

The Petrifying

By Geoff Hyatt

Alex and White Charlie hunch over their cards, seated at what looks like a picnic table made from dull-finished aluminum. Its legs are bolted to the concrete floor. Erik stands over the game, scratching the pit of his chest through his orange jumpsuit. He's not sure how long he slept, but his stomach hints that it's about lunchtime.

"You guys playing rummy?" he asks.

"Yeah," Alex says. "I'm losing."

"You gettin' yo' ass kicked," Charlie says, and then laughs like cartoon weasel. "Shoulda played spades, like I said."

"How far you behind?" Erik asks.

"Fifteen-hundred points." Alex draws a card and looks at it with dismay.

"This the same game you guys started at breakfast?" Erik asks, yawning. His body feels heavy and his stomach muscles ache from too many crunches. He sits down beside Charlie.

"Yup." Alex wears a tired smile. "I keep hoping my luck is going to change and it doesn't. Keep playing anyway, though. What else am I going to do, y'know?"

"Hey Charlie," Erik says, slapping him on the back. "What's lunch going to be today?"

White Charlie's lower lip sucks up under his crooked gray teeth as he thinks. His eyes squint from purple hollows.

"Gimme a sec," he says.

The meals in County Jail run in a twenty-five day cycle and White Charlie has memorized it. This ability to foretell meals makes him a revered prophet for a few minutes of each day. Alex and Erik sit in eager silence, awaiting his proclamation.

"Hamburgers," he says. "Yesterday was grilled cheese, so today is hamburgers."

"That sucks," Erik says.

"Hamburgers is nasty," Charlie says. "I hear the food be better in the pen."

"Well, I guess you have something to look forward to," Alex says.

"Three years." Charlie shrugs. "Three years ain't shit."

"When you going?" Erik asks.

"Soon I hope. Long as I ain't up in this bitch," Charlie says, fiddling with his cards. "Eleven months, dawg. Long time to be in the County."

"You worried?" Alex asks. "I'd be worried."

"You look like an Olsen twin, though, and Charlie sure as hell doesn't," Erik replies. "If they send you up, man, you better shave off all that pretty hair."

"Why?" Alex reaches up and tugs on his shoulder-length locks. "So I'll look like a punk-rock girl instead of a prom queen? I'm fucked either way. Literally."

"You can have my lunch when it get here," White Charlie says to him, "if you want."

"Hell yeah, I'll take it," Alex says.

Erik asks, "Don't you want your food?"

"Naw. I ain't hongry." White Charlie discards a two of hearts and then sets his cards face-down. "Three years, dawg. Three years ain't *shit, anyhow*. Right?"

The tumbling of the cell's lock, like a hammer dropped down a drainpipe, kills the conversation. The battered metal door swings open and all heads turn to look. A tall rectangle of light splits the cinderblock wall, framing a man in an orange jumpsuit. Two guards stand as mirrored shadows behind him. The prisoner walks into the cell, the hinges squeal, and the door bangs shut.

The new man in the cell looks older than any of them. Tattoos blossom across his thick neck and forearms. Some of the inked lines are keen and nearly black, while others are fading broken indigo - pictures carved by a score of hands over at least as many years.

His eyes are strange when Erik catches them; different from most pairs he's seen drift through the blocks. They're not blank and swimming empty in his face, locked in a stare that meets the world like a wall. Nor are they paranoid and twitching; like white mice entangled in red webbing. His eyes are thinking. He has the gaze of man who takes his time to evaluate every situation, but usually does the wrong thing anyway.

With his shaggy blond hair, Yosemite Sam moustache, and broad broken nose, he has the bearing of a lion. He stands with his pillow and sheets folded under his arm, sniffing the air. He glances at the three of them, at the playing cards scattered across the table, and then at the walls around him. The lion shakes his head and sighs.

"Great," he mumbles.

The lion-man lumbers over the only bare bunk and makes his bed. Erik watches him settle in the edge of his vision. The wear of time and quicker things has cut deep lines into the man's face. His mane is streaked with gray. Nobody talks to him and he says nothing. He sits down on the mattress, slouches his bulk against the wall, folds his arms, and closes his eyes.

Erik climbs back into his bunk and sleeps until lunch.

Charlie shouts, "Hamburgers! Whatchy'all gon' do when I ain't here to tell what lunch'll be?"

Losing White Charlie's meal-divining powers is pretty low on Erik's list of concerns, as he's looking at fifteen to twenty-five years if things go bad in court. He sits up, rubbing his eyes.

"You can tell me the meal order after dinner," Erik mumbles as he clambers out of bed and over to the table. "I'll write it down."

If Charlie knew how to write, Erik would have him do it himself.

"Good idea," Alex says. "I should've started doing that four months ago."

The lion sits beside Erik at the long metal table, and begins to devour lunch. True to his word, Charlie gives away his food.

"I can't eat any more of this shit. I think I'm going to puke," Alex says, clutching his stomach. "You want these fries, or this apple?" he asks of the lion-man, who lifts his eyes from his plate to answer.

"Yeah. The apple." He reaches out and takes the apple in his massive paw. The word FEAR is inked across his knuckles. "Thanks."

"What's your name?" Erik asks.

"Leo," he says.

"Seriously?"

“Yeah. Why?” Leo looks at Erik with puzzlement.

“Nothing,” he replies. “I’m Erik. That’s White Charlie and Alex. Charlie just took a five-year gun plea.”

“Up fo’ review in three,” Charlie adds, a bit too quickly.

“*White* Charlie,” Leo says, smirking. “There a *Black* Charlie?”

“He out in the hood. He black, but he just *Charlie*. I gots to be *White* Charlie. Ain’t that some bullshit?”

“People could call you Chuck,” Erik offers. “Or Charles.”

“Charles in Charge,” Alex adds, and then titters. “*Of our days and our nights...*”

“First time goin’ to the joint, Charlie?” Leo asks, chewing a mouthful of apple.

“Uh-huh.” Charlie nods. “I mean, I been to jail all the time, but never the pen.”

“You’re what, seventeen? Eighteen?”

“Eighteen in March.”

“You’ll get out in three,” Leo says. “Go to the AA or NA groups, and don’t piss off the guards.”

Alex snickers. “The guards here all hate him. They let him shave before his last court date, but they didn’t watch him. So he flushed his razor down the can, and when they came back to collect it, it was gone.”

“That wasn’t funny,” Erik says. “Gonzales tossed the cell and strip-searched us.”

“I know it, I know.” Charlie sneers. “I wasn’t tryin’ to get ‘em hatin’ me. Damn, you can flush anythin’ down them things. I ain’t got no sheets ‘cuz I flushed ‘em days ago. I jus’ wanted to see if they’d go down. Shift sergeant say it ain’t his problem.”

“Yeah,” Leo says. “Don’t pull that shit in prison. The C.O.s will bust your head in.”

“I know it, dawg. I know.”

“The last guy we had in here,” Alex says to Leo, “killed himself.”

“Humph.” He takes a bite of the apple. “How’d he pull that off?”

“He tore open his wrists with his fingernails,” Erik says.

“Bullshit.”

“No, it’s true,” Alex says. “It was a mess. You can still see the stain on the floor over by the toilet. I shit you not.”

“Crazy. I had a cellie who killed himself by eating his eyeglasses.” Leo chuckles. “Insane. Looked like Doug Henning. Shit. You guys are probably too young to know Doug Henning.”

“He was that hippie magician,” Erik says. “I remember him from *The Muppet Show*.”

“*The Muppet Show*,” Leo says, one corner of his mouth pulling into a smile as he nods. “Right. That was a good show.”

“Do you want to play Risk with us later?” Alex asks him. “We play Risk after dinner.”

“They put that game in here?” Leo asks. “They must *want* us to kill each other.”

“It was in the cell when I got here,” Alex says. “Somebody probably had it sent in by his mom or somebody, and then just left it here.”

“That last dude sucked at Risk,” Charlie says.

“Maybe that was the last straw for him,” Erik says. “You should play, Leo.”

“No thanks. I’ll sit out. Don’t really have the temperament. If you guys pin my army in Madagascar I’ll fucking kill all you motherfuckers.”

“Um, okay.” Alex looks to Charlie. “You going to play?”

“Y’all always be gangin’ up on me when we play,” he replies, “but I got nothin’ else to do, I guess.”

Erik returns to his bunk and sleeps until dinner.

White Charlie wakes Erik by throwing an apple at his head.

“I’ve killed people for less than that,” Erik says as he sits up in his bunk, clutching the apple in his right hand.

“Yeah. You’re a killer. Right.” Leo slouches at the table, a plastic spork in his giant fist. “Your slop’s getting cold.”

Erik climbs down and eats at the table with the other guys. Alex, between bites, points across the table to a tattoo on Leo’s arm.

“What’s that say?” he asks.

“*In Loving Memory--Nadine Rose Stonerock,*” Leo says.

“Who’s that?” Alex asks.

Alex doesn’t mean anything by it, but he asks too many questions. Also, he often shares information better kept to himself. Thus, Erik knows of Alex’s love of wearing women’s panties and the hobby he’s made of masturbating in bus stations. He prays he’ll shut up.

“She’s my wife,” Leo says, and takes a gulp of his milk.

“What happened to her?”

“What do you think, genius?” Leo’s voice is flat and even. “She died.”

“Sorry,” Alex says.

“Why? You didn’t kill her.”

“Do you know who did?”

“What?” Leo sets down his spork.

“Jesus, Alex,” Erik sighs. “Just eat your food, okay?”

“Do you know?” Alex persists. “Because someone killed my sister a few years ago, and they never found out who. It kind of sucks.”

“I bet,” Leo says. “I know what killed my wife. All too well. Thanks for asking.” He drinks the last of his milk. “What time do the lights shut off here?”

“They don’t,” Charlie says. “This the high-risk wing.”

Leo’s lips curl into a snarl. “Suicide watch? Protective custody? Screw that.”

“No,” Erik says. “P.C.’s by receiving, and they put the suicide guys in the bambam gowns. This is for the general crazy and/or dangerous folk.”

“Crazy *white* folks,” Charlie adds. “I say I want to be in B-West, but the sergeant say I get tore apart up in there.”

“It *is* pretty dark down there, Charlie,” Alex says.

“Shit, dawg,” Charlie says. “I’m the biggest nigga I know. I probably grew up wit’ half the brothers down there.”

“Humph.” Leo shrugs.

After dinner, three of them play Risk while Leo reads a Bible. White Charlie dominates the game until Alex and Erik gang up and crush him. He bitches about this to no end.

The wall-mounted TV beyond the bars shuts off at what Erik has been told is midnight, and everyone else in the cell tries to sleep. They put folded towels over their eyes to block the grimy light, giving them the look firing-squad victims laid out on their backs. As if one of them should still have the butt of his final cigarette lolling from his gaping mouth.

Erik peels off his orange jumpsuit and stands in a t-shirt and boxers. He drags his mattress off the bunk and rolls it up. He ties it up with his bed sheets and does sets of curls with it. Then come shrugs with the mattress, then stomach crunches, then push-ups. He does this until the ache makes him want to retch.

He unrolls the mattress and places it against the wall and begins to punch it. *Jab, jab, hook, hook, overhand right. Jab, hook, uppercut. Jab, hook, right cross*, et cetera. He thinks only of how his shoulders and legs guide his arms, relaxed on their course, until they tighten in the last two inches of the strike, always landing those two knuckles when the fingers curl into the proper fist, until he's dizzy, soaked with sweat, and shaking.

"Hey, Rocky," Leo growls from his bunk, "cut that shit out already. I'm tryin' to sleep."

Erik stumbles to the shower-stall in the corner and peels off his clothes. Once in the shower, he grabs the plastic spork that's lying in the tiled corner. He presses in the shower button and then jams the spork into its casing. This way it won't shut off in five minutes. Erik washes away the sweat and filth from his aching body. He's slowly growing stronger, and it hurts.

He leaves the shower, dries off, and dresses with unsteady hands.

He sits on the concrete floor in a full-lotus position and closes his eyes. He counts his breaths until the exhalations and inhalations are each ten seconds. Occasionally, thoughts of things beyond these walls intrude. He names them and casts them aside. He's not thinking of his girlfriend, with her polished brass hair and blue sapphire eyes, or what she might have told them. He's not thinking of his mom, seeing him through a veil of tears and bulletproof glass, only able to say, at last, "You look nice in orange." He's not thinking of his dog, or his apartment, or the few people left he counts among his friends.

He's a stone sinking in a river, and what were the numbers of his counted breaths become bubbles rising through the dark water. This is the only thing. When he reaches the bottom, his body stills itself, and he ceases to be.

Erik opens his eyes.

White Charlie stands over him in a t-shirt and boxers, arms folded, pale as death. "Play cards?" he asks.

"What are you doing awake?" Erik asks as he stands up.

"Can't sleep." He sits at the table and rubs his eyes. "Think I made a mistake."

"Obviously," Erik says, looking around.

“No, I mean wit’ my plea.”

Erik sits across from him. “What else could you do, y’know?”

“I should see if I can go an’ change it. Go in that court an’ fight fo’ what’s mine.”

“But Charlie, you’re guilty.”

“I still can fight it out, though.”

“You’ve been arrested, what, six times?”

“Seven.”

“You stole a car.”

“I didn’t steal it, my friend did. I jus’ drove it. I pleaded to the gun.”

“You guys fled police in a stolen car, and in that car they found a stolen shotgun and two ski masks. Plus, you had a gun on you.”

“Yeah, but it didn’t work,” Charlie says. It was broke.”

“You think you’re going to get less than what you got from any jury? In Indiana?”

“Shit, dawg. I ain’t that bad. The whole world ain’t nothin’ but niggas wit’ guns.”

“In court, you’d go away for ten years, at least.”

Charlie’s eyes are leaden marbles, gray and heavy. He has nothing to say until Erik tells him, “You did the right thing.”

“Yeah,” Charlie says. “I ain’t never been to the pen, though.”

“You’ll get out in three years. You’ll be in a low-security wing. When you’re released, they’ll give you a pair of khakis, a pair of shoes, a blue shirt, and a bus ticket. They’ll set you up with a P.O. and a job. You’ll be all cut from working out, maybe pick up some good tats. Then it’s just pussy and freedom, and you’ll have the good sense to stay out of there.”

He knows none of these things, really. It’s something he heard one con say to another in a different cell to make him feel better. Most of what Erik knows about acting tough he’s learned from gangster movies and cheap novels. Fortunately, he’s a pretty good actor. This will only carry him so far, he knows. At least he’s not Charlie.

White Charlie’s got nothing coming. Ignorance and desperation keep prisons full, and he’s got both in spades. He thought a stolen Ford Escort might outrun the State Troopers. He’s a trash-talking, impulsive, emaciated, hyperactive, bottom-rung white-boy thief who’s never had a plan in his life. At this moment, he looks like a child contemplating his dead pet, trying to wrap his mind around the grim finality of the situation. He’s fucked. Literally.

Charlie smiles faintly. “Yeah.” He nods. “Yeah,” he says again, “three years ain’t nothin’.”

“Let’s play cards,” Erik says.

They play through the night and into the early morning, when the guards first start barking out court dates on the other end of the block.

The lock on the cell door turns, and the steel monolith swings open to the inner corridor. Sergeant Gonzales, pot-bellied and pock-marked, like a mustachioed General Noriega, stands in the doorway. Two other guards stand behind him.

“Time to go, Charlie. Roll it up. Get your shit together and put on your oranges.”

“Aw, damn,” Charlie says as he throws down his cards. “Today’s breakfast is pancakes.”

“We’ll get you a doggie bag. Move it.”

“I don’t got nothin’ to bring, ‘cept my cards,” Charlie says as he stands up. “You can keep those, Erik.”

“Thanks, Charlie.”

Alex wakes as Charlie pulls on his uniform. He sits up like Frankenstein’s Monster coming to life, but moves no more than this. He stares at the guards looming in the open cell door.

“I’ll miss you, Chalupa,” Charlie says. As he slips on his plastic sandals, he blows a kiss to the sergeant.

“Send me a postcard, and do it quick,” Gonzales says. “With your mouth, you won’t last a week in there. We’ll see who calls who bitch then.”

“Leave him alone,” Leo grumbles, still sprawled across his bunk, a tattooed arm hanging over the edge. His eyes are closed. “He’s not your problem anymore.”

To Erik’s surprise, Gonzales says nothing.

Charlie looks over his shoulder as he walks to the door, and says, “Maybe I’ll catch up wit’ y’all in the pen.”

“Good luck,” Alex says.

Erik waves stupidly at the steel door as it slams shut. The last he hears of White Charlie is him screaming, “Three years, bitches! Three years ain’t shit!” as he’s led out of the block.

At breakfast, they are three. An extra tray of food is served because Charlie’s name isn’t off the meal list yet. Nobody talks, save to establish who wants what from the ghost-meal. Erik feels weird eating Charlie’s pancakes, like he’s taking food from a tomb offering, but he’s hungry.

“Prison’s not so bad,” Leo says, his mouth full, in response to no spoken question.

“Yeah. Sure,” Alex replies.

“No, really,” Leo says. “You can have a TV, or a guitar. Books. You can work out, write. Play softball, basketball, you know. If you’re not behind the wall, with lifers, they usually have you in dormitories.” He looks at Erik. “You’ve been to college, right?”

He gives pause and says, “I’ve had some.”

“You live in the dorms?”

“For a year.”

“Going to prison is like living in the dorms, except you can’t go home, and people aren’t usually as bright. They fight more.”

“It’s easy for you to say it’s not so bad,” Erik says. “You’ve got, like, a hundred-and-fifty pounds on me, and about as many more tattoos. You look like God made you hardcore.”

“Humph,” Leo grunts. “Don’t I wish. I didn’t always look like this, you know.”

“Are you going back?” Alex asks.

“To prison? Over what landed me in here? No.” Leo shakes his head. “Just missed an appointment with my P.O., that’s all. I was workin’ on this job site, and we had to finish gettin’ this roof put on, you know? We were down one guy ‘cause the bitch called in sick, and it was going to rain the next day, so I called up my P.O. and told him I wasn’t going to make it. He told me he didn’t give a shit what the work situation was.

So I tell him that if I leave the site, the foreman will fire me, and then I'll have no job. If I have no job, I'll be breaking my parole conditions anyhow, so I went to work."

"What happened?" Erik asks.

"Well, here I am," Leo says. "They can't hold me for more than four days unless they move to revoke my parole, which they're not going to do over one missed appointment." Leo chuckles. "My girlfriend's worried sick, though. You got a girlfriend?"

"I'd rather not talk about it," Erik says.

"Oh, you in on a domestic or some bullshit like that?"

"No, not really," he replies. "I'm sort of, um, a *chemist*, I guess."

"Ah." Leo nods. "How's the girl fit in to that?"

"They got to her first."

"They usually do," Leo says. "You can get a smart woman, or you can get a loyal one, but you can't get both. My girl Brandi, she's a dancer, and..." Suddenly, Leo's face twitches and he squints, thinking. "I might have a problem."

"What?" he asks.

"My P.O. is comin' by tomorrow. I bet he's going to drop me."

"You dirty?"

"There might be a tiny bit of cocaine in there." He shows how tiny between his thumb and forefinger. "Lemme think," he says.

Leo gets up from the table and walks over to the calendar Alex has drawn on colored construction paper and affixed to the wall with toothpaste. It looks like a cheerful third-grader made it.

"Did some after I picked up Brandi from work, there...hrmm. Did a rail with the guys at the bar then, okay. When was that morning with Brandi? I was runnin' late for work, and she made coffee, and cut up that rail on the table." Leo puts his fingertips to his lips. "The Weather Channel was on. What day did the announcer say it was? It was supposed to rain the next day-" Leo's hands drop. "Uh-oh."

He turns, looks at Alex and Erik, and shrugs.

"I was wrong. They got me. I'm going back."

Leo sighs, trudges over to his bunk, and then sits down on the edge of it.

"Damn," he says, like the kicker just missed the extra point in a pre-season game he didn't really care about anyway. "Damn."

"Over one dirty drop?" Erik says. "No way, Leo."

"It's not just one," he says. "I've been clean for awhile, but before? Whew, my piss was burning a hole through the bottom of the glass every goddamn time." Leo chuckles. "I was clean for awhile, but I slipped. I wasn't supposed to get tested 'til the end of the month, but they'll drop me, 'cause they always do when they send you up to the County. Just lost track of things, you know? Dammit. The more things change, eh?" He coughs. "Well, I might not like where I'm going, but I sure as hell know the way."

Erik tries to think of something to say, but the lock grinds and the door swings open before he can speak. He turns, half-expecting them to be coming for Leo, who doesn't even look.

The guards aren't coming for him; they've brought in a new one. His hair is dyed Windex-blue, and he's wearing the top of his orange jumpsuit rolled down around his

waist. He's shoved up the sleeves of his t-shirt to display the I.C.P. clown tattoo on his sinewy arm. The kid throws his sheets and pillow on the floor and turns to the guards.

"It smells like ass in here," Blue Hair says. "This is bullshit. How long am I going to be in here?"

"Three days, at least," one of the guards says.

"Three days? What? My piercings will all close up by then! Y'know how much that shit costs? At least let me put my tongue ring back in, dog."

"I'm almost tempted to let you do that," the other guard says. "Enjoy your stay."

The door slams shut. The kid yells, "Fuck you!" after the guards, who laugh. He kicks the door.

"Three days in this shithole for an MIP? Fucking bullshit! This is fucking bullshit! You think you can do this to me? Put me in with these fucking losers? I got rights, dog..."

As Blue Hair rants and froths, Erik looks to Alex, who bites his lip and shakes with silent laughter, then to Leo, who gazes stone-faced at his own clasped hands, and then to what would have been Charlie's lunch-tray, sitting there, empty.

Erik leaps from the table, takes two lunging strides at the kid's back, and then swings the hard plastic tray with both hands in a sweeping arc. The tray's edge cracks against the kid's temple, the impact sending it clattering to the floor. The kid spins, eyes blank, mouth open, legs buckling. Erik uppercuts him, snapping the head back before the body sinks to the floor. The kid slumps against the cell door. Erik continues to pummel him. Neither makes a sound. He steps back for an overhand right when a massive hand seizes his wrist, squeezing it so hard that his fist uncoils.

Erik turns to see the word FEAR shout up from the grip. Leo smiles at him, glances down at the kid, and then raises a shaggy eyebrow. Alex sits at the table beyond, gaping, wide-eyed and silent.

"I think the tray did it, bro," Leo says, letting go. "No sense catchin' another charge."

Erik presses his hands against his forehead. The kid gurgles, his battered face pressed awkwardly against the steel door, his chest rising and falling beneath his bloodied white t-shirt.

"Fuck," Erik says between heavy breaths, looking down at the kid. "I'm fucked."

"Nah, he'll come to," Leo says. "We'll carry him to his bunk. I'll explain to him how he fell out of it when he was sleepin'. He'll agree." Leo chuckles. "The guards'll get a kick out of this. It's probably why they put him in here."

Erik clenches his jaw and counts his breaths. *I am a stone, sinking into the dark water*, he thinks.

"This place is fucking with my head," Erik says, grinding the heels of his hands into his eyes. "I'm not supposed to be here. Something...I don't know, something is *seriously* wrong with me."

"Nah." For the first time, Erik sees Leo's grin display rows of giant white teeth. "Seems to me like you're doin' just fine."

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