

## PREFACE

OVER THE YEARS, I have been asked when it was that I “saw the light,” had a dream, or heard a voice. What experience created a reverberation that transformed me from the person I was then to the person I am today? The truth of the matter is that I have never changed. Rather, I have simply discovered who I’ve always been: the young child who knew that his life mattered, that he could make a difference in the world, and that he was born to fly.

In spite of the pain and hurt, and however much I engaged in crazed violence and lashed out at the world for thinking it owed me something, in the center, in my heart, there was always something of a natural goodness. This may have been the place from which my tears poured when I was a young child. In that same place, the violence later grew so much larger than life that I stopped believing in myself. But I finally came into a situation where I dared myself to reclaim that natural goodness. That I reclaimed it on San Quentin’s

death row doesn't change who I am. I have experienced an inner journey that brought me to the life-affirming realization that my violent actions were never a reflection of who I really am.

If I had known how painful it would be to sit and write this book about my life, I doubt that I would have ever picked up my pen filler, the only writing instrument allowed to an inmate in solitary confinement on death row. It was only from not knowing what layers of memories—particularly from childhood—would slowly unfold that I innocently began to write. I remember what a friend said when I told him what I was writing. We were walking together out on the death row exercise yard.

"Man," he said, putting one arm out to bring us to a stop in the middle of the yard, "I wouldn't do that. Look at this." He raised his sweatshirt, revealing horrible, healed-over gashes—scars, he said, from dog bites.

"I still dream about this shit," he said. "You want to sit down and write all night about this kind of stuff?"

"What happened?" I asked.

"Whenever I did anything wrong, I mean anything, my pops would sic his dog Fang on me. He would hold Fang by the chain, and he wouldn't let him go. He made him bite these holes in me—here, there, everywhere."

It would have sounded strange to say "thank you" to my friend, but what he said spoke to me. It helped me realize my true purpose in picking up the thin straw of ballpoint pen filler, resting it between my fingers, and beginning to write. At first I wrote in circles, the long way around memories. Then I began to silently challenge myself: *Without anyone else having to know, I asked, how honest can I be with myself as I write all the scattered memories of my life? Can I do so without blame, with only a truth that has no place to go beyond these sheets of paper?* In essence, questioning my own sincerity is what inspired this book.

Many events recalled in these pages could have kept me angry my entire life; many times just the memories made me want to quit

writing. I would forget about not blaming others, fearing the truth that might be triggered by the next word or sentence I wrote. At times I literally cursed the makeshift pen caught painfully between my fingers. There was no name I did not call it. It was not just that it hurt to hold it, but that it moved so slowly, forcing me to attend to every detail. I couldn't write any faster than it let me; it refused to skim lightly over the surface as I tried to breeze past the unpronounced emotions that would crawl up my throat and fill my eyes with tears. The filler's slow pace repeatedly dragged me into a swamp of unwanted memories. Only through the patience learned in meditation was I able to settle myself into a place that allowed me to keep writing.

*Jarvis Jay Masters*

SAN QUENTIN

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