subject at hand, or staff just willing to make life a little richer for inmates. But union rules had changed that procedure, and now no volunteering of time was allowed. Betsy was glad to be paid for the work that she did, and yet when she heard about how it used to be, she understood why inmates always accused staff of covering programming only because they were being paid overtime, she understood why inmates would never believe she might be sincerely interested in their artwork, their music.

"No, it's just not a good idea, Al," Sam Randle said. "I appreciate the fact that this man's done good work for over two years and you'd like to document it. But he dug his own grave, now he has to lie in it."

Susan had questioned Al, "What about Mitch? He's no longer in my class, but he's still in Tom's and has done some work with Mac."

"I don't want him around you," Al had said. But then he thought, maybe there was some way to include at least a few of Mitch's paintings.

Though how would it look? He'd written this man up, asked him to leave the poetry program and suddenly his work shows up on the video. Sam was the one he could trust to get a good reality check without taking the risk that the Arts Program would be seen as absurd or naive.

"You might think I've lost my mind, Sam, but I was just wondering ..."

Sam didn't think Al had lost his mind. In fact, he appreciated that Al always tried to do his best for each inmate. That was doing his job, that was being useful in here. Still, Sam thought, Al had given this man chance after chance and he continued to maintain unacceptable behavior. At some point, Al had to let go. He didn't have to write him off as a human being, but he had to disassociate himself and his program from this Mitch Reiser. Besides, Sam might know that Al and Susan were sincere and wanted only to give credit to the work this inmate had done. But perception was often more important than reality at NCCF, and if staff perceived Al and Susan as

stupid do-gooders, or worse as dupes of a dangerous inmate, that could be death to their program. So Sam's answer was no, you'd better not do it.

"All right, Millicent!" Dolores approved. "You're sure decked out fine." As plans had moved ahead for the videotaping, Millicent Hidalgo and her crew had finished their panels for the North Coast Battered Women's Shelter. These panels had been the intended backdrop for the banquet's stage, but now that there was not going to be a banquet, Millicent and Al had come to see Dolores. Millicent wanted, she had said, some other institutional recognition of her crew's work before she followed the procedures she, Al and Dolores had spelled out in their memo to get the panels from NCCF to the Shelter. Dolores listened to Millicent and Al, and then talked to Warden Martinez. He had his office call a small press conference and it was for this press conference that Millicent had dressed up.

"I know Teri," Dolores said as Lieutenant Winters, the institution's Public Information Officer, introduced the two women. "She makes sure The North Coast News covers most of my talks in town and most of the work our inmate groups do inside. Thanks for coming out."

The small woman hoisted her camera pack higher on her shoulder and reached out to shake Dolores' hand.

"And I know Nancy," she smiled at Nancy Corcoran from the Shelter. "And Trevor. But I don't think we've met before," Dolores said to the young man who accompanied Trevor.

"This is Seth Rogers," Trevor introduced. "He's here to cover this event for the Continuation High School. Since a crew of our kids are going to help the folks at the Shelter install the panels, we thought it would be nice to come here, to see the work before it left the place where it was created."

Lieutenant Winters and Dolores walked with the visitors to the studio in the basement of the Education Building where the mural crew had worked on the panels. Al, Millicent and the crew were gathered and ready to talk to Teri, to Nancy, to Seth. Red Bilini walked in from the

North Coast Correctional Facility Reporter, to cover the event for the inmate newspaper. Soon Warden Martinez joined the group.

After handshakes and the setting up of cameras, the poising of pens, Warden Martinez began, "This is a unique occasion. One that honors the fine work Millicent Hidalgo and her mural crew have done, and, more, one that honors the gift of this fine work to women who have been the victims of crime.

"There are many assumptions floating around today: assumptions that criminals feel no remorse, no responsibility, for hurt they have caused; assumptions that victims, in their justified anger and pain, want criminals locked up in the worst of cages forever, with no access to human expression. The very fact of these panels," the Warden's long fingers indicated the boards richly colored now with the faces of a dozen women, "puts the lie to these assumptions.

"Ms. Corcoran, may I turn the floor over to you, for your words?" Warden Martinez ended.

Nancy Corcoran nodded in response to the Warden's slight bow, and walked to where he had stood. She visibly took a great gulp of air, and began to speak. "I have spent most of the past three years working for the rights of victims, working to create a safe shelter for women who have been beaten and raped by men. When Millicent approached me, and the women at the Shelter, about accepting these panels, my first thought was, no, I want nothing to remind me of these men who have hurt me and my friends. Nothing. But the longer Millicent talked, the more I realized that I was doing what I had counseled dozens of women not to do: I was keeping myself a victim, seeing myself and the Shelter still as at the mercy of the men who had caused us pain. I realized in my own mind, and realized further in talking with the other women after Millicent left, that we were being offered a chance to respond not as victims. We were being offered a chance to respond knowing our own strength and worth so well, that we could accept a gift from men who wished to offer it. I realized, we realized, that if we really wanted men to be responsible for the

harm they had caused, we had to be willing to gratefully accept the fruit of that responsibility.

And we do."

Nancy turned so that she faced the men of the mural crew straight on. "Millicent told us none of you were here for crimes against women. But all crimes are against women – against the mothers who bore you, against the women who love you, against your daughters. The victim is not only the individual you've robbed or maimed. Many others are also victims.

"I cannot say to you that I am no longer angry. I cannot say to you that I was not afraid to come here today. I cannot say to you that I fully forgive whatever harm you have caused innocent people. But I can say that we thank you very much for these beautiful panels. I can say that we appreciate the effort you took to create them for us. And, most of all, I can say that I hope with all of my being that creating this work, work that so sensitively portrays the faces of women, has helped you become whole."

Warden Martinez reached out to shake Nancy Corcoran's hand. Millicent put her arm around the young woman's shoulder. Manuel, whose turn it was to speak next, hesitated, wanting to shake the woman's hand, but unsure. Nancy saw his uncertain gesture and turned to face him, smiled, extended her hand.

"As you said, Ms. Corcoran," Manuel spoke, "none of us are in here for crimes against women. But, as you also said, all of our crimes have hurt some woman. We're all sorry for the hurt we've caused our mothers and sisters and daughters and wives.

"You spoke about what you and the women at your Shelter had to go through to accept our gift. Our crew also had to go through a lot to be able to offer these panels to you. We hear on the news every day about a public that wants to lock us up and throwaway the key. Such talk does not open our hearts. We know, and I'm sure Warden Martinez will shut me up if he thinks I'm out of line here, that prison often takes a rowdy youngster and turns him into a hardened criminal. It is work like the work Millicent and the Arts Program offer us that gives us convicts a chance to find another way."

"You can count me out," Timothy Augustus said to Susan when she announced the final approval for the videotaping. We don't even know that the video will ever be played on outside TV"

"We can't know for sure, but Al says that woman in Oakland promises she'll take a good look. It's up to us to come up with a quality program that will convince her."

"Well, I'm not going to participate in this sham." Timothy had really wanted to read his poem straight out to Chermaine, in front of all those people. He wanted to eat dinner with her, to dance with her. Not so much for a man to want, he thought. He didn't want her to turn on her TV set and see his face one hundred miles away. He didn't want his face on the TV set to be seen at an angle chosen by the video crew. He didn't want editing left to that Tony dude, whom he didn't even trust. He didn't want the whole tape at the mercy of the censors from the Warden's office. He didn't want the quality to be judged by some self-appointed experts at a rinky-dink TV station. He didn't want more and more people between him saying his poem and Chermaine listening. He wanted his mouth speaking, her ears hearing.

"Remember that talent show when DC read?" Timothy asked Susan. "The video crew taped it and never even asked if they could use that footage on the internal TV They just played it. DC was pissed! As he should have been. He might have forgotten and will be willing to read again, but I haven't forgotten. As I say, you can count me out."

"You're going along with this bullshit?" Varella Williams shouted into the phone. "First you write the poor man up, then you agree to exclude him from his videotaping. What's happened to you, Susan?"

Varella thought often about her visit to NCCF, five months before. She didn't have much sympathy with crime, but it was clear, once behind bars, it was the criminals who became victims. These men needed opportunities in the world and all they were given were gun towers

and locked cages. As far as Varella could see, Susan had been at that prison too long. Her students needed her to be a poet – someone who would stake her life for their right to speak what they saw, felt, experienced. They didn't need another sell-out, willing to hedge and compromise with a wrong-headed, wrong-hearted System. To Varella, it was simple. If Susan couldn't be a poet in that world, she should leave. And she should leave as noisily as possible, letting everyone know just what she thought.

Thomas Robertson had mixed feelings about the cancellation of the Arts Program banquet. He was sorry that four months of hard work would not lead to its natural expression. He was sorry that the men Susan taught would not be able to share their work with their families. He was sorry that, once again, hope and good feeling would lose out to some form of despair and cynicism.

But selfishly, Thomas was glad. Twice in the years Susan had worked there, he'd accompanied his wife to an event at NCCF. He'd been happy to see her world, even happy to fit faces to the names of her students. But he had hated to see the way inmates came on to his wife. He'd wanted to dunk Mitch Reiser's puppy-dog face in a bucket of water. Most of all, he wanted to climb the walls himself, to escape. He couldn't bear the steel and concrete, the guards, the rules. He was a man who had never lived as part of a nine-to-five rat race and seeing a world so tightly structured and controlled, made him want to turn into a bird, an angel. a 747 – anything with wings.

"Not quite a banquet, but it will have to do," DC joked with Betsy as she checked his name against the afternoon's movement sheet.

"Well, think of your nephews getting to watch your face on TV After all, they're under eighteen, they never would have even been able to come see you perform at the banquet."

DC shrugged, "I guess that's true. Probably none of my people would have been able to make the trip up here this time of year."

Downstairs in the video studio, the musicians and poets were gathering. Mac, Tony and Al had hung the artists' paintings and drawings earlier in the week, and Tony had instructed his crew to intersperse shots of these works with the sounds the live performers would make.

Max and Ralph stood in one corner, going over their poems. Both men had their poems memorized for weeks, but each needed this last minute assurance. Reginald Potter was clowning with Tall Tony, each accusing the other of being the more nervous. Gordon James' band was going to open the program, and they stood tuning up as the video crew positioned its cameras and lights. The country music band was sitting with Raylene on the floor, checking one last time on the order of their program. Tom Scaramella and his students lay out their hand-made instruments which they would shake, rattle and beat after the reading of each poet. Al ran around taping down cords and positioning mikes. And, then, all the activity quieted. Tony said, "Ready?" and from the corners of the studio the men and got into place.

In the two weeks of fast planning, Al, his staff, and the inmates involved, decided to make the taping more a live concert than a studio session, so everyone not yet on stage, sat down on the floor to be an audience. The blues band began and was fine. Al could tell from the first few notes that this was going to work, was going to be good. He sat down and leaned against the back wall. Everything moved as they'd planned it – the band left to applause, then DC, the first poet, began. No one flubbed, or not really, not the poets, not the musicians; it all worked.

Al caught Susan's eyes, Raylene's, Gordon's, Tom's. They all knew. This wasn't Carnegie Hall, it wasn't the Grand Old Opry, a Pulitzer Prize, the Apollo Theater, translation into ten languages or a gold record. It wasn't even a banquet. It was a minus-zero budget studio in a maximum security prison and a tape that either would or wouldn't be seen by a handful of people. But it was real. It was these men, their students, making music and reading poems in front of three walls of paintings and drawings. It was real; it was good. And it served.