

I OPENED MY LOCKER AND REMOVED my bag of books. I looked at each in turn and read its title and remembered when and where I had read it, then tossed it into the center of my bunk: John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*; Graham Green's *A Burnt-Out Case*; Nelsen Algren's *A Walk on the Wild Side*; Albert Camus's *The Stranger*; Ernest Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls*; Louis-Ferdinand Celine's *Journey to the End of the Night*; J.M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians*; Paul Bowles' *Let it Come Down*; Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*; Nietzsche's *Will to Power*, and Jean Paul Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*. I had grabbed them off the shelf without thinking, when packing to surrender, figuring the chance of finding a good book where I was going was low, but I wondered now if the selections were random after all. They seemed to have in common the theme of alienation from society, the Outsider motif, which was at odds with my newfound urge to engage with life. I couldn't choose; they were yesterday's news. I looked up and saw the black inmate on the top bunk across the aisle staring at me. He waived a book around and yelled something that was lost in the noise of the room. I motioned him over. He climbed down from his bunk, crossed the aisle and came up alongside me. He was short. His hair was slicked back and shiny like that of a '50s Motown artist. He sported a matchstick-thin mustache and one of his two front teeth was gold. The word dapper occurred to me.

Trade you for a book, he said.

He handed me a dog-eared paperback: *Pimp, The Story of my Life*, by Iceberg Slim.

What's it about? I said.

Bout a brother name of Robert Beck who was raised up by his mamma in Chicago. He went to College but he really wanna be a pimp, so he go to pimp school on the streets and gets a degree in whorology. He a chump and a chili ass pimp till he get his coattails pulled by Sweet, the top spade pimp in the country, the Master Mack of all time!

He pronounced *of all time* the way Mohammad Ali famously described himself as The Greatest. He continued his recap of *Pimp*.

Sweet tell my man he gotta be icy cold like the inside of a dead whore's pussy, so he change his name to Iceberg Slim. Soon he got a fine stable of bitches. Got a tall pile a scratch. Got a new shiny hog. Got vines cost two hundred slats apiece. But like my man say: A pimp's

fame is as fleeting as an icicle under a blow torch. One day he find himself in the penitentiary, forty-three years old, ain't got shit to show for all them years of pimpin, so he decide to square up and get his life right. Ol boy get out the joint, move to California and write this book.

I opened the book at random and read:

Nigger, you're pretty, but a bleach cream will never be invented that will make you white. So, pimp your ass off and be somebody with what you got. It could be worse, you could be an ugly nigger.

I had taken Black Literature courses at San Francisco State—Zora Neale Hurston, James Baldwin, Richard Wright, Toni Morrison—but Iceberg Slim wasn't on the curriculum.

All right, I said. Pick a book.

He scrambled up onto my bunk. He looked at the books and frowned.

Pick one for me, he said.

I picked *Of Mice and Men*.

What's it about? he said.

The title is a line from a poem: The best laid plans of mice and men often go awry. It's about planning a better life for yourself.

He climbed down off my bunk. He held out his hand.

Lamar Johnson, he said. I plan to be a pimp.

Dean Davis, I said. I don't have a plan.

Lamar shook his head.

Brother, you don't know where you goin, you gone wind up someplace else!

I looked around the room.

I'll keep that in mind, Lamar, I said. Where do I get coffee?

We make store on Thursday, he said. You got money on the books you can buy what you want. Mud, squares, whams and zooms.

What are those?

Coffee. Cigarettes. Snacks like soda pop and Twinkies.

I've got money on the books, I said, but I need coffee now.

Got to trade for somethin.

Don't have anything.

Lamar went to his locker and returned with a styrofoam cup half full of instant coffee.

When you make store, he said, hook me up with a pack of squares.
Double Os.

What are double Os?

Kools.

It's a deal, I said.

He handed me the mud. He needed the cup back. I tore a square of paper from the bag in which I'd brought my books, folded it into an envelope, poured the coffee flakes into the envelope and gave Lamar his cup. He returned to his bunk with his book. I made a little wedge of a spoon from a strip of the paper and spooned a pile of the brown flakes into my cup and filled the cup with hot water from the tap at the back of the pen. I clambered onto my bunk and cracked open *Pimp* by Robert Beck, alias Iceberg Slim. I was soon immersed in another world: the mean streets of the Windy City, Chicago, circa 1930s and '40s, the world of the black pimp, a time of spats and slats and derby hats; of Billie Holiday & Billy Eckstein; of Sarah Vaughn, Nat King Cole, Zoot Sims, Charlie Bird Parker; of Packards & Duesenbergs, and Maggie & Jiggs comic books. When I looked up from the book and rubbed my eyes and looked around the cellblock, I felt I was emerging from one dream and entering another, the gauzy curtain between them no more substantial than the smoky haze that hung in the air. I tried to remember the sights and sounds of the life I'd left behind: the golden hills of the Marin headlands; the fog rolling in beneath the Golden Gate Bridge; the white caps on the water; the twinkling nightscape of San Francisco seen from across the bay; the pretty face of Lucy, the light in her almond eyes; her long legs, her dimpled derriere; the soft sweet breath of Lola—but these, too, seemed like the smoky tendrils of a dissipating dream. I had the disquieting sense of embarking in a flimsy craft on a foggy sea to a distant, foreign shore.

I SKIPPED THE MORNING MEAL. By noon I'd finished *Pimp*. I was impressed that when Beck sat down to write his book, he had something to say. That if he had become a writer first and gotten his degree from Tuskegee and read lots of books filled with the fine writing of others and foregone the pimping game and never known the streets, he'd have become just another brilliant genius wordsmith with nothing real to write about. I felt fortunate to have read the book here in Arcadia, where the characters who peopled its pages milled

around me in the flesh.

THAT BITCH! THAT JAZZY JIVE WHORE! My man Iceberg would've put his foot up her funky ass before he turned her out on the street!

Lamar tossed *Of Mice and Men* onto my bunk. He continued his rant.

That sissy bitch, Curly, he better never *ever* go to East St. Louis! They'll turn his pussy ass out in a minute! And that lame-ass, George, why he gotta pop a cap on the ass of his own road doggie? He shoulda shot Crooks! That sorry-ass, busted-back, slop-totin nigger, sleepin in the barn like an animal and kissin the white man's ass! He better never go to East St. Louis, too!

I smiled. Lamar's point of view was not one to be heard in a Modern American Literature class.

How'd you like *Pimp*, Davis? he said.

I liked it a lot, I said. I liked how Beck did it his way, even if he lost it all in the end. I liked how he squared up after, and wrote a good book about it. But I didn't like how he made his money off women who don't feel good about themselves till they've got a foot up their ass. But that's just me. So, Lamar, how come you want to be a pimp if your man Iceberg decided it was a sick life and he squared up?

Can't square up off somethin I ain't did yet! Lamar said.

Makes sense, Lamar, I said.

I could relate. Like Beck, I'd done it my way. I could hardly discourage Lamar from doing the same.

What else you got to read, Davis? he said.

You might like this, I said.

I handed him *For Whom the Bell Tolls*.

What's it about? he said.

It's about a man named Robert Jordan who sacrificed his life for a bunch of wine-swilling gypsies.

Lamar's eyes narrowed.

Sound like a chump thing to do, don't it, Davis?

It wasn't something he planned on doing, Lamar, but shit happens.

Lamar's gold tooth flashed.

Ain't that a natural fact!