

Detention

The sun sat low on the western horizon, chased by alternating zephyrs bearing the tastes of salt then orange blossoms. Traffic hissed past on the boulevard beyond the wide grass lawn that spilled out from the white-lattice verandah girdling the base of the three-tiered government house.

"Ahh. Evening," I confirmed the obvious aloud, instantly shamed by the unchecked utterance but thankful to have a reference point at last. This is Tuesday evening. I expanded the bits of recognition, recalling that Sunday was Houston; Monday was Panama, the booby-trapped strip, and the flamed-out landing; and now ... today. I've been here almost 24 hours, I confirmed to myself, removing the last vestige of uncertainty that had nagged at me for hours. As if by some sleight of hand, the numbing fatigue that had held me in chains for what seemed like days, evaporated into the balmy fragrance. I was whole, safe for the moment, and eager to take up residence in Van Vorter's detention quarters which I placed at a level somewhere between military lodgings and Holiday Inn.

Stilton -- that was the name of Van Vorter's assistant assigned the task of installing me in my temporary digs -- stopped to talk with a group of young women I took to be secretaries or file clerks enjoying the end of their work-day before plunging into the evening's delights. He was obviously a favorite, judging by the way they hung on his words and gestures, their thrall evident in the way their expressions mirrored his at barely a flicker's delay. The two dark-skinned Madonna's on the far side stole glances in my direction, washing me with inquisitive eyes before returning their attention to where it more rightly belonged. In unison the group leaned toward him paying rapt attention to his whispered words, then turned in sudden alarm to stare at me, reproach clearly in the forefront of their minds. Stilton said something else and their demeanor softened to laughter as he gathered their attention to him once again before reluctantly he begged leave, excusing himself to his duties.

"I told them you were some sort of a spy or arch-criminal -- a great killer of babies," he said affably ushering me down a steep set of steps and onto the pathway leading to the featureless cinder-block building next door.

"I'm a pilot, also," he said as if the admission spoke volumes ... which it did. If not peace, it was a sign of truce, at least. The easy bit of camaraderie that said "I've been where you've been and I know what's in you better than others like Van Vorter do." It was the instant brotherhood of warriors who at other moments would be perfectly content to knock each other's blocks off. "Watch your head," he cautioned as we ducked through a low, narrow port that served as guard-post and entranceway to a dimly lit vestibule. The rumpled guard looked up from his dog-eared girlie magazine and acknowledged Stilton with a nod and a gesture toward the further corridor.

"Cinco," he snorted and turned his attention to shadows swaying on the far wall.

"Van Vorter's the best they've got," Stilton cautioned as we made our way down a progressively darker corridor. "He's fair, but if you lie to him he can be a vindictive bastard, so watch yourself." He stopped at an open door, then moved aside to let me pass through. The stench hit me full-force even before I crossed the threshold, but with an act of will forced myself to go on. Inside was pitch black. "I hope for your sake you're telling the truth," he continued as if reluctant to leave me on my own. "Anything you can tell Van Vorter about Perez will help you because the police have been looking to nail him for years." The revelation caught me so off-guard I almost asked, "who's Perez?" But instead I replied as non-committedly as I could, "I've never laid eyes on the man and all I know is that he's to meet me." And after a decent interval, "Who is he and what's he done?"

"I don't know the answers, myself," Stilton said, unsure that he should be confiding in me at all. "He's supposed to be rotten, though, so be careful." With that he thudded the door shut against its stops and shot the bolt home with a convincing "thwock."

"I'll stop in later so see how you're getting on," he called over his shoulder from halfway back to the world of the living. I listened to his footsteps retracing their route down the narrow passageway, endured a short period of silence while he transited the vestibule, caught the soft murmurings of conversation as he cleared the guard post, and then felt the growing weight of utter stillness that was to rule my life in the days--maybe months--to come.

It was several minutes before my eyes accommodated to the darkness enough that I could make out the confines of my surroundings. "Visual purple," I reminded myself in the interim, takes a while to build up sufficiently in the retina to allow the low-acuity cones to supplant the densely-packed cones as our visual receptors. In the meantime I watched pinpricks of light surf the backwaters of my blindness. As long as I concentrated on my sightlessness or listened for inaudible patterns in the stillness, I was able to hold the stench at bay. But once acknowledged, it rose up to overpower every other sense. Feces, urine, Lysol, vomit, sweat, decayed fruit, dust, mold, slime, insanity, terror--what else there might be--surrounded me, assaulted me, clung to me, penetrated me, violated me, coagulated in me now as if I were now its possession. It happened so fundamentally and absolutely that in that instant I changed from victor to victim in ways that only jailers and their wards can know.

The first task I tackled after finding I could inhale the leaden glop without passing out was to explore the limits of my new universe. Eight-foot by eight-foot my first circuit of the cell informed me. The concrete-slab floor was stepped slightly to a depth of two feet along the wall opposite the door and dropped away gently to a sump in the far right-hand corner. As my eyes became fully conditioned to the darkness -- the only light came through a two-foot by six-inch chest-high opening in the door -- I sensed the ceiling at what I thought to be 10 feet

above the pad. Aside from the latchless door the cinder block walls were bare save for the regular joints that eventually allowed me to assess my confines with extreme accuracy.

Though I didn't know it until the next day when I got my hands on a ruler and took the measurements, the distance from the first joint to tip of my index finger is slightly longer than $1 \frac{1}{16}$ inches, not the inch I had assumed as I set about determining the more exact dimensions of my new universe that those provided by the initial walk-around. The results of these efforts -- necessarily quick-and-dirty under the circumstances -- showed my space to be somewhat smaller than I was able later to define. By my rough calculations that first night, I found a block to be 18 inches long by six inches high with (I assumed) a thickness of six inches. As each wall was $5 \frac{1}{3}$ blocks long and what I judged to be 20 blocks high, the cell's area was 64 square feet, yielding a volume of 640 cubic feet. Later calculations would show this to be off by nearly 30%, but I'll come to that later.

It may not seem important to someone involved in everyday life, but solitary confinement can do strange things to a person, or so I had been trained to believe back in the early days of my military flying. Coping with it required a plan and strong attention to minute details or you could lose your grip on reality. In order to remain firmly rooted in the present, I set about creating minute but exacting tasks to occupy my mind, the first of which was this little measurement drill which I would refine continuously throughout the duration of my stay.

Down the hall I heard muted conversation and a burst of laughter. Then silence as I waited tensed to continue Van Gorter's game. But nothing happened. No conversation. No laughter. No footfalls in the concrete corridor. Nothing.