

1964

Overnight Stop

James Ballard

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmq>

Recommended Citation

Ballard, James. "Overnight Stop." *New Mexico Quarterly* 34, 2 (1964). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmq/vol34/iss2/5>

This Contents is brought to you for free and open access by the University of New Mexico Press at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in *New Mexico Quarterly* by an authorized editor of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact disc@unm.edu.

James Ballard

OVERNIGHT STOP

ASLEEP, AND NEXT, TOO FAST, ALERT, and there had been a noise somewhere. From his left. The sound of a door being unlocked, and that meant it was one of the cops. Nobody except the cops could open doors here.

Footsteps. Two people. Cold air then, and Kiwi's shirt went crawly against his chest. His shirt was sweaty, and in the draft it was like caterpillars on him. Like fishing worms. One day back in New Orleans, nothing to do that day, he came across a place out from town that sold fishing worms. Minnows, general bait, and he bought ten of the worms, a nickel's worth, and down the road, gave them their freedom again in a ditch. And in his hand, before he let them go, they were damp and working. The way his shirt felt on him now.

He started to get up. But the motion was rocking back and forth in his head then, and so he only sat still. In a way, it was fun. The rocking was. But then, knowing it wasn't fun at all, he stopped it and went ahead and stood up, and went to the front of the cell. There was a cop, and a civilian. The cop had the civilian in front.

"Hold it, friend."

The man stopped.

The cop gave a cluck. It sounded cheerful. He had a cheerful look. Sure. Nothing like having a real live human being to tell stop and go. This particular one looked easy to tell.

He was raunchy, and somewhere between middle-aged and young. He was carrying a topcoat over his arm, and he had on a dark suit with pants that didn't have a crease anymore. When the cop told him to stop, Hold it, he had merely stopped. Not quick, not hanging back, just obeying.

The cop was looking for a key out of a bunch of keys on a ring. He found the right one. Kiwi was about to move aside. But it was the cell next to his that the cop was opening.

"In here."

OVERNIGHT STOP

161

The man went on through. Still obedient, but even so the cop gave him a shove as he went through. Not a rough one, but enough of one that Kiwi heard the man stumble. The cop closed the door again. No slamming. Just closed it, and the lock snapped.

The cop that brought him in here, he remembered, that one shoved him. It must be part of the routine. Maybe it was the same cop. This one was a short guy. He couldn't remember the other one. It was only back in the afternoon, but now he couldn't remember. He had been too confused, back then.

He wanted to ask the cop what time it was. When the cop turned around, he would ask him then.

"You got a cigarette, buddy?" The man in the other cell. To the cop. "Sergeant, you got a—"

"Yeah. Yeah, I got a cigarette."

"You have? Honest to God? You spare me one, Sarge? You do that?" The cop was fastening the key ring to his belt again.

"Come on, Sergeant. You can spare me just one. Just a little drag on one, okay?"

The cop might have heard him. Maybe not. He was turning away.

Kiwi watched him. It was no good asking this fellow what time it was. He wouldn't be giving it away.

The cop was passing his cell. He stopped. And looked him over.

"What's your name, friend?"

"Name's Luks."

"Say it's Luks, huh."

"That's right. Keyswick Luks." Want to make something out of it?

Then, and it startled him, the cop grinned at him. "Okay, Keyswick Luks. Don't you go anywhere and get lost now."

And turned, and went on away.

He put a hand on one of the bars. Smooth. A little greasy. Steel. . . .

Went back to the bench afterwhile, and sat down again. And soon, once more, stretched himself out again along the bench. And lay still.

THE PLACE WAS QUIET NOW. The man in the next cell was quiet. No sound anywhere. Dead of night. Or it felt like night. If he only knew the time.

When he first got here, back in the afternoon, somebody in one of the cells down the corridor was yelling and arguing and going on about something. And kept on, *Lemme ow, lemme owwww lemme out of here lemme owwwwwww*, and when he went to sleep it was

with that sound going. Old lullaby. All he could hear anymore though was his own breathing. Everything peaceful, now.

Knoxville. The Knoxville jail. Before he was in this town half an hour, he got arrested. That probably made some kind of record.

He should have stayed in New Orleans maybe. Or since he had left, kept on going anyway until he got where he was headed. It was Baltimore he had started for. Instead, he hadn't done either one. He was waiting for a ship in New Orleans. He gave it up, down there, and took off. And here he was, up in the mountains, a long way from water even.

Not that it was so bad, actually, now that he felt okay. When he first got here, when the cop shoved him in and clicked the door shut after him, the noise, the screeching and bawling the man down the corridor kept making, *lemme owwww, lemme owwwwww*, was right in his ears sometimes, and then at other times, off away somewhere. Far and sad sounding, and the light, from the fluorescent tubing along the ceiling, was slick and filmy.

Whatever it was had been the matter though, it was over with now. Being asleep must have fixed it. Whatever the man had been yelling about, that was over with too. Or anyway the man had got quiet about it. Everything still, and it wasn't bad at all now being in here. The air was close, but some of the ships he had been on smelled the same way. Warm in here. If he only knew what time it was, that would have the last detail in line.

Maybe he had slept a long time. It was late in the afternoon when he got picked up, and if he had, it might be on towards midnight already. The place didn't have any windows that would let him see the outside and get a feeling about the time. The light in here was fluorescent, and even with his head clear it looked like something you could feel if you suddenly moved your hand a certain way. One thing about being out of here, would be getting to see real light. Maybe he would get out, in the morning.

They'd better give him back his seaman's papers too, when he got out.

The clerk cop sounded irritated about him being a seaman. "Say you work on ships—huh?"

"That's right."

"On board of ships?"

"On board."

"You trying to be smart or something, fellow?"

"I'm trying to answer what you asked me. I work on ships."

"That's not what I asked you. I asked you are you trying to be smart. You can't be smart in here, fellow."

They were watching each other.

"Doing here in Knoxville—huh? Aint no ships here."

And when he started to say he was headed for Baltimore, where it was ships, the cop cut him off. "Okay, okay friend. Skip that." And when he asked for his papers back, the cop told him not to give it a thought.

"Hey, neighbor?"

The man in the next cell.

"Buddy? You awake? You got a cigarette over there?"

"Sure haven't, mac. Wish I did."

"Not even just one? That I could have just a drag off? Oh Jesus."

Nice to have a cigarette. Early this morning was the last one he'd had. In Alabama somewhere, a man that gave him a ride gave him a cigarette too. Nice to have something to eat. Last night was the last time. It was odd he hadn't started feeling hungry yet.

Maybe this man knew what time it was.

"Hey, mac—Mister?"

"Yeah, buddy?"

"What time you got?"

"Seven thirty, buddy. Little bit after, that is."

He hadn't slept a long time at all then. Only two or three hours. The whole night to get through.

"I saw the clock outside, see. When they were writing me up? That was only about fifteen minutes ago, see. Time passing slow?"

"Sort of."

"Well, you just take it easy. . . . You know what day is it, don't you?"

"Day? Sure."

"Sometimes you don't," the man said in a minute. He sounded apologetic. "I mean, when you been drunk? And you're sort of confused, you might say? You lose track of the day, sometimes."

"I know what day it is."

The man didn't say anything.

He had sounded short. He could have said it better than that.

"Uh—buddy? Would you mind *telling* me what day it is?"

He waited. "It's the thirty first," he said then. And he was careful this time to have it sound all right.

"Right!" the man said. "The thirty-first. October the thirty-first. Thanks, buddy. Thanks a hell of a lot. I'm sure glad to find it out. Man if I'm not, You ever get bothered about what day it is? I mean, you forget which one? Ever get that way, buddy?"

"Can't say I do, no."

"It's a bitch when you do, I tell you that. When you lose track, you know. Man. October the thirty-first."

"All that bothers me right now is the time."

"But you're fixed up about that, buddy. It's seven thirty. Getting on towards eight, I guess."

"That's what bothers me. Spending the rest of the night in here."

"Huh?"

"Spending the rest of the night in here."

"Why, it's not seven thirty p.m., buddy. It's seven thirty in the morning."

"How's that? Have you got that right?"

"Well sure I've got it right, buddy. I can tell when it's morning, even if I don't know what day it's morning on. It's morning now, buddy." The man sort of laughed. "It is, no kidding. I thought I was bad off, buddy, didn't know the day. You didn't know it was day or night. Don't mind me laughing, hear? I'm not laughing at you."

In the morning. He had slept the whole night long.

"So that makes it the first of November, then," the man said. "Instead of the thirty-first of October?"

The whole night long. "That's right. It sure does."

"Just so I know which one it is. Don't make much difference, see, long as I know. They going to let you out this morning, are they?"

"Hope so."

"What've they got you in for, anyway?"

"Vagrancy, I guess."

"On the road, huh. Well, you just about got it made, then. They only keep you overnight, see, when it's vagrancy. You'll be out of here couple of hours now. I mean, I don't want to sound like I know, you can't ever tell what cops are going to do, but that's the way it usually is. You'll be walking down the street couple of hours now. Getting cold out there though, you know that?"

"Sort of cold this afternoon. I mean yesterday."

"Got colder too, buddy. Going to rain."

And that meant it was yesterday, instead of today, that he'd had anything to eat. Maybe that was the reason he didn't feel hungry now. Maybe the feeling-hungry stage was already over.

"Yeah, you just about got it made, buddy. Be glad if all I had was a couple of hours. I'm set here till tomorrow morning, chances are. Guy picked me up for being drunk, see. Wasn't drunk at all. Way it is, see, I'm just coming off one? And I guess I got that drunk look still. Walking around a while back to calm my nerves, guy picked me up and brought me in. Just have to sit here, I guess. Be all sobered up at least, time I do get out. Sure as hell be glad, too. Glad to be sober again, I mean. And you say you're on the road, buddy? You headed anywhere special? What I mean, you're sort of young, buddy, looks like to me, to be on the road. I mean I noticed when we were going past your door, you couldn't be much more'n a boy."

The man talked a lot. Maybe it was to have something to do.

"You don't mind talking, do you, buddy? Sort of passes the time off, a little. Keeps my nerves a little calmer, frankly, it's somebody to talk to. Since I can't walk around no' more." The man gave his laugh again. "Can't go anywhere for a while, if you get what I mean. That's what I was doing, see. Walking around? Schedule's changed now, though. Sure appreciate talking to somebody. This sobering up's a bitch, I tell you. It's worth it, though. To be sober again. I only had a cigarette now, it wouldn't be—"

Owwwwwww lemme owwwwwww lemme owwwwwwwww

Bawling. And with it, this time, battering, clanging. Echoing, back and forth along the tiled floor and tiled ceiling. Stopped.

Once in a gale, a deck plate got loose, when some of the rivets popped. The plate was battering up and down.

"Guy ought to keep that up," the man said. "Wake some of these other fellows up, they might have a cigarette. Cell door makes a pretty good racket, don't it? When you shake it good."

Going again then. The banging, and the voice again. It didn't sound like a voice anymore. A human being's. But it was.

Then the cop again, the short one, hurrying along the corridor, swinging his club. The cell the racket was coming from was down at the far end of the corridor. It was out of sight from here. Lemme owwww, and it stopped then, and the door banging, both at once. The cop was talking. You want to get out of here, friend?

Whatever the man answered, Kiwi couldn't hear it. Old Lemme ow was keeping quiet, this time.

The cop said some more. And I hear another sonnabitching sound out of you, you're going to be in here a week.

No answer.

In a minute, the cop was coming back. This time, he was smoking a cigarette.

"—Hey! Buddy!"

He stopped. "What do you want?"

"Buddy for Christ sake lemme have just one drag on that. I need a cigarette buddy I swear to God I do, I'll pay you for it I'll pay you for a whole pack, just one drag you can have it right back for God's sake just—yeah. Yeah, that's it. Thanks a—. Oh."

The cop had dropped the cigarette to the floor. Moved back, one step, and dropped it, and put his shoe on the end of it.

"Oh."

He went on away.

IT LAY ON THE TILING. One end of it black and flattened. The body of it still solid.

The man's hand then, near the floor, and his wrist, and part of his forearm. Kiwi saw the hand, and the fingers, and watched how they worked and strained, and watched the tendons in the wrist rise and stretch. And finally, become still.

Strained and wide, but no motion at all, and in the peculiar light the hand looked paralyzed. Like an object instead of a hand. Like a scream you couldn't hear. After a time, it moved again. And disappeared back into the cell.

"That son of a bitch moved back, you know? He put it just out of reach."

"Yeah. Yeah, I saw him when he did, buddy. . . . Might as well forget about it, I guess. . . . Hey, buddy?"

"Want me to see if I can reach it?"

"Would you do that, buddy? I was just going to say, it looks closer to you maybe. Christ, buddy, I hate to ask you. If you got down close to the floor sort of, you could get to it maybe."

He knelt down, and reached for it. But it was too far.

He stretched out on the floor, and tried again. That gave him a little more reach. But not enough.

"That's okay, buddy. Just don't bother about it. Thanks anyhow. I

appreciate it, just don't bother. I wouldn't give the sawed-off bastard the satisfaction, frankly, after the way he did. Stepping back like that. Just don't bother about it, buddy."

It was comfortable, down here. The deck was no harder than the bench. Probably about as clean. To be still here a while. Still.

Cool on the floor, and the tile cool against his face. He looked at the black trough of plaster between two of the tiles. It had waves along the edges. The waves were the wake that was left when the plasterer drew the tip of his spatula along. They were frozen in, from when the plaster set.

Something he had meant to do. The cigarette.

Let it alone. Just let it be. To be still here. Just rest.

BUT AFTER A TIME, he stood up again, carefully so as to keep from getting dizzy, and unbuttoned his shirt. The collar of it was grimy. The whole thing was. It used to be a good shirt. He had got a stack of shirts once, with part of the payoff at the end of a trip.

He took it off, and knelt down once again, and slid it along the floor. It looped around the cigarette, and swept it on in towards him. And all the way. He took the cigarette out of the folds of the shirt. It was a Pall Mall. For wherever particular people congregate. He laid his shirt on the bench.

"What kind you smoke, mac?"

"Buddy, it don't make me no difference. You just reach over here, buddy, and take these matches. All I ask, save me just a couple of drags on it."

"Here. You smoke it first."

He reached through, and felt around to give it to the man. The man was protesting, You smoke some of it first, buddy, you go ahead, but then their hands met, and he stopped. Kiwi heard the match against the folder, and smelled the smoke then, and then a drift of smoke floated out into the corridor. The man sighed.

"YOU KNOW SOMETHING, BUDDY?"

He would be just as glad, now, if the man would stop talking for a while. This must be the letdown. A big deal to get a letdown from. What if you got elected President some day.

"Buddy? I say you know something? I was wrong about you. Before, you know? When that little squirt brought me back here, and I was waiting on him to unlock this door, I noticed you the way you were

looking us over, and I figured you for a kind of bastard. I did. I didn't know for a long time if I ought to try to say something to you even, see if you had a smoke or anything. I thought you were just one of these people that didn't give a damn. It wasn't anything personal now, I admire somebody that would look a cop over in his own jail. I just thought that was the kind of guy you were. And then you got down on the floor, and you even took your shirt off and used it. Man, I was sure wrong. I'm glad to admit it I was. I want to apologize to you, buddy, right here and now."

It was time he put his shirt back on. He picked it up, and smelled it. Pretty bad. But it was smelling that way before he got here. Once a shirt got like that, it never got clean again.

"Listen, son."

If the man would quiet down.

"They'll be letting you out, see, right away now. That's all they do when they vag you, see, is hold you overnight. They're glad to get rid of you. But listen. I want to give you a little friendly advice, if you don't mind. You mind if I give you a little hint, sort of?"

"Okay."

"Aye hell, buddy. I'm just trying to help you out a little, is all. All it is, don't ever, buddy, don't ever, look a cop in the eye. I admire somebody that would, like I told you, but that's the worst thing you can do to get a cop sore at you. Is look him in the eye. They just don't like it, buddy."

Down the corridor, somebody coughed. Again, and he was having a spell of coughing then. That wouldn't stop, and still wouldn't, and he was barking and strangling. It let go of him finally. He sounded like he had been running a long way.

Across the corridor, a shape on the bench in that cell stirred. Sat up, and yawned.

"Here you are, son," the man said. "Few good drags still left on this thing. I had my share. It's all yours now."

He reached through the bars again, and fumbled to meet the man's hand.

"You got it, buddy? Yeah, here we are. Don't burn your fingers now."

He got a finger burned anyway. Most of the cigarette was smoked away.

On the left, the door was being unlocked again. And once more the cop was coming down the corridor. Two of them. The short one, and

a big one. They went to the far end, and worked back one cell at a time, right and left, unlocking the cells, herding the people along.

A DOORWAY that opened onto a wide alley. It was the exit from the jail. The entrance into the streets, the outside. To getting started again. Ain't no ships here, friend. Baltimore, where they were. Raining. Thin and drifting, but that was not the reason he was waiting. The sudden openness had him off balance, and he didn't want to venture any farther just yet.

Then, a cop was standing alongside him.

"Raining," the cop said.

It was the short one. He was wearing a visored cap with a plastic rain-cover over it, and a black slicker buttoned to his chin.

"Good day for sleeping, though. Go home and get me some sleep now. I need it too. You fellows sure as hell gave me a hard time last night."

The man sounded cheerful. On a ship, he remembered, he used to be in a good mood himself, when the end of the watch came and he was going off duty.

He turned up his jacket collar, and pulled the zipper as high as it went. He should have kept his heavy jacket. Or else his raincoat. He should have done a lot of things. He couldn't keep standing here, though. Figure out which way, and get on the highway headed north.

This cop would know which street to take. It wasn't likely he'd be telling, though. The game he played with his cigarette, he probably wouldn't give away directions to get out of town either.

The fellow in the other cell was right. He had said Out by ten, and that was how it happened. Vagrancy. That was the charge, and the magistrate said fifteen dollars. Dumb bastard, if anybody had fifteen dollars they wouldn't be vagrant in the first place. Fine suspended. Don't want to see you around here anymore, fellow.

The cop was still standing there. All buttoned up.

"Always feel peculiar, coming out here in the morning." To himself mostly, looking more or less ahead of him.

Kiwi glanced at him. Maybe the guy would after all tell him directions for getting to the highway. But the cop was gazing straight ahead now, and he decided against asking. And to stop fooling around. Get started.

"Broke, fellow?"

It took him a while to realize what the cop had said. And a while

longer to begin getting an answer together. For he was broke, not a penny not a cent, and it would be in order to say something or other to him, Thank you, something or other, to indicate he was talking out of turn. It was no cop's affair whether or not he was broke.

"Because I can let you have fifty cents if you are." And turned then, and faced him. "Four bits do you any good?"

He shook his head. "Thanks anyway."

"You mean you don't want it?"

"Thanks anyway."

"Goddamn it, fellow, you're broke, aren't you? They picked you up for bumming, didn't they? Jesus Christ, I offer you four bits and all you do is stand there and shake your head?"

He watched him. They had picked him up for looking at them.

The cop was snarling. "Go on. Down the street with you, before I run you in again." He was stalking away. Red-faced, rigid.

"WAIT."

Shoving on past him.

"Will you wait a minute? Damn right four bits will do me some good. If you got it, I'll take it. Jesus."

"I'd think you would." The cop was unbuttoning his slicker, digging in a pocket. "Seen the time I'd be glad to get fifty cents, friend. Here."

Four bits. Flat and heavy, fifty cent piece. Coffee. Some food. What you could do with fifty cents.

The cop was overriding his thanks, buttoning his slicker again, smoothing the lapels. Growling. All right, it's all right, never mind. Heading down the alley then, striding along. And reaching the sidewalk, turning. Gone.

FIFTY CENTS. Round, flat, heavy and warm in his hand. Fishing worms were ten for a nickel. Ten times ten made a hundred.

He slipped it into his pocket. Gave the zipper of his jacket a pull, and left the doorway. First to get some breakfast. Then the route north. It ought not to be hard to find. It might stop raining soon. If it didn't, just have to go ahead and hitchhike in the rain. He would be out of the mountains by tonight. And by tomorrow, good luck getting rides, he would be in Baltimore. Day after tomorrow, if he had any kind of luck at all.