

LEAVING DISNEYLAND

by Alexander Parsons

(The following excerpt opens in Tyburn Federal Penitentiary in Nevada, just after Doc Kane is granted parole, but before his release is processed. He owes a debt to his friend, Old Man Ellis, for erasing an infraction from his record that might have prevented his release. In return, Ellis has asked him for help with one of his scams.)

Just outside the doorway Ellis stands silhouetted against the brightness of the Yard. Doc steps into the sun, leaving the hum of the sewing machines behind. "I knew you was involved in this."

Ellis cracks a smile, the lines around his lips deepening into crevices. "Figured you could use a break."

"Had me a break."

"Yeah, I remember something 'bout a successful parole hearing," Ellis says. His frayed denims are monochromatic gray and ill-fitting, as if of a previous generation of uniform, reminiscent of stripes and chain gangs.

"How you get the Parole Commission to miss my gambling?"

"Files get lost. Not all fellas got complete jackets. Be a whole different story when they computerize this place."

"But regional files? Grippe giving you any heat? He been after me."

Ellis shrugs. The sun's glare and heat is like a physical assault, hammering in tandem at the stone of the penitentiary walls and buildings.

"I stuck to what you told me," Doc says.

"I knew you would, Doc. This place ain't beat you."

Ellis has never made mention of his own parole hearings, but Doc has wondered for a long time why none seem to come up, especially if the old man can grease the wheels as he's done for Doc. He claps Ellis on the shoulder, feeling the knobby collarbone under his hand, happy for Ellis' company.

"So how you get me out of work in the middle of such a fine afternoon?" he asks. It's a rare opportunity to walk in the sun with the Yard empty, never mind the heat. He has to concentrate to keep a dumb grin off his face. The two squat against the perimeter wall, tucked in the narrow band of shade

it affords, while around them the ground bakes in the heat, the air warping and twisting.

"Was thinking about all that complaining you been doing in the cafeteria. 'Bout that smell. Thought you could use some fresh air."

"Hard to eat in there. They ain't cleaning the pots or something."

Ellis gives a hint of a smile, "Stimple, he's the fella that heads prison maintenance. Warden started smelling something bad in the admin offices and told Stimple to fix it. He been trying, but since that sandstorm he been busy. Ain't nothing changed 'bout that smell 'cept it's got stronger and the Warden's 'bout ready to fire his ass."

"And you real concerned about Stimple's sorry-ass maintenance-man career."

Ellis nods, "Stimple is a reasonable man. Always good to have a fella like that around."

"Huh."

"He's nervous. I ain't saying desperate exactly, but he's ready to listen to suggestions 'bout the cause of this odor. Blueprints don't seem to much match the actual buildings, see. Shapes is right, I guess, but a lot of details is missing. Stimple need someone who knows the prison enough to look where he wouldn't know to."

"Stimple gonna be awful grateful when you discover the problem." Doc is smiling. He wipes the sweat from his face and neck.

Ellis nods again, "I ain't saying I can find it, but if I do, he just might be."

They stand and walk toward the cellblocks. Doc doesn't look forward to fishing rotten meat out of some forgotten air duct, but Ellis has supplied him with more good fortune than he believed possible.

Inside center hall the faint smell of rot sours the air. Ellis shuffles ahead and turns into the lieutenants' office, motioning for Doc to wait. Doc shifts from foot to foot, staring at the sign posted next to the scarred oak door. It reads, "If you ain't a lieutenant at Tyburn, you ain't shit." He chuckles.

Lieutenant Raven's dry voice edges beneath the door. Old Man Ellis reemerges, a ring of keys dangling from his left hand. Raven is with him. His smiles thinly at Doc and hands him a pass. "One hour," he says. Satisfied by their silence, he reenters the office.

"Got to keep a close eye on that man," Ellis says. "He taking a liking to you."

"Was at the parole hearing. Shut down Grippe midsentence."

"That boy bad luck for you, Doc."

"Both of them." Outside, Ellis shakes the key ring like a trophy. Long skeleton keys jut from the assortment of smaller silver and gold keys. The jingling skitters up the wall behind them and Ellis pauses. He listens and shakes them once more, looking like some wizened shaman. His stiff, thin body is suggestive of a stunted tree whose limbs have been hardened and gnarled by sun and wind.

Far ahead the squat cube of the disciplinary housing unit--the Hole--wavers, sunken into the ground as if capping a yawning pit that will soon engulf it. As they walk he says, "Prison like a old body you got to be familiar with. Got a personality and a language," he smiles. "Got halitosis, too."

Doc grins back. Ellis seems to turn any conversation into a game, weaving inflection and expression and seemingly pointless stories together to form a pattern of meaning for any listener acute enough to trace it.

Ellis moves slowly, skirting the edge of the Yard for the shade of the walls. Coils of razor wire hang high overhead, spooled on overhanging supports. "Built this place in 1872," he says. Doc knows that Ellis hasn't invited him out merely for a break from routine or to help with his odd jobs. "First federal penitentiary. Took them close to ten

years to make the old part. Had convict laborers they'd march in from an army stockade. Worked them digging and laying brick and stone twelve hours at a stretch, feeding them garbage, driving them hard. Cons who gave too much lip worked with a twenty-pound ball chained to their leg. Carrying the baby, they called it, 'cause you had to cradle it every time you needed to march."

These stories fascinate Doc, make him feel a part of something larger, of a tribe with its own legends and heroes, part of something permanent that doesn't end when a sentence is served or a transfer effected.

"Guards quit even if they couldn't afford to. But for the cons there wasn't no out. Just a condition of their sentence. Funny, ain't it? Lincoln sets Nevada up fast so he got another anti-slavery state and then they pack us out here to build this place." He spits. "That's history for you."

A small dust devil coalesces and twirls across the empty ground before dissipating when it strikes the unforgiving bulk of the perimeter wall.

"Read up on the official prison history and you see the first fella to die here was Jackson Harding in 1877. Tuberculosis. Got the first space up on Bone Hill. It true he dead, but he wasn't no

first. Had a number of fellas that died building this wall." He slaps a hand--hard--against the stone of the perimeter wall. The large blocks are chiseled smooth and fit tightly in a series of interlocking joints. The wall rises thirty-five feet, changing from stone to a course of brickwork.

"Dug a trench 35 feet deep and filled it with stone to support this," Ellis says. "Those that died working ain't recorded 'cause there wasn't no prison yet to die in, and no cemetery to put them in. Back in the forties used to hear these stories from the old cons, fellas who knew fellas been here from the start. Said they's a lot of bones under these walls." Ellis' eyes focus on Doc, "Real convenient, see, to have a deep trench around waiting to be filled. Just roll you in and brick you over."

Ellis speaks briefly with the guard stationed at the entrance to the Hole, who checks their passes and waves them through, ignoring the blare of the metal detector reacting to the keys in Ellis' hand. It is hot and gray inside. The floors of the center hall gleam with a thick layer of wax. To either side the cell doors are sealed. As their shoes squeak on the concrete, hands extend from the food slots, angling watch crystals to see who's entered. The air smells of bleach, sweat and vomit.

Two guards round a corner, a prisoner slung between them. He wears a padded helmet and as the guards drag him he tries to catch up, but his legs move sluggishly, lifting slightly only to stall, as if he's forgotten that he means to walk mid-motion. Doc catches the roll of white eyes in the shadows of the helmet, hears a gurgling, unintelligible utterance.

"--fuck out the way," says one panting guard and then they are past.

"How much you got riding on Hammer?" Ellis asks. Hammer is an inmate who habitually knocks together whatever's around: tray to table, bunk to wall, shoe to bars, etc. He's been doing this for six months, and most of his time has been spent in a padded cell in seg. During his first stay in solitary he'd used his head against the wall. Now he spends long stints in isolation, eyes made vacant by Thorazine. There is betting over how soon he will be transferred. Odds laid on the mental institution.

"Fifty if he goes in a month," Doc says, attempting a smile. "You?"

Ellis manages a sly silence.

"You going to fix the bet and I want to know," Doc says.

At the rear of the hall Ellis unlocks the stairwell and they drop two levels. Doc sticks close to Ellis' bent form.

During Doc's sentence he's been sent down to the Hole three times, and each time Grippe has placed him in the remote sidepocket cells, where isolation is so complete that even noise is barred from entering. Each time he'd entered the windowless 9'x5 1/2' cubicle defiant, resolved that he'd beat the time, measuring days with the contraction of muscle during endless sets of pushups, situps and isometric exercises, pushing into the pain of exhaustion to free his mind of thought, keep it too tired to dream. Each time he'd failed. Steel, cement, matte brown walls, movement limited to pacing a strip of floor between the toilet, bunk and sink--it was too constricted, and soon the hallucinations started.

He's seen others emerge from the Hole broken, dragged out with their mouths agape, drooling and incontinent from too much Thorazine or Prolixin--the Prolixin shuffle, they called it--sanity having long since escaped the confines of segregation. And, too, he's heard stories: distant cells without light or forever bathed in it, cold and dank and lost in a labyrinth of old stone and subterranean seeps, the cons living through years

of isolation, emerging with their thoughts as deeply sunken as their eyes, left to shuffle the prison halls in contemplative silence.

During Doc's last stay in seg, Grippe had visited. After three weeks of total isolation, Doc was even glad to see the man who'd sent him there. He'd watched Grippe's face pinch--showers were such a rarity that even Doc was not inured to his own reek. It was a strange visit. He still wonders if it occurred, or if his mind invented it.

Grippe had set down a lunch packed in a Styrofoam cup and leaned against the far wall, looking Doc over and shaking his head, the gesture strangely genuine.

"You just got to bend," he'd said. "Talk to me about the gambling. Your next parole hearing comes up and I'll put in a good word."

Doc didn't trust his voice to work and looked instead at the food.

"Accept what the rules is about, Kane. They ain't arbitrary." And in his eyes there was a naked need, a look that said he meant it, that it was important to him that Doc get out.

Doc tried to speak, cleared his throat and tried again, his voice louder than he'd expected, difficult to modulate. "I accept rules," he said.

"But we ain't got the same ones. Not in here, and not outside, neither."

"Goddamn you," Grippe said, leaving Doc with his thoughts for two more weeks.

Getting out of the Hole had been another kind of punishment. The "Bonus Round," as Bunt called it. He remembers the end of that stay: the overwhelming wash of movement and noise issuing from the crowded cellblocks; his eyes watering from the seemingly vibrant blue of a faded uniform; the touch of a breeze exquisitely intense. His keyed-up, starved senses had left him unable to focus, helpless in the face of so much stimuli, unable to process or filter or cope.

"You ever been in seg?" Doc asks.

Ellis raises his eyebrows.

"What do you think?"

"How long?"

"Long enough to learn I wasn't going in again. Like they say: First time's an accident, second is stupidity, and the third time you deserve what you get."

"I never heard that."

"How many times you been in?"

"Three."

"Like I said."

A third locked door reveals the boiler room. Sewage and water pipes cross and recross overhead, a latticework tangled with old and unused pipes, some of which have gaping rust holes. It is dank and musty here. Ellis pulls a small MagLite from his pocket and hits the beam when the wall switch fails to spark more than one anemic bulb. A line of industrial-size water tanks loom at the back wall, their bulk menacing. Something skitters through one of the pipes near Doc's head.

"Rats ate all the bugs," Ellis says with a grin. At the back of the low-ceilinged room, beyond the boilers, is another door covered with a greasy layer of dust. The knob gleams when the beam of the flashlight strikes it.

The door opens noiselessly into a room where white, rusted file cabinets lean against one another like a set of loose teeth. The floor is warped. Several of the planks have come free of the joists, revealing further depths to the prison. Ellis kicks the rightmost cabinet with his foot, "Gotta warn the rats."

He takes a key from an envelope in it and uses this to open the middle drawer. Yellowing papers wilt in dark green folders. In the space behind these he pulls a worn blueprint, smoothing

it on his knee. "Amazing how much paperwork gets lost."

Ellis traces the light over the blueprint. "Remember this: Left twice, right twice, down, left, right, down, left three, right. My memory ain't worth a damn. Lucky for you."

"Whyn't you just write it down," Doc asks.

"You ever get thrown in the Hole for gambling slips? I seem to remember something 'bout that. Remember something too 'bout how hard it is to get rid of written records."

"Yeah, all right." The blurred lines of the blueprint seem to waver. It is divided into five rectangles, each an overhead of a level in the central administrative prison wing.

"Didn't know there was five floors."

"Got five floors here, too. Got a floor beneath this. Long time ago they used to keep the violent dings there. Had Lawrence Bonny 'till the papers heard about it and made 'em brick up the whole level," Ellis says.

Doc shivers, "Don't care what he did. Should have just killed the sick mother. This ain't no place for the living."

"They's worse places than downstairs. Got rooms been forgotten about before they built this part of the prison. I got lost a few years ago and

found the storage room where they kept a old electric chair. Look like a big insect waiting to jump."

Doc straightens. "I got the instructions, so unless you got something else to show me."

Ellis carefully refolds the blueprint. "Parole board say ok."

"Uh huh."

"Heard that the D.C. Blacks need to collect on some gambling debts."

Doc shrugs.

"You the only short-timer in your crew, ain't you," Ellis says.

"Me and Bunt. So what?"

"Well, you a short-timer and I know you a man of principle. Seem to me that sometimes a man of principle can be a little too rigid. Not bend when the wind comes."

"Don't you never come out and say what you mean?" Doc asks.

"Not once," Ellis says in a flat voice.

"Why the fuck you bring me down here, Ellis?"

Ellis sighs. "I'm sorry, Doc. I don't need to lecture no grown man. No disrespect meant."

"All right, then," Doc says. "We got your directions. Let's get the fuck out of here."

But Ellis shakes his head. "There's something you got to see. Something I found, that I been thinking about." He shuffles to the far corner of the room and opens a door with a clouded glass pane.

"I ain't up for this," Doc says.

"This ain't something I can show anybody else."

"You sure we safe down here?" Doc asks as he steps through the doorway and into a narrow hallway of corroded brick that appears warped by the weight of the building above, the floor sinking unevenly where the ground has softened and settled. A web of cracks spreads across the ceiling. Doc walks softly, afraid that even brushing the wall will bury them, remembering the ground-tremor he'd felt while weightlifting the previous week.

"This place ain't no worse than the rest. Got sinkholes everywhere." Ellis' words come fast, "Architects was so damn busy designing this place to look like the Capitol Building--you know you living in the Senate Chambers, Cellblock B?--and caught up in all these ideas 'bout enlightenment through surroundings--sunlight, big architecture--that they didn't bother to look beyond the building. Had most of the wall up and laid most of the foundations when it finally rained and they

found the first sinkhole. Too late to move by then. Been some cave-ins in the past--a big one 'bout thirty years back. It was to rain out here more and they'd have a problem, though." Ellis' patter is stripped of its southern languor, his voice tight.

Doc's mouth is dry. He's never seen Ellis so tense. At the end of the hallway Ellis pauses at a wood door banded with metal. He pushes a long skeleton key into the lock and twists. There is a soft click and then he steps back. The flashlight's beam lances in like a needle. The damp floor glitters.

"You first," Doc says.

Ellis shakes his head, "Together. We go together."

The flashlight exposes a pair of corroded chains that angle from the far wall to support a metal cot. Light glints from long, yellow teeth set in a fleshless grin.

That night Doc lies in his bunk trying to erase the memory of the desiccated corpse's smile. It is long after Five Count. The cellblock is filled with the somnolent, almost inaudible sound of so many dreaming prisoners, their whistling exhalations a soothing, nocturnal cadence. From the echoing space

of the rotunda he hears the slow steps of a guard on his rounds.

"Now you know," Ellis had said when they surfaced from the Hole and were again traversing the bleached expanse of the Yard.

"Next time you feel like sharing, find some other lucky partner," Doc said, but Ellis wasn't listening.

"Found it six months ago and I knew it meant something," Ellis said.

"Don't mean nothing but that some poor motherfucker messed with the hacks and got a permanent bit--the kind of sentence nobody wants."

"Been in my head every day." Ellis spoke quietly, effortfully. "Found it and felt like it meant something, you know?"

"If Bone Hill got a face, that's it," Doc agreed.

"Don't tell no one about this," Ellis said.

"Whoever that boy was, he deserves a proper burial. Ain't no way to be left."

"No," Ellis said emphatically. "That ain't no one person. Not no longer."

"It's a body," Doc said. "A corpse. Or it was a corpse. A skeleton, now."

"That ain't no person," Ellis repeated, the lines in his face so deep and numerous that his

skin looked to have a grain to it. "History is what it is. You tell someone and pretty soon word gets around and then a crew gets sent to clean it up and then what's left?"

"What does that matter?"

"It matters!" Ellis stopped and got in Doc's face. "It matters! He ain't there and then people can pretend it didn't happen! Can say there never was no message because there never was no event. No skeleton, nobody to make no skeleton." He'd glared at Doc. "You just shut up about it. I shown you and that's that."

"All right, Ellis," Doc said softly.

"You just remember what you seen."

But Doc's not sure he understands. Facts don't work here as they do on the outside. What has happened, what is rumored to have happened, what is rumored will happen--they all vie for eminence. The result is a bizarre, hybrid reality thick with incertitude, doubt, suspicion, inconstancy. A world that is the very antithesis of the ordered social contract, the legalistic equations of time served as it relates to crimes committed. It is a world that refutes the validity of such equations. And when facts rooted here--riots, dead bodies, shankings--twist their way outside they are easily discarded, as if what constitutes them is suspect.

Doc wonders if there's anything from his sentence--any lesson or habit--that will serve him when he's released. Above him, the kid shifts. Doc's eyes open, but there is no light in the cellblock, the inky black of night coiling in the air.

The kid shifts again, the springs of his bed squeaking.

There is a rhythm to the movement. The kid is masturbating. Doc listens to the quiet rustling and feels himself flush, grow hard. Who you thinking of, he wonders, envious that the kid has fresh memories of past girlfriends to hold up to his mind's eye.