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Discharge Day

James Lee Burke

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DISCHARGE DAY

a chapter from a novel *The Lost Get Back Boogie*

The captain was silhouetted on horseback like a piece of burnt iron against the sun. The brim of his straw hat was pulled to shade his sun-darkened face, and he held the sawed-off double-barrel shotgun with the stock propped against his thigh to avoid touching the metal. We swung our axes into the roots of tree stumps, our backs glistening and brown and arched with vertebrae, while the chainsaws whined into the felled trees and lopped them off into segments. Our Clorox-faded green and white pinstripe trousers were stained at the knees with sweat and the sandy dirt from the river bottom, and the insects that boiled out of the grass stuck to our skin and burrowed into the wet creases of our necks. No one spoke, not even to caution a man to step back from the swing of an axe or the roaring band of a MuCulloch saw ripping in a white spray of splinters through a stump. The work was understood and accomplished with the smoothness and certitude and rhythm that comes from years of learning that it will never have a variation. Each time we hooked the trace chains on a stump, slapped the reins across the mules' flanks, and pulled it free in one snapping burst of roots and loam, we moved closer to the wide bend of the Mississippi and the line of willow trees and dappled shade along the bank.

"Okay, water and piss it," the captain said.

We dropped the axes, prizing bars and shovels, and followed behind the switching tail of the captain's horse down to the willows and the water can that sat in the tall grass with the dipper hung on the side by its ladle. The wide brown expanse of the river shimmered flatly in the sun, and on the far bank, where the world of the free people began, white egrets were nesting in the sand. The Mississippi was almost a half mile across at that point, and there was a story among the Negro convicts that during the forties a one-legged trusty named Wooden Dick had whipped a mule into the river before the bell count on Camp H, and had held onto his tail across the current to the other side. But the free people said Wooden Dick was a nigger's myth; he was just a syphilitic old man who had his leg amputated at the charity hospital at New Orleans and who later went blind on julpip

(a mixture of molasses, shelled corn, water, yeast, and lighter fluid that the Negroes would boil in a can on the radiator overnight) and fell into the river and drowned under the weight of the artificial leg given him by the state. And I believed the free people, because I never knew or heard of anyone who beat Angola.

We rolled cigarettes from our state issue of Bugler and Virginia Extra tobacco and wheat-straw papers, and those who had sent off for the dollar-fifty rolling machines sold by a mail order house in Memphis took out their Prince Albert cans of neatly glued and clipped cigarettes that were as good as tailor-mades. There was still a mineral streaked piece of ice floating in the water can, and we spilled the dipper over our mouths and chests and let the coldness of the water run down inside our trousers. The captain gave his horse to one of the Negroes to take into the shallows, and sat against a tree trunk with the bowl of his pipe cupped in his hand, which rested on the huge bulge of his abdomen below his cartridge belt. He wore no socks under his half-topped boots, and the area above his ankles was hairless and chafed a dead, shaling color.

He lived in a small frame cottage by the front gate with the other free people, and each twilight he returned home to a cancer-ridden hardshell Baptist wife from Mississippi who taught Bible lessons to the Alcoholics Anonymous group in the Block on Sunday mornings. In the time I was on his gang I saw him kill one convict, a half-wit Negro kid who had been sent up from the mental hospital at Mandeville. We were breaking a field down by the Red Hat House, and the boy dropped the plow loops off his wrists and began to walk across the rows towards the river. The captain shouted at him twice from the saddle, then raised forward on the pommel, aimed, and let off the first barrel. The boy's shirt jumped at the shoulder, as though the breeze had caught it, but he kept walking across the rows with his unlaced boots flopping on his feet like galoshes. The captain held the stock tight into his shoulder and fired again, and the boy tripped forward across the rows with a single jet of scarlet bursting out just below his kinky, uncut hairline.

A pickup truck driven by one of the young hacks rolled in a cloud of dust down the meandering road through the fields towards me. The rocks banged under the fenders, and the dust coated the stunted cattails in the irrigation ditches. I put out my Virginia Extra cigarette against the sole of my boot and stripped the paper down the glued seam and let the tobacco blow apart in the wind.

"I reckon that's your walking ticket, Iry," the captain said.

The hack slowed the truck to a stop next to the Red Hat House and blew his horn. I took my shirt off the willow branch where I had left it at eight o'clock field count that morning.

"How much money you got coming on discharge?" the captain said.

"About forty-three dollars."

"You take this five and send it to me, and you keep your ass out of here."

"That's all right, boss."

"Shit, it is. You'll be sleeping in the Sally after you run your money out your pecker on beer and women."

I watched him play his old self-deluding game, with the green tip of a five dollar bill showing above the laced edge of his convict-made wallet. He splayed over the bill section of the wallet with his thick thumb and held it out momentarily, then folded it again in his palm. It was his favorite ritual of generosity when a convict earned good time on his gang and went back on the street.

"Well, just don't do nothing to get violated back to the farm, Iry," he said.

I shook hands with him and walked across the field to the pickup truck. The hack turned the truck around and we rolled down the baked and corrugated road through the bottom section of the farm towards the Block. I looked through the back window and watched the ugly, squat white building called the Red Hat House grow smaller against the line of willows on the river. It was named during the thirties when the big stripes (the violent and the insane) were kept there. In those days, before the Block with its lockdown section was built, the dangerous ones wore black and white striped jumpers and straw hats that were painted red. When they went in at night from the fields they had to strip naked for a body search and their clothes were thrown into the building after them. Later, the building came to house the electric chair, and someone had painted in broken letters on one wall: *This is where they knock the fire out of your ass.*

We drove through the acres of new corn, sugar cane, and sweet potatoes, the squared sections and weedless rows mathematically perfect, each thing in its ordered and pre-designed place, past Camp H and its roofless and crumbling stone buildings left over from the Civil War, past the one-story rows of barracks on Camp I, then the shattered and weed-grown block of concrete slab in an empty field by

Camp A where the two iron sweat boxes were bulldozed out in the early fifties. I closed off the hot stream of air through the wind vane and rolled a cigarette.

“What are you going to do outside?” the hack said. He chewed gum, and his lean sun-tanned face and washed-out blue eyes looked at me flatly with his question. His starched khaki short sleeves were folded in a neat cuff above his biceps. As a new guard he had the same status among us as a fish, a convict just beginning his first fall.

“I haven’t thought about it yet,” I said.

“There’s plenty of work if a man wants to do it.” His eyes were young and mean, and there was just enough of that north Louisiana Baptist righteousness in his voice to make you pause before you spoke again.

“I’ve heard that.”

“It don’t take long to get your ass put back in here if you ain’t working,” he said.

I licked the glued seam of the cigarette paper, folded it down under my thumb, and crimped the ends.

“You got a match, boss?”

His eyes looked over my face, trying to peel through the skin and reach inside the insult of being called a title that was given only to the old hacks who had been on the farm for years. He took a kitchen match from his shirt pocket and handed it to me.

I popped the match on my fingernail and drew in on the suck of flame and glue and the strong black taste of the Virginia Extra. We passed the prison cemetery with its faded wooden markers and tin cans of withered flowers and the grave of Alton Bienvenu. He did thirty-three years in Angola and had the record for time spent in the sweat box on Camp A (twenty-two days in July with space only large enough for the knees and buttocks to collapse against the sides and still hold a man in an upright position, a slop bucket set between the ankles and one air hole the diameter of a cigar drilled in the iron door). He died in 1957, three years before I went in, but even when I was in the fish tank (the thirty days of processing and classification in lockdown you go through before you enter the main population) I heard about the man who broke out twice when he was a young stiff, took the black Betty everyday on the levee gang when the hacks used to shoot and bury a half dozen convicts a week in the embankment, and later as an old man worked paroles through an uncle in the state legislature for other convicts when he had none coming himself,

taught reading to illiterates, had morphine tablets smuggled back from the prison section of the charity hospital in New Orleans for a junkie who was going to fry, and testified before a governor's board in Baton Rouge about the reasons for convicts on Angola farm slashing the tendons in their ankles. After his death he was canonized in the prison's group legend with a saint's aura rivaled only by a Peter, crucified upside down in the Roman arena with his shackles still stretched between his legs.

The mound of Alton Bienvenu's grave was covered with a cross of flowers, a thick purple, white, and gold-tinted shower of violets, petunias, cowslips, and buttercups from the fields. A trusty was cutting away the St. Augustine grass from the edge of the mound with a gardener's trowel.

"What do you think about that?" the hack said.

"I guess it's hard to keep a grave clean," I said, and I pinched the hot ash of my cigarette against the paint on the outside of the car door.

"That's some shit, aint it? Putting flowers on a man's grave that's already gone to hell." He spit his chewing gum into the wind, and drove the truck with one hand over the ruts as though he were aiming between his tightened knuckles at the distant green square of enclosure by the front gate called the Block.

The wind was cool through the concrete, shaded breezeway as we walked towards my dormitory. The trustees were watering the recreation yard, and the grass and weight lifting sets glistened in the sun. We reached the first lock and waited for the hack to pull the combination of levers that would slide the gate. The Saturday morning cleaning crews were washing down the walls and floor in my dormitory with buckets of soap and water and an astringent antiseptic that burned the inside of your head when you breathed it. The dirt shaled off my boots on the wet floor, but no sign of protest or irritation showed on a man's face, because the hack was there with me, there was some vague reason for them to re-do part of their work, and they squeezed out their mops in the buckets, the ashes dropping from their cigarettes, and went about mopping my muddy tracks with their eyes as flat as glass.

"You can keep your underwear and your shoes," the hack said. "Throw your other clothes and sheets in a pile outside. Roll your mattress and don't leave nothing behind. I'll pick you up in the rec room when you get finished and take you over to possessions."

I pulled off my work uniform, put on my clack sandals, and walked down the corridor to the showers. I let the cold water boil over my head and face until my breath came short in my chest. One man on the cleaning detail had stopped mopping and was watching me through the doorless opening in the shower partition. He was a queen in Magnolia section who was finishing his second jolt for child molesting. His buttocks swelled out like a pear, and he always kept his shirt buttoned at the throat and never bathed.

"Take off, Morton. No show today, babe," I said.

"I don't want nothing off you," he said, and rinsed his mop in the bucket, his soft stomach hanging over his belt.

"You guys watch the goddamn floor," I heard somebody yell down the corridor, then the noise of the first crews who had been knocked off from the fields. "We done cleaned it twice already. You take your goddamn shoes off."

When I got back to my cell the corridor was striped with the dry imprints of bare feet, and my cell partner, W. J. Posey, was sitting shirtless on his bunk, with his knees drawn up before him, smoking the wet end of a hand-rolled cigarette between his lips without removing it. His balding pate was sunburned and flecked with pieces of dead skin, and the knobs of his elbows and shoulders and the areas of bone in his chest were the color of a dead carp. He was working on five to fifteen, a three-time loser for hanging paper, and in the year we had celled together warrants had been filed for him in three other states. His withered arms were covered with faded tattoos done in Lewisburg and Parchman, and his thick, nicotine-stained fingernails looked like claws.

"You want to try that sweet scene in Baton Rouge tonight?" he said.

"I might miss my train, W. J."

"Seventy-five dollars, babe, and you won't wake up with a hard on for a month. I tell you it's better than pissing away your money on the next five dollar cunt you meet in a beer joint."

"I'll catch it the next time around. Tonight I'm just going to shake it," I said, and smiled at him, because I didn't want to hurt his feelings about his favorite story, one that had been retold in every section of the Block at one time or another, and which probably caused more solitary love affairs in darkened cells throughout the farm than all the other sexual legends that worked into our minds about three o'clock when the sun started to bore a small hole in the back of our bent

heads.

"You get the money, Iry. Let them girls pull all that bad juice out your pecker, and you'll hit the street Sunday morning like them two years wasn't there."

"Okay, write it down. Maybe I can get a train tomorrow, but I'm going to kick your ass if I get nailed in a whorehouse raid."

He was already living in my evening's experience while he wrote the address down on the torn edge of a piece of prison stationery. But W. J.'s story about the Room in a three-story ante-bellum house north of the Huey Long Bridge was the best erotic account I had ever heard in either prison or the army. The first night I celled with him the warden's wife sent a portable television set down to the Block so we could watch Sandy Koufax pitch against Cincinnati, and after the set had shorted out in a diminishing white spot of light against the darkness of the dormitory and the communal groan of the eighty men sitting on the floor, W. J. began his story about the Room. His wasted face looked awful in the glow of cobalt light from the breezeway, but his story enchanted each of us in the same way that a fable read by an elementary school teacher confirms the fantasies of children. I was never sure if the story was myth or an accurate account of a whorehouse in Baton Rouge during the forties, but nevertheless it was very real to us at that moment.

The Room was on the third floor of the house, furnished with a tester bed, a short ice box filled with pink wine, bourbon, and cracked ice, and an electric buzzer on a cord that was placed under a solitary pillow. There were three doors that faced the Room, and after the Negro maid let you in and showed you how to snap the bolt from the inside, you undressed, fixed a drink, and pressed one of the three buttons on the buzzer. They came out in pairs and worked on you with their lips and avocado mulatto breasts, traded positions all over your body, then suddenly withdrew through the wall when you pushed the button a second time. Your head spun with the liquor and the pure pagan exhilaration of doing things and having things happen to you which you didn't think possible before, and when you pressed the button a third time you were bursting inside with that fine point of fire that waited to exhaust itself in the torn maidenhead of a sixteen-year-old virgin.

I put on the shiny suit and the off-color brown shoes that had been brought to my cell last night by the count man. I threw my sheets, blanket, and the rest of my prison uniforms and denims into the

corridor, and put my underwear, work boots, and three new shirts and pairs of socks into the box the suit had come in.

"You want the purses and wallets, W. J.?"

"Yeah, give them to me. I can trade them to that punk in Ash for a couple of decks."

"Take care, babe. Don't hang out any more on the wash line."

"Just tell that big red-headed bitch to slide it up and down the banister a few times to keep my lunch warm." He dropped his cigarette stub into the butt can by his bunk and picked at his toe nails.

I walked down the corridor past the row of open cells and the men with bath towels around their waists clacking in their wood sandals towards the roar of water and shouting in the shower stalls. The wind through the breezeway was cool against my face and damp neck. I waited at the second lock for the hack to open up.

"You know the rec don't open till twelve-thirty, Paret," he said.

"Mr. Benson said he wanted me to wait for him there, boss."

"Well, you ain't supposed to be there."

"Let him through, Frank," the other hack on the lock said.

The gate slide back with its quiet rush of hydraulically-released pressure. I waited in the dead space between the first and second gates for the hack to pull the combination of levers again.

Our recreation room had several folding card tables, a canteen where you could buy koolade and soda pop, and a small library filled with worthless books donated by the Salvation Army. Anything that was either vaguely pornographic or violent, and in particular racial, was somehow eaten up in a censoring process that must have begun at the time of donation and ended at the front gate. But anyway it was thorough, because there wasn't a plot in one of those books that wouldn't bore the most moronic among us. I sat at a card table that was covered with burns like melted plastic insects, and rolled a cagarette from the last tobacco in my package of Virginia Extra.

I heard the lock hiss, then the noise of the first men walking through the dead space, their voices echoing briefly off the stone walls, into the recreation room, where they would wait until the dining hall opened at 12:45. They all wore clean denims and pinstripes, their hair wet and slicked back over the ears, combs clipped in their shirt pockets, pomade and aftershave lotion glistening in their pompadours and sideburns, with names like Popcorn, Snowbird, and Git-It-And-Go cloroxed into their trousers.

"Hey, Willard, get out them goddamn guitars," one man said.

Each Saturday afternoon our country band played on the green stretch of lawn between the first two buildings in the Block. We had one steel guitar and pickups and amplifiers for the two flat tops, and our fiddle and mandolin players held their instruments right into the microphone, so we could reach out with "The Orange Blossom Special" and "Please Release Me, Darling" all the way across the cane field to Camp I.

Willard, the trusty, opened the closet where the instruments were kept and handed out the two Kay flat tops. The one I used had a kapo fashioned from a pencil and piece of innertube on the second fret of the neck. West Finley, whose brother named East was also in Angola, handed the guitar to me in his clumsy fashion, with his hugh hand squeezed tight on the strings and his bad teeth grinning around his cigar. He was from Mississippi, and he chewed on cigars all day and left any area he was working in covered with tobacco spittle. He was doing life with his brother, which is ten and a half in Louisiana, for burning down a paper mill in Bogalusa while the watchman was asleep next to an oil drum.

"I mean you look slick, cotton. Them free people clothes ought to turn you a piece of ass right on the back seat of the Greyhound," he said.

"West, your goddamn ass," I said.

"No, shit, man. Threads like that is going to have pussy snapping all over Baton Rouge." His lean, hillbilly face was full of good humor and the wide opening of tobacco juice in his mouth. "Break down my song for me, babe, because I ain't going to be able to hear it played right for a long time."

The others formed around us, grinning, their arms folded in front of them, with cigarettes held up casually to their mouths, waiting for West to enter the best part of his performance.

"No pick," I said.

"Shit," and he said it with that singular two syllable pronunciation of the Mississippi delta, *shee-it*. He took an empty match cover from the ash tray, folded it in half, and handed it to me between his callused fingers. "Now let's get it on, Iry. The boss man is going to be ladling them peas in a minute."

Our band's rhythm guitar man sat across from me with the other big Kay propped on his folded thigh. I clicked the match cover once across the open strings, sharped the B and A, and turned the face of the guitar towards him so he could see my E cord configuration on the

neck. The song was an old Jimmie Rogers piece that began "If you don't like my peaches, don't shake my tree," and then the lyrics became worse. But West was beautiful. He bopped on the waxed floor, the shined points of the alligator shoes his girl had sent him flashing above his own scuff marks, bumping and grinding as he went into the dirty boogie, his oiled ducktailed hair collapsed in a black web over his face. One man took a small harmonica from his shirt pocket and blew a deep, train-moaning bass behind us, and West caught it and pumped the air with his loins, his arms stretched out beside him, while the other men whistled and clapped and grabbed themselves. Through a crack of shoulders I saw the young hack come through the lock into the recreation room, and I slid back down the neck to E again and bled it off quietly on the treble strings.

West's face was perspiring and his eyes bright. He took his cigar from the table's edge, and his breath came short when he spoke. "When you get up to Nashville and start busting all that millionaire cunt, you tell them West Finley give you your start. And if they need anything extra, tell them to ship it in a box C.O.D. and I'll stamp it with the hardest prick in Angola."

Everyone laughed, their mouths full of empty spaces and gold and lead fillings. Then the outside bell rang and the third lock, which controlled the next section of the breezeway, hissed back in a suck of air.

"Got to scarf it down and put some protein in the pecker, cotton. Do something sweet for me tonight," West said, and popped two fingers off his thumbnail into my arm as he walked past me towards the lock with the other men.

"Just leave the guitar on the table," the hack said. "The state car is leaving out at one."

I picked up my box and followed him back through the lock. He held up my discharge slip to the hack by the levers, which was unnecessary, since the lock was already opened and all the old bosses along the breezeway knew that I was going out that day, anyway. But as I watched him walk in front of me, with his starched khaki shirt shaping and reshaping across his back like iron, I realized that he would be holding up papers of denial or permission with a whitened click of knuckles for the rest of his life.

"You better move unless you want to walk down to the highway," he said, halfway over his shoulder.

We went to possessions, and he waited while the trusty looked

through the rows of alphabetized, manila envelopes that were stuffed into the tiers of shelves and hung with stringed, circular tags. The trusty flipped his stiffened fingers down a row in a rattling of glue and paper, and shook out one flattened envelope and brushed the dust off the top with his palm. The hack bit on a match stick and looked at his watch.

"Check it and sign for it," the trusty said. "You got forty-three dollars coming in discharge money and fifty-eight in your commissary fund. I can't give you nothing but fives and ones and some silver. They done cleaned me out this morning."

"That's all right," I said.

I opened the manila envelope and took out the things that I had entered the Calcasieu Parish jail with two years and three months ago after I had killed a man: a blunted Minie ball perforated with a hole that I had used as a weight when I fished as a boy on Bayou Teche and Spanish Lake; the gold vest watch my father gave me when I graduated from high school; a Swiss army knife with a can opener, screwdriver, and a saw that could build a cabin; one die from a pair of dice, the only thing I brought back from thirteen months in Korea because they had separated me from sixteen others who went up Heart Break Ridge and stayed there in that pile of wasted ash; and a billfold with all the celluloid-enclosed pieces of identification that are so important to us, now outdated and worthless in their cracked description of who the bearer was.

We walked out of the Block into the brilliant sunlight, and the hack drove us down the front road past the small clapboard cottages where the free people lived. The wash on the lines straightened and dropped in the wind, the tiny gardens were planted with chrysanthemums and rose bushes, and housewives in print dresses appeared quickly in an open screen door to shout at the children in the yard. It could have been a scene surgically removed from a working class neighborhood, except for the presence of the Negro trusties watering the grass or weeding a vegetable patch.

Then there was the front gate, with three strands of barbed wire leaned inward on top, and the wooden gun tower to one side. The oiled road on the other side bounced and shimmered with heat waves and stretched off through the green border of trees and second growth on the edge of the ditches. I got out of the car with my cardboard box under my arm.

"Paret coming out," the hack said.

I knew he was going to try to shake hands while the gate was being swung back over the cattleguard, and I kept my attention fixed on the road and used my free hand to look for a cigarette in my shirt pocket. The hack shook a Camel loose from his pack and held it up to me.

"Well, thanks, Mr. Benson," I said.

"Keep the rest of them. I got some more in the cage." So I had to shake hands with him, after all. He got back in the truck, with a pinch of light in his iron face, his role a little more secure.

I walked across the cattleguard and heard the gate rattle and lock behind me. Four other men with cardboard boxes and suits similar to mine (we had a choice of three styles upon discharge) sat on the wooden waiting bench by the fence. The shade of the gun tower broke in an oblong square across their bodies.

"The state car ought to be up in a minute, Paret," the gate man said. He was one of the old ones, left over from the thirties, and he had probably killed and buried more men in the levee than any other hack on the farm. Now, he was almost seventy, covered with the kind of obscene white fat that comes from years of drinking corn whiskey, and there wasn't a town in Louisiana or Mississippi where he could retire in safety from the convicts whom he had put on ant hills or run double-time with wheelbarrows up and down the levee until they collapsed on their hands and knees.

"I think I need to hoof this one," I said.

"It's twenty miles out to that highway, boy." And he didn't say it unkindly. The word came to him as automatically as anything else that he raised up out of thirty-five years of doing almost the same type of time that the rest of us pulled.

"I know that, boss. But I got to stretch it out." I didn't turn to look at him, but I knew that his slate-green eyes were staring into my back with a mixture of resentment and impotence at seeing a piece of personal property moved across a line into a world where he himself could not function.

The dead water in the ditches along the road was covered with lily pads, and dragonflies flicked with their purple wings above the newly opened flowers. The leaves on the trees were coated with dust, and the red-black soil at the roots was lined with the tracings of night crawlers. I was perspiring under my coat, and I pulled it off with one hand and stuck it through the twine wrapped around the cardboard box. A mile up the road I heard the tires of the state car whining hotly down the oiled surface. They slowed in second gear along side of me,

the hack bent forward into the steering wheel so he could speak past his passenger.

"That's a hot sonofabitch to walk, and you probably ain't going to hitch no ride on the highway."

I smiled and shook the palm of my hand at them, and after the car had accelerated away in a bright yellow cloud of gravel and dust and oil someone shot the finger out the back window.

I threw the cardboard box into the ditch and walked three more miles to a beer tavern and cafe set off by the side of the road in a circle of gravel. The faded wooden sides of the building were covered with rotted election posters (*Don't get caught short, Vote Long—Speedy O. Long, a slave to no man and a servant to all*), flaking and rusted tin signs advertising Hadaacol and Carry-On, and stickers for Brown Mule, Calumet baking powder, and Doctor Tichner's Painless Laxative. A huge live oak tree, covered with Spanish moss, grew by one side of the building, and its roots had swelled under the wall with enough strength to bend the window jamb.

It was dark and cool inside, with a wooden ceiling fan turning overhead, and the bar shined with the dull light of the neon beer signs and the emptiness of the room. It felt strange to pull out the chair from the bar and scrape it into position and sit down. The bartender was in the kitchen talking with a Negro girl. His arms were covered with tattoos and a heavy growth of white hair. He wore a folded butcher's apron tied around his great girth of stomach.

"Hey, podner, how about a Jax down here," I said.

He leaned into the service window, his heavy arms folded in front of him and his head extended under the enclosure.

"Just get it out of the cooler, mister, and I'll be with you in a minute."

I went behind the bar and stuck my hand into the deep ice-filled cooler and pulled out a bottle of Jax and snapped off the cap in the opener box. My wrist and arm ached with the cold and shale of ice against my skin. The foam boiled over the lip and ran down on my hand in a way that was as strange, at that moment, as the bar chair, the dull neon beer signs, and the Negro girl scraping a spatula vacantly across the flat surface of the stove. I drank another Jax before the man came out of the kitchen, then I ate a poor boy sandwich with shrimp, oysters, lettuce and sauce hanging out the sides of the French bread.

"You just getting out?" the man said. He said it in the flat, casual

tone that most free people use towards convicts, that same quality of voice behind the Xeroxed letters from Boston asking for the donation of our eyes.

I put three dollar bills on the bar and walked towards the square of sunlight against the front door.

“Say, buddy, it don’t matter to me what you’re getting out of. I was just saying my cousin will give you a ride up to the highway in a few minutes.”

I walked down the oiled road a quarter of a mile, and his cousin picked me up in a stake truck and drove me all the way to the train depot in Baton Rouge.