

Beckman squatted in the corner, thinking. His cell mate, staring at him from darkened caves, kept his worn and spotted coat pulled close to his body, even though it was hot in the cell.

Beckman stared back and, with a surge of daring, asked the man, "What are you here for?"

The man, without changing his expression--he had no expression to begin with--said through ventriloquist lips, "food and shelter."

"You mean you got arrested so that you could come here to eat and sleep?"

The man nodded. "It used to be easy. All you had to do was stagger down the street and they would pick you up, but now--I had to get on the bus and go all the way to Germantown. I staggered around out there about fifteen minutes before they came and got me. It's getting to be a real problem. I don't do it much, you know, not like some of the other fellas who are always trying to get in here. I just do it whenever I really need a square meal and can't find it no other way."

"One thing I've always wanted to ask men like you."

"Men like me?" the cell mate repeated, with a smile.

"How did it happen? How did you end up like this?"

"You've asked the wrong man, my friend. You should ask them." The man swept his arm toward the cell door and window, "They'd know better than I would. All I seem to remember is one day realizing that I didn't care about anything. They could do what they wanted to me." He swept his arms toward the window again "and I didn't give a real damn. I figured I'd be dead in a week, but that didn't happen. I've lived like this for ten years now, and still don't give a damn."

The man stared at Beckman more intensely and, with a smile, said, "Young man, I think we have a lot in common."

Beckman was struck with horror. He crouched back in his corner, his former courage gone. The cell mate stared at him for a long time, then climbed into his bunk and lay facing the wall.

Beckman trembled in the heat of his corner. The prophetic truth of the man's words resounded in his head, obliterating thought as well as standing beliefs, invalidated memory, and pounded with demonic force at the walls of his heart.