TEXAS JAILBIRD

My name is Cameron Wells, but most folks call me Sonny because I was the last of ten children. I was named after my Daddy. I grew up in Carthage, Texas, in the northeast part of the state not too far from the Louisiana border. Carthage is the county seat of Panola County. The word ‘panola’ means ‘cotton’ in the Redskin language. Like most of our neighbors, Daddy grew cotton, and I did my share of chopping and picking the stuff before I left home at age 26. I went to the same grade school as country singer Tex Ritter. Because of him, most people know the name Carthage.

In October, 1930, the Daisy Bradford #3 oil well finally hit a gusher at 3500’ down, in a field about six miles north of Henderson, which was 28 miles west of Carthage. Like many other men in the area, I left my family to learn a new trade by trying to find better paying work in the oil fields.

As luck would have it, I landed a job. Maybe the boss thought I had an honest yet determined face. I started at the bottom of the totem pole: as a ginsel, a 'worm's helper,' a 'worm' being another name for a leadman. After so many months, you could work your way up to being a chainman, then later a derrickhand. But the work was brutal, dirty, and exhausting – much, much harder than farming cotton. The good pay was very welcome, however. The Great Depression was now in full fury, with one-third of able-bodied men wandering and out of work nationwide. So I was glad to be earning some cabbage.

Sadly, it was there at the oil fields that my troubles began. I was cocky and stupid and picked up several bad habits from the other veteran roughnecks: drinking, gambling, fighting, cursing. I started visiting cathouses on Saturday nights with my buddies. I stopped going to church, and forgot about all the lessons my Mama taught me from the Good Book. I was ashamed to tell my parents about my sins, so I said nothing, although I did send a goodly chunk of my paycheck home every week. Then, one day, I got into a dumb, stubborn argument with my job foreman. I refused to be lowered head down by rope into a drill bore to retrieve a busted drill bit. He let me go then and there, so suddenly I was out of work. Other unemployed men who were eager to take my job without complaint were already lined up outside the company fence.

So I drifted, hitch-hiked, rode the rails. Gradually, I took on the demeanor and appearance of an ordinary bum, one of millions it seemed. I was too proud to go back home and fess up. When hunger became too much, I begged at churches, or at folks’ back doors, or lined up with other down and outers at soup kitchens. I learned to avoid policemen and railyard bulls. I became an expert liar and deceiver. Then I started stealing -- first items when there was no one around, later mugging other weaker bums and drifters for a dime or a hunk of food. I felt pathetic, but helpless to change.

My worst mistake was trying to rob a filling station in Silsbee, near Beaumont. I just wanted the cash drawer, not to hurt the attendant. But the old timer drew a hidden pistol, and as we struggled, the gun unexpectedly fired. The man was mortally wounded by his own hand, but who would believe that? I ran, but was later picked up and identified in a police line-up by a witness who happened to be exiting the filling station’s men’s room at the time of the shooting. I was made, and no mistake.

I later went before Hardin County Judge Sammy Reston, and was sentenced to fourteen years hard labor without parole at Huntsville Penitentiary for involuntary manslaughter. (I would have gotten only seven years in the Can, but I had a folding jackknife in my pants pocket when I was caught. That counted as a deadly weapon that I might have brandished during the hold-up, even though I didn’t.) My descent into Hell commenced from that point. In the courtroom, my Mama cried after sentence was passed, and my Daddy just looked away, ashamed. Needless to say, I was the first of my brothers and sisters to go to prison. I was a sorry case. And now I was just a common, ordinary jailbird.

Huntsville is the oldest penitentiary in Texas, built back in 1849. It was made of red brick with high walls, so it was nicknamed “The Walls” by its former and current inmates. The death penalty was carried out there by hanging rope until 1923, then the prison switched to the electric chair -- “Old Sparky.” Huntsville once housed the famous outlaw John Westley Hardin, but I wasn’t impressed by that fact, because I really didn’t want to be there anyway. I broke the law and now I had to pay the price. I figured I would rot in Stir until I turned 40.

I don’t mind admitting that my first day in prison was awful. First you strip naked, then they check your mouth, your hair, and up your ass for any contraband. Then they take your civvies and issue you a black and white striped jailbird suit and a cloth cap. Next, they give you a thin wool blanket, a towel, a comb, a toothbrush, a cake of soap, a set of drawers, a pair of socks, and a cheap pair of work boots. Then they read you the rules. You get to shave once every three days, and you get to shower once a week. Clean clothes come once a week. Visitation time is one hour a month -- family and relatives (or your lawyer, if you have one) only. You can write up to three letters a month. You can read the heavily-screened (nothing sexy) prison library books and magazines, or the Bible. You rise at 6 and have lights out at 10. You get three squares a day, but don’t expect your mama’s cooking. Grits, eggs, fried bologna, okra, cornbread, collard and turnip greens, black-eyed peas, beans, fruit, fried potatoes, and fatback mostly. Greasy and starchy -- you get the picture. Rusty-tasting water and lousy black coffee to drink. The State of Texas wants its prison meals filling enough to keep you alive, but they want to do it on the cheap. Nary any milk or desserts. No candy or soda pop or even sugar for your joe.

Next, you get a con number and a cell assignment. I’m con # 4277, cell # 323. My cellmate was Vernon Mitchell. When I first met him, he said to call him “Taters” on account of his favorite food is potatoes. He was in for nine years for an armed robbery he tried down in Galveston. He was about twelve years older than me, and he’d been inside “The Walls” for two years so far. They kept all the niggers in another cell block, so we never saw them unless we were on a big outdoor chain gang job. But even then, whites and darkies were kept separate so no fights could break out. Made sense to me.

I never saw the Warden, Willard Stillman, but Taters told me that Stillman was a washed-out rummy that kept his door closed and a bottomless bottle of hooch hidden in his desk. As a result, the guards could pretty much do what they wanted to the inmates. My #1 problem was the senior guard on my block, Dewey Drummond. “Call me Boss D, new meat! And always answer me with Yes, Boss,” was my introduction to this balding, beady-eyed, 300-lb. mountain of blubber, as he pointed at my face with the mean end of his billy club. Taters told me Drummond was probably queer, by the way he eyeballed the younger prisoners in the weekly shower room. Probably had a pecker the size of a peanut, I figured. I once heard that those kind usually did. I learned fast to stay wide and clear of Boss D, but he must have had it out for me, because he kept getting in my face.

When Boss D got a chance to read my file about a week after my arrival, he must have learned that I had once worked in the Henderson oil fields. "Well, look at what we have here, boys...an oil millionaire gone wrong. I think I'll call you 'Oil Wells', boy!" he guffawed one morning during roll call. As usual, Boss D was red-faced and sweaty merely from the exertion of dragging his bulk around. His sadistic smile showed a big gap between his two stained front teeth, and he usually had flecks of white spittle parked in both corners of his mouth.

My first experience of off-site chain gang work was not pleasant. You get shackled with heavy ankle chains, then they load you up in a twenty-man flatbed truck. They drive you away for the day to chop weeds and briers alongside county roads. You get a double-edged sling (kaiser) blade to sweep back and forth as you cut the brush. The guards watch you with their shotguns and rifles and dogs. Prisoners get a water break every hour for five minutes, and a fifteen minute lunch break for some sandwiches and fruit. If you have to piss or crap, you have to ask permission. On a typical hot and humid summer's day, the work is torturous and mind-numbing. Soon, you are soaked with sweat. No talking except during breaks and on the drive there and back.

Whenever it rained, we were shackled again but taken instead to private nearby factories to haul and size burlap cloth and then machine-stitch it into sacking. It was free labor for the plant owners, through some prior payback arrangement with the State of Texas. The work was boring as hell but not too sweaty, and days like that went by rather quickly.

But the very worst work detail was the rock quarry. In addition to the ankle chains, each prisoner was attached to a twenty-five pound ball. You were given either a pick, a sledgehammer, or a shovel. The job was to break large rocks into smaller gravel pieces for road constructions, then load the pieces into trucks. The sun's glare off the white rocks always hurt my eyes badly. Sunglasses could only be worn by the guards. You had to hoist and move your ball with you all throughout the day -- even to take a piss or a crap, either of which had to be done a sizeable walk away at the upper ground level of the quarry. The relentless labor was muscle-aching and back-breaking! And if you didn't keep moving and working, a guard would gladly whack you with his trusty Ugly Stick to set your mind back on business.

The weeks slowly turned into months. How could I ever endure this nightmare for fourteen long years? Nights in Stir were especially unsettling, because inmates would often yell out or even scream in the dark when having bad dreams. My cellmate, Taters, and I had many long discussions about how best to serve our time in the Slammer. Meanwhile, Boss D stepped up his harassments on me and other hapless prisoners. Once, in the mess hall, he slyly but deliberately tripped me while I was taking my food tray over to a table. "Oil Wells, you clumsy son of a bitch, clean that mess up right now!" he bellowed. Another time, while I was mopping the dull green floor on the center aisle of the Main Hall of our cell block, Boss D came over and spit a huge gob slowly right next to my foot. "You missed a spot, Oil Wells. Do it over again, and make it right this time, you hear me boy?" I grew to hate him more and more by the day. I fantasized about shoving his fat face down a filthy toilet bowl and holding his head underwater while I flushed it. Then I would take his billy club and beat him all over his stinking body until he begged for mercy.

Later, I found out that Boss D was stealing some of my letters to and from my family. I learned of this from my parents when they came to visit, when they asked why I hadn't written, or asking if I had received such and such letter from them. Sure enough, I would catch Boss D openly smirking while he was eavesdropping on my conversations from across the visiting room. The dirty bastard!

Prison is a rough world, a place you never want to wind up in, trust me. I kept my nose clean going into my first year behind bars. But now I really wanted Boss D dead. I knew that other prisoners had secretly made shiv knives to stab, cripple, or even kill other prisoners who had ratted them out, or had gotten in their face for one reason or another. Sometimes they got caught and had their sentences increased, or were punished by being locked away in Solitary for a time on bread and water. Yet sometimes there were 'no witnesses' and the attacker got away scot-free. I asked Taters if he had ever seen a guard get what was coming to him by getting stabbed by another prisoner.

"Sonny, don't you ever even think about doing it. If you stab or kill a prison guard -- or a cop on the outside, for that matter -- you're a dead man. They take care of their own, understand? You won't make it to trial. You will have a fatal 'accident' on the way to the courtroom, or you will be found hung in your cell as a 'suicide,' or you will get shot 'trying to escape,'" Taters warned. "Best thing is to lay low and take the abuse and wait out your time. It ain't right, and it ain't justice, but it's all we can do when we're stuck in the Big House. The Man holds all the cards, and he knows it."

Boss D continued, however, to zero in on me, especially during chain gang work details, cracking me on the back or shoulders with his wooden club when I least suspected it, snarling, "Get back to work, you lazy prick," or "What are you staring at, Oil Wells? Daydreaming about pussy? You won't be drilling for any of that stank for thirteen more years!" The fat bastard always laughed in the same sick way, while scratching his overhanging belly as it strained against his uniform shirt buttons.

Another year dragged by. I was now 28 years old. How could I stand this torment for another dozen years? Then I came to the ultimate realization that all convicts eventually come to: There just has to be a way to...ESCAPE!

I talked over the matter at length with Taters. “Four have tried to escape in the time I’ve been here, before you came, that is,” he replied. “Nobody made it. Two were shot dead trying to flee a roadside weed detail. Another one tried to steal a truck at the quarry, but he was caught and beaten to a pulp by the guards. His sentence was then doubled. The last guy tried to sneak out of the laundry room by breaking through a ventilation shaft. They flushed him out using a hot steam hose when he got stuck in the shaft. Spent four months in the prison hospital, he was burned so badly on his hands and face. Then they transferred him out to another prison. I suppose a large cell block riot, with guards taken hostage, might allow a few cons to escape in the chaos. But that requires a lot of planning and trust and organization. I really can’t see it ever happening. So my advice, Sonny, is to forget about getting out of here, and just ride out your time as best you can, like I’m doing. You’ll be older, sure, but you’ll be wiser too, and at least you’ll still be alive.”

I might have taken my cellmate’s advice, except for the fact that Boss D kept riding me. One day, I was using a push broom during cleaning detail on the second tier of my cell block. While I was finishing sweeping, Boss D wheezed his way up the stairs on some errand. But as he tried to squeeze past me in the end stairwell, he tripped on my broom handle and awkwardly fell down a few steps at a bad angle and busted his ankle. “Goddammit, Wells, you pushed me on purpose!” he wailed. “Guards, take this son of a bitch to Solitary! Of course, his lie was believed, and it was one month in The Hole on bread and water for me.

When I finally got out of Solitary, there was Boss D, still wearing an ankle cast and leaning on a cane. “Oil Wells, one day we are going to have a reckoning. It might be inside, or it might be outside, or it might be after your release in 1944. But I mean to have your hide – once and for all -- for what you did to me,” he hissed menacingly. “Doc said I might have a limp for the rest on my life once this cast comes off. If that turns out to be the case, you’re a dead man, boy, and make no mistake.”

Arguing is useless when you’re in prison. You have no real rights, and no one cares about truth and justice. You're just a con with a number, like me -- #4277. So instead, my thoughts went back again to planning an escape. I simply had to get out of Huntsville before I went crazy!

New Year's 1933 came in without any joy or celebration. The nation was still stuck hard in the Great Depression. We followed some of the bad news in the old newspapers that some of the guards shared, or sometimes we got to hear FDR on the radio. But on February 1st, our cell block got a new guard by the name of Rufus Lemont. He was about my height and age, not married yet, and seemed at first to be largely innocent of the cruel ways of the world. Rumor had it that Rufus' father was a friend of Texas Governor Sterling, and that’s how he got the lucky job. The most interesting thing about Lemont was that he had his own motorcar -- a new, dark blue Ford Coupe with real whitewall tires that his big shot daddy got him. Rufus always proudly talked about his car as he chatted with and got to know the cons on my block. Of course, Boss D was immediately suspicious, then jealous, of this new guard. Whereas Dewey Drummond was despised by every con, Boss Lemont related to the men more like normal human beings instead of animals. So Boss D set out to change that.

When the weather warmed up, we resumed our outdoor chain gang work – both on the roads and in the quarry. Boss D ordered that Boss Lemont had to beat any prisoner with his billy club who was caught ‘eyeballing’ -- that is, daydreaming, or silently staring, and thus not working. Bullying, kicking, and punching the cons was also promoted. After six months or so, Boss Lemont slowly gave into the pressure from Boss D and the other guards and became just another soulless prison enforcer. But he was still green enough to make small mistakes in his duties. I carefully observed these, and thought of how I could somehow use this flaw to my advantage.

Eventually, an idea formed in my mind. I promised myself that I would one way or another escape this lousy lockup by the end of the year. I bounced my plan off of Taters to get his opinion.

“If you can lure Lemont close to our cell bars with any kind of distracting conversation some night -- near the end of his regular shift -- I can try to grab him fast and knock him out, then lift his keys and open our cell. I’ll drag him inside and switch into his uniform. Then you can help me dress him in my stripes and put him in my bunk. I’ll relock our cell from the outside, and leave the keys out of reach on the ground. Boss Lemont is just about my size, so if I pull his guard hat down low over my face, I think I can walk outside in the dark like he would, carefully find his car, and -- calmly as I can -- drive off. What do you think? I know you don’t want to run with me, Taters, so you'll just stay safe behind in our cell. Tell the Screws that I knocked you out too, and confess that you knew nothing about my plan. That’ll keep you out of any trouble.”

“Well, Sonny, it’s very risky," Taters admitted. "And you're right in thinking that I don’t want to go with you. I’d rather ride out my time, like I've been doing. But I’ll do my part to help you because we are pals. Who knows? Maybe one day on the Outside, we will meet up again somewhere and you can do me a big favor in return. All I ask is that you really knock me out too after you give Lemont his lights out. A nice lump on my noggin will give my side of the story some good, solid credibility,” Taters grinned.

Soon it was December. A week of blustery, miserable, heavy rain arrived. As luck would have it, Boss D had called in sick with a bad chest cold, so a different guard – old and tired -- from Block G was substituting. He promptly fell asleep in a far corner chair down the Main Hall. I felt it was as good a time as any to make my move. Boss Lemont’s shift would end at midnight. It was about 11:40 p.m. on Wednesday, December 13th. I knew it was now or never!

“Psst…Boss Lemont…" Taters called out in a low voice from Cell 323. "I can’t sleep, Boss…I have a pain in my mouth, like maybe something sharp is stuck between my teeth…I know it’s late, but do you think you can take a quick look in my mouth with your flashlight? Or maybe even take me to the sick ward?” begged Taters, still in a low voice. “It hurts real bad, Boss.”

Lemont checked his watch, sighed, then said, “Alright, Mitchell, but let’s make it quick before my shift ends.” Rufus walked over to the cell while I pretended to be asleep in my bed. Under my blanket, I clutched a badly worn-out baseball I had earlier lifted from the discard can in the sports yard.

Taking out his flashlight, Boss Lemont peered inside Tater’s mouth close through the steel cell bars. “Hmm…I can’t see anything...but, man, your breath sure stinks,” Rufus observed ruefully.

That was when I boldly made my move. Leaping up from my bunk, I put my left hand over Lemont's mouth while simultaneously ramming his skull backward toward the bars. In my next motion, I clobbered Rufus squarely on his crown with my right hand clutching the hard league ball, holding him as he silently slide down then to the dull green block floor. I quickly grabbed his flashlight, then his keys, then slowly unlocked the cell door. Next, I quietly dragged his unconscious body into 323 and, with Taters’ help, switched into the guard’s uniform. Lemont’s uniform shoes were unexpectedly tight and uncomfortable, but they only had to be worn for a short time. We placed Rufus in my bed wearing my stripes and covered him with my blanket. Finally, Taters and I locked eyes and I solemnly shook his hand in thanks and goodbye. He turned his back dutifully towards me. I whispered, “Sorry, old pard, but I've got to do this,” and he answered, “I know...Good luck.” I clobbered him out cold with one shot of the baseball -- surely giving him a real goose egg -- and then placed him gently on his bed. I checked left and right down the Main Hall of the cell block to be sure that all was clear, then I locked the cell door from the outside and placed the keys on the floor. With as much confidence and calm as I could muster, I pulled Lemont’s cap down over my face as best I could and made for the block's exit. I was routinely buzzed out through a security gate by a bored guard leafing through a magazine who mistook me for Lemont. It was pouring rain and dark outside, which helped obscure visibility from both the guards at the main gates and the armed guard towers. I looked in somewhat of a panic for the dark blue Ford Coupe, but thankfully found it just as Lemont’s shift replacement came running by, dodging muddy puddles. He gave me a quick wave in the downpour. I silently waved back without raising my head. I knew that Lemont always kept his car keys under his passenger-side floor mat (an inmate had once asked him what car keys looked like nowadays, and he revealed that useful little detail), so I found them fast with my dripping wet fingers and fired up the engine. I hadn’t driven a car for three years, but the skill returned fast -- like riding a bicycle, you never forget. I turned on the headlamps and took off calmly and carefully, smoothly shifting the gears. I checked the rearview mirror as the massive red walls of Huntsville Penitentiary receded in the distance. I was out, but not out of danger yet!

I knew I had to make as much distance between myself and the prison as possible, because once they found me missing, and Lemont was discovered and recovered, the manhunt for me would begin in earnest.

My plan was to drive -- fast but not too fast --south using back roads, then ditch the car and the guard uniform somewhere in Houston. From there, I would skip the obvious route to Galveston and instead head for more obscure Port Arthur. Once there, I hoped to hitch a boat ride into Mexico, maybe to Tampico or even Veracruz if I was really lucky. True, I had no money, but I could always beg, or roll a drunk outside any back-alley honky-tonk for a few coins. I was a wanted man, and desperate. Circumstances were dire, and I was sorry in advance. I wanted to go straight for sure, for I never wanted to go back to prison – any prison – ever again. I promised myself that I would try and become a model citizen and start a fresh, new, clean life somewhere, anywhere! If only God could give me a second chance…

I drove in the rain until I spied a railroad worker’s equipment shed near a rural crossing just outside of Houston. It was perfect. I broke in through the window, and found some stained overalls that fit, a ragged cap, and an old wool jacket. I quickly got out of my prison guard uniform and swapped outfits. I also found a floppy pair of work boots to replace Lemont’s tight-fitting uniform shoes. I looked around for any food to take, but found none. (Truth be told, my adrenaline was so high that I wasn’t even hungry yet.) I drove about a mile, then ditched the Ford, with the uniform inside, in some thick brush. Meanwhile, the rain had stopped and the sky was beginning to lighten in the east. Suddenly, I heard a distant train whistle. Maybe it was heading east? I ran back the mile towards the train tracks in my floppy stolen boots. I got back just as I saw a long freight, mostly, but not all, oil tanker cars, heading into the rising sun…east! Watching for any railyard bulls, I gingerly found an empty box car and hoisted myself aboard. Fortunately, it was empty, so I settled in and immediately fell asleep from exhaustion. I dozed fitfully until I awoke to the sweet salty smell of the Gulf. Was I still in Texas, or had I slipped into Louisiana? I peered out of the boxcar’s door and saw we were indeed near Port Arthur. I decided to jump when the train slowed down for a curve and then started off again on foot into town. I could hear the screeching of the seagulls already in the distance.

I went into the first open diner I saw down by the docks. Its worn wooden shingle said: FINLEY'S. Inside was a small counter with six stools, and an arrangement of four tables with chairs. There were no other customers this early, so I asked the fry cook scraping his grill if he knew of any boats that needed crewmen. “I need a job, any job, badly,” I confessed.

“Got your seaman’s papers, son?” the fry cook asked cordially.

“Sorry to say, no sir, (I almost slipped and said, “No, Boss”) but I’ve worked in the oil fields as a roughneck and I’m no stranger to hard work,” I admitted.

“I reckon you’re broke then too,” the cook remarked, sighing. “So many are today…Well, seeing as you’re the first customer for the day, and Christmas is almost here, how about a cup of joe and a donut, on the house?” he offered. “My name is Ephram Finley. I own the joint. Used to be a shrimper back in the day until I got too old for the work. I’ll ask around down by the docks while you eat and see if any boats need an extra worker. Are you particular as to what kind of job, or to where the boat’s heading?” Finley asked.

“I’ll do or learn anything – fishing, crabbing, shrimping, loading, even dry dock repairs -- but my real goal is to make it down to Mexico for work in the oil fields near Tampico or Veracruz. I hear the cost of living is cheaper South of the Border, so I thought I’d give it a shot until things improved here in the States. By the way, my name is Travis,” I fibbed. "My family's from San An-tone." We shook hands. “So you were the one who fought at the Alamo, eh?” Finley chuckled. “Promise not to rob me while I’m gone, O.K.?” he added good-naturedly. He poured me a hot mug of coffee and put a nice big donut on a little plate for me. Then he headed out the door. I immediately poured a ton of sugar into my joe, stirred it in, and sipped. Ah!

About ten minutes after Finley left, a tall brunette smoking a cigarette walked in, attractive (especially to me, having not gazed at a live dame for three years), shapely, probably in her late 30's. She introduced herself as Finley's sole waitress, Florence. "You can call me Flow if you like," she winked in a flirty kind a way, as only someone who works mostly for tips learns to do. "Everybody does." I could easily still smell the soap she used for her morning bath, and her light touch of perfume, even over the smoke from her cigarette. Sexy woman smells I had almost forgotten! I instantly liked her breezy, smiling manner, and told her my fake name and what I was doing there, and where Finley had gone, while I ravenously ate my donut and drained my extra-sugary coffee.

Finley returned shortly afterwards with some good news.

"Travis, I found you something going to New Orleans. Your job is retrieving crab pots in the waters between here and there. It's about a five-day job at sea. Pays $7 plus your meals. Skipper's name is Tall Tom. The boat's called The Chanteuse. Leaves right after she fuels up, so you better get a move on. From The Big Easy, you might later catch a boat headed for the Mexican Gulf Coast and those oil fields," Finley explained. "One more thing, Travis. I hope you don't object to working for a nigger. Some whites won't, which is why he's short-handed on this run. But I know Tall Tom and I trust him, and so can you," Finley added.

“Ephram, I don’t know how to thank you for all of your kindness to a stranger like me, but I’ll never forget you,” I said, shaking his calloused hand goodbye. “Bye too, Flow!”

I found The Chanteuse straight away. She was a beat-up but sturdy-looking tub, and I immediately spied the Skipper, a very tall, muscular buck in a stained white undershirt and blue dungarees.

“You must be Tall Tom. Ephram Finley just spoke to you about your needing an extra hand with the crab pots on a run to New Orleans. Well, I’m your man,” I added, extending my hand in greeting. “My name is Travis.” We shook.

Tall Tom must have been 6’ 4” and 250 solid pounds if he was an ounce, and was probably in his mid-30’s. His dark eyes looked me over in a quick, appraising glance. “Ever done any crabbing, Travis?” he asked, smiling, showing strong white teeth.

“No, Skipper, I’m afraid all I know is oilfield work. But I can learn real fast, believe me,” I replied. “I’m honest and uncomplaining and ready right now to give you my best work.”

“I bet you are, so I’ll give you a shot," Tom agreed. "If you follow my orders, we’ll get along just fine. I have two other crewmen who’ll come with us. They’re out getting food and other supplies. Once we gas up, we’re ready to cast off. Pay is $7 and your chow. You’ll be the only white man aboard, seeing as my other man is off drunk somewheres. Got a problem with that?” he asked with raised eyebrows.

“No sir, Skipper,” I replied. “No problem at all. Happy to be aboard.”

“Now Travis, I would guess that you are flat broke. I think I’ll pay you $4 in advance and have you get a new set of working clothes and some better shoes. There’s an Army/Navy surplus store down the street that’ll fix you up fine. And I bet you’re hungry too. So when you get back, I’ve got some beans and cornbread with molasses and coffee down in the galley, and you can have your fill,” Tall Tom generously offered.

I did as he asked -- naturally keeping a careful lookout for any cops -- and when I came back and was finished eating, I met the other two crewmen of The Chanteuse. Leroy was 16, and Nathaniel (“Natty”) was around my age. Both were easy-going and good-natured.

Before long, we shoved off, going east. Keeping close to the shoreline in waters no deeper than twenty feet, we reeled in the crab pots which were marked by small floating yellow buoys, then emptied the catch into barrels filled with fresh seawater. Leroy and Natty then showed me how to re-bait each pot – which was actually a square or circular metal cage – with either chopped up raw chicken legs or something called ‘beef melt,’ which was like chunks of beef liver that the crabs went nuts for. (Going for the bait, the crabs would enter the pot trap through a one-way opening and get stuck inside.) The re-baited pots were finally tossed back into the warm Gulf waters. The blue crabs we caught would eventually wind up on the plates of hungry diners in fancy restaurants in New Orleans and elsewhere. But Tall Tom made sure we enjoyed plenty of the sweet crabmeat ourselves, for our catch was bountiful during our five-day run. They were mighty good eatin’ too, especially with some spicy hot sauce!

All of us crew worked hard, ate well, and slept soundly. The rhythm of the routine, the steady drone of the boat's engines, and the refreshing salt air was all a balm to my formerly prison-battered soul. (One night, I found out that the boat was named on behalf of a special nightclub singer that Tall Tom had fallen in love with, but she ran off with some rich guy from the big city.) I still had to be careful, however, in sharing any details of my life with the rest of the crew. A lot I had to make up, then remember, so as not to slip-up in a string of lies. But the chief lesson I learned on this voyage was that niggers were not as bad as other whites – even me, too, once -- seemed to think. They were just folks like us, with the same problems and the same glories. All men are born, live for a time, and die. Skin color doesn't make any difference.

We pulled into New Orleans on schedule, and unloaded our crab barrels onto waiting wagons at the docks. The catch was repacked in wooden crates filled with layers of ice to keep the blue crabs fresh. When our work was finally finished, Tall Tom walked us down to the nearest saloon and bought us each a cold bottle of Jax beer (my first taste of suds in over three years, and believe me, it went down like heaven) and then gave us our pay. “You did a real good job for me, Travis,” Tall Tom admitted. “You’re more than welcome to become a regular on my boat. Leroy and Natty like you too. We go back and forth between here and Port Arthur pretty regular in season. I’ll never get rich, but it pays the bills, and it’s a good life -- especially being your own boss. What do you say?”

“Skipper…Leroy…Natty…I swear that you guys were some of the best men I ever worked with. I thank you all from deep down and sincerely. But I must move on. I’m going to look now for a bath, a shave, and a haircut, then I’m going to try and find a freighter heading for the Mexican Gulf. I’ve got to try my hand again in the oil fields and try and save up a nest egg. Maybe find a nice senorita and get hitched. Maybe even have a few *ninos* of my own! I hope you all understand. So I reckon it’s adios now, my friends.” I smiled and warmly shook each man’s hand, wished everyone good luck, then turned and left the bar.

After getting cleaned up, I used some of the remainder of my pay to buy two new work shirts, two new pairs of socks and a new pair of drawers. Then I went to a Chinese laundry and had my crabbing outfit washed and dried while I waited. I was still fearful of the police, but I felt much more like a free man. Being away from Texas and spending five days at sea helped me clear my mind and refocus my life.

The rusty Mexican freighter I eventually found at the Port of New Orleans cared little for any kind of official documentation such as seaman’s papers or a passport. (U.S. Customs and other authorities must have been on ‘the take,’ because I never saw them; they never inspected the ship-- "El Yucatan" -- or its cargo.) I was just one of twenty-three men from anywhere and nowhere willing to load and unload whatever cargo was being delivered or collected in various ports along the Mexican Gulf Coast. In port, we took on a cargo of cotton, lumber, machine parts, coal, and cinder blocks to be used for building construction. The pay was $1 a day, in Mex pesos, plus my grub. I would have my choice to get off in either Tampico or Veracruz. It looked like my ultimate escape plan would finally be coming true! Soon, I was in Mexican waters. Free at last from the horrors of Huntsville! It was December 25 – Christmas Day – when I made my momentous realization. It truly was a *Feliz Navidad*!

After three more weeks of work and travel -- mostly loading and unloading lots of bananas and mangos -- I wound up getting off in Tampico, and soon found work there as an oil chainman at the Ebano site for a year. I made my way overland the following year to Veracruz, where I also stayed for a year. I worked hard there as a derrickhand in the oil fields at the Poza Rica site. Naturally, by now, I had learned the basics of the Spanish lingo. I saved my money and stayed out of bar fights and avoided any trouble. I dated plenty of fine Mexican ladies too on my time off -- avoiding Mexico’s infamous cheap whorehouses and their curse of The Clap. I also remember that year reading in the Mex newspapers about the deaths of the bank-robbing outlaws John Dillinger and Bonnie & Clyde, back in the States.

When 1935 arrived, I heard from the other roughnecks that better money could be earned in the Orinoco Belt oil fields of Venezuela, down in South America. My Spanish was very good at this point, as were my oil field skills, so I felt I confident that I could get a new job there, even as a ‘Norte Americano gringo.’ This time, I could afford a regular ship’s tourist's passage from Veracruz to Caracas. I obtained a phony American passport with yet another alias ("Walter C. Dobbs"), and off I went.

After two years working as a tool pusher -- a top position in the oil field ranks -- outside of Caracas, I was now thirty-three years old. I had found a beautiful Venezuelan wife with long, raven-black hair, Consuela, who was ten years my junior. Together, we had a new baby boy that we named Roberto. The three of us were thriving, and I was very, very happy. We hoped to have more children too.

One day, alone in town, while buying some supplies, I heard an almost forgotten voice behind me say clearly, with menace: "Hey, Oil Wells...I finally caught up with you..."

My mind reeled and my stomach dropped. I automatically balled up both of my fists, and slowly turned around to face my destiny...

But instead of the dreaded Dewey Drummond, I saw that it was my old pal and cellmate, Taters Mitchell! He had fooled me with a convincing imitation of Boss D's voice.

Taters went on to tell me over a glass of beer in a nearby cantina that he had recently finished his sentence and that he had been formally released from Huntsville two months ago.

"I remember you telling me about wanting to go to Tampico and Veracruz, Sonny, so I went there first looking for you. Nobody knew the name Cameron Wells, so I described your features and they said that it sounded like an American guy named Travis, and that he went to Caracas to try his luck in the oil fields there. So here I am," Taters explained. "I wandered around town this whole last week hoping I'd eventually bump into you."

Taters went on to say that Boss D was dead -- "just keeled over from a heart attack last year on The Block...some cons actually applauded" -- and that a bunch of Texas Rangers had searched for me for about six weeks before they gave up on my escape. "They did find Rufus' Ford and his uniform, however, right outside of Houston where you dumped it," he added. "And you might like to know that Boss Lemont was transferred to a different prison too."

I then proceeded to tell Taters every detail of my life from the last four years.

"You could write a whole book on all of those adventures of yours, Sonny," Taters remarked. "Oh, by the way, I visited your family back in Carthage. They are all doing fine. They admitted that they sensed you were still alive somewhere. But they said that you must never go back to Texas or you'll get arrested and sent back to Huntsville. They said if I ever found you, to give you their love. I'm going back to the States anyway, so I'll drop by their place again and tell them you're O.K."

I took Taters to my house to meet my wife and baby son, and he stayed for dinner ("*Voy a tener un poco mas de esas papas por favor, Senora,"* he asked in halting Spanish*)* and was given a guest bed for the night. I tried the following morning to persuade him to remain in Venezuela, but he had "other big plans...but don't worry -- they are all legal! Plus, I have a nice gal waiting for me back in the U.S." So I gave him $200 in bolivars, plus another $200 of the same for my parents. "You can exchange this for Yankee dollars at any major bank in town," I explained. "And please tell my family that I love them, and that one day, somehow, we'll all meet again."

As we said our final, emotional farewell at the docks later that day, I realized that Taters -- Vernon Mitchell -- had been the best friend I ever had...

THE END

by Jack Karolewski

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