

LETTERS FROM PRISON

Ted White

Letter #7: September 28, 1986

At the end of this week, I will have been here a month. And it's starting to get to me: The tedium, the basic unrelenting banal boredom.

It's Sunday, and the TV has been football all afternoon. Football - on TV - bores me. It's repetitious and unreal, full of intense commentary and crowd noises, and totally ephemeral. When one game ends there is another, back to back, stealing away whatever sense of uniqueness a single game might have. And during one of the interminable breaks in the action of one game, "highlights" - looking exactly the same - from another one are shown. Football for the sake of football; meaningless action that adds up to nothing except a list of final scores.

Earlier, before lunch, we played three games of Spades. Phil and I (as partners) won all three, but mostly because we were dealt better hands - I had trouble concentrating on the games.

You can only play so much cards. You can only read so many books. You can only sit around for so long. Lonny and I have been pacing back and forth. It's five o'clock. Where's the food? Where's supper? (And - will it be any good?)

I read Paul Williams' Only Apparently Real, correcting the typoses with this pen, wondering if my contributions to the Phil Dick Myth would be acknowledged (they weren't, even in discussions of the publishing history of a work I exhumed from his agent's files, after years of lying fallow), comforted in this only by the omissions of Calvin Demmon (an almost-collaborator of Phil's), Ray Nelson and Roger Zelazny (actual collaborators) - Paul's view of Phil Dick doesn't include most of his sixties friends and associates, nor the possibility that Phil could collaborate with anyone else (Phil is too unique, too much the property of his seventies friends now). But despite the unbalanced focus of the book (was that 1971 break-in that important? More important than Phil's 1974 conversion to Christianity and its effects on his subsequent work?), and the coy way Paul turns himself into a work of art (Phil's art), there are insights to be gleaned, almost inferentially, from the book, and the book does evoke the Phil Dick Experience. The major insight is one Paul appears not to recognize: Phil had a very poor grasp on his own reality, and almost unfailingly Got It Wrong when relating his experiences with others, especially editors, agents, and publishers. Virtually every story he tells about his experiences is suspect, a point Paul verifies the one time he checks one out with Phil's agent's records. Few of Phil's scurilous stories about his editors are given, but Terry Carr alone is named - unfairly - in this respect, which is a shame, since Terry was one of his most sympathetic editors.

Still, it was engrossing reading, and filled in a lot of factual - and chronological - details, lending context to my own (1964-72) experiences of the man. (Maybe my sourness today is influencing my reaction to the book as well.)

At first the Jail Experience is new - there are new things to be found out, new people to be met - but after a while you begin to realize that the essence of the Jail Experience is the dull sameness of each day, one after the next. Small differences assume great importance: The nature of each meal, the arrival of fresh mail, a visitor, a class. Little things get on your nerves, like one man's unfailingly bad jokes, or another's cackling laugh. The very predictability of these things get to you.

Supper was better than usual: "steak" - overcooked to falling-apart tenderness (just as well, since the only eating utensil is a plastic spoon); mashed potatoes with gravy, string beans, salad ("French" dressing), and butterscotch pudding, with lemonade. I ate it all, giving away only the redundant two slices of white bread.

I took a break from Paul's book to write the second installment of the serial I have

running in Lee Hoffman's SCIENCE-FICTION FIVE-YEARLY. It was inspired by Phil Dick (as was the first installment, written in 1981), and suddenly I felt the desire to write it. That's the first non-letter (or non-Letter) writing I've done here. It makes me wonder if I can - or should - try writing some "real" fiction here. I've resisted it up to now, mostly because of my impatience with hand-writing - which, among other things, cramps my hand and leaves a groove in my middle finger.

They just unlocked our cells, and I've moved inside to write this on my "desk." It's a lot easier than my lap.

I've had several days to get used to this cell now. I "enjoy" it in the sense of having a place for my things, privacy, a place to nap in the evenings, etc., but there are liabilities. The major one is remembering everything I want to take out with me in the morning. Wayne used to forget his cigarettes, or, on laundry days (Sundays and Wednesdays), his personal laundry (underwear, socks). I have to be sure I have the letters I want to answer, the books I want to read, and the snacks (hardboiled eggs left over from an earlier breakfast, sandwiches or commissary candy) I may want to eat. I usually make a pile of these things the night before, adding to it as I think of things. But the anxiety stays with me each time: Have I forgotten something? (Like everything else, I expect this will eventually become a boring routine - until I mess up.)

The air-conditioning in here makes the individual cells colder than the dayroom. The hotter it is outside, the colder it is in here. Last night I slept with most of my clothes on.

I'm not sure there's much more to describe about life here. Surely most of what is yet to come will be a dull recital of menus, interleaved with my reactions to the books I've most recently read: boring stuff. Who cares if Bill (the 62 year old) is from New England originally, and that I guessed this from his accent (which stands out in contrast to the accents of the rest of us here)? Or that Chester is 57 - making me (at 48) only the third-oldest, instead of the oldest in here? These are petty details indeed - worthy of Michael Ashley's puny contempt.

So what's left for future Letters? Shall I delve into Weighty Philosophizing? Or relate the tidbits of gossip which come my way via phone and letters? (Dan Steffan finally landed a really decent job as the Art Director of a slick Washington, D.C. monthly, and will get to redesign it; the Jerry Jacks Estate is being settled somewhat more decently than I'd feared from first reports; my daughter is not only bearing up well on her own, her grades are improving and she's gaining more friends ...)

I need to maintain this channel of communication, mostly to keep some sense of direction to my life in here, but simultaneously I worry about running out of things to say, and about writing too much, too frequently, clogging the channels with verbiage.

I guess I'll have to start on that novel.

Letter #8: October 1, 1986

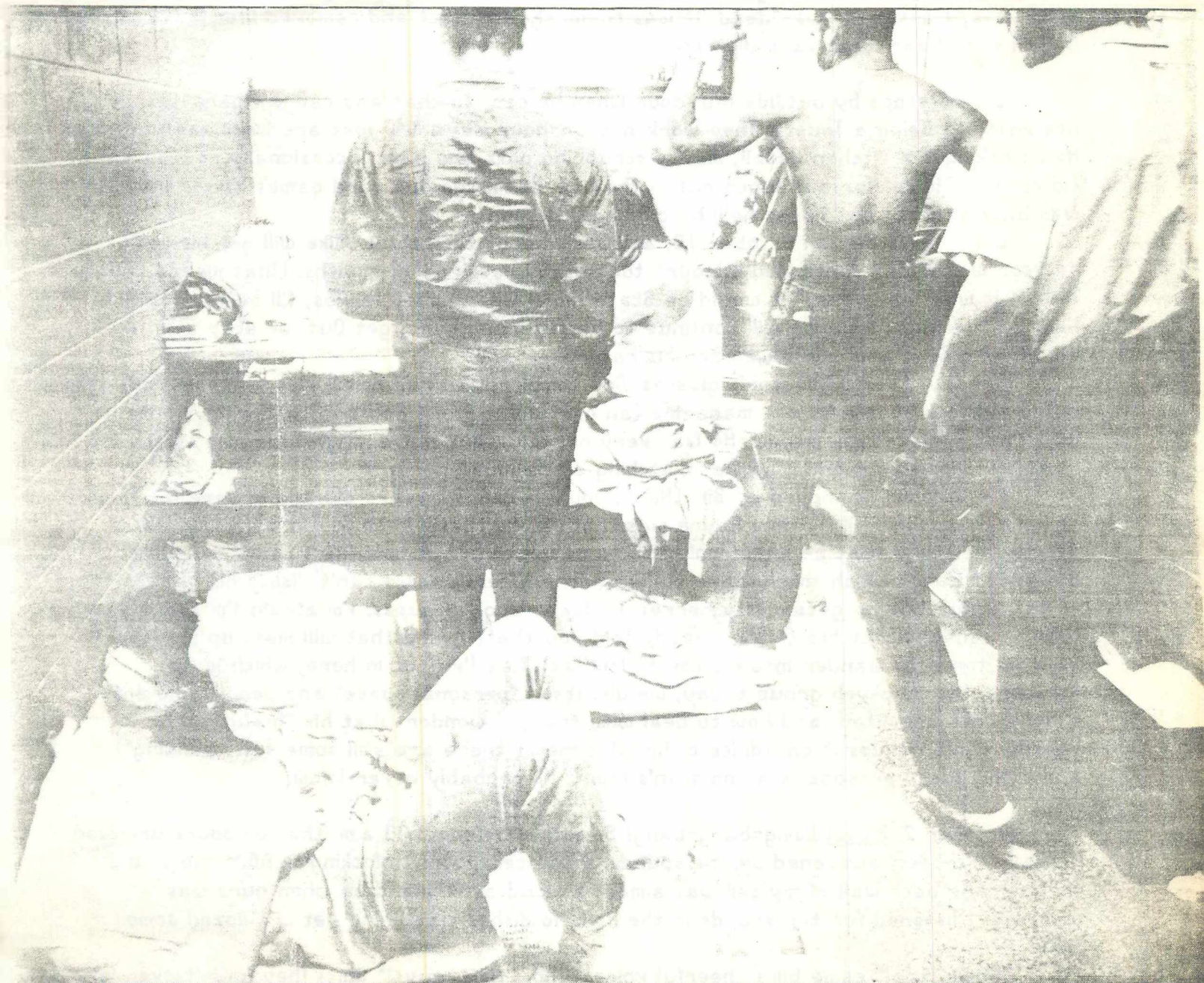
This is the seventh ballpoint pen I've used in the nearly a month I've been here. Of such small frustrations is prison life fashioned. Each pen - two Papermates, three Keymids and a Bic - runs "dry" after using between a quarter- and a half-inch of ink in its transparent plastic tube. Oddly enough, when you remove the basic part (a plastic tube filled with ink and attached to a metal point mounted in a brass-colored plastic surround), there is no visible difference between these three different brands. And there is no difference in performance, either - they all quit too soon. I've wondered if it was the paper I write on, increasingly damp from the excessive humidity, but each pen starts out writing in a clean, dark ink, and grows progressively lighter until every stratagem (taking the pen apart, blowing into the open end of the inner-ink tube, etc.) ultimately fails. Frustrating. A microcosmic example of life here.

Today was not a good day. I was assured in my psych group today that I'd do the

full four months until mandatory parole - "By the time they had a meeting with you and processed the paper work, it would be four months anyway" - which only sounds bad if you've been expecting less, and maybe hoping to be out by Thanksgiving, or Christmas at the latest. Oh well ...

According to a front-page article in The Fairfax Journal, "On a recent weekend, the 315-bed Fairfax jail held 567 inmates - the most in its history ... As many as ten inmates have been crammed into jail cells built for five people." I can attest to that. I understand that one reason is the large number of State prisoners (like myself) being housed in this County facility. And the reason for that is that the state pays the jail \$70 a day for each state prisoner housed here - more than the county pays for county prisoners. Isn't that delightful? I know they don't spend more on us (my cellblock has both state and county prisoners and we're all treated alike), nor does it add up to any \$70 a day. "It's all politics, man."

I'm enclosing the article with this Letter. The photo shows a typical cellblock dayroom. Ours is identical, but somewhat neater.



Stephen Jaffe/Jou

Men inmates at the Fairfax County Adult Detention Center fill their minimum-security cell that should hold five inmates.

They are building a new wing here, originally supposed to be open July 15th, and now expected to open in late December; the contractors are now paying daily penalties. Parts are being opened now - a new visitor's facility is supposed to open this week - and we've heard air-hammers taking down old walls; the electricity in most circuits went off for a couple hours last week, forcing us into an early lock-in that night; and the fire-alarm bells have gone off at odd moments for over a week now.

So it wasn't surprising when the alarm bells went off again tonight, around 7:00 p.m. I was lying in bed, reading Joseph Wambaugh's The Choirboys (the truth about American police, as told by an ex-cop). The alarm went on and on - no less than five minutes, and maybe twice that. I heard someone yelling, "Fire! Fire!" and figured it was some wiseass down the hall. But after the alarm finally stopped, I happened to look out the (rather high on the wall) window, and saw at least three firetrucks outside, a hose snaking up to the building.

There was no smell of smoke and no attempt to evacuate us, but, as I stood at our door, peering out into the hallway and the stairway up to B-level, I saw grimy-faced men in fire-fighting outfits coming down, and heard a guard tell someone else that someone - an inmate, I assume - was dead. It was curiously abstract and removed from us. I wonder if we'll ever hear what actually occurred.

* * *

Wayne stops by outside our door when he can, to chat and cadge cigarettes. He is not enjoying being a Trusty. They work sixteen-hour days. "My feet are killing me," he says. He's working the kitchen detail, mostly scrubbing pots and pans, occasionally pouring the tin cups of "juice" for our lunch out in the hall. He misses our card games and wishes he was back in here, but hopes he'll be getting Out soon.

Lonny gets Out on October 12, and has papers to show it. Mike will get his cell. Jackson was finally sentenced in court today, and received 12 months. (That means County Time; if it was "one year," it would be State Time.) When Lonny leaves, I'll be third-senior here I wonder if Wayne will continue to be returned here, get Out, or stay a Trusty. I like the Big Guy, and would welcome his return.

Sunday, I fixed Chester's glasses. One temple-piece had come off - a screw had fallen out. I pulled a staple from a magazine (an overlooked item, heh-heh) and bent it into a wire that replaced the screw. He was very grateful, but not enough to let me watch "St. Elsewhere" on TV tonight - he was watching a "Magnum" rerun.

I'm becoming annoyed by Bill. (He is, you'll recall, 62 years old and in here for fraud.) He isn't an asshole, like Steve Payne was (and Payne is still here, down the hall in A9, despite his story that he needs only \$65 to get out ...), but he's fussy and tends to do unwanted things which simply have to be undone afterwards. I can't dislike him for wanting to be helpful, but he gets on my nerves. He lacks "cool," I guess. I'm afraid I'm soon going to start snapping at him ("I've already told you that!"), and that will mess up my "cool." Plus, he tends to wander into my cell to look at what I've got in here, which is Not Accepted. (In my psych group today, we discussed "personal space" and people who enter others' cells uninvited, and how to deal with them.) I wonder what his "fraud" was - he says he can't discuss it on advice of his attorney ("there are still some suits pending") - and if this fussy persona is a con-man's front. I'll probably never know.

* * *

October 2: Bang! Bang-bang-bang! Sometime before 5:00 a.m. the cell doors unlocked. Actually, I'd been awakened by the sounds of the cell-doors unlocking in A6 - the sound through the back wall of my cell was almost as loud as it would be when ours was unlocked. I listened for the sounds in the hall. No dishes clattering yet ... I dozed some more.

"Chow time!" came Bill's cheerful voice. "Chow time, guys!" Shit! They hadn't even let down the little door that opened the slot in our cellblock door. They hadn't yet banged loudly on the door with something metallic (keys? You can always tell the approach of a

guard by his jangling keys ...) and yelled out, "Breakfast!" Sometimes a half hour passes between the unlocking of the cells and the arrival of breakfast. But there was helpful old Bill trying to rouse us so we could sit around and wait for our food. I turned over and tried to remember what I'd been dreaming: something about living in an old (late 20's) Packard roadster ... something about living outdoors and how it would have to end soon when winter came ... something about standing outside a building with lit windows, waiting for it to be opened - to serve breakfast?

"Let's go, guys!" Bill called. Fuck him! Officious turd! I could hear him clearing the table - although only two guys eat breakfast there, the rest of us eating in our cells, Mike on the floor next to his mattress. Yes, I could get real tired of Bill.

Soon enough - but at least half an hour after Bill's first chirpy call - the slot-door slammed down. "Breakfast! Breakfast!" said the deputy, banging on the door. I pulled on my pants, and went out for my tray. I gave Mike the first one passed to me and took the second. "Want yer fruit today?" I asked Mike. It was mixed slices of orange and grapefruit. "Take half," he said. "I'll take half yer eggs!" He knew I never ate the "scrambled eggs" - "curdled rubber" would be a better description.

I took my tray to my cell. By the time I came back out, the coffee had been brought in; I picked up the seven half-pints of milk, and passed them out as I headed to my cell. "Here's your coffee, Ted," Bill said. "I don't drink that stuff," I told him for the seventh straight day in a row.

I put the jelly on my toast and tried to open the milk carton. This was one of the ones that didn't want to open - I had to tear it open, making a torn spout that would dribble down my chin if I wasn't careful. I alternated sips of milk with spoonfuls of fruit and bites of toast. I scraped the remaining egg off into my toilet, and pissed on it. After I'd taken my tray and milk carton to the door (they count the empty milk cartons and plastic spoons - never know what you might use to hang yourself), I brushed my teeth, pulled my cell door shut, and went back to bed, for a few more hours of sleep.

A little after 8:40, the guard came by to announce lock-out. I had my stuff ready, dressed, and moved everything I expected to need during the day out into the dayroom. Bill was lying on his mattress, dozing. Since his mattress goes in my cell during the day, I had to wait for him before I could close my door, unload the stuff off my chair, and sit down in front of my cell door. He gave no sign of waking and rising. I wanted to shout, "Chow time, Bill!" in his ear, but I didn't. I don't kick puppies, either.

Mornings are silent times. No one wants to be awake. We sit silently, reading that cruddy newspaper, The Fairfax Journal (nothing in it about last night's fire - it's not a real newspaper), or just waiting for the TV to come on and, at 9:00, "Love Connection." Sullenness hangs in the air. I picked up The Choirboys, nearly finished the night before, and waded back into it. Heavy stuff: despite the absolute scumminess of the protagonist cops, what happens to them in the final chapters was getting to me. Existential police fiction. Just the thing to read in here.

* * *

Lonny and I went up to gym, looking for Wayne, but Wayne didn't show. Red Bob was there, and told me Bob the ex-psychologist was getting Out today or tomorrow. "He's getting real impatient," Red Bob said.

Wayne came by later to our door, and showed us a new warrant that had been issued against him. He'd plea-bargained his counts down, but now the County was issuing warrants for the charges the State had agreed to drop. Shit. Typical. I guess he'll be here a while yet. I hope he moves back in here when Lonny leaves. (If he doesn't, someone else will ...)

They tried to deny me access to my remaining books in Property today. "You gotta get them direct from the publisher," this old turkey of a deputy said smugly. "I did," I said. He didn't believe me until he'd looked at them. "How'd you get all these books?" he asked, shaking his head. But he let me exchange the five I'd originally pulled for five more.

I've (hand)written less than six pages of this letter. When I started, this pen was brand-new. Now the ink is light and getting fainter. Good thing I ordered two more from Commissary. I'll need another pen by tomorrow.

Shitty jail; shitty pens.

So it goes.

Letter #10: October 7, 1986

"You can't have these stamps," the guard said to Phil. He'd just opened the letter and shook out the loose stamps.

"My wife sent them," Phil said helplessly.

"Well, you can't have them," the guard said, unsympathetically. "They're not allowed." He pushed the envelope and accompanying letter through the door. Phil stared at him. "They'll go in your property. You can have them when you get out."

"Sure," Phil said. "Lotta good they'll do me then!" But the guard had turned away and didn't hear him - nor care.

"Shit," I said. "I asked my mother to send me some 17¢ stamps - for when I go over an ounce."

"They're not all like that, man," Mike said. "He's a real asshole. Some of them don't care."

"Why the fuck should they care?" Phil asked, looking more and more angry as realization sank in.

"They're worried about drugs," Mike said. "They think them stamps might have something like acid on their backs. That's why they take the stamps off the letters you get." (I'd noticed about a quarter of the letters I got were missing their stamps, but I'd assumed that was because some guard was stealing them.) "It's an easy way to smuggle in a hit or two of blotter (LSD)," Mike added.

"I seen on the television where they got this test," Chester said. "They put a cigarette in a glass of water, and if it swells up, it's got dope in it. Thass why they don't let you bring no cigarettes in here witcha."

"I dunno," I said. "Guys in GH2 when I was down there had their own cigarettes they'd brought in."

"No sir!" Chester insisted. "They don't let you bring in no cigarettes - might have dope in them."

"You telling me I didn't see any cigarettes in GH2?" I asked.

"Thass right," Chester said. "They ain't gonna let you bring no cigarettes in. They search you, man."

"They used to do that, but not any more," Mike said quietly. "They let me bring in my cigarettes."

"No sir, they don't allow it," Chester said, as though Mike had not spoken. "They got this test."

I snorted. "Great," I said. "And if your cigarette passes the test, you've got a ruined cigarette."

"It's a test, man," Chester said. "Saw it on TV."

"Sure you did," I said. "What's it a test for?"

"Dope, man," said the 57-year-old black man, who had never smoked any drug but nicotine.

"What kind of dope?" I persisted. "Marijuana, PCP, what?"

"I dunno - just dope. It swells up. They take the tobacco out and put the dope in, then they put a little tobacco back in the ends. Doncha know nothing?"

"I know this much," I said. "I know marijuana doesn't swell up. Neither does parsley - that's what they put PCP on."

"I'm talking 'bout reefer, man," Chester said. "You don't know nuthin'!"

"I know a fuck lot more about that shit than you do," I said, getting angry. "What do you think I'm in here for?"

"You don't know nuthin," Chester repeated, adamantly. "I saw that test on TV!"

"You believe everything you see on TV?" I asked, sarcastically.

"Thass right," Chester said, "I do. They don't lie on TV. I believe them before I believe you." His voice dripped with scorn.

I shook my head. "Okay," I said, shrugging my shoulders. "You believe the fucking TV. Stay stupid."

Chester laughed derisively. "You stupid," he said. He shook his head in disbelief. "Man don't believe the TV," he said. He knew who was the fool.

* * *

I have never before had to deal with real stupidity. Some of the other guys in here are not real bright, and have problems spelling or doing arithmetic, but they're not stupid. They have their own areas of cleverness, of quick-wittedness. Lonny may not spell well, but he plays cards well. Mike and Phil both read a fair amount - I pass along books to them - and most of us peruse the paper each weekday. Wayne, when he was here (he may have gotten out today - no-one knows for sure) asked me to go over his homework with him (and had most of his answers right).

Chester doesn't read. He doesn't play cards. He sits and watches TV. Apparently he thinks it's all Real.

The other evening, a guard stuck a receipt through the door. It was marked "A7" and indicated that money had been credited to a commissary account. Mike, Chester and I looked at it. (It was evening, and everyone else was napping.) Neither of the names on the receipt - the donor, nor the recipient - was familiar to us. Mike and I saw this at first glance.

"Who this for?" Chester asked, puzzling over the slip of paper.

"It's for (So&so)," I said. (I have forgotten the actual names involved.)

"Which one he is?" Chester asked.

"No-one in here," Mike said.

"He that guy in A-cell?" Chester asked.

"No," I said, "That's Jackson."

"What about tha guy in B?" Chester asked.

"That's Phil," Mike said.

"Phil? Whass his last name?" Chester asked.

"Funk," Mike said.

"Huh?" Chester said. "This for him?"

"No," I said, "This is for (So&so)."

"Maybe it for Bill," Chester said. Bill Leamy had come in the same night as Chester.

"Nah," Mike said. "They got it wrong. It's somebody in another cellblock."

Chester continued to look at the receipt. He shook his head. "It ain't for neither of you?"

"No," I said. "Give it here." I took the slip and wrote across its end in pencil, "Not A7."

"What are you doing that for?" Chester asked.

Without answering him, I stood up and took the slip back to the door and stuck it through the space between the door and the doorjamb - the place through which we stick commissary orders and Request Forms.

"What you doin', man?" Chester asked.

Mike explained what I had done.

A passing guard took the slip moments later, and perhaps even found the correct cellblock for it. Half an hour later Chester looked up and noticed the slip was gone. "That paper's gone," he said. And then, another half hour after that, he looked up again and

exclaimed, "The paper's gone - they done took it." Mike and I just looked at each other. This sort of thing could get on my nerves.

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Ted White's LETTERS FROM PRISON are written to his friends in SF fandom, and the above set (7, 8 and 10) are being published by Mark Kernes, 777 Gravel Hill Rd., Southampton, PA 18966. Letters 1, 2 and 3 were published by the Nielsen Haydens (75 Fairview #2D, New York NY 10040); Letters 4, 5 and 6 by Victor Gonzalez (3815 Eastern Ave N #3, Seattle, WA 98103); and Letter 9 is being published by Lucy Huntzinger (2215-R Market Street, San Francisco, CA 94114). Any friend of Ted's who missed some or all of these is welcome to contact the appropriate publisher for a spare copy. Additionally, anyone willing to publish one or more of Ted's Letters should contact the Nielsen Haydens at the above address, or phone them at (212) 942-6832.

Reiterating, these are Letters, not a fanzine. Surely, anyone who knows Ted isn't going to hold being in prison against him - some might even consider it a badge of honor - but he's going through some very tough times here; tougher than you can imagine if you haven't been in prison. All of which is my way of saying, don't treat these missives as a fanzine and review it; and be selective in quoting, if you feel you have to quote.

Also, again, Ted can receive unlimited personal mail, but no fanzines or other publications (except books mailed directly from the publisher). Send zines and other pubs to his regular home address.