

STANLEY  
ELKIN

A Bad Man



STANLEY  
ELKIN  
*A Bad Man*



# A Bad Man

Stanley Elkin



*For Joan*  
*And for her brother Bernard*

## **Acknowledgment**

The author wishes to express his thanks to the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation and to Washington University for their support.

# Contents

[1](#)

[2](#)

[3](#)

[4](#)

[5](#)

[6](#)

[7](#)

[8](#)

[9](#)

[10](#)

[11](#)

[12](#)

[13](#)

[14](#)

[15](#)

[16](#)

[17](#)

[18](#)

[A Biography of Stanley Elkin](#)

# 1

One day a young man in an almost brimless fedora burst into the office where Feldman was dictating a letter to his secretary. He pointed a gun and said, "Reach, the jig is up, Feldman." They were working in front of Feldman's safe, where his department store's daily receipts were kept. The secretary, whose name was Miss Lane, immediately pressed a button on an underledge of Feldman's desk, and loud bells rang.

"That will bring the police before there's time to open the safe," she announced in the dingy din. But Feldman, who until this time had been sitting in his chair, elbows on the desk, his cheeks pushed into his palms in a position of concentration, slowly began to raise his arms.

"I'm afraid I shan't require your services for a while, Miss Lane," Feldman shouted.

"One false move," the young man said, "and I'll plug you."

"You've got me covered," Feldman admitted.

Miss Lane looked from one to the other. "What is this?" she demanded.

"It's the jig," Feldman explained. "It's up."

He was sentenced to a year in the penitentiary.

It was in the western part of the state, in the mountains, where he had never been who went East for vacations, to a shore, or who had been to Las Vegas for the shows, and twice to Europe for a month, and to the Caribbean on cruises with clothes from Sportswear.

It was not in a town, or near one, and there were no direct connections between Feldman's city and the prison, three hundred miles away.

After his sentencing, a deputy came to him in his cell. "Tomorrow we're going on a train ride," he said.

Feldman didn't sleep. Except for the few hours when he had been arrested, it was the first evening he had ever spent in a jail. He still wore the fresh blue businessman's suit the buyer had brought him from Men's Clothing. He wondered if he would be handcuffed. (He remembered a pair of specially wrought silver handcuffs he had once had made up for the sheriff.)

In the morning the deputy came. He was carrying a large suitcase. "Right-or left-handed?" he said.

"Pardon?"

"Left-handed or right-handed?"

"I'm right-handed."

The deputy studied him for a moment. "It's on your record. I could check."

"I'm right-handed. I am."

"Put out your right hand." He locked up his wrist.

"You've scratched my watch."

The deputy smiled. "Tell you what. I'll give you a fiver for that. They won't let you

keep it. You can use the money in the canteen.”

“I have money.”

The deputy grinned. “They’ll take it away,” he said. “Afraid of bribes. You can keep up to five dollars. I’m giving you top dollar.”

“Take the watch,” Feldman said.

The deputy slipped the watch from his wrist and put it in a pocket of his suit coat.

“Where’s my five dollars?”

“Listen to me,” the deputy said. “You *are* green. They take everything away. They don’t give any receipts. Afraid of forgery. There are guys up there could forge a fingerprint. The state’d be in hock to the cons up to its ears if they gave out receipts. With no claim you never get anything back. You should have left everything behind. They should tell you that. I don’t know why they don’t tell you that.”

Feldman nodded. The other loop of the handcuff swung against the coins in his pocket. The empty handcuff felt like some strangely weighted sleeve he had not yet buttoned.

“Even change,” the deputy said. “Listen to me. It’s too late for you to do anything about it now. Try to complain. You can’t complain against a custom. You know? So listen to me, give me your wallet. You probably got cards, pictures. I’ll keep the money and send the wallet to your people. Why should those guys up there get it? They’re mostly single men up there. I’ve got a family. Listen to me.”

“All right,” Feldman said.

The deputy took the wallet Feldman handed him. He looked familiarly at the photographs and cards. “You want to know something funny? My wife has a charge account at your store.” He ripped the cash out of the wallet. “She needs a new dress. You may get some of this back.”

“The rich get richer,” Feldman said.

“Here’s a buck for the watch,” the deputy said. He shoved the bill behind the handkerchief in Feldman’s breast pocket. “We’ll go in a minute,” he said. He leaned down, picked up the suitcase he had brought with him into the cell, and heaved it up onto Feldman’s cot. He opened the grip and took out a strange leather harness which he fitted over his jacket. “Buckle me up in the back,” he told Feldman. “Okay, your right hand again.” He took the empty handcuff and fitted it through a metal ring that hung from a short chain attached to the harness. “Latest crimestopper. Both hands free,” the deputy explained. “Close the suitcase,” he commanded.

Feldman shut the suitcase clumsily with his left hand. He felt leashed.

“You carry that,” the deputy said. “Wait a minute.” He took a chain from his pocket and looped it quickly and intricately around Feldman’s left wrist and through the handle of the suitcase. He locked the chain. “Okay,” he said, “now we can go.”

Feldman strained against the suitcase. “Nothing in there but my pajamas and a change of underwear. The suitcase is weighted, that’s why it’s so heavy,” the deputy said.

In the train Feldman was told to take the aisle seat. The deputy would not unlock his left hand. He pressed a button on the armrest and pushed his seat back. “Long ride,” he said. “Say,” he said, looking at Feldman maneuvering the heavy suitcase stiffly with his locked left arm, his body twisted, “you don’t have to be so uncomfortable. Why don’t you shove your seat back? Here, I’ll do it.” He leaned across Feldman’s stomach

and found the button on the armrest. “Now lean back.” Feldman pushed against the seat. “Hard,” the deputy said. “*Hard.*” Feldman shook his head. “Busted,” the deputy said, and leaned back against his own seat.

“We could find other seats,” Feldman said.

“No, don’t bother,” the deputy said. “The train doesn’t go straight through. We have to change in a couple of hours. It doesn’t pay.” He smiled. “Say,” he said, “look at that. There’s somebody in a mighty hurry. Look at that guy come.”

A man in a black suit was running along the station platform.

“Freedman,” Feldman said.

“What’s that? You know him?”

“It’s Freedman,” Feldman said.

“Come to tell you goodbye,” the deputy said. “That’s nice.” He lifted the window. “In here, Freedman,” the deputy called. He turned and smiled at Feldman.

In a moment the door at the end of the car was pulled open and Dr. Freedman came in. He rushed up to them. “Deputy,” he said, “Feldman. May I?” He pulled roughly against the seat in front of Feldman and turned it around. He sat down in the empty seat, facing Feldman. “So you’re going on a journey. I’d shake your hand, but—” He pointed at the handcuff.

“Mr. Feldman’s on his way to penitentiary, Mr. Freedman,” the deputy said.

“Ah, to penitentiary. Yes, I read about that. To penitentiary, is it? Crime does not pay, hey, Feldman? Well well well. What do you know?”

“Get away from me, Freedman,” Feldman said.

“Tch tch tch. I have a ticket. Here it is. To...Enden. Yes. You go perhaps further. But that’s where I leave you, where you leave me. But of course if the deputy objects I’ll find some other seat at once. *Do you object, Deputy?*”

“No sir, Mr. Freedman, I sure don’t. It’s nice to have the company.”

“Thank you. Personally, I too find that the company of honest men is welcome, but my friend Feldman here has things to think about, perhaps. I hope our chatter don’t disturb him. He’s not well, you know. I was his doctor, did you know that? Yes, indeed. *I know his condition!*”

“Is that so?” asked the deputy.

“Oh yes. He has a condition. A remarkable one.”

“Freedman—”

“Medical science is still in its infancy. As a doctor I admit it. It hasn’t even begun to understand the strange ways in which life works.”

“Freedman—” Feldman said again.

“You know, Deputy, seeing him attached to you like that is very striking, very unsettling.” He looked at Feldman. “You can imagine my surprise, Feldman, when I came into this car and I saw the bonds by which you are forged to the deputy here. Knowing your history—”

“What’s that, Dr. Freedman?” the deputy asked.

“Well, it’s very strange. Years ago, when we were on terms, I made an x-ray. There was a shadow—by his heart. A strange thing. At least four inches. Lying across his heart.”

“*Freedman—*” Feldman said, straining forward.

“Now, now,” the deputy said. “You behave yourself. You’re in custody now. This

isn't any department store. As far as you're concerned, this railroad train's already your prison. That makes you a con. Now unless you want to find out right here what we can do to cons who don't shape up, you better start acting like a con."

"A homunculus," Freedman said.

Feldman groaned and the deputy grabbed at the handcuff and jerked it sharply. "You be quiet," he said.

"I didn't know, of course, until I had had him x-rayed again. Oh, many times. I'm still not absolutely sure, but there, between the sternal ribs, and lying across his heart's superior vena cava and aorta—a homunculus, perfectly shaped. About four inches. A fetus. There, of course, from prenatal times. He was probably meant to be a twin, but something happened. Some early Feldmanic aggrandizement, and the fetus froze there. It couldn't have been four inches at birth. Something that large would have killed him. It must have been alive inside him—God knows how. But Feldman killed it off, didn't you, Feldman?"

"Why didn't you take it out?" the deputy asked.

"Well, I wanted to. He wouldn't let me. It's very dangerous even now. It's probably petrified by this time. If his heart should enlarge, if he should have an attack, or perhaps even a heavy blow in the chest, the homunculus could penetrate the heart and kill him."

The train moved out slowly and Feldman felt an exceptional urgency in his bowels.

"You ought to have that taken care of," the deputy said. "You don't let a thing like that go."

Suddenly Feldman leaned forward. "How do you know?" he asked Freedman.

"How do you know?"

"You saw the x-rays. You saw them," Freedman said. "What do you think, I painted them myself?"

"It's too strange," Feldman said. "A fetus is curled. This is straight."

"Why balk at that? Everything's strange," Freedman said. "You know, Deputy, the fact is, I thought at first it was an extra rib—something. But I'm certain now it's what I said. There was a case in New York State—That's why I was so surprised to see Feldman here attached to you like this."

"Can you see the head and arms?"

"Indistinctly, Deputy, indistinctly," Freedman said.

"It's too much for me," the deputy said. "Excuse me a minute, Doctor. Come along, Feldman."

They went forward to the toilet, Feldman pulling the weighted suitcase behind him terribly. Once inside, he tried to lift it up onto the washstand. It must weigh a hundred pounds, he thought. The deputy watched him tugging at the case and smiled. Feldman felt something wrench in his arm, but at last he was able to swing the heavy case up onto the sink. It teetered dangerously and he moved against it to keep it from falling.

"Now, now," the deputy said, "is that a way? You think the railroad wants you scratching its sinks? Anyway, how do you expect me to sit down and take my crap with you all the way over there?"

"Unlock me," Feldman said.

"Well, I can't do that," the deputy said. "The custody code in this state says that any prisoner being transported to the penitentiary must be bound to his custodian at all

times. Now you've rested enough. You get that suitcase down from there and you come over here." With both hands he pulled on his harness, and Feldman stumbled and fell to his knees. The grip fell from the washstand against Feldman's leg.

The deputy undid his trousers and let them fall to the floor. He pushed his drawers down. He sat on the toilet seat, and Feldman was pulled toward him at the level of the man's stomach.

"What are you looking away for? Don't you ever move yours? Don't you look away from me like that. You think you're better than I am? *Don't you look away, I said!*"

Feldman turned his head to the deputy. He started to gag.

"Maybe you're uncomfortable," the deputy said. "Maybe you'd be more comfortable if you could rest your head in my lap. You uncomfortable?"

"No." Feldman said. "I'm comfortable."

"Well, if you're uncomfortable you just put your head down. And you better not be sick on me. You understand?" Feldman swayed dizzily against the deputy. "Hey," the deputy said, "I think you like this. I think you think it ain't so bad. A man gets used to everything. That'll stand you in good stead where you're going. That'll be a point in your favor up there." Feldman pulled away again.

"Well, I'm done, I guess," the deputy said in a few moments. "How about you? Do you have to go?"

"No."

"Don't be embarrassed now."

"No," Feldman said, "I don't have to."

At Enden they had to change trains.

"So this is Enden," Freedman said. "It isn't much, but I'm glad I saw it. I've still got some time before I make my connection back to the city. I'll walk along with you."

"Dr. Freedman, it was nice to have your company," the deputy said. "Say goodbye to him, Feldman. You won't be seeing your friend for some time."

"Maybe I'll come out to visit," Freedman said.

Freedman and the deputy shook hands.

"Oh, and listen," Freedman said to the deputy, "don't forget what I told you. A homunculus. Petrified. Over the heart. A heavy blow in the chest. Tell them. *Tell the convicts.*" He crossed the tracks and walked beside them toward their train. Three cars ahead a porter stood waiting for them. Near the vestibule where they were to board the train, Freedman moved suddenly in front of Feldman and the deputy. He went up on the little metal step and from there to the lower stair of the train and looked up into the vestibule.

"Ah," he said, "Victman." He held onto the railing and leaned backwards as Feldman and the deputy came up. "Look, Feldman," he called, "it's Victman."

They had to change trains once more. In the foothills of the great dark mountain range which climbed like tiered chaos to the gray penitentiary. There Victman left them, and Dedman took his place.

In the night Feldman whispered to the deputy. "I have to go," he said.

"Sure, Feldman, in a minute, when this game is finished." Dedman and the deputy

were playing cards.

“Please,” Feldman said, “now. I have to go.”

“You know the rules. I can’t unlock you. I asked before if you had to go. Have a little patience, please.”

The deputy won the game and sat back comfortably. “Some revenge, Dedman?” he said. “I believe a man is entitled to revenge.” He dealt the cards, and they played for another hour.

Feldman urinated in his suit. The deputy and Dedman watched the darkening, spreading stain.

“That’s more like it,” the deputy said.

## 2

There was an old Packard touring car waiting for them at the station.

The deputy had fallen asleep; Feldman had to wake him. Dedman had disappeared. Before they left the train the deputy unlocked Feldman's handcuff and the chain that wrapped his wrist. He moved him down the steps and into the back seat of the car. It was very dark.

"You're where they shoot to kill now, Feldman," the deputy said.

The driver laughed sourly and the deputy closed Feldman's door and walked around the car and got into the front seat next to him.

When they had ridden for almost an hour—Feldman could see the tan twist of dirt road as the car's head lamps swept the sudden inclines and turns of the arbitrary mountain—he asked how far it was to the penitentiary.

"Hell," the deputy said, "you've been in it since the train went through that tunnel just after dark. It's *all* penitentiary. It's a whole country of penitentiary we got up here."

"It's four miles from where we are now to the second wall," the driver said.

In twenty minutes Feldman saw a ring of lights, towers, walls.

"That's her," the deputy said.

The car stopped. Feldman guessed they had come to a gate, though he could see no passage through the solid wall.

"Out," the deputy said. "Nothing wider than a man gets through that wall. There's no back-of-the-laundry-truck escapes around here."

The driver opened a metal door, and they walked single file, Feldman in the middle, through a sort of narrow ceilingless passageway that curved and angled every few feet. Along the wide tops of the walls strolled men with rifles. Feldman looked up at them. "Head down, you," a guard called. Every hundred feet or so was another metal door, which opened as they came to it.

"Maximum security," the deputy said.

"Maximum insecurity," said the driver.

They came to a final door, which opened onto a big yard lighted with stands of arc lamps, bright as an infield. Across from him, about two hundred yards away, in an area not affected by the lights, he could see the outlines of buildings like the silhouette of city skylines in old comic strips. They took him to one of these buildings—all stone; he could see no joints; it was as though the building had been sculpted out of solid rock—and the deputy prodded him up the stairs.

"You'll have your interview with the warden here," the deputy said.

Feldman looked at his wrist for marks that might have been left by the chain. He was certain the deputy had abused him, that the business of the suitcase had been his own invention. There was something in the Constitution about cruel and unusual punishment. There was a slight redness about his left wrist but no swelling. He was a

little disappointed. If he got the chance—he would study the warden carefully; didn't they have to be college graduates?—he would report the deputy anyway.

They took him to an office on the second floor.

Feldman was surprised. For all the apparent solidness of the outside of the building, the inside seemed extremely vulnerable. There was a lot of wood. He could smell furniture polish. The old, oiled stairs creaked as they climbed them. It was like the inside of an old public school. There were even drinking fountains in the hall.

"You wait here," the deputy said. He opened a door—it could have been to the principal's office; Feldman looked for the American flag—and pushed him inside.

"The warden doesn't want anyone around when he talks to a con," the deputy said. "I'm sacking out. The driver's your guard now. He'll be right outside." He closed the door and left the room. Feldman waited a few minutes and opened the door. A few things the driver had said made him think he might be approachable.

The driver was sitting in a chair, a machine gun in his lap. "I'm no friend of yours," he said. "Get back in there."

Feldman sat down to wait. I'm probably on television, he thought. They're watching me this minute. Strangely, he felt more comfortable. If everything was just a strategy he could deal with them. Just don't let them touch me, he thought. He fell asleep. Let them watch me sleep, he dreamed.

When he woke up he expected to see the warden standing over him. It was not impossible, he felt, that the warden could even turn out to be the deputy. But when he opened his eyes no one was there, and he knew that there were no one-way mirrors, no hidden microphones, and was more frightened than at any time since he had been arrested. I'm in trouble, he thought, I'm really in trouble.

He began to pray.

"Troublemaker," he prayed, "keep me alive. Things are done that mustn't be done to me. Have a heart. If the question is can I take it, the answer is no. Regularity is what I know best. I have contributed to the world's gloom, I acknowledge that. But I have always picked on victims. Victims are used to it. Irregularity is what *they* know best. They don't even feel it. I feel it. It gives me the creeps."

He finished his prayer, and still seated, looked around the office. It was past midnight. He might have hours to wait yet. "You wait here," the deputy had said. Was it a stratagem? They file you paper-thin with expectation and anxiety. I expect nothing. I'll take what comes. He folded his arms across his chest, trying to look detached. It would be best, he thought, if he could sleep again. A sleeping man had a terrific advantage in a contest of this sort. It would invariably rattle whoever came to shake him awake. "You see what I think of you?" a sleeping man said to the shaker.

But he wasn't sleepy. He was too cold. It's the altitude, Feldman thought. At night you need a coat up here even in summer. He looked down at his suit and stroked his sleeve. It was lucky he believed in appearances. ("A *heavy* material," he had told the buyer. "In this heat?" "What should I wear in that courtroom, a luau shirt?") A man of conservative, executive substance, silver-templed, and tan for a Jew. Never split a Republican ticket in my life, gentlemen.

The door opened and Feldman looked up. A man stood in the doorway for a moment and then moved behind the desk and sat down. He had some papers with him which he examined as if they contained information with which he was already

familiar, using them easily but with a certain disappointment.

Feldman watched the warden, if this *was* the warden. (Already he had begun to do what all strangers in new situations do—attribute to others exalted rank, seeing in each comfortable face an executive, a person of importance.) He was a man of about Feldman's age, perhaps a little younger. Feldman guessed they were the same height, though the warden was not as heavy. What struck him most was the man's face. It seemed conventional, not unintelligent so much as not intelligent. It was, even at midnight, smooth—not recently shaved, just smooth—as though lacking the vitality to grow hair. Its ruddiness could probably be accounted for by the heavy sun striking at this altitude through the thin atmosphere. He might have been one of the salesmen who called at his store. Feldman had hoped, he realized now, for someone mysterious, a little magical. He saw, looking at the warden's face, that it would be a long year.

"Is it all right with you if I open a window? It's a little stuffy in here," the man said. "I'm cold," Feldman said.

"I'm sorry," the warden said, getting up. "I have to open the window." He opened it and came around the front of the desk to where Feldman was sitting.

"Mr. Feldman," he said, "I'm Warden Fisher, a fisher of bad men."

Feldman stood up to shake hands. The warden turned away and went back to stand by the open window.

"Be seated, please," the warden said. "In this first interview I like to get the man's justification."

"Sir?"

"Why are you here?"

"They say I'm guilty."

"Are you?"

Feldman answered carefully. There was some question of an appeal, of getting his case reopened. Probably there was a tape recorder going someplace. The warden was trying to disarm him. "No, of course not," he said, undisarmed.

The warden smiled. "I've never had an affirmative answer to that question." Feldman, disarmed, at one with all the robbers, bums, murderers and liars in the place, felt he needed an initiative.

"You may want me to put this in writing later," he said, "but I feel I have certain legitimate complaints about the way I was treated coming up here."

The warden frowned, but Feldman went on. He explained about his watch and the money. Telling it, he knew he sounded like a fool. He didn't mind. It added, he felt, to an impression of innocence. "I have reason to suspect, too, that the deputy took money from certain enemies of mine in exchange for showing me off to them in my humiliation."

The warden nodded. "Go on," he said.

Feldman felt the warden was bored by the story, but he couldn't stop. When he came to the part about the toilet he tried to get outrage into his voice. Somehow it sounded spurious. He finished lamely with an allusion to the final proddings and shoves.

"Is there anything else?" the warden asked.

"No sir," Feldman said.

"Do you have any proof? Would Dedman or Freedman or Victman testify to any of

this?”

Feldman admitted they probably wouldn't. "I'm not lying though," he added helplessly.

The warden opened a second window. "The deputy's a pig," he said suddenly. "He ought to be in prison. Without proof, however—"

Feldman shrugged sympathetically.

"He ought to be in prison too, I mean," the warden said, turning to Feldman.

"I'm innocent," Feldman said mechanically.

"All right," the warden said, "that's enough."

It was. He regretted having spoken. He didn't know what it was tonight. Every action he had taken had been ultimately cooperative. It was a consequence of being on the defensive. Feldman knew how easy it was to accuse. That was the trick the warden had been playing on him. He had to assert himself before it was too late. If he had the nerve it would be a good idea to push the warden, to run behind his desk and sit in his chair. Then he seized on the idea of silence. To speak, even to speak in accusation was, in a way, to fawn. Let the warden make the mistakes, he thought. Mum's the word. He folded his arms.

"It's easy for me to believe you've been wronged," the warden was saying. A trap. Shut up. Forewarned is forearmed. "There are enough bad men in the world. We all have our turn as their victims."

Not me, Feldman thought.

"What I want to know," the warden said, "is what you've done."

Feldman said nothing.

"Answer me," the warden said.

"I've done nothing."

"All right," the warden shouted, "I said that's enough. Since you've been here you've spoken only of your own injuries. Granted! What else?"

It was no contest. He wasn't free to remain silent. The thing to do was to yield, to throw himself not on the warden's mercy but on his will. He wants words, Feldman thought, I'll give him words. He wants guilt? Let there be guilt.

"It says in that paper on your desk what I did," Feldman said hoarsely. "It says I did favors."

"What else?"

"That I was a middleman, a caterer. That they came to me. That I didn't even have to advertise. Ethical. Like a doctor."

"This is nothing," the warden said. "You're wasting time."

"All right. I filled needs. Like a pharmacist doing prescriptions. Did you ever know anyone like me? The hell. A woman needed an abortion, I found a doctor. A couple needed a kid, I found a bastard. A punk a fix, I found a pusher. I was in research."

The warden shuddered.

"Wait," Feldman said, "you haven't heard anything. In my basement. In my store. In a special room. Under the counter. I've found whores, and I've found pimps for whores. You don't see it on the shelf? Ask. You have peculiar tastes? Feldman has a friend. What I said about the doctor and the pharmacist—that's wrong. I was like a fence. I was a moral fence. That's what it says I did." He stopped talking. "One more thing," he said in a moment, looking around, "this isn't a confession." He raised his

voice. “Warden Fisher wanted me to talk, so I’m talking. I’m just repeating in my own words what’s written in his paper. None of it is true.”

The warden stared at him.

“That last takes care of your tape recorders,” Feldman told him. “And if you’re thinking of clipping it just before I added that, let me point out that I wasn’t speaking in my natural voice.”

The warden shook his head.

“I never took a penny,” Feldman whispered.

“I can’t hear you,” the warden said.

I never took a penny, he mouthed. “I did favors. I helped people. The whole case against me turns on whether I accepted money. I never did. And if you want to know my justification, it was for fun I did it,” he told him softly.

He spoke again in his normal voice. “According to your records, Warden, I accepted money from a Mrs. Jerome Herbert for arranging an interview with a judge who was to hear a case against her husband. Mrs. Herbert had a charge account at my store. We had just installed a new billing system. She received an unitemized bill for five hundred dollars, which she paid with a personal check made out to me. God knows what she bought from me for five hundred dollars, but it wasn’t an interview with any judge. God knows, too, why she would pay an unitemized bill or why she would make the check out to me, but that’s what happened. That’s why I’m here now. It was the machine’s mistake.”

“I smell you,” the warden said quietly.

“What?” Feldman asked. “What’s that?”

“I smell you.”

The pee, Feldman thought, embarrassed. He looked down at his pants and touched one palm of his trouser leg. It was still damp. The altitude—pee didn’t dry. That deputy bastard.

“I told you,” Feldman said, “you want evidence? There’s evidence. Send my piss to your crime lab.”

The warden moved suddenly and grabbed Feldman’s trousers, bunching the damp material in his fist, squeezing it. “That,” he said, “that’s nothing. I smell *you*.”

“What do you mean?” Feldman said, genuinely angry. “What kind of thing is that to say? What kind of way is that for a warden to talk? The deputy was ignorant, but you’re supposed to know better. I won’t be insulted by you, by someone in authority. I’m warning you. I have plenty of friends in this state.”

“You still think this is a game, don’t you?” the warden said. “You still think some philosophical cat and mouse is going on here. You bad clown, you wicked fool with your nonsensical impersonations and your miming and your boastful confessions. You bad, silly man, this is no game. Can you understand? You’re here for a year in this state’s licensed penitentiary, and it’s no game. There are no tape recorders. When I want you to confess I’ll have you beaten up and you’ll confess. Do you understand?”

“Yes sir,” Feldman said quietly.

“Yes sir,” the warden mocked. “You don’t understand yet, do you, actor? You still want me to say what’s always said. All right. ‘You play ball with us, we’ll play ball with you.’ All right. But don’t let that be any comfort to you. There aren’t any prizes for playing ball with us. I don’t care about your mind, and I promise no one will lay a

finger on your soul. It's your ass that belongs to us, Feldman. You want it back, stay out of trouble. Do the routines. Learn to think about your laundry. Keep your cell clean. Don't put more on your tray than you can eat. Look forward to the movies. Make no noise after ten o'clock. Learn a trade. Try out for the teams. Pray for the condemned."

Feldman's heart turned. He felt the homunculus riding it twist.

"Stand up," the warden commanded.

He stood slowly, forcing himself to look at the warden.

"There are some good men here," the warden said. "I don't want them corrupted by you."

He watched the warden glumly.

"I don't expect to see you again. Do you understand me? If we have business it's to be conducted through a procedurally constituted chain of command, and the probability is I'll initiate it. No more midnight meetings with the warden, actor." He started to cough. "Get out," he said. "Your stench gags me."

### 3

Feldman's cell was ten feet wide and a dozen deep, about the size of the room in his father's house when he was a boy. This struck him at once, and since he noticed that the cells varied in dimension, and even in their basic shapes, he wondered if perhaps this information had not also been in his records, and if putting him there had not been meant as some subtle lesson.

When he knew him better he asked his cellmate, a man named Bisch, what his room had been like as a child.

"Like a kitchen," Bisch said. "I slept by the stove." The man was tall—Feldman thought of him at first as a mountaineer—with grayish bushy hair that tufted up from his temples. Everything he did he did slowly, moving deliberately to tasks with the loose moodiness of an athlete stepping up to a mark. He had great pulling-and-tearing power in his long dark hands. Feldman was afraid of him. A strangler, he thought, a chopper, a choker.

Bisch had not even looked up, though he was awake, when Feldman was brought in, or when, moments later, Feldman urinated, splashing loudly, in the lidless toilet. They were awake together for hours that night, and though Feldman coughed and shivered, catching cold, the man said nothing.

Maybe there's a ritual, Feldman thought. Maybe a new prisoner is supposed to introduce himself and announce his crime. "Feldman's the name, favors the game," he said to himself experimentally. "Feldman, not guilty. Machine error."

It was, at first, like being in a hospital. What they all had in common was not their crime or their back luck or their contempt. Being locked up was their mutual disease, but because he was the most recent arrival he thought of himself as the sickest, the one with the greatest distance to travel to recovery, the most to lose. It did not matter that many of these men would never, as he would in a year, see the outside again. They were used to it. To judge by appearances, they were habitual criminals or men for whom being inside a prison was somehow a relief. Later he would look for the one called Pop, the one whom age made spotless, harmless, a saint by weary default of health and ego. Who volunteered to remain there always, who would be dangerous only if let loose, and then just long enough to get back, who would plan his last crime against society with the precision of a scientist and the knowledge of a Blackstone or a Coke, who knew even as he picked the lock or jimmied the window just how long he'd get, where to go till they caught him—only enjoying that much freedom, the two weeks like a sailor's shore leave it would take to catch him. Nervous even in the local jail, wondering as he awaited trial if he had done enough to discount their mercy, their solicitude for his white hairs, his years, and calm only when pronounced guilty, and serene only back in the penitentiary. There was no such man.

He did not really wonder very much about the other men, however. He gave them

his thoughts when he was with them in the dining hall or as he watched them from his cell, exercising in the prison yard—because of his cold they allowed him to remain inside, though he saw no doctor—but most of the time he could think of no one but himself, again like a man coming into a hospital.

As he began to feel better—now he was counterfeiting his cough—he worried about what to do with his time. During the daily hour of free time, he left his cell to see the library, as he had gone, too, to the swimming pool and gymnasium and crafts hall, as he had gone to *all* the facilities, hearing of them and finding them greedily, as on ocean liners he had taken his preliminary inspections of the ship, going into each of its salons and bays, only to decide, finally, on lunch in his cabin, or to sit for long hours in a deck chair.

He recalled his initial tours of their grounds when his son was a small boy and they had first moved to their house in the private suburb. In the back, set a good distance from the house and closed in by a low wall, was a large patio. One night Lilly had made supper out there—big steaks like great meaty South Americas, long fat cobs of corn, potatoes like brown, warm rocks, pale yellow butter, sour cream, rye bread, deep wet lakes of cream soda. Afterwards she went back into the house to do the dishes.

Feldman laid down along the wide top of one of the patio walls and stared up at the just dark sky. One bright star blazed directly above him.

“Come here, Billy,” he said to his son. The boy came and Feldman touched his cheek. “Bring Daddy a pillow from the house,” he said. When his son came back with the pillow, Feldman pulled him up on his stomach. “I’ll be *your pillow*.” He pulled him gently along his body. “Be careful,” he said, “don’t hurt me with your head.” Billy snuggled against Feldman. “Let’s look up at the night sky,” Feldman said. “I’ll give you all the stars you can count.”

The boy counted four pale stars and the bright one Feldman had seen when he first lay down.

“No you don’t,” Feldman said, “that bright one is mine.”

“You said I could have all of them,” Billy said.

“Not the bright one.”

“What makes that star so bright?”

“It’s closer.” He thought about light years.

“Is that one Mars?”

“Mars is a planet,” Feldman said. “It’s red.”

“I can’t see it.”

“It’s not out yet.” Feldman had never seen Mars.

“What’s a planet? Is a planet a star?”

“There are nine planets,” Feldman said. “Earth is a planet. And Mars. There’s Jupiter, and Saturn. Saturn has rings.” I’ve never been able to see the damn things, Feldman thought irritably. “Uranus is another planet.” He couldn’t think of the names of the other four. Maybe there were just two more. He couldn’t remember. He was pretty sure there weren’t just five. So much for the night sky.

“I tell you what,” Feldman said, “I’ll trade you your four stars for my bright one.”

“All right,” his son said.

“Done,” Feldman said. By this time more stars had appeared.

Feldman counted off eleven. “Those eleven stars are mine,” he said. “Daddy has