
Opening Extract from...

Candlemouth

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ONE

Four times I've been betrayed – twice by women, once by a better friend than any man might wish for, and lastly by a nation. And perhaps, truth be known, I betrayed myself. So that makes five.

But despite everything, all that happened back then, and all that is happening now, it was still a magic time.

A *magic* time.

I can recall it with a clarity and simplicity that surprises even myself. The names, the faces, the sounds, the smells.

All of them.

It seems almost unnatural to recall things with such a sharp level of perception, but then that is perhaps attributable to the present circumstances.

Present a man with the end of his life, place him somewhere such as Death Row, and perhaps God blesses him with some small mercy.

The mercy of remembrance.

As if the Almighty says:

Here, son, you done got yourself in one hell of a mess right now . . .

You ain't stayin' long, an' that'd be the truth . . .

You take a good look over all that's been an' gone, and you try an' figure out for yourself how you got yourself arrived where you are now . . .

You take that time now, son, you take that time and make some sense of it before you have to answer up to me . . .

Maybe.

Maybe not.

I have never believed myself to be anything other than a soul. A man is not an animal, not a physical thing, and where I go now I don't know.

Perhaps it is the last vestige of mercy afforded me, but I am not afraid.

No, I am not afraid.

The people here, the people around me, they seem more afraid than I. Almost as if they know what they are doing, this lawful and sanctioned killing of men, and know also that they are doing wrong, and they fear the consequences: not for me, but for themselves.

If they could perhaps convince themselves there is no God, or no hereafter, then they would be safe.

But they know there is a God.

They know there is something beyond.

There is a spirit to this place. The spirit of the dead. Men here will tell you that once you've killed a man, once you've seen the light fade from his eyes, he will always walk with you. Your shadow. Perhaps he will never speak again, never move close to feel the warmth from your skin, but he is there. And those men walk the same gantries as us, they eat the same food, they watch the lights go down and dream the same fractured dreams.

And then there are the sounds. Metal against metal, bolts sliding home, keys turning in locks . . . all reminders of the inevitability of eternity. Once you come down here you never come out. The corridors are wide enough for three abreast, a man in the middle, a warder on each side. These corridors are painted a vague shade between gray and green, and names and dates and final words are scratched through to the brickwork beneath. *Here we're all innocent. Out of Vietnam into Hell. Tell M I love her.* Other such things. Desperate thoughts from desperate men.

And lastly the smell. Never leaves you, no matter how long you've walked the walk and talked the talk. Assaults your nostrils whenever you wake, as if for the very first

time. There is Lysol and cheap detergent, the smell of rotting food, the odors of sweat and shit and semen and, somewhere beneath all of these things, the smell of fear. Of futility. Of men giving up and consigning themselves to the justice of a nation. Crushed inside the hand of fate.

The men that watch us are cold and removed and distant. They have to be. Figure once you attach you can't detach. So they say. Who knows what they see when the lights go down, lying there beside their wives, darkness pressing against their eyes and their children sleeping the sleep of innocents. And then the cool half light of nascent dawn when they wake and remember who they are, and what they do, and where they will go once breakfast is done and the kids have gone to school. They kiss their wives, and their wives look back at them, and in their eyes is that numb and indifferent awareness that the bread and cereal and eggs they ate were paid for by killing men. Guilty men perhaps, but men all the same. Justice of a nation. Hope they're right. Lord knows, they hope they're right.

I watch Mr. Timmons. I watch him, and sometimes he sweats. He hides it, but I know he sweats. I see him watching me through the grille, his weasel eyes, his narrow pinched mouth, and I believe his wife comforts him in his guilt by telling him that really he is doing the work of the Lord. She feeds him sweet apple fritters and a white sauce she makes with a little honey and lemon, and she comforts him. He brought the fritters once, brought them right here in a brown paper bag, spots of grease creeping out towards its corners. And he let me see them, even let me smell one, but he couldn't let me taste. Told me if I was an honest man then I would find all the sweet apple fritters I could eat in Heaven. I smiled and nodded and said *Yessir, Mister Timmons*, and I felt bad for him. Here was something else he would feel guilty about come dawn.

But Clarence Timmons is not a bad man, not an evil

man. He doesn't carry the blackened heart of Mr. West. Mr. West seems to be an emissary of Lucifer. Mr. West is unmarried, this in itself is no surprise, and the bitterness and hate he carries inside his skin seem enough to burst a man. And yet everything about him is *tightened up*. Don't know how else to word it. Tightened up like Sunday-best shoelaces. His manner, his words, his dress, everything is precise and detailed. His pants carry a crease that could cut paper. Look down at his shoes and you look back at yourself. The whiteness of his collar is unearthly, a heavenly white, as if he walks back through town each night and buys a new shirt and, once home, scrubs it until morning with Lysol and baking soda. Perhaps he believes the whiteness of his collar compensates for the blackness of his heart.

First time I met Mr. West he spat at me. Spat right in my face. My hands were cuffed and shackled around my waist. My feet were shackled too. I couldn't even wipe my face. I could feel the warmth of his saliva as it hit my forehead, and then it started its slow progression over my eyelid and down my cheek. Later I could feel it drying, and it was as if I sensed the germs alive on my skin.

Mr. West possessed a single, simple purpose. That purpose manifested itself in many colors – humiliation, degradation, violence, an impassioned cruelty. But the purpose was the same: to demonstrate authority.

Here, in this place, Mr. West was God.

Until the time came, until you walked the walk and danced the dance, until your bare feet did the soft-shoe shuffle on the linoleum floor, until you actually did meet your Maker, then Mr. West was God and Jesus and all the disciples rolled into one unholy mess of madness that could come raining down on you like a thunderstorm, provocation or not.

Mr. West was Boss down here, and the other warders, despite their years of service, despite their experience and

pledge of commitment to the United States government, the Federal Detention system and President Reagan, still acknowledged only one Boss.

They all called one another by their given names. All except Mr. West. To everyone, the Prison Warden included, he had always been, would always be, Mr. West.

If there was a Hell, well, that's where he'd come from, and that's where he'd return. I believed that. *Had* to believe that. To believe anything else would have tested my sanity.

I am thirty-six now. Thirty-six years back of me, thirty-six years of love and loss and laughter. If I weigh everything up it has been good. There have been times I couldn't have asked for better. It is only now, the last ten years or so, that have been tough. Too easy to ask myself what I could possibly have done to have arrived at this point. If there is in fact a balance in all things, then I have found my balance here. Like Zen, karma, whatever this stuff calls itself. What goes around comes around: you get the idea.

I feel sorry for the kids. The ones I never had. I feel sorry for Caroline Lanafeuille whom I loved from a distance for years, but never kissed enough, nor held for long enough. Sorry for the fact that I could not have been there for her through everything that happened with her father and how they left. And had I been there it perhaps would never have turned out the way it did. And for Linny Goldbourne, a girl I loved as much as ever I loved Caroline. Though in a different way. Sorry too for Sheryl Rose Bogazzi. She was too beautiful, too energetic and uninhibited, and had she never been crowned County Fair May Queen she would never have met the folks from San Francisco, and had she not met them she would never have believed she could captivate the world. But she was crowned, and she did meet them, and her mom let her go all the way out there to follow her star. A star which burned brightly then fell like a stone. Six months in San Francisco and she was dead from a

methadone overdose in a filthy tenement room. She'd been pregnant too, no-one knew by whom. Apparently she'd fucked everyone on the block, and most of their relatives.

I feel sorry for my folks, even though they're not alive and weren't alive when all this happened. At least they were spared that much.

Feel sorry for Nathan's folks, because their son is dead and he should not have died the way he did, and never for that reason. Nathan's father, a Baptist minister, is a powerful man, a man of faith and strength and endless forgiveness. He knows the truth, always has done, but there is nothing he can do. Said to me one time that he believed his hands had been tied by God. Didn't know why. Didn't question why. Knew enough to believe there was a reason for everything. But despite his faith, his trust, his passion, I still saw him cry. Cry like a child. Tears running down his broad, black, forgiving face, and the way his wife held his hand until I felt their fingers might fuse together and never be separated.

And they stood there in the Commune Room, me behind the protective screen, my hands cuffed to the chain around my waist, and I saw Nathan's ma look at me, look right through me, and I knew she believed too. *I know you didn't kill Nathan,* her eyes said. *I know you didn't kill Nathan, and I know you shouldn't be here, and I know what they're doing to you is bad . . . but I can't help you now. No-one can help you now except the Governor or the Lord Jesus Himself.*

And I smiled and nodded at her, and I made it okay for her to feel she could do nothing more. They had done all they could, all they could dare to do, and I was grateful for that.

Grateful for small mercies.

It is hard to believe that all this time has passed since that day, but then again that day seems like yesterday, even Nathan's face, as alive in my mind now as if we had shared

breakfast together. I recall the sounds and colors, the rush of noise, the emotion, the horror. Everything intact, like a glass jigsaw puzzle, each piece reflecting some other angle of the same design.

It is hard to believe . . . well, just that. It is hard to *believe.*

Sometimes I take a moment to imagine I am elsewhere, even someone else. Mr. Timmons came down the other day with a transistor radio that played a song, something by The Byrds called 'California Dreamin'', and though his intent was nothing more than to lift my mood, to lighten my day a little with something different, it saddened me to hear such a song. I recall Hendrix and Janis and The Elevators and Mike Bloomfield playing the Fillmore. I remember Jerry Garcia, Tom Wolfe and Timothy Leary with The Merry Pranksters. I remember the Kool-Aid Acid Test. I remember talking with Nathan about Huddy Ledbetter and Mississippi Fred McDowell, and I remember the invasion from England of The Rolling Stones and The Animals . . . all of this as we perceived it then: a mad rush of passionate fury in our hands and heads and hearts.

Mr. Timmons never understood the culture. He understood JFK. He understood why it was so important to reach the moon first. He understood why the Vietnam War started and how communism had to be prevented. He understood this until his own son was killed out there and then he didn't speak of it again. He was passionate about baseball and Chrysler cars, and he loved his wife and his daughter with a sense of duty and integrity and pride. He watched the Zapruder film, and he cried for the fallen King, and he prayed for Jackie Bouvier, and if truth be known he prayed a little for Marilyn Monroe, whom he loved from afar just as I had loved Caroline Lanafeuille and Linny Goldbourne. Just as I had loved Sheryl Rose Bogazzi in 9th grade. Perhaps Mr. Timmons believed that had he been there he could have saved Marilyn just as I believed I could

have saved Sheryl Rose. We believe such small things, but believing them makes them important, and sometimes they have to be enough, carrying such things and believing perhaps that they will in some way carry us.

Mr. Timmons also believes I didn't kill Nathan Verney in South Carolina on some cool night in 1970. He believes this, but he would never say it. It is not Mr. Timmons' job to question such things, for there is the way of the law, the way of justice, the Federal and Circuit and State and Appellate Courts, and there are tall grave men with heavy books who look into such things in detail, and they make the laws, they *are* the law, and who is Mr. Timmons to question this?

Mr. Timmons is a Death Row warder down near Sumter, and he does what he does, as he abides by the code, and he leaves such matters as innocence and guilt to the Governor and the baby Jesus. He is neither expected nor paid to make such decisions. And so he does not.

Easier that way.

Mr. West is another story. Some of the guys down here believe he was not born of human parents. Some of the guys down here believe he was spawned in a culture dish at M.I.T. or somesuch, an experiment in running a body without a heart or a soul or much of anything else at all. He is a dark man. He has things to hide, many things it seems, and where he hides them is in the shadows that lurk back of his eyes and behind his words, and in the arc of his arm as he brings down his billy across your head or your fingers or your back. He hides those things also in the way his shoes creak as he walks down the corridor, and in the way he peers through the grille and watches your every move. He hides those things in the insectile expression that flickers across his face when the mood takes him. And in leaving the lights on when you want to sleep. And in forgetting exercise time. In dropping your food as it is

passed through the gate. In the sound of his breathing. In everything he is.

Before I came here, the brief time I'd spent in General Populace, a man called Robert Schembri had warned me of Mr. West, but what he'd said had been confused in among a great deal of things he'd told me.

No matter what had gone before, I could never have forgotten the first time we met, Mr. West and I. It went something like this:

'Gon' lose your hair there, boy. No hippy hair down here. What the fuck is this here? A ring? Take it off now 'fore we cut your goddam finger from your hand there.'

I remember nodding, saying nothing.

'Nothin' to say now, eh, boy? They got you by the C.O. Jones that's for sure. You done kill some nigger I hear, cut his goddam head clean off of his body and left it for the crows.'

That was the time I opened my mouth. The first and last.

His face was in mine. I remember the pressure of the floor behind my head, the feeling of that billy club across my throat like it would force my jaw up through my ears and into my brain. And then he was over me, right there in my face, and I could *feel* the words he spoke as he hissed so cruelly.

'You don't got nothin' to say, boy, you understand? You have no words, no name, no face, no identity down here. Here, you're just a poor dumb motherfucker who got fucked by the system whichever way you see it. You could be as innocent as the freakin' Lamb of God, as sweet as the cherubims and seraphims and all the Holy Angels rolled into one almighty bag of purity, but down here you are guilty – guilty as the black heart of the Devil himself. You understand that, you remember that, you don't ever forget that, an' you and me are gonna get along just fine. You are nothing, you have nothing, you never will be anything, and this is about as good as it's ever gonna get. Yo' gonna

be here a long time before they fry your brain, and hell if I ain't gonna be here long after you're gone, so understand that when you're in my house you abide by my rules, you mind your manners and say your prayers. Are we on the same wavelength now?'

I was unable to move my head, barely able to breathe.

'I will take your silence as an expression of understanding and compliance,' Mr. West said, and then he gave one last vicious dig of the billy and released me.

I came up gasping, half-suffocated, my eyes bursting from my head, the pressure behind my ears like a freight train.

It was Mr. Timmons who helped me back to the cell, helped me to lie down, brought me some water which I was unable to drink for a good twenty minutes.

And it was Mr. Timmons who told me to watch Mr. West, that Mr. West was a hard man, hard but fair, and I knew in his tone, from the look in his eyes, that he was all but lying to himself. Mr. West was an emissary of Lucifer, and they all knew it.

And that was eleven years ago, best part of. Arrested in 1970. A year in Charleston Pen. while the first wave of protests erupted, died, erupted once more. And the appeals, the TV debates, the questions that no-one wanted to answer. And then to Sumter, a year or so in General Populace while legal wrangles went back and forth in futile and meaningless circles, and then to Death Row. And now it's 1982, summer of '82, and Nathan would have been thirty-six as well. We'd have been somewhere together. Blood brothers an' all that, you know?

Well, maybe that ain't so far from the truth. Because if Mr. Timmons is right, and God knows who's guilty and who's innocent, and if there is some place we all go where sins are called to account and judgement is fair and just and equitable, then me and Nathan Verney look set to see each other once more.

Nathan knows the truth, he most of all, and though he'll look me dead square in the eye and hold his head high, just as he always did, I know he'll carry a heavy heart. Nathan never meant for it to be this way, but then Nathan was caught up in this thing more than all of us together.

Some folks say the death penalty's too easy, too fast by far. Folks say as how those who commit murder should suffer the same. Well, believe me, they do. Folks forget the years people like me spend down here, two floors up from Hell. They don't know of people like Mr. West and the way he feels the punishment should befit the crime whether you did the crime or not. Folks really have no idea how it feels to know that you're gonna die, and after the first few years that day could be any day now. They know nothing of the raised hopes that fall so fast, the appeals that go round in circles until they disappear up their own tailpipe. They know nothing of discovering that Judge so-and-so has reviewed your case and denied the hearing that you've waited on for the best part of three years. These things are the penalty. Gets so as how when the time comes you're almost grateful, and you wish away the days, the hours, the minutes . . . wish they all would fold into one single, simple heartbeat and the lights would go out forever. People talk of a reason to live, a reason to fight, a reason to go on. Well, if you know in your heart of hearts that all you're fighting for is someone else's satisfaction as you die, then there seems little to fight for. It is ironic, but most times it's the guy who's being executed who wants to be executed the most.

Mr. Timmons understands this, and he cares as best he can.

Mr. West understands this too, but the emotion he feels is one of gratification.

Mr. West wants us to die, wants to see us walk the long walk, wants to see us sit in the big chair. Knows that once one has gone another will come to take his place, and

there's nothing that pleases him more than *fresh meat.* Spend six months here and he calls you *dead meat.* Calls it out as you walk from your cell to the yard, or to the washroom, or to the gate.

Dead meat walking, he shouts, and even Mr. Timmons turns cool and loose inside.

How Mr. West ended up this way I can only guess from what I was told, what was inferred. I don't know, but seems to me he's the most dangerous and crazy of us all.

Down two cells from me there's a guy called Lyman Greeve. Shot his wife's lover and then cut out the woman's tongue so she couldn't go sweet-talking any more fellas. Crazy boy. Crazy, crazy boy. But hell, compared to Mr. West Lyman Greeve is the Archangel Gabriel come down with his trumpet to announce the Second Coming. Lyman told me Mr. West was a Federal agent in the Thirties and Forties, did the whole Prohibition thing, busting 'shiners and whores and bathtub gin-makers. Said as how he came up to Charleston when Prohibition was lifted and was employed by the government to keep track of the black movements, that he was down there in Montgomery and Birmingham for the Freedom Rides, cracked a few black skulls, instigated a few riots. Another day Lyman told me Mr. West raped a black girl, found out she got pregnant, so he went back down there and cut her throat and buried her in a field. No-one ever found her, or so he said, and I listened to the story with a sense of wonder and curiosity.

Seemed everyone had invented their own history for Mr. West. To me, well, to me he was just a mean, sadistic son-of-a-bitch who got his revs beating on some poor bastard who couldn't beat back. Few years before I came here someone made a noise about him, some kid called Frank Rayburn. Twenty-two years old, down here for killing a man for eighteen dollars in Myrtle Beach. Frank made a noise, people from the Penitentiary Review & Regulatory Board made a visit, asked questions, made some more

noise, and then Frank withdrew his complaint and fell silent. Month later Frank hanged himself. Somehow he obtained a rope, a real honest-to-God rope, and he tied it up across the grille eleven and a half foot high. The bed was eight inches off the ground. Frank was five three. You do the math.

No-one had a mind to complain again it seemed.

And then there's Max Myers, seventy-eight years old, a trustee. Been here at Sumter for fifty-two years. Jailed in 1930 for robbing a liquor store. Liquor store guy had a heart attack the following day. That made the charge manslaughter. Max came here when he was twenty-six years old, same as me, and on his thirty-second birthday in 1936 he got a cake from his wife. Someone stole Max Myers' cake, stole it right out of his cell, and Max got mad, real mad. He argued with someone on the gantry, there was a scuffle, a man got pushed, fell, landed forty feet below like a watermelon on the sidewalk. Max got a First Degree. For the manslaughter he would've been out around 1950, would've seen another thirty years of American history unfold. But he got the real deal, the no-hope-of-parole beat, and here he was, pushing a broom along Death Row, delivering magazines once a week. When he was jailed his wife had been pregnant. She had borne a son, a bright and beautiful kid called Warren. Warren grew up only ever seeing his father through a plate glass window. They had never touched, never held each other, never spoken to one another save through a telephone.

Max's son went into the Army in 1952, got himself a wife and a home, a cat called Chuck and a dog called Indiana. Went to Vietnam in '65, was one of the first US soldiers killed out there. Killed in his third week. Warren Myers was buried in a small plot somewhere in Minnesota. Max was not permitted to attend.

Max's wife took two handfuls of sleepers and drank a bottle of Jack Daniels six months following. Max was all

that was left of the Myers family line. He pushed his broom, he passed messages, he could get you a copy of *Playboy* for thirty cigarettes. He was part of Sumter, always had been, always would be, and he was the only inmate who had been here before Mr. West.

Penitentiary Warden John Hadfield was a politician, nothing more nor less than that. Hadfield had eyes on the Mayor's Office, on Congress, maybe even on the Senate. He did what was needed, he said what was required, he kissed ass and talked the talk and colored inside the lines. Hadfield ran the regular wings, the A, B and C Blocks, but D-Block, Death Row, he left that to Mr. West. Even Hadfield called him Mr. West. No-one, not even Max Myers, knew Mr. West's given name.

When there was trouble Mr. West would go see Warden Hadfield. The meeting would be short and sour, cut and dried, all business. Mr. West would leave having satisfied Warden Hadfield completely, and Hadfield – if required – would publish a statement that kept the Penitentiary Review & Regulatory Board happy. Sumter was a community, its own world within a world, and even those who lived in the town itself believed that Penitentiary business was Penitentiary business. There had been a prison here since the War of Secession, there probably would always be a prison here, and as long as inmates weren't off escaping and raping some nice folks' daughter, then that was just fine. Folks here believed people like Mr. West were a required element of society, for without discipline there would be no society at all. See no evil, hear no evil, 'cept if it's done to you, and then . . . well, then there's folks like Mr. West who take care of business.

But these things are now, and there is more than ample time to talk of now.

We were speaking of a magic time, back before all of this, back before everything soured like a bruised watermelon.

A thousand summers and winters and springs and falls, and they all fold out behind me like a patchwork quilt, and beneath this quilt are the lives we led, the people we were, and the reasons we came to be here.

Thirty-six years old, and there are days when I still feel like a child.

The child I was when I met Nathan Verney at the edge of Lake Marion outside of Greenleaf, South Carolina.

Walk with me now, for though I walk slowly I do not care to walk alone.

For me, at least for me, these oh-so-quiet steps will be the longest and the last.