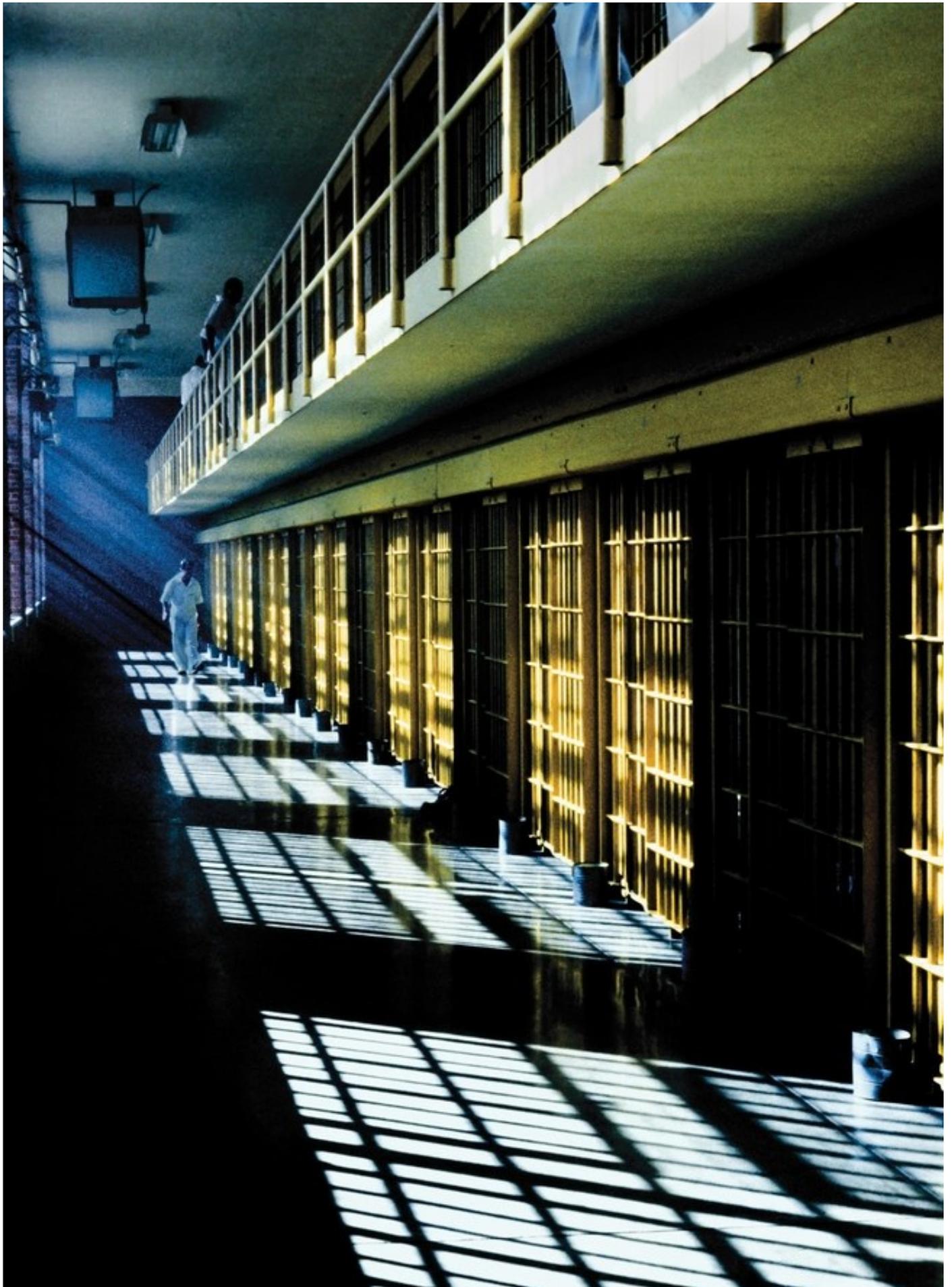


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STRANGLER BOB

By Denis Johnson



Photograph by Bruce Jackson

You hop into a car, race off in no particular direction, and, *blam*, hit a power pole. Then it's off to jail. I remember a monstrous tangle of arms and legs and fists, with me at the bottom, gouging at eyes and doing my utmost to mangle throats, but I arrived at the facility without a scratch or a bruise. I must have been easy to subdue. The following Monday, I pled guilty to disturbing the peace and malicious mischief, reduced from felony vehicular theft and resisting arrest because—well, because all this occurs on another planet, the planet of Thanksgiving, 1967. I was eighteen and hadn't been in too much trouble. I was sentenced to forty-one days.

This was a county lockup, with its ground level devoted to the intake area and the offices and so on and, above that, two levels for inmates. They put me on the lower tier, among the rowdies and thugs. "Down here," the deputy promised me, "if you sleep late, you'll get your breakfast swiped." The air smelled like disinfectant and something else that was meant to be killed by disinfectant. The cells stayed open, and we were free to go in and out and congregate in the central area or stroll on the catwalk that girded the whole tier. This resulted in a lot of wandering around by as many as twenty men in denim pants and blue work shirts and rubber-soled canvas moccasins, a lot of pacing and stopping, and leaning and sitting, and getting up and pacing again. Most of us would have fit in perfectly in a psych ward. Many of us had already been there. I certainly had.

My cellmate was an older guy, late forties, with a bald head and a bowling-ball paunch, awaiting final disposition and sentencing. When I asked him sentencing for what, he told me, "Something juicy." My second night there I overheard him talking to Donald Dundun, a boy about my age who had a habit of wandering the catwalk after lights-out, climbing on the bars and propping himself in cell doorways, stretching out his arms and legs, spread-eagling himself against the jambs and suspending himself in the air that way, and striking up idiotic conversations.

"My attorney already made the deal," I heard my cellmate tell Dundun. "I'm waiting for a date to go to court and plead out to twenty-five years. I'll get released the day I start drawing my Social Security."

"If you don't mind me asking," Dundun said, "what are you down for?"

"A misunderstanding with the wife."



"Ho ho! Maybe you can talk to mine!" Dundun danced away, apeline, and left us alone. He'd been caught leaving a third-story apartment by the window. He wanted to stay in shape for future high-elevation work.

The sounds of the cell block faded, the last stray remarks, the thumping and coughing, and the bunkmate below me said, "You're the one they call Dink, right?"

"I have another name," I said. I lay in the top bunk, talking to the metal wall inches from my lips.

"Not in here you don't."

"What's yours?"

"Strangler Bob."

After a while, I peeked over the bunk's edge and studied the face below me, now only a black oval, like a fencer's mask, and, because I stared too long in the dark, the face began to boil and writhe.



The lower tier's standout resident was a young giant with a blond pompadour hairdo and an urchin's face—apple cheeks, fat forehead, happy blue eyes. The jailers called him Michael, but he referred to himself as Jocko, and the other prisoners did, too. Jocko hustled around all day looking for somebody to listen to his opinions or, even better, arm-wrestle him. He said he'd been in county jails here and there a total of eighteen times, never for shorter than thirty days. He was not yet twenty-one. This time he'd been arrested for giving a man some well-deserved punishment in the dining area of the Howard Johnson's, which he described as the wrong kind of restaurant for that. Jocko knew all the deputies and staff around the jailhouse. He whispered to me that the sheriff's wife, who worked downstairs, in the administrative office, had many times propositioned him. He lacked any ambition or strategy for crowning himself king of the cell block, but he was nevertheless a star, and the lesser lights constellated around him. "Zit-suckers," he called them.



My first morning on the tier I did sleep through breakfast, and somebody did steal mine. After that I had no trouble rousing myself for the first meal, because, other than the arrival of food, we had nothing in our lives to look forward to, and the hunger we felt in that place was more ferocious than any infant's. Cornflakes for breakfast. Lunch: baloney on white. For dinner, one of the canned creations of Chef Boyardee, or, on lucky days, Dinty Moore. The most wonderful meals I've ever tasted.

After lunch most days, Jocko organized a poker game that worked as follows: hands of five-card draw would be dealt out and the draw accomplished, and the player with the highest hand got the privilege of slugging each of the others in the meat of his shoulder with such a smack it echoed around the metal environment. Only half a dozen prisoners took part. The rest of us could see that damage was being done. I kept to the farthest margins. I stood five-seven and weighed a hundred and twenty. As previously acknowledged, my nickname seemed to be Dink—not my choice.

One guy I never heard addressed by any name. He had no friends, never said "Hi" or "What's happening?" He spent hours shuffling pigeon-toed around the catwalk, his skinny frame clenched and twisted by inner tension, throwing punches at the level of his waist, as if pummeling an invisible child, while whispering, "You sonofabitch fuckin' pig, you fuckin' cop," punctuating his speeches with explosive sound effects: "*ShhssprgagahaBLAMMO!*" He had signal-flag ears, a chinless chin, a scrunched forehead, his whole little face rushing out onto a really big nose, a regular beak—a face like a Mardi Gras mask. After his episodes he sat on the floor, rolling the back of his head from side to side against the steel rivets in the wall. The others watched him from a distance. But closely.

Early in December, on an afternoon proceeding no differently from any other afternoon, as far as I could see, as usual very slowly unmasking itself as a damnation without end, Jocko screamed, "Fifty-two pickup!" and scattered the cards in the air and left the central area and disappeared into his cell. It was that moment in the day when time itself grew outrageously lopsided, getting further and further from lunch but somehow no closer to supper, and the bars became harder than iron, and you really felt locked up. The whole tier—common area, surrounding cells, and the catwalk enclosing everything—wasn't much larger than a basketball court, and anybody in there could have told you that, if you went promenading on the catwalk, two hundred sixty steps

would bring you back to where you started. It was the moment for another nap, or for staring at the television. But this day the card players, weary and sore and absent a leader, turned their eyes toward the rest of us, and as soon as they landed on the nameless one, the crazy boy with the Mardi Gras face, we could feel a quickening, an igniting of certain materials that had been swimming around in our atmosphere all along.

The poker players were well into their twenties, a couple in their thirties, men awaiting trial for felonies or serving lengthy misdemeanor time. "Zit-suckers," Jocko called them, but today these six or seven men who played card games with their fists—including, today, Donald Dundun—were playing an even crazier game out on the catwalk, making themselves heard, hollering back and forth as they stalked the perimeter and took up positions on the outermost points of the compass, this handful of them commanding the whole cell block and talking only about the kid, conspiring against his life while he watched TV and pretended not to hear.

"Come out on the catwalk." But he wouldn't come.

"Come on—it won't hurt."

Strangler Bob and I sat in our cell, side by side on his bunk. I didn't want to try and climb into mine because I was afraid to move.

"Somebody push the button!"

"Who said that?"

The boy was out of his chair now, and halfway to the button. "I didn't say it."

Dundun said, "Don't push it."

"I won't."

"Then who said push it?"

The big red button waited on the catwalk's wall, between the electric cigarette lighter and the clanging door to the rest of the building, the same door through which our

meals arrived, and in case of any trouble this button would alert the deputies downstairs. But there was usually a sentry, one prisoner or another, posted beside the button to make sure it got no use.

Dundun made himself the sentry now. "Don't try it."

"I said I wasn't going to."

With his primitive hair and compact musculature, Dundun looked like a nasty little Neanderthal. "You'd better just face the situation."

The boy went back to the central area and sat down. He grabbed the seat of his chair with both hands and pretended to watch the TV bracketed to the corner of the room.

Dundun followed the boy and stood beside his chair. Together they watched a commercial for half a minute, before Dundun reminded him, "What has to happen has to happen."

"You don't seem too broken up about it," the boy said.

Jocko lost his cool. He pretty well combusted in his cell and came out already burning alive. Leaped onto one of the two long dining tables and stood there looking at the ceiling, or the heavens, somewhat like a movie star in a climactic scene, and allowed a terrific energy to consume and become him.

Whether because he hated the idea of killing the crazy boy or because he thought they were taking too long to do it—well, he wasn't making it clear where he stood, except in the most general way: "I have HAD it!" Standing on the table, he lifted his arms and strained against invisible bars. He really was enormous, both muscular and overfed, looked fashioned from balloons, at least usually, but at this moment looked sculpted from quivering stone, his face plum-purple under the heap of yellow hair. "I have HAD it!" With a certain grace he stepped from tabletop to chair to floor. He marched around with vicious movements, crushing hallucinatory animals. His footsteps thundered on the catwalk. "I have HAD it. HAD it. HAD it."

No one knew what to make of these fireworks. Whatever its motive, Jocko's display had a quelling effect on the scene, if only because we all knew the guards were hearing

it. Through the afternoon Jocko settled down by very slow degrees, and the next day he was his obnoxious, overly fraternal, scary former self again.

In the meantime, on this afternoon of the conspiracy against the kid with no name, the others went from blatantly murderous to ruminative and confused, and their plan for assassination climaxed in nothing more violent than sneaking up behind the boy on tiptoe and shooting rubber bands at the back of his head while he dedicated all his focus to "The Newlywed Game" and refused to flinch, refused to give them the satisfaction. The next morning, the deputies called the boy away from his breakfast and moved him to the upper tier.

Rubber bands were permitted, yes. Books, magazines, candy, fruit—also cigarettes, if someone brought them to us, and, if they didn't, then every two or three days the county provided each of its prisoners a packet of rough-cut tobacco called Prince Albert and a sheaf of cigarette papers—remember, 1967. Pets and children wandered loose in the streets. Respected citizens threw their litter anywhere. As for us lawbreakers, we lit our smokes on a push-button electric hotwire bolted to the cell-block wall.

Donald Dundun showed me how to roll a cigarette. Dundun came from the trailer courts, and I was middle class gone crazy, but we passed the time together freely because we both had long hair and chased after any kind of intoxicating substance. Dundun, only nineteen, already displayed up and down both his arms the tattooed veins of a hope-to-die heroin addict. The same went for B.D., a boy who arrived the week before Christmas. We knew him only as B.D. "My name cannot be pronounced, it can only be spelled." That was his dodge. I, on the other hand, didn't know the meaning of my own handle, Dink. Some grouchy, puffy-eyed prisoner would walk by, look at me, and say, "Dink."

Dundun was short and muscled, I was short and puny, and B.D. was the tallest man in the jail, with a thick body that tapered up toward freakishly narrow shoulders. His head, however, was pretty large, with a curly brown mane. On the outs with his girlfriend, and consequently drunk, he'd decided to burgle a tavern. In the wee hours after closing time he'd climbed onto the roof with some tools to see if any way in could

be found, stepped through the panes of a skylight, and landed flat on his face on the billiard table sixteen feet below, and the police woke him up.

B.D. didn't seem any worse for his plunge. It was understood he'd be collected soon and taken to the hospital and checked for invisible damage, but days passed, and it grew obvious he'd been forgotten.

Dundun, B.D., and I formed a congress and became the Three Musketeers—no hijinks or swashbuckling, just hour upon hour of pointless conversation, misshapen cigarettes, and lethargy.

B.D. told us he had a little brother, still in high school, who sold psychedelic drugs to his classmates. This brother came to visit B.D. and left him a hot-rod magazine, one page of which he'd soaked in what he told B.D. was psilocybin, but was likelier just, B.D. figured, LSD plus some sort of large-animal veterinary tranquillizer. In any case, B.D. was most generous. He tore the page from the magazine, divided it into thirds, and shared one third with me and one with Donald Dundun, offering us this shredded contraband as a surprise on Christmas Eve. We gave away our suppers and choked down the paper on empty stomachs and waited to get lost. Jocko, the blond blimp, said, "God dang, your lips are black. And yours—and yours. Lemme see your tongue. What is the story? Did you catch the plague or something?"

"You got three extra suppers, so don't worry about it." Jocko had eaten all three of our meals, plus his own.

B.D. came from the town of Oskaloosa, about eighty miles away. A lot of disorderly characters rattled loose from there and ended up in Johnson County, often in the Johnson County jail. Prior to this encounter, I hadn't known B.D., but I was acquainted with his girlfriend, Viola Percy, who lived right there in our town—in fact, in the neighborhood of slum apartments where I myself had spent the summer—a formidable, desirable female in her late twenties, with a couple of tiny kids and a monthly stipend from the welfare department or Social Security, altogether an excellent woman to have in your corner. But Viola, whom B.D. described as both an angel and a devil, both the sickness and the cure, refused to visit him at the lockup, wouldn't even talk to him. "The situation that got Viola Percy so mad at me," B.D. told us, "was that I fucked Chuckie Charleson's wife—but," he hastened to say, "only once, and practically

by accident. I dropped by Chuckie's just to say hi, but he was shopping for shoes or something, and there's his wife all bored and itchy, and pretty soon we did the evil deed. And, when I left the house, there was Chuckie sitting in his car out front, drinking a beer and puffing on a Kool. Parked right behind my rig. Probably sitting there the whole time me and Janet are rolling around in his bed. And when I open the door to my truck, he flashes me the finger. And he's crying. Well, I feel sorry for Chuckie that he got married to a whore and a nympho, but shouldn't that be his own shit to carry? So I shut the door and drive off, and you figure that's the end of it. But no. *Charlie* has to go and tell *Viola*. God! It baffles me! Running to a guy's woman and saying, 'Boo-hoo, boo-hoo.' It's so sleazy, and so wrong, and so tiny. As a logical result, me and this guy Ed Peavey—do you know Ed Peavey?" I had heard of him. Nobody else had. "O.K., one guy's heard of Ed Peavey. Anyway, me and Ed Peavey, we dropped by Chuckie's, and we said to him, 'Chuckie, hey, even if you're a compulsive snitch and a certified eunuch, no hard feelings. We've got a case of beer, so let's be friends and go check out the river and sit in the shade and get drunk or something,' and we got him in my truck and took him maybe ten miles out of town on the Old Highway, and I stuck a gun in his ear and Ed wrestled off his pants and his undies and his shoes and socks and we drove off and left old Chuckie walking barefoot down the road like that toward town in just his T-shirt with his not very attractive ass hanging out. But . . . Viola. Viola will not forgive, and Viola will not forget. Hey. Is it snowing in here?"

By now the drug we'd swallowed should have been doing its work, but I felt no effect. When I asked the others about it, Dundun shook his head, but B.D. stared at me with eyes like two shiny mirrors and said, "All I know is this: Janet Charleson will pleasure any man alive."

"Does she pleasure animals, too?" Dundun wanted to know.

"I wouldn't doubt it."

"You mean Janet Charleson will do it with a goat? She'll let a billy goat hump her?"

"Like I say, I wouldn't doubt it." But B.D. frowned and withdrew into himself for a minute, and I bet he was wondering if, inside this insatiable woman, Janet Charleson, he'd mixed his powers with those of a goat.

Dundun started climbing on the bars of the nearest cell. He'd slipped off his shoes and socks and now clung to the metal fretwork by his toes. B.D. said, "Is this shit hitting you like it's hitting me?" and Dundun said, "No, man, I'm just exercising."

Dundun's mental space, customarily empty, had been invaded by an animal spirit. He gripped the bars with his left hand and foot, simultaneously stretching his right arm and leg straight out into the air, exactly in the style of a zoo monkey.

"Are you sure you're not feeling anything?" I asked him.

"I'm feeling all the way back to my roots. To the caves. To the apes." He turned his head and looked at us. His face was dark, but his eyeballs gave out sparks. He seemed to be positioned at the portal, bathed in prehistoric memories. He was summoning the ancient trees—their foliage was growing out of the walls of our prison, writhing and shrugging, hemming us in.

A voice laughed—"Hah!"—coming from my cellmate, Strangler Bob, who sat nearby on the catwalk's floor with his arms folded across his chest. Like all of us here, Strangler Bob knew how to sleep—from lights-out at ten until breakfast at seven, and a nap after breakfast, and a nap before supper—but this Christmas Eve he stayed up late and observed us with his dead, soulless gaze.

B.D., meanwhile, said, "I've never seen snow catching so many colors."

The potion wasn't evenly distributed on the page. B.D. had got most, if not all of it, which was fair, but sad. The only effect I felt seemed to coalesce around the presence of Strangler Bob, who laughed again—"Hah!"—and, when he had our attention, said, "It was nice, you know, it being just the two of us, me and the missus. We charcoaled a couple T-bone steaks and drank a bottle of imported Beaujolais red wine, and then I sort of killed her a little bit."

To demonstrate, he wrapped his fingers around his own neck while we Musketeers studied him like something we'd come on in a magic forest.

Dundun clapped his hand on his forehead with a sound like a gunshot and said to the murderer, "You're the man who ate his wife!"

Strangler Bob said, "That was a false exaggeration. I did not eat my wife. What happened was, she kept a few chickens, and I ate one of those. I wrung my wife's neck, then I wrung a chicken's neck for my dinner, and then I boiled and ate the chicken."

"Wait a minute, Mr. Bob," B.D. said. "Can I get you to explain this to me? Do you mean to say you gobbled up a T-bone steak and red imported wine and all, and then you, you know, executed your wife—and *then* you had chicken? Like, immediately after the crime, you were hungry again?"

"You sound like the prosecutor. He tried to make it an aggravating circumstance. It was just a chicken, a goddam chicken." Strangler Bob's body had disappeared, his bald head floating—not just floating but zooming through space. He said, "I have a message for you from God. Sooner or later, you'll all three end up doing murder." His finger materialized in front of him, pointing at each of us in turn—"Murderer. Murderer. Murderer"—pointing last at Dundun's nose. "You'll be the first."

"I don't care," Dundun said, and you could see it was true. He didn't care.



B.D. shivered wildly, and actually such a strong shudder ran through him that his curly hair flew around his head. "Can you really talk to God?"

At this I snorted like a pig. The idea of God disgusted me. I didn't believe. Everybody yacked and blabbered about cosmic spirituality and Hindu yogic chakras and Zen koans. Meanwhile, Asian babies fried in napalm. Right now I wished there was some way we could start this whole night over, leaving Strangler Bob out of it.

Immediately my wish came true, when Dundun—excited, I guess, by this conversation with a murderer and by the prediction that he himself would murder someone—tendered a bizarre suggestion: "Let's bang the button."

While I stood in my tracks, trying to decode these words, B.D. took them at their plain meaning and got himself in front of the button.

B.D. was tall, as I've said, and looked immovable. Dundun, however, swung hand over hand from the prehistoric vines and branches he'd summoned, and hung from the jungle's ceiling and pushed the red button with the heel of one bare foot. We heard a

delicate sound—like an old-fashioned alarm clock in a nineteen-thirties movie—tinkling distantly in the building's sleep. When a deputy arrived and called through the door—"What's going on in there?"—B.D. said, "Nothing," but the deputy was only asking to pass the time while he got the key in the lock, and then three of them came in with batons and set about beating on the heads and bodies of anybody within reach. Murderer Bob went down in a ball on the floor, the same as the Three Musketeers, and the deputies, when their arms were tired and they judged their duty properly exercised, said, "Don't touch that button no more tonight," and said, "That's right, gentlemen," and also, "Or somebody's gonna get crippled."

We crawled off to our cells in a state of terror and bewilderment—though not Dundun, who seemed unaffected by the nightmare he himself had caused to explode in our faces and strolled around the catwalk humming and scattling and fluttering his fingers along the bars. He didn't possess a complete brain.

I dragged my physical being, one big throbbing pulse, into an upper bunk I hoped was mine. During the festival of horrors, my cellmate, Strangler Bob, had evaporated. Now here he was, reconstituted full-length in his bed. I stepped on his knee climbing into my bunk, and he didn't say anything. I expected some obscenities or at least a bitter "Merry Christmas," but not a peep. I studied him surreptitiously over the edge of the bunk, and soon I could see alien features forming on the face below me—Martian mouth, Andromedan eyes, staring back at me with evil curiosity. It made me feel weightless and dizzy when the mouth spoke to me with the voice of my grandmother: "Right now," Strangler Bob said, "you don't get it. You're too young." My grandmother's voice, the same aggrieved tone, the same sorrow and resignation.

I'll never go back to jail. I'll hang myself first.

B.D. must have felt the same about incarceration. About fifteen years after all this, in the early nineteen-eighties, he hanged himself in a holding cell in Florida. Looking at it one way, B.D. thereby committed a murder, so Strangler Bob's prediction for him came true. May he rest in peace.

. . . We saw Viola Percy one night.

The county jail and courthouse lay at the bottom of a hill on Court Street, and near the top of the hill, where Dubuque Street intersected, sometimes the relatives or friends—girlfriends, mostly, drunken girlfriends—of inmates came and stood, and waved and hooted, because we could get a pitiful glimpse of that particular spot from the cell block's southeast corner, through the very last window. It was the night of New Year's Eve and, when a prisoner called us to the window, we all took turns looking at Viola, "my soul mate and my heartbreak," B.D. called her, staged in the light of the street lamp as at the far end of a long tunnel, dressed in a sort of go-go outfit or mini-raincoat made of plastic, with a white yachting cap and white boots halfway up her calves. A small, glittering rain would have perfected the picture, which was, all the same, as silent and remote and unattainable and sad as you could want. And very vague as to its meaning. Allowing him the sight of her in that lonely moment—what it signalled was left to B.D. to interpret. During my brief stay there, Viola never came to visit him.

While I was kept there I wondered if this place was some kind of intersection for souls. I don't know what to make of the fact that I've seen those same men many times throughout my life, repeatedly in dreams and sometimes in actuality—turning a corner on the street, gazing out the window of a passing train, or leaving a café just at the moment I glance up and recognize them, then disappearing out the door—and it makes me feel each person's universe is really very small, no bigger than a county jail, a collection of cells, in which he encounters the same fellow-prisoners over and over. B.D. and Dundun, in particular, turned up in my youth many times after this. I think they may have been not human beings but wayward angels. I won't go into all the events they figured in, but I'll report this much about Dundun: a couple of years after we met in jail, he partnered up with the blond sociopathic giant Jocko, and together they robbed a notorious drug lord in Kansas City. During the robbery, Donald Dundun killed a bodyguard—giving truth to Strangler Bob's prediction.

You might go further and say Strangler Bob's second sight proved out one hundred per cent. The day after the Kansas City robbery, Dundun showed up at my door, three hundred miles east of the scene of the crime, amazed at what he'd done and looking for a place to hide. We consumed a lot of his stolen heroin while he outwaited his pursuers in my little apartment, and when he felt safe and went away he left me with a large quantity of the stuff, all mine, and over the course of the following month I became

thoroughly addicted to heroin. I'd been addicted before, and I would be again, but this was the turning point. My fate was sabotaged. Thereafter, I was constantly drunk, treated myself as a garbage can for pharmaceuticals, and within a few years lost everything and became a wino on the street, drifting from city to city, sleeping in missions, eating at giveaway programs. . . . Very often I sold my blood to buy wine. Because I'd shared dirty needles with low companions, my blood was diseased. I can't estimate how many people must have died from it. When I die myself, B.D. and Dundun, the angels of the God I sneered at, will come to tally up my victims and tell me how many people I killed with my blood. 

Denis Johnson (1949–2017) is the author of several books, including the story collection “The Largesse of the Sea Maiden,” which will be published in January, 2018. [Read more »](#)

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