

A CUE STICK

The boy walked down the long corridor and visually noted the cameras. There was one at every place the main corridor was intersected by a branch hallway. The floor had a metallic sheen which contrasted with the off-white dullness of the concrete walls. The man walking immediately ahead of him stopped in front of the barred door and separated a key from a mass of thirty or more on his key ring. As the door slowly moved to the left, he motioned for the boy to move through the opening. The door started closing to the right as soon as the boy walked through the gap, and for a moment he was imprisoned in a small six-by-four cell. Another door was opening in front of him, and he stood waiting with a towel, sheet, and a blanket held under his left armpit. He rested the weight of his body on his right hip, and the door opened far enough to allow him to enter. A group of men was playing cards at the table in the center of the large day-room. Oh shit. They were all niggers. The game stopped somewhat and they glanced out of the side of their eyes at the new inmate.

His body was without a muscle and he looked to be fifteen or sixteen. His face was pale and without blemish, except for two red pimples on his chin. He fingered one and walked toward an open bunk in one of the two smaller rooms back from the day-room. The barred room had two bunk beds, one of which had two bare mattresses. A man was stretched out in the bottom bunk of the other one. Salinski's older brother. Spooky. The boy threw his sheet, towel and blanket on the top mattress and walked up to the man stretched out on the bunk.

Hey Spooky, how's it going?

Hey dude, what's happening?

Hey. What are you doing here?

Time, man. Time. What the fuck you think?

Yeah.

Why you here?

Me and Dick Cheswick were busted by the man for drinking. We went to court today and got fined a hundred bucks and couldn't pay.

They put you in the felony tank to serve a fine?

Yeah. I guess they ain't got any room anywhere.

Where's Cheswick?

He's using the phone. I guess he's coming here, too.

Another boy came in and took the other open mattress at the bottom of the bunk. He looked older and his body was more developed. Good thing he was here. No fucking niggers are going to get over on us. We'll be all right as long as we stick together. Fucking niggers. Asking questions all the time. What they say you do, man?

Underage drinking.

How old are you, man?

Seventeen.

You like pussy, man?

Hell yes, man.

You eat pussy, man?

Hell yes.

You stupid fucking nigger. Good thing Ches is here. Not Spooky though. He's a strange dude.

The two boys talked the rest of the afternoon and after supper went and watched the card game in the day-room for a while. The lights went out at ten and the door on the two small rooms closed, separating the inmates – four in each room. The day-room was empty. It isn't bad. They

pay you five dollars a day and all you do is eat and sleep. Well, I guess they make you work once in a while. Like sweep and wash the walls. The nigger said the Man made them wash all the fuck words off the walls. Somebody had drawn a picture of Jesus on the wall. Nobody would wash it off. And I heard there were Black Moslems in here. They don't believe in Jesus though. He looks like the one in the picture in the room where the priests change their clothes at St. Dennis.

They made him become an altar boy. He hated it. Memorizing Latin words and not knowing what they meant. He'd ring the stupid bell and say the words. Mia Poca. Mia Poca. Mia Poca. And his brother was an altar boy. So they'd serve Mass together. They'd kneel, each at one side of the altar, and sometimes give the finger to each other. One of them might laugh and the priest would look and he'd be coughing. They got kicked out of altar boys when they got caught stealing the altar wine from a cabinet in the basement. One priest said they should be forgiven, but the big priest was a real mean bastard and said he wouldn't have their kind on the altar of God. It would blafa--. A blafa something. It would be a sin if they helped serve communion. He probably meant a Mortal sin. Stupid priest.

The small barred room was totally dark because someone had placed a magazine page over the night light, concavely built into the ceiling at the center of the room. The boy was lying on his back staring at where the light was trying to escape from the edges of the magazine page. The light illuminated the page and the different dark colors. Like a stained-glass window. Communion. The body of Christ. Like the time when he was fourteen and the old man took him to confession with him and to church on Sunday. He hadn't told the priest about beating off. The priest had come right out and asked him.

Have you ever masturbated?

No.

So when Communion came the old man went first while he stayed in the pew pretending to pray. The old man would know he had a Mortal sin on him. The old man would think he beat off or something last night. He was shaking slightly when his father returned from Communion and knelt beside him. He stopped shaking and moved past his father into the hallway by the pew. His face was white as he walked slowly to the rail.

Your father said you were sick at church today.

Nah.

You shouldn't go to church if you're sick.

What if I'm sick in the morning and then get better later? He'd get all bent out of shape if I was sick in the morning for church and all right the rest of the day.

You know you don't have to go if you don't want to. You should start making up your own mind about these things.

Good. No more church and no more Communion and no more fucking priests asking about beating off.

He dealt the cards to the three sitting at the day-room table. The game had been going on for one or two hours with the same four players. The game was called whiz. Pretty cool game. I'm almost as good as Ches and he played it before. Glad I'm not his partner – lose for sure. But we're still partners outside the game. They won't mess with us. That old guy ain't bad. Stupid nigger though. Always saying licenses for driver's license. That's funny, man. Stupid bastard.

They locked me up for driving without my licenses.

He's always talking. The other niggers treat him like their old man or something. I wish he wasn't leaving. He's all right. I wish all niggers were like that.

The man left the third day after the boy was locked up. He went around the cell shaking everyone's hand before he left. It was funny the way everybody like him. When he left, something changed. Something's wrong. Like this card game.

Hey Spooky, that was a pretty good trick you pulled there.

Wait till you see the trick I'm gonna pull on you.

He glanced sideways at the boy, not quite looking in his eyes. Right before they turned the lights out, he crept up behind the boy's bunk. The boy was lying on his stomach reading a magazine. He climbed up the back of the bunk and jumped on the boy and humped his body a few times in fake intercourse before jumping to the floor. The boy's face went white and he sat up quickly on the bed. He was shaking violently.

Don't you ever come near me again. I'll kill you.

His fists were knotted tightly and his lips were curled in a sneer. The man stood there smiling momentarily and walked away with his tattooed arms limp at his side. The tattoo was a panther. Black panther. He's just a fucking nigger, too. And the niggers doing stuff. Combing their hair and washing their faces and saying stuff. I got this fine looking woman for a date tonight. Cheswick gimme a cigarette. Cheswick light the cigarette. Cheswick you look like a turtle. I never saw Ches back down before. Maybe he's waiting for me to show him I'm his partner – that I'm backing him up.

The boy was shivering as he sat up straight in his bed. He stopped shaking and jumped to the floor. He walked up to Cheswick and looked into his eyes almost pleadingly. Cheswick turned away and went and sat on his bunk. He was scared. Fuck him. Fuck him. Fuck everybody. I'll read a magazine. I'll kill them. I'll kill every fucking one of them. I'll tell them. I'll scare the shit out of them. I'll tell them I'll be waiting for them when they get out. I'll blow their shit away. I'll blow them away with a shotgun.

The boy was shaking as he was turning the pages of the magazine. A young black in the bunk across from him detected the trembling and started smiling.

What time we got our date tonight?

You better stay away from me.

What a young dude like you going to do? You know karate or something?

You better stay away.

Hey. Be cool. I was a young dude too, once, man. I know that it's like. You want to box or something with me? Come on. How about you, turtle face Cheswick, you want to box.

He took his mattress off his bunk and set it against the bars of the small cell. He smiled sweetly at the boy and glared at Cheswick. He stripped down to his boxer shorts.

Watch this turtle face. They call me the Black Knight.

He squared off against the mattress in the stance of a street fighter. His fists were knotted tightly and held at

waist level. He started throwing short jabs at the mattress. His fist smashed the head then the stomach then the head. Stomach. Head. Head. Head. Stomach. Head. Head. Two or three minutes he pounded the mattress. His body was covered with perspiration and he stopped and wiped his arm across his eyes. He repositioned his mattress on the bunk.

The boy was shaking and he continued to leaf through the magazine. His body trembled almost convulsively, and he looked out of the corner of his eye at the young black. Black Knight stretched out on his mattress, exhausted from the fight. He glanced up at the boy and smiled.

You lucky Baker isn't here. They sent him to the hole. If he was here he wouldn't take your shit. He'd rip you wide open. Me, I'll treat you good. I won't hurt you. But I ain't going to wait forever.

The boy was shaking and leafing through the magazine. He kept his head motionless and his eyes moved around the cell. The Black Knight on the bed. The picture of Jesus nobody would wash off. The Black Knight breathing in and out heavy. Oh, Jesus, help me, get me out of here. Help me, please. I'll be different. I won't drink anymore. Just get me out and I'll do anything you tell me. Just remind me and I'll do it, I promise.

His trembling had stopped and he lay on his back leafing through the same magazine for the third time. The young black was lying quietly on his back with his right arm across his eyes. He was pretending maybe to be asleep. Watching me. Just waiting for me to fall asleep. Come on over. Just try. Touch me. I'll kill you. If I had a gun I might blow your balls away right now. What are you going to fuck then? Give me a gun, please. Oh Jesus, help me. Please help me. If I get out of here

I'll know it's You that got me out and I'll do what You say forever. Just get me out. OK. OK. OK. Look at him. He's not asleep. He's waiting. I know he is. The bastard. What are they talking about anyway? They think that's why I'm here. Because I'm a fucking queer. But I like girls, you stupid fuckers. Just because I ain't had a piece of ass. I like girls to fuck. If I had a nice girl – I could screw a nice girl. Judy was too much of a slut. The old lady's right when she calls her the girl from down by the canal. That girl from down by the canal, she says. Like she's not a slut herself. Real nice to have her as a mother. Some mother. But Judy is a slut anyway. That's why I can't fuck her. Maybe if she'd suck me off first. Everybody thinks I'm fucking her. Her old lady was really mad because of all the hickies on her neck. She probably thought every one was a fuck. The first time in my car she wanted to. If it wasn't so cold. No heater. No, it's because she's a slut. Probably got every fucking disease in the world. I like pussy but not scabby old pieces of shit. She's got a nice body. But I can't get a hard-on. I'd ram the shit out of her. Maybe I am queer. No. Fuck no. I don't like dicks, you stupid fucking niggers. I'll kill you if you come around here. If I had a nice girl I'd screw her real good.

He fell asleep

just before the jailor turned on the lights, and he was sleeping when breakfast was served. The noise woke him. He jumped out of bed and walked into the day-room and picked up his plastic tray. Somebody had eaten everything off it except the oatmeal. The oatmeal was gray and watery. Somebody probably spit in it. The bastards. If they try anything, I'll kill them. He walked back to his bunk and lay on his back. Please come. Please come, Ma. A couple more hours. Oh God please don't let them try anything before my Ma visits me and gets me out. I'll do anything, Ma. Just get here, Ma. Please hurry, Ma.

Everyone left the day-room after breakfast and went back to their bunks and slept or lay quietly for a couple of hours. The jailor brought two razors for anybody who wanted to shave. The razors were returned to the jailor missing one of the razor blades.

There will be no visiting hours if that razor isn't
right here in five minutes.

The jailor made an imaginary X with the toe of his shoe outside the bars in the center of the day-room and walked down the corridor.

Up your ass turnkey.

Hey, Smitty, eat my big dick.

I really like your ass, Smitty.

The boy looked around the day-room at the five inmates. He started trembling, first in his arms and next his legs. He ran his fingers through his hair wiping a few beads of perspiration from his forehead at the same time. He grabbed hold of the magazine and rolled it into a cylinder. He squeezed it in his right hand a few seconds and relaxed it. He stopped trembling and jumped off the bed. He started taking off his clothes. He took them off methodically and casually. Each of the other inmates looked into the cell. They huddled in the other cell and whispered. He took his towel and walked through the day-room to the shower. The jailor walked by and looked at him in the shower. He shook his head and walked over and picked up the razor blade off the X he had made on the floor.

I really like your ass, Smitty.

Hey turnkey, I bet you fuck your ass with all those keys you got. A
different one every night.

The boy stepped out of the shower and dried himself. He walked toward his bunk still drying his hair. They all watched him and the bare skin walk across the day-room. He dressed as methodically and casually as he had undressed. He jumped up on the bunk and picked up the magazine. He started trembling now again and continued until the jailor came to take him to the visiting room. He

glanced around the room at the other five inmates. Each was talking on a telephone and staring through the glass wall at the visitors. A woman at the end of the room was standing by the only telephone that wasn't being used. He walked over and picked up the phone. The woman picked up the phone on the opposite side of the glass.

Hi Jimmy.

Hi.

You need any cigarettes or anything or magazines? I got cigarettes from the tavern when I cleaned up this morning. I should be tending bar now, but I got George to do it so I could come down here and visit you.

You stupid bitch. Don't you know what the fuck is going on? You're the dumbest bitch I now. You ask me if I want cigarettes. You dumb bitch.

Ma. You got to get me out of here.

What's wrong.

Today. Now. Get me out of here.

Ok, Jimmy. I'll go to the bank right now. It closes at noon, but I can get there in time. I don't know why you didn't let me pay the fine in the first place. Your father says I baby you too much. That's how much he cares. You never even had to come in here. I told you I'd pay the fine. I

could have told you what goes on in jails. A lot of guys at the tavern have told me what happens in them.

He held the phone to his ear and looked at the other visitors. There were eight visitors scattered in front of the five telephones. Two parents. A girlfriend or a sister. A brother or friend or a queer maybe.

Stupid bitch. I just want to get out of this fucking hole. I don't care. Just go fuck George if you want. Just get the money and get me out of here.

Ma. You better hurry up.

OK, Jimmy. Will you be alright till I get back?

Yeah, Ma, but hurry, alright.

You dumb bitch. At last you leave.

Yeah, you know all about jail. A lot of guys have told you about it. Yeah. Your tavern slobs will get drunk and tell you anything. Give them a good screw and they'll spill their guts all over you. Oh Ma, why the hell do you have to be my mother. Why can't you just go fuck yourself.

He walked into the pool hall carrying a cue case in one hand and a can of beer in the other. A group of five or six teenagers crowded up to him.

Hey, jailbird. What's happening?

Where's your running partner Cheswick at?

How's the time machine?

You get any browneye?

He stood grinning and turned his eyes away from them a moment. He looked back at the crowd seriously.

I'm trying to hustle up some bucks for Ches. You guys got anything you can throw in? Ches'll pay you back.

Yeah, like the ten bucks he owed me for the last two months. Why, how much you need?

Twenty bucks.

You must be high. Nobody's gonna give twenty bucks to Cheswick. He'd never pay you back. He'd buy a case of wine first. The cheapest bear piss he could find.

Everybody laughed and went back to the pool games that had been in progress. One was an eight-ball game. One a one-nine game. I tried. Fuck it. He walked to the juke box and pulled a quarter from his pocket. He rubbed it against his pant leg a few seconds and dropped it in the coin slot. He searched the selections and punched two songs. He finished his beer and threw the empty can across the room. It bounced off the Coke machine and fell into the garbage can. Two points.

Hey dude, why don't you get into this one-nine game over here?

Gordon's going to drop out.

What you playing for?

Dollar-dollar.

Rack-em up.

He took the two pieces of the cue from the case and fastened them together slowly and deliberately. He chalked the tip of the cue with precision. Each game he played with the same mixture of precision and carelessness. He would miss the easiest shots and make the most difficult. he played three hours, losing always as much as he would win. His skill dictated that he

should win – and he lost. The game ended with him three dollars ahead. Another player was ahead by about twenty dollars.

Hey, Peppers. I'll play you one game of eight-ball for twenty bucks.

How about it?

He won the game when the other player beat himself by scratching one the eight-ball. He put the twenty-dollar bill in his front pocket.

You were lucky I scratched. Double or nothing?

Rack-em up.

He watched him rack the pool balls in the wooden triangle. I should have quit. Fucker thinks he's King Shit or something. He's no good. Just so I don't choke! Ches will have a party when he gets out. I'll run the table and then I'll just run down and get Ches.

The triangle of balls splintered in fifteen pieces across the green felt. The two games were over within twenty minutes.

I quit. It was a pleasure doing business with you.

He was trembling slightly as he handed over the second twenty dollars to him. Fuck it. fuck it, fuck it, fuck it. Fuck it.

They're always asking questions.

What's

it like?

It ain't shit.

Where they put you?

Felony tank.

Know anybody there?

Spooky Salinski.

Any nigger fuck with you?

Fuck no.

Monday morning he bailed Cheswick out of jail. They bought a six-pack of beer and rode around the country roads all morning drinking it.

I tried to hustle some money up on Saturday night. I almost got enough but lost a couple of one-nine games because I got Jennings as a partner.

It ain't nothing.

Anything happen in there?

What do you mean? Fuck no, man. Fuck them niggers. I'd like to catch one of those bastards alone some night. And Spooky. I'd kill that son-of-a-bitch if I were you.

He didn't do nothing.

Yeah. He didn't do nothing. But he tried a whole lot of shit.

Yeah. Fuck him.

I'd kill the bastard.

Fuck him. He'll probably be sent up if he gets convicted. I won't even see him again.

That night the two of them walked into the high school dance. They swayed drunkenly and walked around the walls of the gym. A girl was dancing close with a boy with greasy hair. Her hair was ratted and teased in a dated style. She smiled over her partner's shoulder at him.

Fuck it. Why not?

Fuck that greasy-haired bastard. I'll kick his ass.

He walked her home and kept his arm around her waist most of the walk. He moved his hand to her right breast and squeezed and fondled it

now and then. They tried the door of a church but it was locked. They walked to a shelter house in the park by her house. She sat on the top of the picnic table and he took off her jeans. The moonlight showed the whiteness of her thighs. The dark hair. A cunt. A real cunt. God damn.

What's wrong.

Nothing. I'm too drunk, I think.

That's all right.

She put on her clothes and they sat a minute or two. He watched her out of the corner of his eyes. Her legs. Fuck it. May as well take her home. What wrong goddamnit. A fucking cunt right in your face. He walked with her toward her house. They stopped in the field across the street from the house. He walked a couple of feet from her.

What are you doing?

Taking a piss.

He finished and walked up to her. He reached out and pulled her hips against him and held them there and kissed with his tongue moving in circles inside her mouth. His hips mimicked his tongue's action a few seconds. He broke from her and started walking down the street.

See you.

Are you going to school Monday?

He stopped and turned back and looked at her.

Probably.

OK. I'll see you then, alright?

Yeah.

He started walking down the street. He walked about half a block. He turned around and looked at her house. He ran on his toes the half block back and crept into the back yard of the house. He crouched beneath the lighted window. He slowly raided himself and looked into the window. There was a small gap in the curtain.

Ok, baby. Take them jeans off, you bitch.

Oh you sweet thing you. There you go, baby. Come on you bitch. Take it into you. That's it. Take this big stick into you. There. There. Now. Pow. Pow. How's that baby. He crumpled to his knees under the window. After a minute he ran quickly to the street and started to walk. Never again. Never fucking again. I wish they'd catch me. They'd send me to the psychologist and he'd tell me what's wrong with me. He'd tell me I was queer probably. And the fucking cops would all laugh at me. All of them would. The bastards.

They rode the same bus home Monday afternoon and she giggled at him. He sat down in a seat and kept his eyes looking out of the window. She went over and sat in the seat with him.

Why don't you talk to me?

I don't know.

You want to come over to my house tonight?

Nah.

Why not?

I don't know.

Don't be bashful.

Yeah.

Come over anytime you want.

The two boys walked into the pool hall. Spooky was leaning against the back wall. He walked up to them and stood in front of them, setting the butt of the cue stick on the floor. The muscles of his tattooed right arm flexed as he tilted the weight of his body against the cue. His face was without any emotion.

Hey, dudes, how's it going? Hey, listen. That jailhouse is a bad place, man. You dudes were getting out but I had to stay. Look out for number one, right? No hard feelings, eh.

The two shrugged their shoulders. Later, the three of them rode around on country roads drinking beer and wine. Cheswick passed out in the back seat.

Hey, I know where we can cop some liquor money.

Where?

You know where Harry Scanlon lives?

No.

It's on State Street by the gas station. Why don't you head over there.

Ok.

Jimmy parked the car in the driveway behind the blue Camaro. They got out of the car and walked up to the door. Spooky rang the doorbell three or four times, and he knocked hard on the inside door with the heel of his palm. No one answered the door and he turned the handle of the door, opening it. It opened about four inches and caught on the safety chain. He looked at Jimmy – his eyes lost in lust.

You want to break in?

Jimmy trembled slightly and watched as Spooky backed away from the door a few feet. He lowered his shoulder and charged the door. The inside moulding holding the safety chain

pulled from the wall and the door ripped open wide. Spooky kept his balance and Jimmy followed him as he walked through the dark house. He found a light switch and the kitchen lit up. Jimmy trembled slightly and looked through an open doorway into the dark, partially lit room.

A bare leg lay exposed from underneath a mound of blankets. He turned to Spooky with excited eyes.

Scanlon's wife got some fine looking legs.

Spooky crept into the bedroom and crept back out.

That's Jack's leg, you dummy.

Spooky picked up a case of beer that was alongside the refrigerator. Jimmy turned off the kitchen light and they crept from the house.

The pool hall was empty the next day, except for the man he had lost the money to a couple of weeks ago. Jimmy walked over to the pool table holding his cue case in one hand and a can of beer in the other.

How about some eight-ball.

How much?

Two dollars.

Alright.

Lag for the break?

That's cool.

Jimmy finished the beer and tossed it into the garbage. He unfolded his case and took the two pieces of the cue out. He fitted the two pieces together and watched the man lag the ball within an inch of the rail. The man touched his tongue with his finger and marked the ball – a

fraction closer to the rail than correct. Jimmy eyed the white cue and stroked delicately with precision. The ball rolled and stopped flush against the rail. Jimmy looked at the man.

Rack-em.

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