

# *Where Excuses Go to Die*

John Espinosa Nelson



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First Paperback Edition

# “IF WE CAN KEEP A SEVERED HEAD ALIVE”

California Rehabilitation Center (CRC)—Norco, Level II  
Occupancy Design: 2358  
During Stay: 4200  
Today: 3430

**L**ong before I landed at CRC, jealousy of those frequently receiving mail had been something to contend with, not so much for the emotional nourishment as for the busy-work. I vowed to change that as soon as possible, so at Wasco I'd begun subscribing to the *LA Weekly*, *Time*, and *Rolling Stone*. My goal was to have Wasco's head-count Badges slide something under my door every single night after dinner. I ached for commiserating letters from home, but self-generated mail made me feel good, too. Sometimes better, especially when, in birthday cards signed by my dad and brother, I found at the bottom in my mom's handwriting, “the family.”

I started by responding to every “Free Catalog!” offer in every magazine I could get my hands on, including Chuck Hildebrandt's *Saltwater Sportsman*. From drapery and curtain companies to design firms announcing, “wallpaper for every room,” *The PennySaver* yielded more carpet cleaners and remodelers than I knew what to do with. I requested free estimates galore, envisioning the driver from Wasco Upholstery Masters getting turned away at the gate. It tickled me silly. Don Novello's *Lazlo Letters* had been a favorite in high school, and here I was, following in his footsteps. I wrote to Milton Bradley, Occidental Petroleum, and the Wasco City Council with compliments and complaints. Given the big ol' “WASCO STATE PRISON” stamped on my envelopes, automated replies were all that ever came back.

Every so often a letter would arrive from someone I didn't expect: former drinking buddies asking Jill for my address or schoolmates who'd heard rumors and called the Nelson home

to ask about getting in touch. Awkwardly written greetings would find me, with senders apologizing for not having written sooner and describing their loss for words. Mostly, addresses were guardedly offered and I was expected to break the ice. I did so happily, providing preaddressed, stamped envelopes to all who wrote, a large “PENTHOUSE,” “EXECUTIVE FLOOR,” or “PRESIDENTIAL SUITE” often preceding my cell number. These were accompanied by letters I’d started on their behalf to get things moving:

*Dear John—What’s Charles Manson like?*

*Dear John—I heard you set fire to a \_\_\_\_\_!”*

*Dear Fucknuts—Who robs bookstores?*

*Dear John—Is it true inmates make cheese in their cells? If so, could you please pass along a recipe or two?*

If the letter was returned it usually gushed relief, gossip, and news of undecideds too timid to wish me luck personally. Many of those who wrote were people I hadn’t known very well prior to my arrest, but if it was exciting for them to have a prison pen pal, it was important for me to keep shoveling coal into that furnace.

Not everyone cared for my humor: skeptics would demand I explain myself in words on the very edge of *Goodbye, Loser!* I couldn’t help but speculate that those who were flat-out hateful had succumbed to a subconscious need to take advantage of (or not pass up) an opportunity to tell a criminal to rot in hell. Examining our respective roles became a sideline obsession.

But irrespective of tone or content, each effort gave me a sense of purpose: to be myself and to explain myself in writing. I’d learned the hard way to keep things light and amusing, otherwise the correspondence would stop. To even scratch the surface of my immediate realities—or worse, fall into self-pity—would convey an expectation of rescue or absolution. Everyone who wrote me got a unique gift from behind bars instead, even the mean ones.

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My fixation with the parts we play was an itch never more thoroughly scratched than when one of my SASEs reappeared with “PRESIDENTIAL SUITE” furiously crossed out. I imagined some mailroom Badge nearly going cardiac at the idea. Whoever’d processed it had flipped the envelope over and written, “WE DO NOT HAVE PRESIDENTIAL SUITES!!” with such force that the pen went through the paper.

I addressed my next SASE to “Undeserving Criminal Super-Scum and Satan Worshiper” to see if that would garner any takers, maybe someone adding exclamation points and arrows. I sent it off to the last known address of one David Dickinson, a mischief-maker with whom I’d long shared a regard for the subversive, the bizarre, and the bizarrely useful. But Dave’s response required a more substantial envelope than the one I’d provided, as he promptly forwarded a copy of *Will* by G. Gordon Liddy.

A week after that he sent *High Weirdness by Mail*, which was exactly why I’d bet on Dave in the first place. *High Weirdness* gave me access to a multitude of fringe groups: UFO societies, guerilla artists, futurists, political zealots, catalog publishers, and cults, such as the Church of the SubGenius, whose founders had compiled the book.

Score!

It wasn’t long before the Wasco Badges *stopped* sliding things under my cell door, signaling instead for the door to be opened so they could ask, “What the fuck?”

Lively discussions ensued.

*If We Can Keep a Severed Head Alive* by Chet Fleming, a body-less head machine patent owner, was an obvious choice. It took two months to reach me, but when it did the CO handing it over snapped, “Now come ON!”

“Psh! You mean you don’t know who Chet Fleming is?” I replied.

“No, I don’t know who Chet goddamned Fleming is!”

And so forth.

Somewhere, in every housing unit of every prison, stacks of one-sided copy paper, usually printer errors, are left out for indigent inmates to use as stationary. I enjoyed sifting through

these, cherry picking the gems like housing-unit announcements or rule changes that brimmed with dreamlike grammar. Then I took things a step further with my Xerox-machine access (thanks Chuck!). Whatever departmental mementos I could get away with “borrowing” from unattended offices in the education building were duplicated and merged with what I plucked from the free pile. I vowed that Inmate E-80604’s letterhead would never be uninteresting.

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More than most, I favored CDC Form 1801: State of California Choice of Execution Method, used on Death Row to determine a condemned man’s preference. Applications for State psychiatric treatment and blank 602 complaint forms were fun as well. My Aunt Terry and my grandmothers got routine yellow legal paper, but everyone else received creative efforts in line with the person they’d known me to be. It was a charm offensive, and a successful one to boot, ’cause by the time I rolled up at CRC with a stockpile of my distinct and colorful ephemera, funny-looking personal mail was in no short supply.

My first letters from CRC to Jill, Lotus, and Chaplain Will were written on the back of CDC Form 802: Request for Federal Prison System Placement. The ironically useless application even made my father laugh when he got *his* first “Live from CRC” dispatch. And on a greeting card I suspected my mom might see I added the faces of contemporary politicians to a medical textbook photo of two big, hairy testicles.

Outlawed magazines were mostly of the pornographic variety; administrators didn’t care about *Soldier of Fortune* or *Fangoria*, to which I’d subscribed along with *U.S. News and World Report*. But *Soldier of Fortune* yielded Paladin Press supplements, and Paladin publishes everything from surveillance and covert-ops field guides to just about any survival manual or gun-nut handbook in print—titles it joyfully markets to spy-craft buffs, forensics weirdos, rations stockpilers, booby-trappers, rogue locksmiths, hackers, and revenge practitioners the world over.

While I had not, to date, been party to the scuttlebutt on inmate possession of Paladin Press or similar catalogs, they say you never see the train that hits you. And only *secretly* anxious

to test my theory that catalogs aren't technically contraband, I kept 'em hidden at work. With all of CRC's searches and retaliatory unit toss ups I figured they wouldn't last too long "in the house."

Now, the particular CRC clerical position I'd scored through schmoozing with the old-timers was a sweet gig no N-number would ever land. My first CRC desk job was in the assignment office, and the assignment office assigned, well, *jobs*.

Two blind-eye sergeants supervised our office, which was situated between industrial and utility areas outside the main Yard. Four inmate clerks, me among them, were the ones who *really* ran the place, but our sergeants seemed happy enough and no one upset the apple cart. That meant that among the other convicts we were resented, a little feared, and best of all, for sale!

Each morning we updated lists of who'd gotten fired from where and which job had been vacated by an impaling or parole. More discreet was our updating of who owed us what for each cherry assignment we'd finagled for "the right price." With some exception we controlled the salt mines, and we were a happy bunch.

"Hermosa Gary" was one of us four. I avoided this schemer outside of work so as not to perpetuate our reputation as a tightly knit group of extortionists, but it was more than that: Gary was just plain shady. See, as an inmate clerk, it's one thing to shut up and do your typing in exchange for not having to scrub pots. It's one thing to have a secretary clear her throat, slide a plate of cookies at you on the Fourth of July, and turn her back. But it's something else *entirely* to talk a guard into getting things for you from the outside. They call that a "fetch," and Hermosa Gary was running several. When Gary types go down, they take careers with 'em. And when a CO is made a system-wide example of, you can hear the laughter from Pelican Bay to Ironwood.

I *did* let Gary show me where to hide my not-exactly-contraband catalogs, and every time we were left unsupervised I'd pull 'em out and pass 'em around. We read aloud our favorites, celebrating unthinkably perverse themes that would mortify the warden's office (*Be Your Own Undertaker: How to Dispose of*

*a Dead Body*) and cheering at the promotional blurbs for each selection (“This book examines the growing number of satanic gangs and sects that use the occult to empower their members and terrorize their victims” or “With less than a shot glass of fuel per round, home-produced artillery weapons can launch incendiary projectiles nearly three hundred yards with just the flick of a switch”).

The disclaimers made us howl even louder, from “For academic study only” to “The manufacture or possession of firearm silencers is illegal without prior licensing from the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms” (three of us immediately volunteered to write for an application). Then there was stuff like, *Poison: A Practical Handbook*, and *The Big Bang: Do-It-Yourself Gunpowder*. The way those got us going, they might as well have been porn.

“Being forced to kill somebody in justifiable self-defense,” we’d giddily read, “is a sad reality of today’s society.”

“Ooh! I got one!” someone else would interrupt. “*Contingency Cannibalism: Survivalism’s Dirty Little Secret!*” Dropping to a radio baritone he’d read, “In a life or death situation, practicing cannibalism is the ultimate test of a survivalist’s will to live. *Contingency Cannibalism* pulls no punches as it answers such pressing questions as: Does it taste like chicken? What will my friends and family say? What if I like it? Are recipes included?”

We stamped the floor like little girls.

Other guys called out: *Scram: New ID in America* and *Floor Fighting: Stompings, Maimings, and Other Things to Avoid When a Fight Goes to the Ground!* By the time we got to *Modern Bladesmithing Made Easy* the room’s laughter had begun to draw attention. But who could resist? Some entries even had pictures of the books’ covers, often as ferocious as their titles. Just imagine the drawing for *Make ‘Em Spill! Mafia Interrogation for Beginners*, or *42 Deadly Blows to Vital Organs*.

Funniest of all was when I enlarged one of the pictures on our copier and posted it in the corridor. We played dumb, allowing the steady inmate foot traffic to think it was the lieutenant’s newest recruiting tool, since *nothing* enrages the fellas more than the very word:



## SNITCH

### A Handbook For Informers

*by Jack Luger*

Every day in the USA, there are more laws, more lawbreakers, and more people willing to pay cash to find lawbreakers. Federal, state and local governments; business and citizen groups; private detectives and insurance agencies — all pay quick cash for the right information.

In fact, you can become a professional informer, developing information for a living, if you know how. The IRS pays out a percentage of taxes collected from tips. The DEA hands over money seized from drug dealers. And the Federal Government will pay up to hundreds of thousands of dollars for advance notice of an assassination attempt!

In *Snitch: A Handbook For Informers*, Jack Luger tells you what information is valuable, how to gather it, and how to sell it. He shows you how to snitch and collect completely anonymously. He details how crooks negotiate their way out of prison sentences, how cops treat informers, and how to keep from being finked-out yourself.

Chapters include:

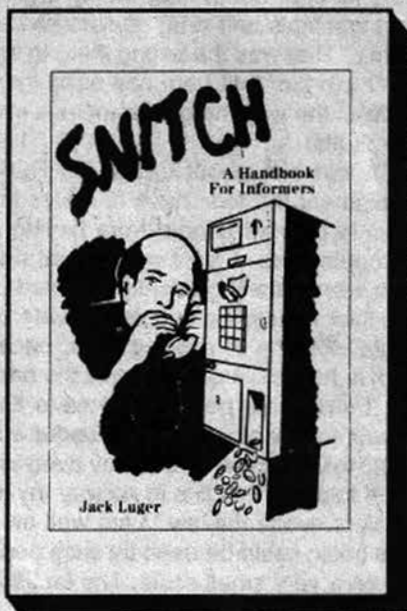
- Who Informs
- Motives
- Compensating Informers
- Working Criminal Informers
- Civilian Informers
- Informers in Prison
- Cops and How They Think
- How to Become an Informer
- Protecting Yourself Against Informers
- And more.

If you are looking for an unconventional way to make money, get *Snitch: A Handbook For Informers*. Because the dirt you dig up could be paydirt.

*1991, 5½ x 8½, 149 pp, indexed, soft cover.*

**SNITCH: \$16.95**

**(ORDER NUMBER 40075)**



It never dawned on a single one of these dingbats the poster might be a hoax; all it took was the mere suggestion of the word “snitch” to set ’em off. And blatantly promoted on the vocational training assignment board? Inmates would stick their heads in the door demanding, “How can you ASSHOLES just sit there with this FUCKIN’ SHIT posted right IN YOUR FACES?”

Shrugging lethargically, we’d nod toward the lieutenant’s door. “Who are we to take it down?” our puppy-eyed faces would ask.

Some guys, red-faced, jaws clenched, would rip it from the wall, balling the paper tighter and tighter to crush its very idea. Others would storm about, indignant and bitter about their inability to make someone pay. You could hear ’em cursing up the passageway to the Hotel.

On one such day, as we giggled at the comments of two Peck-erwood dupes, alarms sounded and Goons started running past our office door. In tow was one of our sergeants, who stopped when he saw us.

“Best get lost for today, back to your dorms. We’ll send for you if we need you.”

I tidied my desk, casually placing the catalogs under my inbox. My usual spot was elsewhere, but with the Badge in the doorway I had no choice. Besides, figuring on a stabbing, I thought at worst we’d be back bright ’n’ early the next morning. *Ho hum, some N-number didn’t pay his drug debt.*

But that night Hermosa Gary talked his way back into our office. He took the catalogs—something we’d all sworn not to do—back to his dorm unit to share with the guys after dinner. For once his timing was off. The junkie who’d gotten slashed that afternoon had died and the story’d been picked up by the local news. The staff was pissed; every dorm was upended.

They found the catalogs. No doubt they fanned through Gary’s other fine periodicals, too, but it was probably *Blowguns: The Breath of Death* that really caught their eye. Or maybe *Put ’Em Down, Take ’Em Out: Knife Fighting Techniques From Folsom Prison*. Point is, Hermosa Gary was hauled off to the Hole and word spread that bomb-making diagrams had been found in a clerk’s cell.

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*Blowguns: The  
Breath of Death*  
that really  
caught their eye.**

That there wasn't a single Badge among 'em who'd enjoyed the irony was disappointing, but I made up my mind to go straight to the captain, admit the catalogs were mine, and challenge the reasoning behind their confiscation.

I never got the chance. Gary, on his way to the Hole and clawing the door like a cat at the edge of a bathtub, spat out my name as the real owner of the catalogs.

The slithery little fucker had gone and ratted me out. *Me!* The same guy who'd convinced the other fellas in the office not to tease him 'cause he looked just like the guy on the cover of *Snitch!*

When they came for me, the sergeant wouldn't explicitly confirm who'd given me up, but his eyebrows asked, "Do I need to?"

Then, halfway through the two days in the Hole I'd been given, the watch lieutenant sent for me and explained I wouldn't be charged with an infraction *or* required to serve any more time in the Hole. Apparently, he'd been looking for a way to get rid of Hermosa Gary quietly, and my previous night in solitary had been part of their charade.

I have no idea what they did with Gary, but both the lieutenant and the sergeant told me that if I dropped it they wouldn't impede my efforts to secure a clerical position in another office. It was clear they were through with hustlers in the assignment office. Me? I figured something with less visibility would be a smart move.

When I returned to the Hotel, I saw that the Goons had trashed the contents of my locker and overturned my bed. But at least they shoved my crazy mail and journal back into the locker; the rest of my stuff got ransacked, but those remained thankfully undiscovered. I shrugged. The rest I could rebuild, especially once I landed a new gig.

I got started right away.